

RUN & SMILE

Inspirational Voices from Malta to Slovakia

Andrew Decelis & Elena Malíková



inclusionfirst

FRIENDSHIP
INNOVATIONS
RUNNING
SUSTAINABILITY
TEAMWORK



Co-funded by
the European Union

RUN & SMILE

Inspirational Voices
from Malta to Slovakia



L-Università ta' Malta
Institute for Physical
Education & Sport



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Preface

Dear Friends of Sport and Active Lifestyle,

In today's fast-paced world of sports, the principles of sustainability and inclusivity stand as guiding lights, illuminating a path toward a brighter, more equitable future. At the forefront of this movement stands a collective effort of the project consortium composed of the University of Malta and ŠK Mladost' within the common Erasmus+ project named Inclusion First. I am sincerely pleased that ŠK MLADOST' could serve as a coordinating institution for this remarkable endeavour, showcasing our deep commitment to spreading recent EU sport policies, emphasizing the intergenerational dimension of sport, and promoting the values inherent in sports.

With this in mind, let me briefly introduce ŠK Mladost', an entity deeply engaged in various international programs aimed at promoting these policies, often reaching vulnerable groups with limited access to online resources. Furthermore, our initiatives extend beyond the EU, contributing to the promotion of sports diplomacy and the dissemination of EU values.

Our club's activities encompass a diverse range, from multisport events to educational projects. Through our extensive experience and network of international relations, including collaborations with esteemed stakeholders like the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2016 and subsequent presidencies, ŠK Mladost' has been instrumental in advancing EU sport policies and fostering international partnerships.

With our experts actively participating in conferences and educational initiatives, ŠK Mladost' continues to



play a respected role in shaping the landscape of sports education, training, and cooperation, both within Slovakia and on the European stage.

In light of this, it was truly an honour for us to collaborate with the University of Malta on the groundbreaking project Inclusion First, which led to the development of a brand-new approach to social inclusion encapsulated in this booklet. As we now can explore the pages of "RUN AND SMILE," we are invited to witness the transformative power of sport in fostering inclusivity, bridging cultural divides, and promoting a more sustainable future. Through the diverse narratives and insights shared within, ŠK Mladost' reaffirms its commitment to championing the values of friendship, respect, equality, and understanding, paving the way for a brighter, more inclusive world.

Tomáš Poláček
President of ŠK Mladost'

Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is with genuine delight that we unveil this collection of stories – "RUN AND SMILE" – a celebration of sport's transformative power and the resilience of the human spirit. Each narrative, painted with vibrant strokes of imagery and personal stories, stands as a testament to hope and fortitude in the face of challenges. Through captivating titles, we extend an invitation to embark on a journey through the diverse experiences and perspectives that weave the fabric of our vibrant community.

As we approached the culmination of this labour of love, a surge of emotions washed over us. It was a magical sensation, akin to witnessing a seedling blossom into a majestic tree, knowing that every word penned had contributed to its flourishing. In this moment, we paused to pen these final words – a foreword that encapsulates the essence of our collective odyssey.

Foremost, our hearts overflow with gratitude to the European Commission for their generous support of our project, Inclusion First, through the Erasmus+ programme. Without their belief in our vision, this publication would have remained but a distant dream. Their funding has not only made this book a reality but has also empowered us to champion the cause of social inclusion through sport on a broader scale.

Additionally, we owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to our esteemed colleagues and collaborators from Malta and Slovakia. Their unwavering professionalism and tireless dedication during countless hours of volunteer work have been the bedrock of this endeavour. Together, we have weathered challenges and forged bonds that transcend geographical boundaries.

Above all, our deepest aspiration is for this booklet to resonate deeply with its readers, serving as a wellspring of inspiration and guidance in their own life's journey. Within these pages, we delve into the multifaceted concept of social inclusion from various angles – spanning the intergenerational spectrum to realms of business, athletics, coaching, and beyond. Through diverse narratives and insights, we aim to illuminate the transformative potential



of sport in fostering inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

A recurring theme interwoven throughout these pages is the symbiotic relationship between sport and culture, and its profound impact on fostering social cohesion. It is here that we find the heart of our message – that through sport, we can bridge divides, celebrate diversity, and nurture a more inclusive society.

