

Estonia, mirrored in big sports

Mister President, what do the Olympic Games mean to you?

For me, the Olympic Games – the summer games more so than the winter games – are the most impressive event for bringing the countries and nations of the world together. No other occasion is as proud, big and noble. The Olympic movement involves more countries than the UN has member states.

All countries great and small, must honour the vision of the games and this makes it even more important for small countries. Everything that is linked to co-operation and is based on a healthy foundation is good for Estonia. Therefore, the Olympic Games and Estonia's participation in them serves our best interests.

The population or area of a country or its economic or military might has no importance here. The Estonian delegation has the same status as that of the USA, Russia, and China. Estonia can meet with all the other countries of the world and compare itself and compete directly with them on a level playing field. Direct competition and the achievements of our athletes have proven that we are really good at this. All the Olympic Games since our independence have been very positive for our people.

On the other hand, after 20 years of independence we should probably be sufficiently self-confident that the mere presence and display of our flag should not be considered an end in itself.

In a way this is true: at this stage, we are much more than just “present”. The participation of the Estonian athletes in the Albertville Olympic Games in winter 1992, only a couple of months after restoring our independence, was most definitely a bigger highlight, emotionally speaking, than this year’s winter games in Vancouver. And indeed, it is nice to think – in a way – that participation in the Olympic Games or the Eurovision Song Contest or Venetian Biennale or EXPO World Fair under our own flag has become an inseparable part of Estonia’s everyday life, a part of being an independent state.

But the achievements of the Estonian athletes tell us quite convincingly that we are more than mere participants and simply “present”. Medals, good places, nice performances, and positive international feedback – these are all the things that make Estonia renowned and these are things we can be proud of – with good reason.

So that the Olympic medals show the excellence or even superiority of the Estonians?

Excellence – indeed, and that we are among the best in some fields. I do not think that when the Estonian athletes returned with three gold medals from the Turin Winter Olympic Games while the Finns got zero, this gave Estonia a reason to feel superior, as a country and as a nation, in comparison to the Finns. Definitely not. But we can feel good and happy about our achievement. Happy by the fact that the Estonian athletes did well, not because the Finns, the Russians or the Latvians did worse.

Successful sportspeople are an example for many of us, even a role model. What common feature do the best among us share? What have Andrus Veerpalu, Kristina Smigun, Jüri Jaanson, Gerd Kanter, and Erki Nool in common? They are all incredibly hard working and committed; no one has reached the highest pedestals just by luck or accident. They are the living embodiment of Andres from Tammsaare’s Vargamäe. They are big as people, not only as athletes.

They prove to us mere mortals that there is only one-way out of a difficult situation, a crisis, and problems – this is by being professional and through consistent hard work. Our top athletes reflect our nature and give us working examples. And is this not important to know?

I will re-phrase my question now – would being left without a medal show that we are third-rate?

Does the fact the Finland, a country with long and well-established traditions in winter sports, did not get an Olympic gold four years ago make it a worse country? Of course not. Apart from professional self-expression, sport is a game of chance and one must consider the different factors at play. If the Estonian athletes are without a medal this year, does it mean that Veerpalu and Smigun are bad athletes? No, definitely not. The others are just stronger at the moment; they have more luck.

If we think in terms of population, by right Estonia should have no hope of competing for medals with the USA, Russia or China. However, Estonian athletes have returned with medals from all the Olympic Games since 2000. What do you think the key to our success is?

Statistically, we should not even think about any medals or should treat medals as something exceptional. Luckily for us, life is not about statistics. The Estonian athletes have had many chances to stand out in the crowd; they have been bigger than our population would allow us to expect.

Without having masses of talented individuals, a huge sports systems, and loads of money, we are still successful. How come? Estonian sports are pioneers here; a number of small highly professional and scientific groups, some with international success, have been established here. These often beat other systems, which are incomparably larger and richer.

Such groups can be compared to any other Estonian success stories, such as Skype, and it

seems that here somewhere we can see signs of the “Estonian way”, where power is the brain. If we believe in this, it will become more than just power; it will become our guide.

Does sport provide a code of action or conduct for a ‘regular life’?

Of course. For Estonia – a small country – it is highly important that countries respect international law and mutual agreements in transnational relations. The existence of the Republic of Estonia would be in question – if not out of the question – if the “he who has the power, makes the law” principle, which once governed the world, would still be in place today.

Sport, and at least world-class sport, is also based on an arrangement: the rules of fair play. Without these rules, there would be no sports, but just a circus controlled by money, chemistry, and the performance of medical companies.

Unfortunately, these principles have often been breached over the years; the shadow of doping has always hung over the games. In the past, it was mostly urged on by the desires of the so-called Warsaw Pact countries to prove their alleged superiority – using unfair means – and therefore, conceal its backwardness in every other sphere. Later, money interfered.

Luckily for us, the International Olympic Committee has done a great job and those who are taking banned performance-enhancing drugs are ostracised. In this regard, all short cuts should be ruled out, as “fair play” is an ethical category, a principle that conveys highly valuable behavioural guidelines.

Therefore, I support the severe punishment that is meted out to those caught using banned drugs or other shortcuts, as cheating ceases to be an individual act at the top level – it concerns us all.

Sport and politics?

As I said, these two spheres were illicitly and closely linked in the recent past, as medals and rankings were used as benchmarks to indicate the strength and power of a nation; many rules were broken for the sake of a high place. Or boycotts were used to put somebody in his place, which meant many athletes were victimised with no ultimate winner.

In a way, I do understand the political or even human motives of the boycotts; in fact, these were a message to those who chose the hosting cities. Peace, fair play and co-operation – only those who follow these principles every day can organise games that convey their message.

The participation of many heads of state and governments in either the opening or closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games also represents public contact between sports and politics today. They come to watch the competitions and to communicate with each other. This aspect of the Olympic Games has received little coverage, but it is also highly important. Many political leaders come together; they meet each other in an informal atmosphere, and unexpected opportunities for communication as well as the promotion of transnational relations may arise. The meaning of this aspect of the Olympic Games only develops in time.

Mister President, is Vancouver your first personal direct contact with the Olympic Games?

Indeed, it is. My achievements in sports are not so good; also, I could not have represented Estonia as an athlete back in the days when I was in top shape – at least hypothetically. For several reasons, I have been unable before to participate as an observer and a head of state.

The town that is hosting the Olympic Games – Vancouver – is, on the other hand, a very familiar place for me; I lived and worked there for almost three years in the beginning of the

1980s. I have also visited the Whistler Skiing Centre, where the skiing competitions will take place, and even been on skis there myself.

Of course, every Estonian who lived in exile dreamed of Estonia becoming free again, one day. But even in my wildest dreams, I would never have been able to picture Estonian athletes competing for Olympic medals under our very own blue, black and white tricolour on the very same Whistler skiing tracks, and me being there, cheering them on, as the President of the independent Republic of Estonia. This is a miracle.