

IN SEARCH OF SEPPO

by Kevin McGill

Your editor traveled to Finland and was surprised to find that the Finns are totally unlike the portrayal offered by "60 Minutes." He found a country which cares more for athletics and general fitness than the U.S. The indoor training facilities are as good as any in America. And. . . these people are happy, and warm. He looked for Seppo, and was shown a glimpse of the Finnish soul.

After that dramatic introduction, you are wondering, if you are not a javelin nut, who is "Seppo"? Some of the experts are saying to themselves, "Of course, he refers to Seppo Raty." Well, true and false. Seppo took on a much larger meaning to me than just one great javelinist. While searching for Seppo Raty, a medalist at all Olympics and World Championships, 1987-1992, I experienced some things which enlightened me on the subject: how does a small country like Finland manage to excel in the javelin, among other sports activities?

In order to answer that question, I wrote to Max Jones in the fall of 1992. Max is a national coach in Britain, and editor of the excellent periodical, *The Throws*. One thing led to another, and suddenly I was invited to go to Finland, courtesy of Finnair and the Finnish Coaching Association. Max had given me the address of a fellow Brit who had moved to Finland years ago, Don Welsh. Don lives in Eastern Finland, where many great throwers like Raty live, and he helps out Idan Heittajat, the Eastern Throwers group.

Don contacted Antti Mattila, a Finnair manager, and I was offered the opportunity to fly to Finland during the Winter Throws Championship. Don would take me to that meet, and we would visit a number of the terrific training centers that exist in Finland. No way I could turn this down, and in March, 1993, I packed my warmest boots, lots of thick socks, and headed out to the Frozen North.

Prior to departure, I decided to take a Finnish language course, thinking that no one in Finland, outside of Don, would speak English. Most people do speak English, I found. There are some coaches and ex-throwers like Jorma Kinnunen who speak English reluctantly. Since I similarly lacked confidence—and experience—in Finnish, I rarely ventured into serious conversation. I would say a greater percentage of Finns speak English than people who ride the subway in NYC, so I felt quite at home in Finland.

Here we are in a place with less than five million in population, in 130,000 square miles—much less when you subtract the 60,000 lakes. Finland is small, and I kept thinking—where are the pizza places. . . and the K-

Mart's? Well, I found out that Finland has about 100 artificial running tracks and over 300 cinder/dirt tracks. New York City, with eight million people, has maybe ten artificial tracks? I don't know, I just live here. Any cinder track left in the city has more ruts than the Oregon Trail, so I wouldn't count too many of those. Where can a person go in NYC to work out, hit the pool, sauna, etc.? There are plenty of private gyms with fees equal to annual salaries of the average middle class person. What does Finland have for indoor places to train, open to the public for a reasonable fee? Only the best places I have ever seen in my life.

Tanhuvaara, the first center I visited, is located in Savonlinna, almost the heart of Eastern Finland. In the first photo, you can see the biomechanics setup they use to time sprinters at 10m intervals.

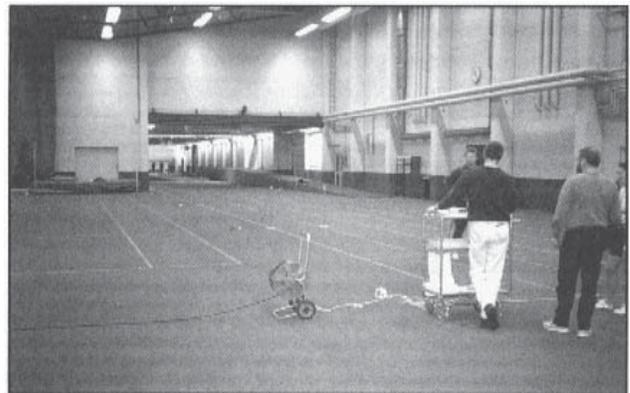


PHOTO 1

What you are looking at is the end of a long straight-away which is wide enough to provide a long ramp for training on a slant. On the far end there is a LJ/TJ pit. To the left of the picture, you can see the edge of a huge net where the javelin throwers can throw javelins, balls, medicine balls, etc. There is a HJ pit next to it. Behind me in the photo is a PV pit and two completely enclosed

indoor hammer/discus rings. There are again huge canvas-like sections hanging from the rather high ceiling which contain the hammer safely. Local people can come in and lift, run, get a massage, etc. Of course, there is an excellent sauna here, perfect for meetings and training clinics.