Acknowledging the digital landscape, we recognize the evolving terrain of social inclusion and the role of technology in shaping our collective narrative. From harnessing digital platforms for accessibility to addressing challenges of online engagement, we navigate this landscape with a steadfast commitment to fostering inclusivity in the digital age.

As we reflect on our collective journey, we are reminded of the enduring values that have guided us, particularly the spirit of friendship in a multicultural dimension and mutual understanding. In upholding these values, we not only embody the ethos of the European Union but also chart a course towards a brighter, more inclusive future.

Let us continue to tread forward with a smile on our lips and hearts brimming with determination. Together, let us persist in our pursuit of goals with grace and unwavering resolve, knowing that with each step, we draw closer to realizing our shared vision of a more inclusive world.

With warm regards,

Elena Malíková
Project Manager

Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure that I introduce "Run and Smile," a booklet that represents a manifestation of the power of sports in promoting social inclusion and well-being. The INCLUSION FIRST project, under which this booklet was developed, has consistently championed the values of sports as a vehicle for social inclusion. Our efforts align with the latest EU sports agenda, including the EU Work Plan for Sport (2021-2024) and the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027). These frameworks have provided a solid foundation for our initiatives, ensuring that we remain at the forefront of fostering inclusivity through sports.

Throughout the project's lifetime, we have made significant strides beyond our initial plans, enriching the project with additional valuable contributions. One notable example is our engagement with the XG report on Green Sport, to which I had the privilege of contributing. This report, developed by the Green Sport Expert Group of the European Commission, is significant in raising awareness about the intersection of sports and environmental sustainability, particularly in relation to the European Green Deal. By integrating these insights, we have broadened the project's scope, demonstrating how sports can contribute to a greener and more sustainable future.

I am very delighted that within the INCLUSION FIRST project, numerous personalities, both from Slovakia and Malta, discussed the green dimension in their interviews. A great example is Maltese Eman Azzopardi, whose life is intricately woven with a deep commitment to social and environmental causes.

Moreover, our project has aligned with key global initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We have placed a particular emphasis on SDG 3, which focuses on good health and well-being, and SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities. The stories within this booklet, such as the inspiring interview with Ayoubah Fona, a migrant in Malta who found a new sense of belonging through sports, exemplify our commitment to these goals. His journey



underscores the transformative power of sports in fostering integration and reducing social inequalities.

"Run and Smile" encapsulates the essence of our mission: to create a more inclusive society through the unifying power of sports. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all project team members, partners, and participants who have contributed to this endeavour. Together, we have not only expanded our knowledge, but also created a ripple effect that will continue to influence our communities positively.

I invite you to explore the pages of this booklet and witness the profound impact of our collective efforts. Let "Run and Smile" inspire you to embrace the values of inclusivity, sustainability, and well-being in every stride you take and every movement you make.

With best wishes,

Prof. Andrew Decelis
Director

Institute for Physical Education and Sport
University of Malta

About the Project

The **INCLUSION FIRST** project shone a spotlight on social inclusion through the values of sports. Its strategic objective was to promote recent developments in the EU's sports sector. At its heart lay "RUN AND SMILE," a collection of inspirational stories featuring insights from 24 personalities on various facets of social inclusion. Their motivational journeys were interwoven with pertinent EU sports policies.

A key goal of the project was to **bring EU sports policies closer to non-governmental sports organisations**, making them more accessible and understandable for stakeholders at all levels, including the local level. This objective was pursued notably through the INCLUSION FIRST platform.

The project name cleverly underscored its focus on prioritizing inclusion while also serving as an acronym for its five core elements: **FRIENDSHIP, INNOVATIONS, RUNNING, SUSTAINABILITY, TEAMWORK**.

The project consortium aimed to concentrate on the latest EU sports agenda, including the sport policies outlined in the EU Work Plan for Sport (2021–2024) and the priorities of the EU's Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027) in the sports sector. Mainly, the consortium developed **Council conclusions on sport as a platform for social inclusion**, as devised during the Maltese Presidency, and **Council conclusions on sport diplomacy**, as formulated during the Slovak Presidency. By collaborating with selected countries, the project provided follow-up on the EU sports agenda set forth during the presidencies of Malta and Slovakia in the Council of the EU.

