

THE FINNISH DEFENCE FORCES AS AN EDUCATOR OF MILITARY AND CIVILIAN TOP ATHLETES

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History

Especially during the early period of the country's independence, the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) played a significant role in the organization of sports and fitness training, the building of sports facilities, and the organization and start of physical education and coaching training as well as competitions.

The FDF have strongly influenced and supported the early years of the operation of several national sport federations. Among these are skiing, gymnastics, shooting, riding, fencing, modern pentathlon, biathlon, orienteering, swimming, parachute jumping and aviation and finally Finnish baseball.

Under the Defence Forces Act, one of the tasks of the FDF is to promote the will of the citizens to defend the country while also encouraging activities to improve their physical fitness. In Finland there are two ministries that take care of the citizens' condition (fitness) by law: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defence. Even nowadays this fact gives strong basic grounds for improving the fitness of conscripts and personnel, for international and national military sport and for the research in physical fitness.

Conscription

Professional armed forces are a very common military system in the world of today. Despite that, the FDF are still based on conscription, in which conscripts serve for periods of 6, 9 or 12 months. Annually 82% of the age class of 30,000 men performs their compulsory military service. It is very high figure and gives good expression of the attitude of young men towards national defence in Finland. The Finnish people have a common opinion that the army is the "Men's School" and necessary for everybody. For women, military service is voluntary.

Of athletes, nearly 100% do their military service. Each year some 160 athletes serve as conscripts in the Defence Forces Sports School in Lahti. Of the men in the Finnish Olympic teams, 60 to 70% have done their service in the Sports School. The rest of them have served in ordinary military units.

The Defence Staff has underlined very clearly that the main support to the athletes will be concentrated to the Defence Forces Sport School even in the future. Those athletes who will serve in other units or for a shorter time will have fewer opportunities to practice their sport during the military service. During the Second World War, athletes proved to be among the best soldiers. Nowadays athletes are still a very potential group to be trained as soldiers, thanks to their better physical fitness and mental strength. Nowadays, the military leadership training as a part of conscription benefits without any doubt work and studies in Finland.

These aspects are the reasons why the Defence Forces want to emphasize leadership training and, therefore, act like an educator of young athletes regarding life after their sport career.

Defence Forces Sport School

The DFFS is situated in Lahti and it is a unit of the Häme Regiment. All athletes serve 12 months to become corporals or even second lieutenants in the reserve. They will get military training in reconnaissance.

It is not so easy to be selected to the Sport School. The athlete must be among the top athletes of his age group in Finland. The Sport School coaches also make the interview to clarify the athletes' future motivation towards sport. The National Federations give a statement in which the athletes are ranked. In addition, the applicants must undergo psychological tests. The test is eliminating. This system ensures that the athletes are talented and strong enough to train and pass a demanding military and sport programme.

Finnish Military Sports teams

There are no professional athletes in the FDF. Military athletes have to undergo officer (1-4 years) training similar to other soldiers. The Frontier Guard officers and warrant officers receive the same training. The training for frontier jaegers at the Frontier Guard lasts about a year.

For the top-level sportsmen in the FDF and the Frontier Guard, a coaching system led by the Defence Staff has been developed to achieve success in international military sports. All services, the Army, Navy and Air Force, are subordinate to the Defence Staff or included in the coaching system.

The athletes in A-teams are 2/3 professionals. Teams, including leaders, coaches and athletes have their own coaching budget consisting of daily allowance, travel and accommodation costs. There are about 50 athletes in A-teams and the best athletes also belong to the national team.

Other contribution to sport

Based on law and established traditions, the FDF also support national civilian top sport. In addition, the FDF have supported the organization of the big international sport contests such as World Championships and the Olympic Games in 1952. This support still continues. The FDF will have a role in organizing the World Championship in Athletics in 2005. The FDF are also one of the main partners in the biggest orienteering relay of the world: the Jukola Relay.

Future challenges

The basic training system for Finnish officers has undergone great changes. A special reconnaissance and physical education branch is available for cadets interested in sports and PE. The impact and possibilities of these changes must be carefully studied when evaluating the future coaching system and career alternatives of athletes. For example, as a temporary decision, athletes could choose the shortest alternative of officer education and after that work as professional athletes for at least 5 years.

Another current issue (and problem) is professionalism among young athletes. Fulfilling the compulsory military service before the age of 30, which is the deadline, poses a challenging task for the professional athletes nowadays. Presently, the goal of this planning is to create a reasonable possibility for those athletes, who already live abroad, to perform their military service. Deviding the shortest military service to 3 periods could perhaps be one solution.

The Defence Forces must take a prominent role together with the Sport Federations to have an impact on the choices young men make. Military service must be completed before the professional sport career.

Conclusion

Based to the common conscription system, the fact that every young athlete does military service, the FDF play a central role in the attitude young athletes will adopt. The objective of the Defence Forces Sport School with its 12-month leadership training, reconnaissance and physical education branch in officers' basic training and unprofessional international military sport teams, is to train athletes to take responsibility for their life after the sports career.