For cross country skiing in the winter and tennis in the summer—this is the ideal spot for training. Jarmo Hirvonen is the resident coach, and he is well versed in every aspect of track & field. Some of his pupils include the Parviainen brothers, Aki, and Mika. Sadly I must report that Aki, with a PR of 80.94 as a junior, suffered a severe elbow injury in the Winter Championships.

Jarmo is shown in the middle of photo 2, in the rear. To his right are Nitta Veikkolainen (front), 51.26 discus, and Antero Paljakka, who hit 19.62 in 1992 with the shot. Far left is Mika Parviainen, who has a PR of 80.26 and a win in the U22 European Cup. Aki Parviainen is the fellow with the “Bulls” top. He is an excellent technician who will make his mark in years to come. Behind Aki is Marcus Humphries from Britain, now coaching, and next to the “editor in shades” is Mark Roberson, a Brit who throws somewhat like Steve Backley, with a PR of 80.90. Mark is also one to watch in future years.

PHOTO 2



On March 3, Hannu Siitonen, Montreal silver medalist, and Juha Tiainen, 1984 gold medalist in the hammer, visited Tanhuvaara to perform clinics with the various groups. I conducted an interview with Hannu and it is on the videotape I am making available. With Hannu, I began to hear of the legends in Finnish javelin history.

There is a 231-page book on the history of Finnish javelin throwing, called *Suuri Suomalainen Keihaskirja*, which runs about \$65 USA. Trust me, javelin nuts, you will lust for this book. On page 151, my education into Finnish javelin throwing began. On that page is a picture of Hannu standing by a barn. On the second story of this barn, there is a large door opening out to his fields. In the middle of the winter, when the snow was very, very deep, Hannu used to throw his javelins out onto the field. . . and then he would ski through the snow to recover them. Being an ex-thrower myself, my jaw dropped! I can envision this happening only in Finland, where the drive to excel in this event has been astonishing.

Hannu lives near the Russian border, and I heard (don't know if this is true) that if he got off a really good

throw, it would go into Russia! Hmm. Hannu did tell me, with an absolute straight face, that the reason he could release the javelin so close to the line during meets was from this barn tossing. Hey, if he missed, it was head first out of the second story of the barn into the snow. If he released too soon, he would hit the inside of the barn. Don't you love this stuff?!

You are probably thinking, “That poor Hannu, living in such a remote area, he was the only thrower to not have great facilities. Not true. Seppo lives a good hike from Tanhuvaara, and he trains in a place you would not believe. My search for Seppo took place before the winter meet, so let me describe this adventure.

We left in the afternoon to look for Seppo and his coach, Eino Maksimainen. Don Welsh and I found Eino, who is a dentist, quite easily, and we took a tour of the area where Seppo trains. The first spot was a cinder track on the edge of town. Then I expected to see another full-facility training center, and was I surprised. In photo 3, Don and Eino are taking off the cover of the short, very hard approach area that Seppo uses. Seppo had been there earlier and has to make sure this thing is covered. It is basically a mat tacked onto asphalt—like throwing on a church floor, only harder.

PHOTO 3



PHOTO 4



Photo 4 is a little dark, but shows the plowed-out area towards which Seppo throws. You may not see it, but there is a javelin still sticking in the snow, about 75 meters away, where Seppo had thrown it. The area behind Eino

and Don is hard ice, covered by snow. It dawned on me. . . Seppo throws in a refrigerator. Thirty years ago, I threw in some poor conditions, but nothing ever was like this. Why does he do this? Seppo is a family man and he prefers not to spend too much time away. He does not like the limelight and basically just tolerates guys like me. . . if we can find him.