Digital, environmentally friendly, and innovative, the project placed significant emphasis on the green and digital transitions, aligning with the priorities of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme and the relevant call for proposals.

The project underlined the call's scope and was designed with small-scale partnerships in mind. It broadened access to the programme for small-scale actors and individuals who were traditionally hard to reach in the sports sector. Furthermore, the project contributed to the establishment and growth of transnational networks and **fostered synergies among local, regional, national, and international policies**.

The European policies in the field of sports that served as the basis for the proposed project included:

- Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled "Developing the European Dimension in Sport," 2011
- Council Recommendation on Promoting health-enhancing physical activity across sectors, 2013
- Council Conclusions on maximising the role of grassroots sport in developing transversal skills, especially among young people, 2015
- Council conclusions on sport diplomacy, 2016
- Council conclusions on sport as a platform for social inclusion, 2017
- Tartu Call for Healthy Lifestyles, 2017
- Council Conclusions on promoting the common values of the EU through sport, 2018
- Council Conclusions on combating corruption in sport, 2019

- Council Conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery of the sport sector, 2020
- New European Bauhaus initiative, 2020
- EU Work Plan for sport (2021–2024)
- EU programme Erasmus+ (2021–2027)

The project affinity to the general objectives of the call was very close, and the project provided cooperation opportunities in sport in light of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme. It highlighted five core project elements: FRIENDSHIP, INNOVATIONS, RUNNING, SUSTAINABILITY, and TEAMWORK while addressing the general objectives of the call:

1. Supported active European citizenship and brought the European dimension to the local level through sport values, such as **FRIENDSHIP**.
2. Attracted and widened access for newcomers, less experienced organisations, and small-scale actors to the programme. This partnership acted as a role model for organisations willing to start cooperation at the European level. Its **INNOVATION** element focused on increasing quality in the work and practices of the organisations and institutions involved, opening up to new actors not naturally included within one sector.
3. Supported the inclusion of target groups with fewer opportunities, notably vulnerable groups. It used **RUNNING** as an example activity, which might be easily replicable in any other health-enhancing physical activity.
4. Linked **SUSTAINABILITY** to building the capacity of organisations to work transnationally and across sectors. It included green aspects and was guaranteed by a pledge of stakeholders to keep project outcomes financed after its initial funding from the Erasmus+ programme.
5. Addressed common needs and priorities in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport. The project capitalised on a synergic effect of those areas. **TEAMWORK** lay in enabling transformation and change at individual, organisational, and sectoral levels, leading to improvements in proportion to the context of each organisation.

The partner institutions – the University of Malta and ŠK Mladost' – were chosen for their expertise in relevant fields, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all project objectives. Their collaborative efforts were essential for achieving common goals and maximizing the project's impact. **The EU dimension added significant value**, as the scope of project activities was challenging to accomplish individually by each consortium member. Moreover, the project facilitated capacity-building among organisations, enabling them to effectively engage in cross-border cooperation and networking, a requirement stipulated by the small-scale partnerships of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme.

The project's contributions to the priorities outlined in the call were extensive, particularly regarding its digital, green, and innovative aspects within the sports sector. With a strong emphasis on green and digital transitions, the project aligned closely with the objectives of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme and the current Call document. Notably, the anticipated outcome of the project, the **INCLUSION FIRST platform**, exemplified its digital orientation. Sustainability and environmental consciousness permeated all project activities, with innovation serving as a core element, including the development of a pioneering platform aimed at a global audience.

Addressing horizontal aspects such as environmental sustainability, inclusion and diversity, and the digital dimension, the project was designed with eco-friendliness in mind, integrating green practices throughout its various phases. It actively involved local and regional sports clubs, as required by the specifications for small-scale partnerships. All project activities occurred within the countries of the participating organisations, linking closely with the **national perspectives of sport policies in Malta and Slovakia** while also considering policies developed at the international level. The project's approach encompassed both non-governmental and governmental levels, facilitating communication and mutual discussions. Notably, the project considered the increasing global focus on sustainability and the green dimension across governments worldwide.







