The 2nd World Discus Throwing Conference

Tallinn, Estonia

The 2nd World Discus Throwing Conference, with the theme “Tomorrow’s Success is a Bold Vision of Today”, was held in Tallinn, Estonia, from 15 to 16 September 2009.

The first of four conferences in the 2009 European Athletics Coaching Summit Series, it was organised by the Estonian Athletic Association, Eesti Kergejõustikuliit, with the support of European Athletics and attracted 69 participants from seven countries. The programme featured appearances by no less than four Olympic medallists and included theoretical presentations, practical demonstration sessions and a panel discussion. This report summarises the main points covered in the various elements.

Speed training for discus throwers
Vésteinn Hafsteinsson (ISL)

Hafsteinsson, who is the coach of 2008 Olympic Champion Gerd Kanter, led a session that was mostly theoretical but included some practical exercises and was based on his experience working with a group of top discus throwers. He said his aim was to give the coaches present something they could immediately apply and use with whomever they work. He started his presentation with an overview of three aspects of speed training for youngsters and juniors: running, jumping and medicine ball training. In the second part he turned to specific speed training for world-class athletes. Here he discussed throws, drills and technique training as well as specific weight lifting. He said that in his approach, speed methods as well as various speed-forms were introduced in relation to the general development of speed as well as for specific speed for the discus.

Key elements in a stable discus technique
Vésteinn Hafsteinsson (ISL) & Gerd Kanter (EST)

In this session, Hafsteinsson teamed up with his athlete Kanter, who ably demonstrated various points. Hafsteinsson structured his presentation around a comparison of the techniques of Kanter, Robert Harting (GER), Piotr Malachowski (POL) and Dani Samuels (AUS). He did this by focusing on five points of each thrower’s technique: the swing, turn, sprint, power position and release. Kanter, of course, showed his way of doing things. The presentation concluded with questions from the participants and an open discussion.

Decathlon Discus Training
Vésteinn Hafsteinsson (ISL)

For his third presentation of the conference, Hafsteinsson discussed the theory of
preparing a decathlete to perform in the discus. He covered technique, specific strength and mental training. From a practical point of view, he showed four elements of technique for decathletes and some drills for them to master. He then discussed the mental aspects, emphasising stability and control. The presentation also included practical exercises for specific strength that decathletes should use in their daily routine.

**My experience of the importance of discus throwing as part of decathlon**

Erki Nool (EST)

Nool, the 2000 Olympic Champion in the decathlon, confessed that discus throwing is physically the easiest event for a decathlete. In his case, it was usually practiced on the off days. “If I felt tired, I practiced discus throwing,” he said before adding that, unfortunately, he and most other decathletes struggle with this very technical discipline. One reason is that they generally do not have the perfect body build for the event: we cannot compare an athlete who weighs 85kg and an athletic giant who weighs as much as 125kg. A second reason is the annual training cycle: during autumn, decathlon training is very similar to that of specialist throwers – a lot of throws, less running, more weight lifting. In this period Nool tended to have confidence in the event and was feeling really good. However, every spring his training incorporated more running and special exercises and fewer throws. With this, his confidence for throwing was gone. For one of his conclusions Nool recommended that top decathletes should use professional specialists in the discus and other technically complex events.

**Comparison of the technique of John Powell and Mac Wilkins**

Shaun Pickering (GBR)

Former international-level thrower Pickering started by explaining that in the 1970’s and 1980’s Americans John Powell and Mac Wilkins were the two most talked about discus throwers in the world. You were either a John fan or a Mac fan; there was no middle ground! Their intense and often bitter rivalry made them a talking point on and off the field. And the discussion continues to this day. The presentation pulled together the two throwers’ own words and images of their throws, highlighting key differences and, perhaps more importantly, similarities in their techniques. According to Pickering, Powell, who at 1.88m and 105-109kg was the smaller of the two, had a quick, economical technique and tried to “outwork” the opposition with thousands of throws and simulation drills. On the other hand, “Multiple Mac”, 1.93m and 115-120kg and
probably the greatest all-around thrower in the world (78m+ in the javelin and 21m+ in the shot), used his height advantage and tremendous athletic ability to full effect in a controlled and powerful technique, with an explosive, “almost violent” final delivery. While Powell would allow the discus to find its own path or orbit, concentrating on the movement of his lower body and feet in particular and thereby minimising the effort required to hold the discus in position, Wilkins would look to set the discus on a high path to the front of the circle by almost throwing it to its high point with a sweeping jump out of the back of the circle. Most of Powell’s throws were released at shoulder-level, about 1.80m, while Wilkins’ release height varied from shoulder-level to an extremely high 2.30m in some of his better throws. However, when viewing their Olympic medal winning throws from Montreal in 1976 side-by-side, it is surprising just how much the two have in common in terms of timing and positions. Indeed, other than a slightly longer wind-up and unwind from Wilkins, from the first lifting of the right foot at the back of the circle to the release of the discus, the two throwers’ timings are particularly similar.

