

## THE FINNISH DEFENCE FORCES AS A PROMOTER OF HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND PHYSICAL FITNESS OF THE CITIZENS

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The Physical training in the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) is based on the requirements and objectives set both by national defence and the society. The objectives of the FDF and the needs of surrounding society are parallel due to general liability to do military service and the doctrine in national defence based on a conscript army service system. It is the task of the FDF to promote the will among the citizens to defend their country and the activity improving the citizens' physical fitness (Act on the Defence Forces).

### Background

General conscription was enforced in independent Finland in 1918. Already then, the FDF became a significant promoter of the physical condition among Finnish men. Regulations in gymnastics and sports were issued in 1920. The significance of sports in improving the citizen's defence capacity and the objective of sports in military training were handled in the regulations. To increase the readiness in national defence and the interest in sports, the Civil Guard was established. The FDF was an important background factor in civil guard sports, which had an impact on a considerable part of the citizens. The Civil Guard took care of leadership training in sports, and also participated in the construction of sports tracks, swimming pools, firing ranges and jumping hills. A shooting competition from 1938 shows well the extend and effect of the activity: more than 40.000 people (some 10% of the whole population) participated in this competition. The FDF has also participated in and greatly contributed to the development of the Finnish sports institutes. One of the reasons for the establishment of sports institutes was the need to get instructors to the FDF. For instance, the Finnish Sport Institute in Vierumäki was established in 1927 by persons engaged in the activity of the Civil Guard.

### Governmental and nongovernmental sport

Rural and urban municipalities act as official representatives of the society in the support of the citizens' physical activity. They create opportunities for physical education in schools and see to that the citizens are offered physical activity through the administration in charge of leisure and recreation services. The municipal sports authorities are more and more engaged in creating and maintaining resources. The role of the FDF as a promoter of citizens' sports activities is prescribed by law (see above).

Sports clubs, different organisations and various projects are increasingly in charge of the physical activity of the Finns. The Ministry of Education allocates funds for the development of sport for all in particular. In funding, the share of athletics is some 20%. As a joint effort the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health have started a project called « In good condition at all ages ». It aims at increasing the physical activity of middle-aged people, from 40 to 60 years of age. By effective and versatile activity maintaining work ability, in which one basic pillar is physical activity, the work ability and professional skills or personnel are secured. An employee engaged in physical activity is often active and energetic (Figure 1). The objective is to increase the number of those physically active from 33% to 43% by the year 2000. The project was started in 1995. Central organisations that co-operate in this project represent physical education, health care, social services, the labour market and the unemployed.