INTERVIEWS

malta

Eman Azzopardi



Eman Azzopardi's life is intricately woven with a deep commitment to social and environmental causes. Inspired by Albert Schweitzer's quote, "Quello che tu puoi fare e' solo una goccia nell'oceano, ma e' cio che da significato alla tua vita" (What you can do is only a drop in the ocean, but it is what gives meaning to your life), Eman's journey began in the early '90s while doing voluntary work with street children in Palermo.

Over the years, Eman actively engaged in various social and environmental initiatives, volunteering with local and foreign charities, and dedicating 22 years to social work with a local institution. Notably, on a weekly basis, Eman initiated the voluntary cleaning of valleys and surrounding countryside near their hometown and embarked on a personal mission to collect 10,000 plastic bottles from the Maltese countryside within four months in 2022.

While currently taking a break from environmental initiatives, Eman remains closely connected to nature and the Maltese countryside, regularly hiking with like-minded individuals who share a passion for the environment. An annual tradition involves walking 1 km for every year lived on Eman's birthday, raising funds for an agency assisting terminally ill patients. Despite some viewing these initiatives as inconsequential, Eman finds profound meaning and purpose in these seemingly small contributions to the well-being of the community and the environment.

Could you share more about your early experiences doing voluntary work with street children in Palermo and how that shaped your commitment to social and environmental causes?

The voluntary work of Palermo started not long ago. My sister had gone to do this voluntary work before I'd been there and it was like something automatic that when I was in Sixth Form at St. Aloysius, there was this opportunity of going to Palermo for a month in summer and I took it. I was like a 16/17-year-old young person going to Palermo. It was fun because you meet people and you make friends, most of them are still my friends nowadays and you would be doing something good for yourself and for the community while building connections. I've been to Palermo for about 7 summers and then after Palermo, I've been to other places. to Sarajevo just nine months after the war finished in the Balkans, to Albania, and to Brazil. So, I took part in quite a number of voluntary work with various organisations even in Malta; in Cospicua and in Zejtun with the nuns of Mother Theresa and with the Jesuits Community in Zejtun.

It shaped me... every experience was different on its own both locally and even abroad. As I said, when you meet lots of people, you start seeing what is the reality in other situations, not just locally but even abroad; what people go through. And these in a way, affect your life. Taking part in these voluntary experiences eventually led me to choose the social work course at University and after that I've been working as a social worker for 22 years in a children's home.

You've been actively involved in various social and environmental initiatives, including 22 years of social work with a local institution. Can you tell us about a specific project or initiative that had a significant impact on you?

During the 22 years I was working in Social Work, the experiences were many, and I can't recall just one. I've come across so many different boys and so many different families which all needed help and which all needed our support. There were also a number of failures... and it's like we have no control over these children, but there are also a number of successes, and there are also a number of boys who have grown up now and they are adults. We still have very good contact with them, and they keep looking up and they keep contact with us throughout the years, maybe once a year we meet up and then you realise that whatever you did left an impact on others a "Positive impact". Unfortunately, other children, other young people, wouldn't have managed to have a good life. It's like a vicious circle, however, we are still there even though nowadays, I'm no longer working in that institution, I'm still in contact with many of the young people through Facebook and through the Social Media and giving the support they need.

The voluntary cleaning of valleys and the mission to collect 10,000 plastic bottles from the Maltese countryside demonstrate a strong environmental commitment. What inspired these initiatives, and what challenges did you face during their implementation?

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So, funnily enough, I started cleaning the valleys around Zebbug. It started during the Covid times. One day I was walking...it was a Friday, and I was walking through the valley, and I met a guy who was with me at St Aloysius. He was accompanying a runner who was running a number of kilometers according to his age, to his birthday. And this gave me inspiration to start something. First I started cleaning the path I used to walk in every morning, and funnily enough the first time I went, I collected about two full bags of garbage. And...like... it was a Friday and then I decided to take this initiative every Friday, doing this for the local communities. Then, eventually after about two years of doing this, I changed my target. Throughout the two years, there were other friends and people who used to come and help out; at times I was alone and some other times I was with some people who used to

accompany me. I was noticing that there was a lot of plastic bottles around and at first, I said I would like to collect 1000 bottles. These 1000 bottles I collected them in about three times...three days, three outings so I've topped it up to 10,000. Funnily enough, there were still so many bottles at that time, we're talking about 3/4 years ago, in a matter of ... I think in four months, I managed to collect 10,000 bottles and then I used to dispose of them where they should. And then, the thing changed and there was this campaign of the BCRS, so now you don't find any plastic bottles around; you only see very few with no label. But I still have this commitment towards the environment. This week I was walking the same valley where I go walking everyday and I saw this crate.. this carton box full of milk cartons and wine cartons. Someone just left them there, and initially I just took a photo, I couldn't take them with me, so I took a photo, posted it on Facebook and tagged the Local Council to be collected.

