The 1st European Decathlon Conference

Tallinn, Estonia

Introduction

More than 75 athletes and coaches from six countries attended the first European Decathlon Conference, which took place in Tallinn, Estonia, from 5-6 October 2011. The conference, which was hosted by the Estonian Athletic Association, kicked off the 2011 European Athletics Coaching Summit Series.

The programme focused on the long jump and high jump in the context of the decathlon and included a wide range of theoretical and practical presentations from top specialist Yevgeniy Zagorulko (RUS), as well as career analyses of former elite performers Erki Nool (EST) and Tõnu Lepik (EST).

This report gives summaries of the main presentations.

Thoughts on the Difference in Training and Competition Results

Erki Nool (EST)

Nool, the 2000 Olympic champion in the decathlon and 5th in world all-time list with 8815 points, is the unofficial world record holder for the long jump within a decathlon (8.22m). However, he feels he did not reach his full potential in this discipline. He said around 70% of decathletes are not pleased with their long jump results and about 2/3 of them make their lifetime bests in training. He cited lack of technique training with a full approach as a problem area and said that because of their relatively higher bodyweight compared to specialised long jumpers, decathletes must try even harder to their speed abilities. Typically training approximately 80% of the time with a half approach allows them to include technique work more frequently in the programme, perform more repetitions and easily control the technique. However, such jumps do not fully prepare them for the higher velocities and forces experienced from a full approach in competition. He mentioned that his average training jump from an eight-step approach was 7.30-7.40m but in competition he would normally expect to jump 7.70-7.80m from a full approach.

Nool also gave an overview of his training programme for the 1995 summer season. In the preparation phase, he focused on sprint drills (every training session included at least 15 x 60m and up to 700m in short acceleration runs). Depending on the day, he did sprint runs with different intensities and loads, but no longer than 150m. The result was an 8.10m long jump in his first competition that year and both a 21.03 sec 200m and 46.98 sec 400m dur-
Epro, a PhD student at the German Sport University Cologne, explained the possibilities of the 3-dimensional video analysis to evaluate the high jump technique of athletes and provide them with key points for improvement. After giving an overview of the performance parameters for the event, he presented analyses of four top-level decathletes competing at the 2011 IAAF World Championships in Athletics - Ashton Eaton (USA), Aleksey Drozdov (RUS), Thomas Van Der Plaetsen (BEL) and Roman Šebrle (CZE). He also showed a graphical view of a 3D biomechanical video analysis of different level decathletes and high jumpers in Estonia that he had made in winter competitions in early 2011.

Espo’s main message was that running is the key to jumping higher. His analyses clearly showed the importance of optimal horizontal velocity at the end of the approach for producing vertical velocity in the take-off, and therefore maximal height of the CM (centre of mass) in the bar clearance phase. The goal of the take-off is to transform as much horizontal velocity as possible to vertical velocity but too little horizontal velocity does not produce enough forward motion while too much horizontal velocity leads to an inappropriate take-off position and probably a failed attempt. This process calls for both muscular strength and optimal body positions. The technique of most decathletes is characterised by a slow approach and over-reliance on muscular strength in the take-off. He concluded with key objectives for improvement:

- aim for higher, but optimal, horizontal velocity in the end of the approach (transform more horizontal velocity with no decrease in the muscle contraction mechanisms in the take-off) to produce higher vertical velocity;
- penultimate stride (fast over + push);
- lengthen the path of vertical acceleration of the CM without losing velocity (reasonable lateral and backward lean for the start of the take-off);
generate the appropriate amount of rotations in the take-off phase to clear the bar.

**Modern Training of the Elite High Jumpers**  
**Yevgeniy Zagorulko (RUS)**

The conference keynote speaker, Zagorulko, has been the head coach for the high jump in the USSR and Russian Federation almost for three decades. He is one of the most well-known high jump coaches in the world and has probably coached more major event medallists than anyone else.

The first of his two presentations was a theoretical lecture dealing mostly with the physical and mental requirements of elite high jumpers and the key technical aspect of performance in the event. To become an elite high jumper, an athlete has to be tall, light and possess great physical abilities, especially strong legs. He or she must show certain levels in speed and strength parameters and work day to day to improve technique. However a well trained body is no guarantee for getting to the top. A champion has to be like a gladiator and do everything that it takes to beat the opponent. Strong willpower, a trusting relationship with the coach, self-discipline, patience, toughness and endless perseverance describe the true champion.

Zagorulko stressed the importance of correct running. In his words: “Athletics is running! This is were you have to suffer and this is where you build the character.” He sets a high value on speed – “a high jumper has to be fast!” - his best female athlete, Anna Chicherova, has a personal best 12.0 sec in the 100m and 25.4 sec in the 200m. But he also uses the well-known 12 min Cooper-test on his jumpers in the preparation phase and looks for them to show results around 3000m. When talking about his training philosophy and methodolo-
Conclusion

The conference can qualify as a success both for the organisers (Estonian Athletics Association and European Athletics) and participants. A post-event survey showed the gratification of the participated coaches and athletes from Estonia or other European countries. Some expressed the hope that the conference becomes a tradition and a helpful knowledge and experience sharing point for wide range of combined event coaches and athletes.

Thoughts from the participants:

“In my opinion the conference was a success and the keypoints, mentioned by different speakers, are important and known truth, which have to be reminded time-to-time to the experienced coaches and newcomers. A little has changed, but the basics stay." - Martin Kutman (Estonian coach with over 60 year experience; best athletes: Anna Iljuštšenko, 1.96m NR)

“The practical session of Mr. Zagorulko was interesting and showed us that we are moving in the right direction.” - Karl Lumi (Estonian high jumper; PB: 2.21m)

“I think it was a interesting and necessary conference. It showed us the basic physical criteria that an athlete should have and some specific nuances. We will see the value from the next season’s results.” - Huko Linnas (Estonian coach for decathletes)

Reported by Gaspar Epro

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