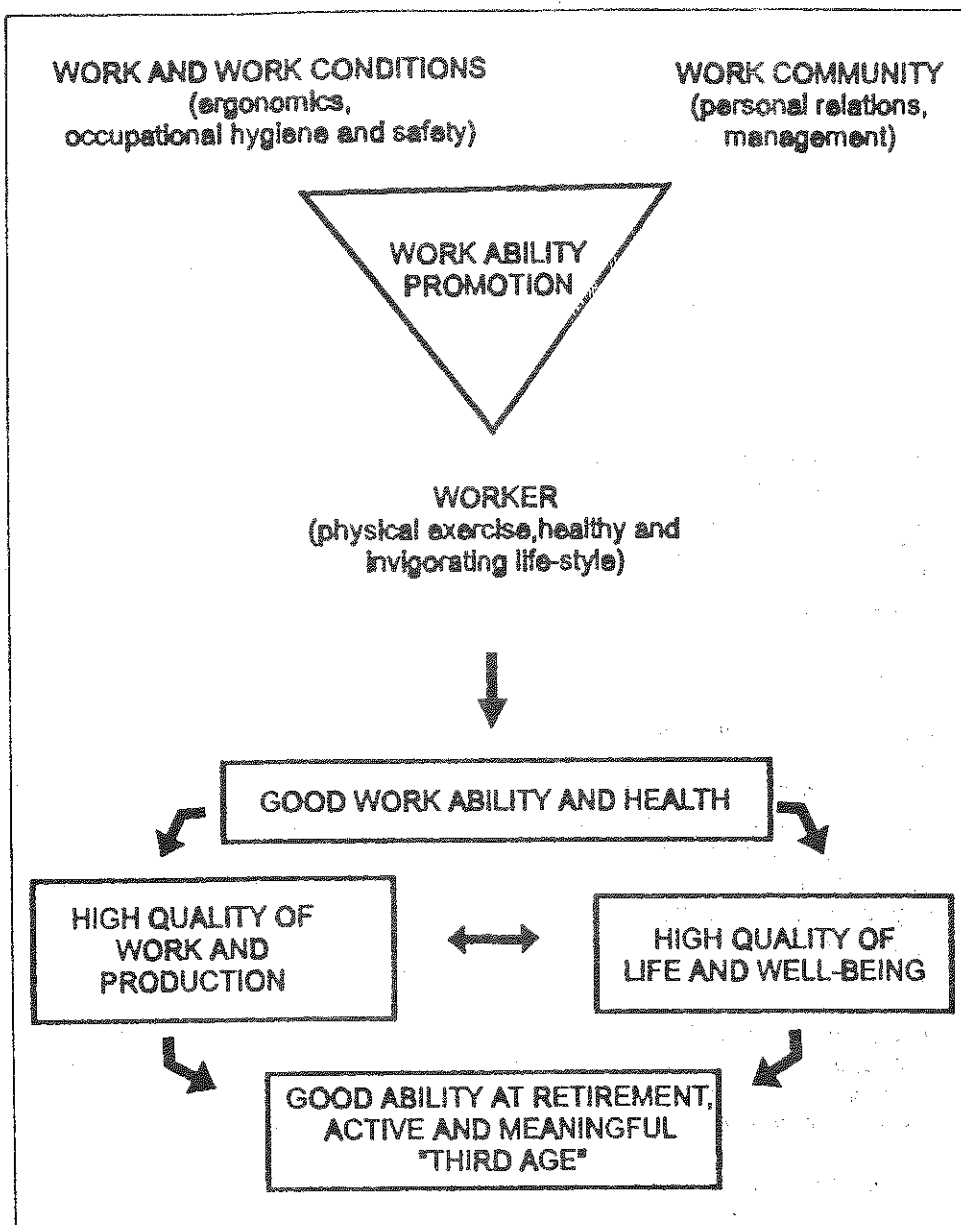


Figure 1.  
Work ability promotion creates a good basis for health, work ability and professional skills.  
(Louhevaara & Smolander 1995)

There are several sport-for-all organisations in Finland producing training material for instructors in leisure and recreation services. They also organise various campaigns and events to support the citizens' interest in sports. The activity of sports clubs is mainly aimed at the physical activity of children and the young and athletics intended for various age groups.

Research in sports for all and its impact on health is carried out by the University of Jyväskylä, the UKK Institute (named after the late President Urho Kekkonen), the Paavo Nurmi Institute, the National Public Health Institute, the Institute of Occupational Health and the Social Insurance Institution.

## Health of Finnish citizens today

Presently, the physical performance of the Finns at the age when they perform their compulsory military service seems satisfactory. In recent years, there has been a downward trend in endurance fitness (Appendix 1).

In 1980, 71,6% and in 1994, only 58,7% of the conscripts reached class 'good' (> 2,600m) in the 12 min running tests. On the other hand, muscular fitness has remained on the 'good' level which it reached in 1888 (Appendix 2). This standard is much due to increased training facilities. In the 1980's and 1990's, the number of fitness rooms increased considerably throughout the country. In addition, during these decades, especially young men started to pay more and more attention to their body image. In motor skills, skiing is an event showing a decline. An inquiry conducted in 1989 revealed that in the year prior to their military service, 40 to 49% of the conscripts had not been doing cross-country skiing at all. Less physical education at school and the fact that it is likely that leisure sports has become more one-sided probably explain the decline in the standard of general motor skills.