Although you're currently taking a break from environmental initiatives, you continue to hike and stay connected to nature. How has this connection influenced your perspective on environmental issues, and do you have plans to resume such initiatives in the future?

So, as I said, I'm still very connected to nature. I love it...almost every day I walk for about an hour in the valleys. I love watching sunsets and I trek with a particular group every...almost every week. So yes, I'm still connected to nature and these illegalities and these people who harm nature bring me a lot of mixed feelings and I'm very angry at them. So when I see something which is irregular, I try to point it out

to the authorities. I use my Facebook a lot to put up photos about the environment and nature so as **"to raise awareness"**. Yes, I try to raise awareness.

Your annual tradition of walking 1 km for every year lived on your birthday is a unique way to contribute and raise funds for terminally ill patients. What motivated you to start this tradition, and can you share a memorable experience from one of these walks?

So, I started it as I said from this guy who I saw accompanying this birthday guy and that was when I was 45...I was going to be 45. And then, on my birthday I asked my partner to accompany me to

walk 45 km. I'm very used to walking and I decided to collect money and donate it to Hospice who were the first agency I did a placement with when I started social work. In my opinion, they're a very humble organisation; they do a lot of good, their services are all free, so I decided every year since I was 45, now I'm 49. No, 48 I'm sorry. So far I have done this walk for four years. The most memorable experience of them all was the one of this year. It was very cold, very rainy, it was very bad weather but still we managed to walk 49 km in rain, mud and everything; all the weather conditions like hail, there were some sunny parts, but we kept going. We left about five o'clock in the morning, and we spent about 7 seven hours walking.



Kendrick Bondin



Kendrick Bondin, Secretary at the General Workers' Union (GWU) in Malta, is a dedicated official representing members in various sectors, including the Public Service, Public Sector, Health Sector, and Private Public Partnership. With over ten years of experience at GWU, Kendrick has taken proactive steps to enhance the union's relevance through European-funded projects, focusing on innovation and effectiveness. He has created and implemented the GWU's equality and mental health policies, and improved LGBTIQ+ and non-EU Spanish speakers' representation.

Mr Bondin holds a bachelor's degree in communications and philosophy and a Bachelor of Science degree in Sports and Active Lifestyle from the University of Malta. His second degree in Sports and Active Lifestyle, pursued part-time, expanded his passion for yoga. In 2020, he furthered his studies in yoga, earning qualification as a yoga instructor. Currently, he teaches yoga under the registration of FitYoga by Kendrick, offering multi-style yoga, including traditional Hatha, Vinyasa Flow, and restorative practices, providing a holistic mind-body-spirit workout. He is a certified teacher by Yoga Alliance and holds certification in Restorative Yoga Teacher by Yoga International.

Mr Bondin's approach to yoga is influenced by his background in sports and studies, evident in his creative, joy-infused sequences and a spiritual touch in his classes. Tailoring classes to diverse audiences, including participants over 70 years old, Kendrick serves as a coach and mentor, guiding participants to thrive in life by nurturing the body-mind-spirit through yoga, fostering a balanced and peaceful journey for everyone involved.

How do you balance your leadership role in the trade union with your role as a yoga instructor, and do you see any synergy between these two responsibilities?

I must confess that yoga has helped me in my life. As part of being a trade union leader, this has actually reinforced me and has helped me to overcome difficult situations, which I may be facing at present, which I may have faced or which I may be facing in the future. Yoga is a way of life. By implementing yoga in my life, it helped me in my leadership position and everything else in my life, in my free time, physical, mental health, and even my energy. So all in all, I think it boosted my leadership skills to listen more, and be more of a mediator and be more focused on my work.

In what ways have you worked to improve the representation of the LGBTIQ+ and non-EU Spanish speakers within the GWU?