We next traveled to a hall where Seppo runs. Those in cold climates in the U.S. can remember running in the school halls during the winter. Seppo basically sprints on a marble floor. When Eino mentioned leg and ankle problems with Seppo, I thought, "How does Seppo walk, let alone throw?" We saw evidence of Seppo—small throwing balls jammed into the rafters—but we did not find him here either.

Well, there was one more place where Eino figured that Seppo had to be—the weightlifting area. This was down the road a bit, and in a basement. It was about the size of a closet in a Gold's Gym. We saw Seppo's boombox and his weights. Photo 5 shows Eino doing a squat, while Don chuckles. I am basically standing against the other wall while snapping the picture.

PHOTO 5



Still, no Seppo though. Let me tell you, I concluded one thing: it is not facilities that make the Finns great throwers. Sure, some have access to great centers, but most go infrequently—on weekends, or once a month.

We went back to Eino's house and I put questions to him. Parts of this interview will appear later. Eino is down to earth and a straightforward, very pleasant person. At one point, he left the table and came back with an armload of books. He told me that these were records of everything Seppo had done. I slowly went through these, having learned enough Finnish words to know "squat," "clean," "jump," etc. Could it be the secret to Finnish throwing is here?

Let's take a look at some of the test results which Eino gave me. Figure 1 details 18 separate tests given periodically from 1981-90.

They emphasized some exercises for a while, then switched to others. We have these results in meters and kilos, except for the 30 meters, which is seconds. When I looked at this, the bottom line caught my eye. That was a 10-meter increase in his javelin PR in 1991, a World Record throw later disallowed. I asked Eino about the power clean, since it seemed to be the outstanding improved test. Even with rather bad legs, Seppo managed a decent standing long jump of 3.20. Some coaches have remarked that the power clean can relate to jumping improvement. Seppo had about a 400-pound clean in 1991.

What was a shocker was to see a picture of Seppo doing a heavy clean—terrible technique. This was not unusual, as many of the Finnish throwers did not have great technique in cleaning. Mark Roberson of Great Britain, on the other hand, exhibited a near-ideal technique.

Coaches can learn from this chart the importance of record keeping. Good high school throwers should take a record with them to college, and hopefully the college coach will study it to see trends, weaknesses, etc. One reason the Finns throw far is that they keep careful track of progress during workouts and in testing.

There is available for Finnish throwers an excellent

FIGURE 1

Tests	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
30 meters					4.16	4.06	3.96		4.06	4.06	
1 Jump					2.75	2.90		3.02		3.05	3.20
3 Jumps	8.90	9.09	8.95	8.88	8.88	9.23			9.00	9.79	9.84
5 Jumps	14.30	15.00	14.60		14.20	14.79	15.40			15.18	14.25
4kg Shot Forw.			14.60	16.80	18.40	19.86	20.20	20.47	21.20	21.40	22.46
5.4kg Shot Back			15.80	17.35	18.40						
4kg Shot Back							23.00	23.96	23.77		24.67
2kg Shot Forw.										28.77	30.00
1.6kg Shot 1 Arm						37.00	39.80	41.10	45.85	46.24	
Bench Press	95kg	100	110	120	130	125	160	170	180	180	180
Pullover			120	120	140	145	145				
Straight Pull.							75	80	90/2	90/2	90/2
Power Clean	120kg	140	140	140	150	150	170	175	172.5	172.5	180
Jerk			130	132.5	145	150	165	172.5	170	170	165
Snatch			100	110	110	110	127.5	140	135	140	135
Full Squat			115	130	160	220	250	260	270	270	270
Front Squat					140	160	190	215	205	190	210
Deadlift			180	180	200	220	250	250	260	260	260
PR Javelin	75.44	72.74	74.38	82.60	85.72	81.72	83.54	83.26	83.92	86.92	96.96

diary, with pictures of throwing stars on the cover and top coaches on the back. Finland rewards coaches who produce outstanding throwers with gifts of up to 10,000 Finnish marks and the honor of being on the cover of each diary. There are all sorts of charts in the book, and the understanding is that when you get one. . . you fill it out. Seppo does. I can attest to that.