On a national level, the health of reservists causes worry and according to the forecasts the situation will worsen in the future. Diseases of the locomotion system, mental disorders and diseases of the cardiovascular system are the most general reasons for the incapacity to work. The number of Finns who are overweight has increased. This increase was strengthened in the 1990's, particularly among those under 35 years of age. Men are fatter than women but quite recently, overweight among women has increased more than that among men (Figure 2).

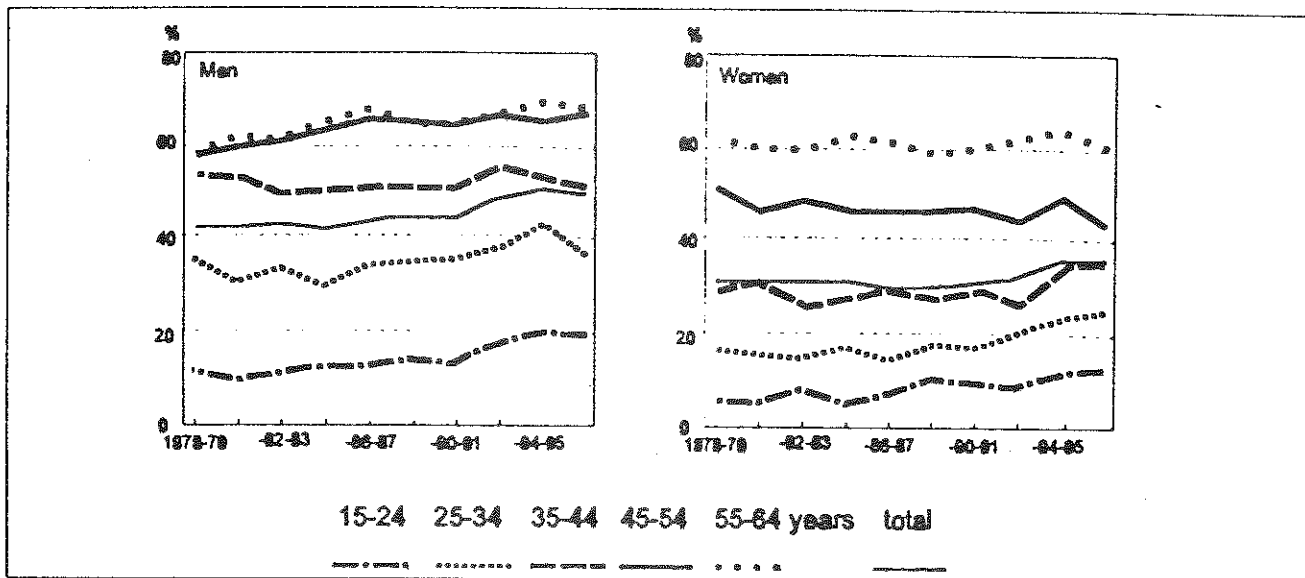


Figure 2. Proportion of overweight men and women (BMI  $\geq$  25) in 1978-1996 (%)

According to the studies made, 25 to 33% of the population exercises enough in regard to health. Those in the age group 35 to 44 do least of leisure-time exercises. Some 20% of the population of working age think that the lack of exercise is the most important reason for poor health among so many Finns. Of the adults, 80 - 90% regard exercise as important for them for various health reasons and as an interest by which positive experiences are gained. The problem is to get people to continue with exercises on a permanent basis.

The role of physical education at school has traditionally been significant for Finnish children. Nowadays there is less of physical education due to the emphasis on mathematical and language studies. In the lower and upper comprehensive school, the number of lessons in physical education is 2 hours a week on an average. In senior secondary school, the number of lesson hours varies but the average is about 1 hour a week.

About 85% of the Finnish men do their compulsory military service. Approx. 30,000 conscripts enter service each year. About 800 of them are women who do service as volunteers. There are some 420,000 reservists, of whom only a fraction are women. The Defence Forces want to develop the performance of the conscripts so that their capabilities meet the requirements of the modern battlefield. The responsibility and individual thinking of the individual are emphasised. In addition to the traditional physical requirements (endurance and muscular fitness), the requirements set on strength and body control are increased.