In my line of work, I meet a lot of different workers who hail from different groups and minorities. A group, which I have focused on and always strive to help out, since I am one of them, is the LGBTIQ community. In fact, I have been involved in the LGBTIQ consultative council during the policy making process and consultations for the equality of marriage, for better fair treatment, and for gender recognition. I am still involved in this consultative body, which is a national body, and also in my life of work and in my day to day practice, I meet people who may come to terms with difficult situations in the line of work because of their sexuality or gender identification. Often, it is

a question of individual cases which we handle. And also as a union, I have strived and implemented an equality policy, which encapsulates more equality for our members and employees. Furthermore, in our line of work, in collective agreements, I make sure that the terminology used is in the plural, so they do not identify a person with their gender or sexual orientation and to make sure that people are treated equally, as workers regardless of their ethnicities and other groups and other labels. So it's a day to day thing.

With regards to the Spanish speaking persons, since I am fluent in Spanish, I assist in translating, particularly our legislation, which might be different from that of their country. This helps them avoid any form of abuse which they may encounter at work. Unfortunately, I have met several persons hailing from Spanish speaking countries who were being abused and managed to assist them along the way.

With mental health being a significant concern in various workplaces, how do you believe yoga contributes to the mental well-being of employees?

I do agree it helps, and this is a significant issue nowadays. Thank god, there is more awareness about it, although it is still taboo. I encourage people to speak up, but yoga can help you individually. Yoga helps to calm the mind, just let go and accept the situation and it's a way to be in the present and not in the past or what have I done, or how could I have done it. We try to solve that situation, and avoid ifs and buts and what happened or what will happen. Yoga will help you

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live the moment. All we have in this world is just this moment, the present moment. We don't know what will happen in the future. We don't know and we cannot solve what happened in the past. We can only live now and that's why we call it a present because it's a gift. So yoga really helps you to just accept and let go.

How does your varied educational background in communications, philosophy, and sports contribute to creating a holistic yoga experience for your students, and are there particular elements you prioritise to support their well-rounded development?

Yes, they were essential education and my communication skills helped me in understanding more people, listening and furthermore understanding how organisations work and how to use different mediums of communications, which nowadays you cannot do without. Philosophy enabled me to understand more yoga. Yoga is not just physical, it's a whole life. There's a lot of philosophy involved in it. Nowadays, I'm striving more to understand more the eastern philosophy that yoga has. So I had a good educational background which helped me to become a yoga teacher. And sports helped me with the physical part of yoga, which enabled me to get my yoga certificate, an international certificate to teach everywhere.

In fact, sports has helped me as well to understand poses and how to help people not to get injured. If the technique is not perfect, it's fine. We're there

for our own good. It's not a competition, but I don't want my participants to get injured. So I'm always there to understand and help them physically and my philosophy background helps me to enable people to even relax more and speak up more so they can relax more for their mental experience and regain their energy. Therefore, they will have a balance in body mind and energy spirit.

What message would you like to convey to the general population about the benefits of yoga, and how it can positively impact their overall well-being?

First of all, I'd like to say that yoga is not gymnastics or athletics. It is your own journey. I have participants who are 77 year olds who attend. I adopt the poses according to what the person needs. Every day is different. Today you might be the best in all the poses you do, but tomorrow you might be feeling a little bit sick, you have some thoughts, and you cannot do many of the poses and it's fine. It is there for you, yoga, is there for you to make you feel happy, not happy; in bliss, in the present, accepting, and to live life in a better way, accept the present, be present and be healthy, not only in body, not only mentally, but even energywise, because sometimes you meet people who say I don't know what to do in my life, I feel lost. Yoga will help you find that path as well and to feel connected, and that you are not alone in this world. I encourage people to do yoga in their own time, at least 5 minutes a day, so they can live a better life.



Adrian Casha



Adrian Casha, born on October 12, 1968, has carved a multifaceted and impactful career within the realm of football, education, and health advocacy. Beginning his journey as a referee with the Malta Football Association (MFA) in 1990, he ascended to become a FIFA Referee in 2003, marking two decades of active officiating. In 2011, Adrian transitioned into a leadership role as the MFA Director of Refereeing, orchestrating a five-year tenure that witnessed Maltese referees achieving their highest-ever international rankings across various categories.

