

Dear sportsmen and all sports-minded people
Ladies and gentlemen.

Presumably you all share the view that there are few key conditions society must meet if it is to ensure the survival and secure the welfare of the Estonian state and people.

Personally, I see the present and future of our country resting on the shoulders of healthy and educated people; secondly, on a system of government based on Western liberal democracy; and thirdly, on the values, language and culture shared by society's members.

Sports, or more broadly, physical activity, is a part of both lifestyle and our common values. In a normal, free and democratic state, sport at its highest level is a form of free self-expression practiced by people and interest groups and supported by the state pursuant to a social contract.

Above all, the state supports sport because healthful lifestyles, including playing sports and being physically active, is the best investment we can make with regard to ourselves and the future. Top athletes are advertising agents of a kind, the embodiment of healthful lifestyles and role models for thousands of boys and girls.

I am very glad that this understanding is gaining a firmer foothold in Estonia with each passing year. It is precisely this – the time we spend on sports and our health – which indicates the level of development of a society and our maturity as citizens and people.

True, many see sport as no more than the latest achievements of Estonian athletes in the international arena. It is seen as something that confirms our credibility as a state. Some see medal counts as nothing less than a comparative ranking of countries as sovereign states and nations.

The error of this view should long be clear to us. East Germany and the Soviet Union have long ceased to appear on the list of independent nations. Behind the triumphs and records of the day we now see the face of cheating and the toll of human experiments.

That does not mean that those yearning for the former system – victory at all costs – have disappeared from the scene. This was expressed quite tellingly some time ago when even some in Estonia praised as a role model – without any qualms – a country whose president, after an unsuccessful showing by the national team, took the sport officials to task, sacked a few of them and demanded of the rest that they produce medals on their next outing. In public discussions in Estonia, I have heard some say that an athlete who performs poorly should repay their grants and stipends to the state.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is a totalitarian attitude whose time in Estonia is hopefully no more.

Yes, every country, especially a small one, needs heroes. We see ourselves reflected in their accomplishments -- the image of the individual and of our united strength. Our most illustrious stars have been elite athletes whose most outstanding achievements have often spoiled the public to the point of losing their perspective on reality.

But these achievements do not belong to everyone, the people or the sporting establishment. These medals are not public property. Those medals and victories belong to capable people, the best in the world in their field. The state has supported these athletes as it supports its capable researchers, writers and other talents.

If we want something in return for our support, it should be good sportsmanship and competitive spirit. Excitement and positive emotions. And, to an increasing extent, we should expect our athletes to fulfil certain social roles, to serve as role models and a source of encouragement. A great athlete is also a great human being, as we can attest to every day. That is the basic connection between a top-level athlete and his or her people. As to how that connection works, that can be seen in things like broader lifestyle changes, decreasing number of visits to the doctor and additional healthy years of life.

We measure it in the number of people at swimming pools, gyms and playing fields, recreational trails and 10K races.

Everyone who takes an hour out of their day to be physically active and try to better themselves is a hero. By doing so they give a gift to themselves and their loved ones – extra years of life and dividends in the form of shared pride and joy. That, and not just the glitter of medals, is what we keep bear in mind here in this hall and at all other times. This is what we should promote, and this is where we should lead by example and make it happen.

I wish the Estonian Sport Congress a productive discussion.

Thank you.