With this great background in throwing, there is a subtle pressure to follow what has gone on before. Fill out the diary, respect the coach and work hard. It seems to be built into the system. On occasion, an athlete will switch to another coach, but I noticed no animosity or rivalries during my stay there. In fact, it was pointed out to me on one occasion that a coach was talking to his former athlete's current coach—lots of laughing, etc.

I should point out that one unusual aspect of Finnish javelin is this: most coaches are pure volunteers. Only the National Coach of each event and the overall Throws Coach get a regular stipend, as far as I can tell. Coaches like Jarmo are employed at the training centers, but there are many guys like Don who put in an enormous number of unpaid hours. Almost every weekend there is something going on, and I saw no evidence of jealousy between the volunteers and the few paid coaches. When I say "volunteer," do not get the impression they show up once or twice a week. Many of these coaches have daily contact with the athletes.

Seppo's coach showed me all his workouts, and I would like to print a few sample weeks from various years to show you the quantity and quality of work which was done. These kinds of reports are regularly printed in an excellent throws/jumps periodical called *Heitto/Hyppy*. The first week is from February, 1982:

Sunday

- Technical throws 15 x 800gm

Monday

- Bench Press 6x60, 4x80, 2x2x90kg
- Deep Squat 6x100, 6x100, 4x110, 4x110kg
- Clean 5x100, 4x110, 2x120, 1x130, 1x130kg
- Half squat 10x120, 8x130, 6x140, 4x150, 3x160, 1x170kg
- Abs, weight on chest 8x50, 6x60, 4x70, 2x80kg
- Half squat 2x6x90, 120, 130kg
- Snatch 6x60, 70, 80kg
- Total = 11,710kg

Tuesday

- Warmup
- Running
- Alt. bounds, jumps 2x5x11
- Bunnies 5x10

Wednesday

- Basketball
- Strides 5x30m
- Flat-out sprints 5x20m
- Medicine ball 30 throws

Thursday

- Basketball
- Medicine ball 40 throws
- SLJ 5x5; 2x5x3 bunnies

Friday

- Deep squat 2x8x90, 2x6x100, 2x4x110, 2x2x120, 1x130, 4x120, 4x110kg
- Bench press 2x8x60, 2x6x70, 2x4x80, 2x2x90, 1x100, 3x80kg
- One-arm pulls 3x6x20kg
- Leg press 4x6x80kg
- Total = 12,920kg

Saturday

- Rest

Comment: this is typical deep winter training. I was surprised to see such little actual throwing, but perhaps there was some soreness or injury. In these early years, Seppo's squat was nothing like what it became in the late 1980s. As you can tell by Figure 1, Seppo progressed quite a bit from 1982-89, more than doubling his one-rep max.

Talk about progress. Check out this front squat workout that he did on December 28, 1986: Front squat 5x60, 2x5x100, 8x5x130!!!, 1x150, 1x160, 1x170, miss 1 x 175, 1x150, 1x155, 1x160, 1x165, 1x170, miss 1x175, 1x150, 1x155, 1x160, 1x165, miss 1x170, 1x150, 1x155, 1x160, miss 1x165, 1x160, 1x160, miss 1x170, 1x150, 1x155, 1x160, miss 1x165, 3x1x150.

His PR for the front squat for that year was listed as 160, so I assume that some of these attempts were not full depth. Still!! That is an enormous number of sets for that lift. That was the transition year for the javelin so it is hard to say what effect this kind of hard work had on his training. A glance at my notes confirms that this kind of front squat workout that year was common. No other lift received this sort of attention at this stage of the season.

So, this is a brief look at some of Seppo's training. In a future installation of this report, I will transcribe interviews, give a report on biomechanics and review Finnish javelin technique.

While we did not find Seppo in his hometown, I finally got to meet him in Kuopio, the site of the Winter Championships. It was around midnight in the bar of the meet headquarters hotel, when American javelinist Karin Smith approached me and said, "If you'd like to meet Seppo, he will see you now, but you can't bring any recorders or pens."