His commitment to football extended beyond national borders, serving UEFA as a Referee Observer and Coach from 2011 to 2017. In 2019, he was elected MFA Vice President, assuming roles as Chairman of the Medical Policy Committee and the Competitions Committee. Currently, Adrian serves as a UEFA Match Delegate, contributing to the smooth execution of football matches.

Remarkably, Adrian Casha became an inspiring Ambassador for Parkinson's following his diagnosis at the age of 50 in 2018. In 2022, he assumed the role of Project Manager at Step Up for Parkinson's Voluntary Organisation, launching a Sport for Parkinson's National Campaign to raise awareness about the benefits of physical exercise for individuals with Parkinson's and generate funds for a specialised Parkinson's Centre.

His educational journey includes a B.Ed. (Hons) Degree in Maltese (2000), an M.A. in Translation (2010) from the University of Malta, and a degree in HR Management & Training from the University of Leicester in January 2020. Adrian Casha's life is a testament to resilience, leadership, and a profound commitment to making a positive impact across diverse spheres.

Can you share the key milestones and highlights of your 20-year career as a referee with the Malta Football Association?

Since I was young, I was always passionate about football and I always dreamt to be the national team goalkeeper. I have played as a goalkeeper at school, but unfortunately I lacked self-confidence. When I was 22 years old, I saw a newspaper advert, and I applied to take up a refereeing course, to learn more about the laws of the game. Soon after I started, I felt comfortable in the role of a match official. From 1990 until 2010, I went through a long journey, starting as

an assistant referee, at that time called linesman.

In my initial months, I was an assistant referee in youth matches, running the line in two or three consecutive matches. As my career progressed, I started establishing myself as a referee in the Third Division League in Malta. Then the Second Division, then the First Division, and finally the Premier League. It was not easy to reach the top because there were so many good referees at the time. So I was nominated by the MFA to the FIFA Assistant Referees List to learn from our established referees at the time and start to have a taste of international football.



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After two years as a FIFA Assistant Referee in 1997 and 1998, I relinquished my post as an International Assistant Referee because I always wanted to be the man in the middle, and I believed that I had the skills to do so. I waited for a year to be included in the Premier League Referees List, and within three years, I became a FIFA Referee, which was quite a fast track. At the end of my 20-year career as an active referee, I was offered the post of Director of Refereeing, which I occupied between 2011 and 2016. Surrounded by experienced former match officials, I did my very best to see Maltese refereeing gain a higher status internationally. In fact, at that time, we had four referees in UEFA Category 1, Clayton Pisani in the Men's List, Esther Azzopardi in the Women's List, Franco Cachia in Futsal, and Jude Amin Utulu in Beach Soccer. During this time, I established myself as a leading UEFA Referee Observer and a UEFA Referee Coach, extending my network with several contacts with member associations abroad. I was invited to some countries to deliver courses, such as Republic of Ireland and Bulgaria.

In 2011, Charles Agius and myself also started referee exchanges in Europe which benefitted Maltese referees. At that time, UEFA committee members questioned our initiative and seemed to be more in favour of spending money on electronic equipment. We persisted with the idea because the experience of our referees was limited to officiating matches week in week out in front of low attendances, where our football was slow and not so technical. Through exchanges, we were giving them the opportunity to officiate in professional leagues in other countries, like Georgia, Northern Ireland, North Macedonia, Latvia, Finland, and Wales, amongst others. At the same time, the local clubs benefitted from the project, since they were experiencing a different

approach to the game by foreign referees.

After a break from football between 2017 and 2019, getting involved in other sports, I was elected as MFA Vice-President in July 2019 and re-elected in March 2024. I have been acting as a UEFA Match Delegate since 2021.

Being diagnosed with Parkinson's at the age of 50 in 2018 is a significant life event. How has this diagnosis influenced your perspective on life and work?

It was a big shock for me, and when I started feeling symptoms at the age of 49, I never thought I had Parkinson's. I thought it was just some kind of neck pain and rigidity, which would be healed by normal physiotherapy, but I made no progress. Therefore, I had an MRI, however, nothing came out, because Parkinson's is not something which can be detected by an MRI or by a blood test. I went to a neurologist and within seconds I was diagnosed with Parkinson's, since I had lost my smile.