In the new training system for conscripts, to enter into force in 1998, the terms of service are 6 months at their shortest and 12 months at their longest. The share of physical education in each period of training is almost 20% of the whole training. Authoritarian training methods have been prevailing in physical education, and therefore motivating and progressive training, based on reflection, has not been implemented in the very best way.

The present situation is very challenging for us. The reorganisation of conscript training, the fairly good facilities for physical activity in the garrisons and the reforms in officer training offer good opportunities for the development of physical training. It is the intention to make physical training of the conscript period progressive with new orders, whose contents have been modified to take into consideration, for instance, the total strain of the training.

The development of the instructors' professional skills is probably a vital factor. The whole society lives a state of great cultural change, proceeding from an industrial society to an information society. A change from a way of training which is too patronising to a way that encourages initiative must be made. This will motivate the conscripts to achieve better results and thus give them more positive experiences of physical training. The position of the instructors must be strengthened, they must be encouraged to make independent decisions and thereby be able to develop the contents of the training. The instructors must have courage to examine their own work, results and attitude as instructors and to make themselves the changes needed. The instructors' know-how in the development of the physical performance has to be improved. And this is something for which officers training bears responsibility. We must be able to answer the youth of the information society why a certain exercise is carried out, how it affects the human body etc. The relation between strain and recovery is affected by the 24-hour-period, which includes much else than physical training.

Officer training has to provide the basic knowledge of sport pedagogy, anatomy, sport physiology, biomechanics, coaching and sport medicine. Based on sufficient basic knowledge, the instructors have every opportunity to cope with the practical training situations that are undergoing constant change. In a certain way, a unit commander can be compared to a sport coach. He must be able to draw up such weekly programmes that soldiers are capable of developing in an optimum way. From time to time, the training can be very straining, but not until the prerequisites have been created. After strenuous training there must be a period of recovery to avoid overtraining. A continuous state of overtraining will lead to tiring and it will possibly end in a negative attitude towards sport and other training. During the period of conscript training, the soldiers should receive models for exercise programmes, which they can use after their military service, and which they think as meaningful. In the future, the work of a military instructor will resemble much more the work of a professional in physical education.

In the development of officer training, the newest trends in teaching and learning will be followed. It can even result in a new science in military training: military pedagogy. Central parts in military pedagogy are adult and professional education, sport sciences, sociology and psychology. Military pedagogy uses all these in support in order to implement, develop and study the development of the capability of individuals and troops to perform and act. The objective is the instructors' professional development, and thereby the development of training practice.

If the instructor knows his business and is prepared to support the learning of his subordinates, and if he shows positive and motivated behaviour and his instructions' methods are that as well, the training result is likely to be good.

Furthermore the subordinates may become permanently interested in sports. A great responsibility as to successful training lies with the brigade-level commanders, whose example and attitude may definitely either support or hamper the development of a new kind of culture promoting learning in their own unit. The saying, from a high quarter, « it is unfortunate that nowadays the respect of the subordinates has to be earned again and again each day. » describes well the current challenges of the authoritarian system.

### Conclusion

We in the FDF are now living in period when there are good opportunities to develop physical training in a better direction. The high command of the FDF supports the reforms in physical training. In a broad sense, the citizens have a positive attitude towards sport. The orientation of the young generation in officer training is positive. In the National Defence College, the training of soldiers is developed so that the initiative of the individual, his capability to make independent decisions and to work in a group are considered.

We are facing substantial changes in the future. The future army will see young people whose physical fitness has deteriorated while the demands of the battlefield increase. In sports the interest of the young ones will follow the latest fashions, and they must, to a certain extent, be taken into account, so that military training keeps up with the times. Nevertheless, the basic forms of sport will always retain their position in military sport. The final objective to increase the sports activities among reservists. They have to be made to look after their condition, so that FDF will have as efficient troops as possible and that the citizens' health and well-being will be further improved.

