The 1st European Discus Throw Conference “Breaking the Myths”

Tallinn, Estonia

Introduction

The Estonian Athletic Association, Eesti Kergejõustikuliit, welcomed its newly crowned Olympic gold medallist in the discus, Gerd Kanter, discus world record holder Jürgen Schult and 71 participants from 19 countries to Tallinn, for the first European Discus Throw Conference on 17 and 18 September 2008.

The conference, which had the theme “Breaking the Myths”, was the first event in the new European Athletics Coaching Summit Series. It was organised with the support of insurance company ERGO to coincide with the second edition of the ERGO World Discus Challenge, a competition for 2008’s six best three-thrower national teams.

The conference programme included theoretical presentations, practical sessions and a panel discussion on the issues and problems faced by today’s coaches and athletes in the throwing events. This report summarises the main presentations.

Planning and scheduling strength training for the world class discus throwers in my training group.
Vésteinn Hafsteinsson (ISL)

Hafsteinsson, who has been Gerd Kanter’s coach since 2001, gave two presentations. The first was a formal lecture covering strength training and periodisation and the second was a practical session, featuring Kanter and physiotherapist Indrek Tustit, in which the activities of a typical training session were demonstrated.

In his lecture, Hafsteinsson covered the principles of strength training, training methods and training forms using the example of Kanter’s programme over the last eight years. He said his aim was to use science, experience and common sense to make a programme specific to Kanter and nobody else. He emphasised that the key to successful discus throwing is speed and therefore strength training must emphasise its development through a structure based on the principles of Olympic and power lifting. Hafsteinsson also talked in some detail about stabilisation and symmetry exercises and about rehabilitation techniques. He added that with Kanter having achieved world and Olympic titles and a best mark of 73.38m, they were considering training programme adjustments the would bring the thrower into top form for meetings where the wind conditions were likely to be favourable for long throws and a chance at Schult’s world record, perhaps in the spring of 2009 in the USA.

The practical session, which took place in an indoor training hall, started with a warm-up of 30 minutes during which Tustit and Kanter demonstrated their daily routine of running, coordination work, hurdle drills, gymnastics and stabilisation exercises. After that Hafsteinsson and Kanter went through the technique part of the session, covering all the technical details of the throw.
steinsson then discussed the same details referring to a video screen with a film of Kanter in action. At the end of the session Hafsteinsson opened up for a dialogue with participants.

Biomechanical analysis – what to believe?
Aadu Krevald (EST)

Krevald, the biomechanics advisor to Gerd Kanter’s team, is the former Docent at Tallinn University of Technology, Referring to the fact that various researchers have attempted to use different methods to describe the movement of biological objects in space, he explained that the underlying presumption to biomechanical analysis of the movement of the human body is that the sum of the mutual impact of individual body parts (internal forces) equals zero. Treating the athlete as a biosystem consisting of body parts, we must first find the common centre of mass for the entire system (SCM). The SCM always involves all the parameters characterising the mechanical behaviour of the system. After determining all the parameters through the analysis of a particular performance, we obtain rational information about the performance. There is then a need to further analyse the individual body positions, movements and amplitudes. Now, discussing several performances by one athlete, we can talk about successes and failures and in most cases we can also determine why a performance was unsuccessful.
In the case of the discus, Krevald said the above-mentioned parameters cannot be measured by the eye or with simple to use measuring instruments. However, they play a crucial role in the success of the throw. Coaches try to optimise these parameters in day-to-day training sessions, but unfortunately the only feedback is the flight distance and direction of the implement.

Gerd Kanter’s way to the top
Raul Rebane (EST)

Rebane, who has worked for Estonian national television as sports journalist and programme manager, is currently the media consultant, initiator and manager of Gerd Kanter’s team. He started his presentation by defining a myth as “a story that comes true when you believe it.” He then gave examples of how bits of information become and the philosophy behind his success. Referring to the title of the conference, he said that breaking myths was one of the guiding principles for himself as an athlete and for the team of specialists who had supported his development. There are many different routes to the top, to the Olympic gold medal, and everyone has to find their own way. The most important thing is to stay on the main road. He said, that he has his teammates on the side roads holding “STOP” signs trying to keep him focused.

Kanter explained that there are three aspects that have contributed to his victories: first, a belief in his ability and a strong desire to win; second, a professional approach and working with a team of specialists who are professionals in their own fields; third a feeling that what he does is needed and appreciated. He said that from the beginning it was the idea of his team that sport must be clean and fair to be worthwhile. He acknowledged that there are problems with doping in sport but that there are some good signs that the idea of getting victories by cheating doesn’t work as well as it once did.

Talking about the state of discus throwing today Kanter said that there were some dark clouds that had to be overcome. He pointed out that, unlike the shot put and the jumping events, there was no official winter championship and that there had been no discus in the Golden League for four years. But he said he was confident the sunshine will come.
more important than the whole picture to form myths that limit athletes. What is your record in the bench press? What is your record with the 3kg shot put? How far do you throw the 2.2kg discus? These points are interesting, perhaps important, but they do not really say how well someone will perform in competition. In fact, for these and other exercises that many believe predict performance in discus throwing, Kanter is not as good as other top throwers. But he is the Olympic Champion.

The factors that determine whether an individual can succeed as an athlete are: first, genetic, second, lifestyle and third, the capability to handle the routine demanded by a training and competition programme. It is common that an athlete enters a system and is prepared in accordance with the procedures, and myths, of the system. However, every athlete is an individual and has his or her own character. Systems, in fact, have to be developed for the athlete, not the other way around. The time of mass production in sport is over. You could not apply Kanter’s Olympic winning training system to another athlete – it will not work.

Rabane explained that Kanter’s strengths include his self-belief and ambition. He illustrated this by recounting a story from March 2001. At the time, Kanter’s personal best was 57.68m and he had just made his first training plans with his new coach Vésteinn Hafsteinsson. He asked Rabane three times “Raul, who will be the Olympic Champion in 2008?” Rabane responded that he had no idea. Kanter said: “I will be”.

Discus throw training methods
Jürgen Schult (GER)

Schult, who has held the world record in the discus (74.08m) since 1986, currently works as a national coach in Germany and is guiding the career of Gordon Wolf (U20 world champion in 2008). He started his presentation by giving the statistics that influence the organisation of the training programme he uses. For example, competition averages, performances at Olympic Games, World Championships and European Championships, analysis of the world best lists and development of performance from world class athletes. Then he introduced the main points of building up a training programme. He explained the importance of the relationship between weight lifts and special exercises, and the development of performance in weight exercises and weight lifting intensities. He covered long-term development as well as double and single periodisation. He gave an overview of 18-year-old Wolf’s training programme and development. Wolf already has a PB of 59.59m with the 2kg discus.

Conclusion

The conference was definitely a success. Both the organisers and European Athletics expressed their satisfaction but, more importantly, the results of a post-event survey in which the participants were asked about the statement “The conference as a whole was worthwhile and valuable” found that 50% agreed and the other 50% strongly agreed.

A two DVD set with videos of all the presentations, the practical session and the panel discussion is available from www.team75plus.com.

The Estonian federation has now committed to staging a follow-up conference in 2009, to again coincide with the next edition of the ERGO Discus Challenge, and then making the conference a regular event, possibly on a biennial basis in the coming years.

Reported by Hans Üürike

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