I had finished telling some people that the search for Seppo was actually taking on a humorous side. I had been everywhere he normally can be found, and here we were in this bar, miles away from his home. It was like the novice mystic getting ready to meet the Dalai Lama. With some degree of "Who knows what to expect?" I approached Seppo.

In my best Finnish, I said, "Paiva," and shook his hand. "Paiva" means "Good day," and here it was midnight. We spent about 30 minutes chatting, along with Karin and Paivi Alafrantti. Eino had told me that they were spending a lot of time throwing weighted balls with



Seppo Rätty—in the flesh.

one hand, and I asked him about that. It seems that he wants to throw from more of a power base since his legs and physique cannot take a speed approach.

The next day, in the meet, he confirmed this situation by whacking the top of the huge bubble where the event took place on throw after throw. May I state that if Seppo had launched a throw without hitting the roof, it would have gone into orbit.

He likes to train alone and to be close to home but he does tolerate occasional training in the centers. He believes that each thrower should have a model and he thought Janis Lusia (Soviet World Record holder and Olympic champion in the '60s and '70s) was fantastic.

You could sense the dedication in his eyes. Seppo is a professional javelin thrower. This is his job and he communicates that fact. His words were measured but he gave me a clue concerning this search for Finnish excellence. He told me that this desire is passed on from thrower to thrower.

It really isn't that the javelin is foremost in the average Finn's mind. How can a man like Seppo go outside each day in the winter to freeze and risk serious injury just to throw a spear? What enables this small nation to produce world class thrower after thrower, men and women? It is almost like a "soul." This desire to throw becomes part of each Finnish thrower's per-

sonality. Passing this energy, if you will, from one to another, spreads the word of the javelin.

This passing of the flame happens at a young age. When I watched the 14-year-olds throw, I was stunned to see such near-perfection. Two of the young throwers I saw had thrown over 70m with a 600-gram javelin! They wear the same clothes, the same shoes, and even act the same. There was no goofing around. They had learned the sacrament of the javelin. They had already mastered the rites.

What I actually learned is that the answer is not really any of the technical stuff I have written about and will write about. How much can variation can there be in power cleaning? Technically, the Finns are good, but so are many others. The real answer is in the hearts and minds of these people. You really cannot learn this, you can only see it in action.

In New York City, the heart in high school track is largely gone. At Columbia University in 1992, the high jump at the PSAL meet was won at 6-2. Eight million people, and the highest a city athlete can jump is 6-2. Forget the pole vault. We have missed the point in this city, and maybe in many other cities throughout the U.S. Kids go out for sports, if they do it at all, for social reasons, while in Finland they search for excellence. Let's not blame the kids here, let's blame ourselves. We are the ones who elected officials who paid no attention to fitness and sport. And now, in New York, there is talk of spending \$350 million on a new arena to keep the Yankees in the city. That is the problem here.

Finland does not have the resources we have, and their economy has taken a huge hit from the Soviet Union's collapse. Yet, they provide a healthier environment for people in general and a tremendous environment for elite athletes and those who aspire to become world class. At the two centers I visited, I did not see one fat kid, and these were just regular town kids visiting the center. In New York, I can walk 30 feet and find mountains of blubber on many kids and even more on adults.

In one sense, I think we have blown it here. Rather than spending \$350 million on the Yankees, New York should spend it on building training centers all over the city for people to enjoy and rebuild themselves. The vast majority of New Yorkers cannot afford the expensive gyms. When Finnish youngsters go to their centers, they see people of all ages—average folks working out, socializing, hitting the sauna, etc. And the food in Finland!!! Terrific.

My comments on New York apply to many cities in this country. Recent evidence is that most adults vastly prefer the couch potato scene. Only by providing fitness centers on the level of Finland's can we break this cycle.

So, when I left Seppo, all of this became crystal clear. We need to get athletes in the U.S. to a higher level. They need to pass on energy to younger kids, who can be enthusiastic because there is a place to work out. If you want to know how a small country of less than five million can do it, go to Finland and see for yourself. As I write this, I know I must return to this beautiful place and meet these new friends again. Philosophers have gone to India for enlightenment, but I was raised to a higher level in Finland.