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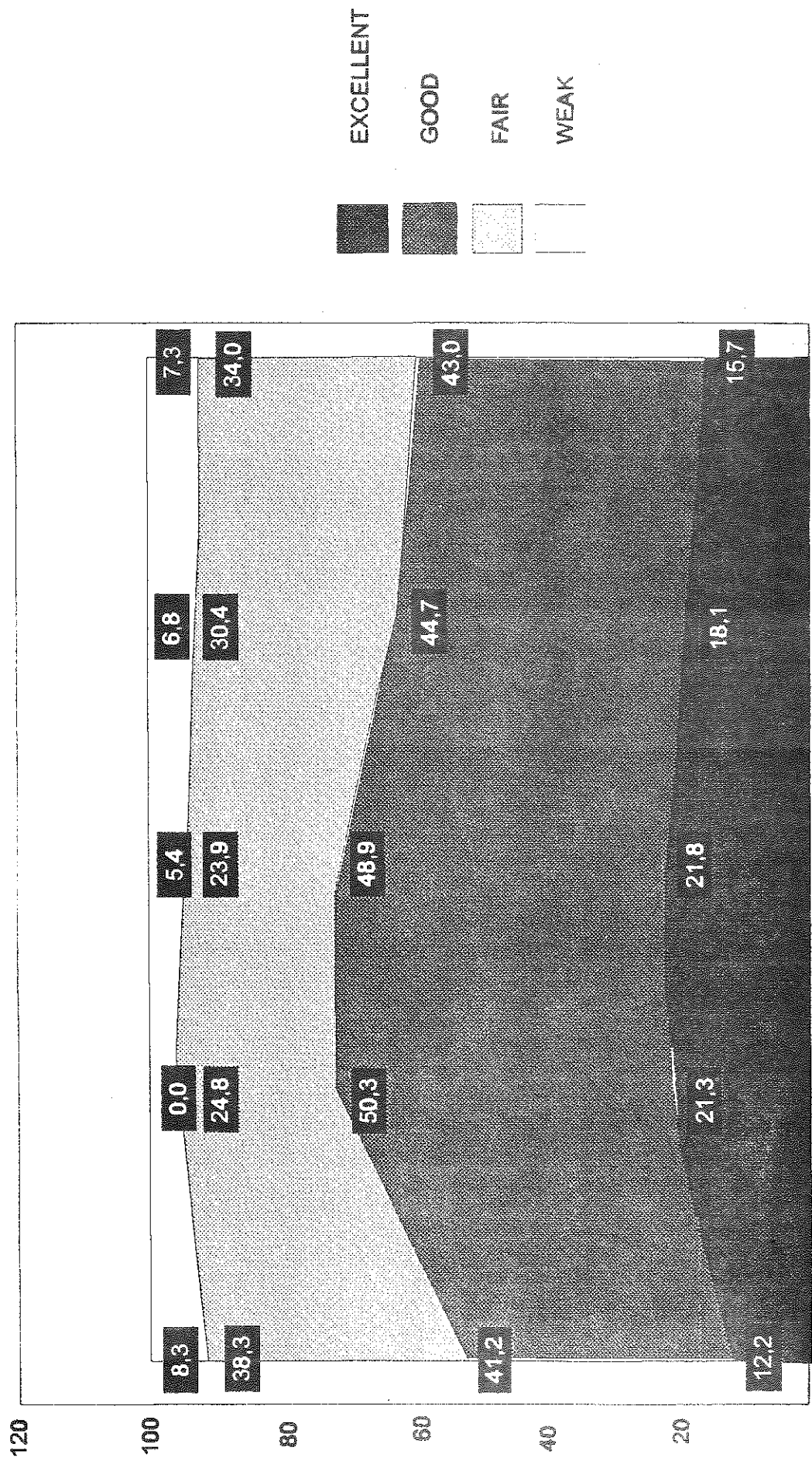
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# CONSCRIPTS 12 MIN RUNNING TEST 1974-1994, 1. TEST (%)



Year 1974 1980 1985 1990 1994

# MUSCULAR ENDURANCE 1984-1992 (good + excellent %)