One Participant’s Feedback

Until a few years ago there were several shortcomings in the development of discus throwing. One of these was a lack of discus-specific conferences providing a vision about correct training methodology. For today, this issue is solved and we can say that there were many concerned people visiting 2nd World Discus Throwing Conference to learn what is best and most beneficial. The programme included many different lectures and two sample training sessions. For me as a young thrower it was all interesting.

Vésteinn Hafsteinsson’s lecture “Speed training for discus throwers” was particularly valuable, because I think that speed is a key component of discus throwing and it is the right time in my own career to talk about this in biomechanical detail.

I was also looking forward to the sample training sessions. The first, “Key elements of stable discus technique”, was performed by reigning Olympic champion Gerd Kanter and his coach Hafsteinsson. The comparison of different throwers: Kanter, Robert Harting, Pjotr Malachowski and Dani Samuels was very thorough and helped me to gain a better understanding of discus throwing technique. The second, led by Aleksander Tammert and called “Through cognisance to perfect technique,” was also very valuable. Some scientists have come to the conclusion that he has the best discus technique in the world! It was really interesting to see the videos about how he developed to being the best technician ever.

I think that there should be more conferences like this one and that they must include sample training sessions as we had in Tallinn. It is a good learning opportunity for young athletes and also for coaches. I would like to thank the organisers and all the presenters for this great experience. Thank you.

Meigo Tammsaar, 19, is a discus thrower from Tartu, Estonia. His personal best is 53.65m.
remarkably similar. Pickering’s conclusion was that while their thinking may have been different, the results were almost the same, proving that in the discus, at least, “many roads lead to Rome”.

Through cognisance to perfect technique
Aleksander Tammert (EST)

The 2004 Olympic bronze medallist, Tammert is well-known as a thrower who has a really stable technique. Ten major championships finals, 15 seasons over 60m and a personal best of 70.82m (16th on the all-time list) are achievements few have accomplished. After so many years at the top of his sport, Tammert has learned to analyse his performances and technique in minute detail. In this presentation cum practical demonstration he introduced his coach Dave Wollman’s basic principals, which were used throughout his career. Using videos from his early years and from the major championships, he discussed how he was able to develop his technique and maintain it under the pressure of top-level competition.

Panel discussion

The conference ended with a discussion led by a panel that included Hafsteinsson, Kanter, Pickering, Tammert, the 1984 Olympic Champion Rolf Dannenberg (GER), and Raul Rebane from Kanter’s support team. The discussion focused on issues and problems faced by young athletes in the throwing events. The main points addressed were the lack of international junior competitions, a need for new learning materials (DVDs, books etc), developing an interactive consulting system and a great need to get the media’s and people interest in throwing events and the discus in particular.

Additional points

During the conference, an attractive exhibition on the history of Estonian discus throwing put together by the Estonian Sports Museum was on display. Among other exhibits, visitors were able to see disci of various sizes and designs, the oldest dating back to the end of the 19th century and the newest specifically produced for Kanter by Nordic Sport.

The organisers were pleased with the contents, turnout and feedback for this year’s conference. They thanked all the conference speakers and partners for their support. They are looking forward to organising the next edition in 2011 and on a biennial basis afterwards.

Copies of the powerpoint presentations given in the conference can be downloaded at www.team75plus.com. Further information on the European Athletics Coaching Summit Series can be found in the “Development” pages at www.european-athletics.org.

Reported by Hans Üürike

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