I spent 3 years in denial, not sharing the news with anyone. Nobody would have guessed that I was living with Parkinson's, as I did not have any particular tremors. I started taking medication and kept myself active by going to the gym, boxing training, and playing table tennis. In a way, I was lucky that I was diagnosed at an early stage. However, after 3 years, I decided I wanted to support other people with the same condition, so I joined *Step Up for Parkinson's Voluntary Organisation*, and I have been working with them since then. Parkinson's has left both a physical and psychological effect on me. However, I feel blessed to have Parkinson's because I look at life from a different perspective. I do not worry about trivial matters as much as I used

to. I always remind myself that I have Parkinson's but Parkinson's doesn't have me, and I am in total control. I lead a normal life as much as possible, apart from the stiffness I have in the mornings. My wife helps me with that, by buttoning my shirt, and sometimes doing my shoe laces. However, when the medicine starts working, then I feel fine.

Thanks to Parkinson's, I started realising how important it is to prioritise in life and to take care of one's health, and also to leave a positive influence on your peers and amongst family members. So whatever I do, I try to do it with passion and pride, and with perseverance as well, which would be the name of my book, *Pride, Passion & Perseverance*, which I intend to publish next year. Notwithstanding my challenges, I look at life in a positive way. I look at the glass half full and not half empty. Life is beautiful, so I make the best out of it.

What inspired you to join Step Up for Parkinson's as a Project Manager, and how do you envision making a difference in this role?

I was introduced to *Step Up for Parkinson's* by a friend who also had Parkinson's. At first, when I saw some videos of their dance therapy classes, which are now called specialised movement classes, I said, this is not for me, because most of the people living with Parkinson's are older adults.

However, after three years with Parkinson's, way back in December 2021, I decided that life had given me a lot of opportunities, a healthy and a wonderful family, so many friends, in Malta and abroad, and therefore after being so lucky, I wanted to spend the rest of my life as an ambassador for Parkinson's. When on 1st April 2022 I announced my



illness publicly in a media conference, many people were in disbelief because I have always been active in sports.

I never realised that I would impact the lives of so many people. I am glad to say that since 2022, awareness about Parkinson's in Malta has increased considerably, and so many people are speaking

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about it, while many others are trying to help our Organisation. I introduced the Sport for Parkinson's campaign and different national sports associations offered to help by organising tournaments and fundraising events for us, and now, 2 years later, we opened a Parkinson's Therapy Centre. We are giving hope for people to improve their lives, by feeling better physically, emotionally, and socially. I met people with Parkinson's who thought that they would never, for example, go out to social events or go abroad, but through our encouragement, they started joining us on social events and trips abroad. The present and future initiatives shall continue

to give hope to people, and to believe that after being diagnosed with Parkinson's, they can still live a normal life. It may sound easy, but it is not, one really has to be strong. Thanks to refereeing and sports in general, I am mentally strong.

Could you discuss the goals and initiatives of the Sport for Parkinson's National Campaign?

Sport for Parkinson's campaign was initiated first of all, to create awareness about the role of physical activity in alleviating Parkinson's symptoms. Secondly, it was aimed to raise funds for the organisation, and thirdly also for the spirit



of solidarity through sports. Following the success of the first edition, I did some research and found that boxing and table tennis are two of the most beneficial sports for people with Parkinson's, because of the movement which reduces stiffness and because of the development of motor skills. In fact, I started training table tennis after a lapse of maybe 40 years. In 2022, I became the world champion in table tennis for Parkinson's, held in Croatia, in the Men's Doubles event with Marjan Vitanc from Slovenia. Last year in Austria, I managed to finish third in the same category, and won a bronze medal. My coach in both instances was Katia Mifsud.

Looking ahead, what are your aspirations for the development of football in Malta, and what are your plans for Parkinson's, and for your personal and professional growth?

In football, I want to continue being close to football clubs and to member associations. I am involved in football to serve football. I firmly believe that football, and sports, in general, but mainly football has given me so many wonderful opportunities and experiences, so that is why I dedicate so much of my time involved in football development and supporting our clubs and member associations.

In 2020, we launched a new strategy for Maltese Football, the motto being *We Can Perform Better*. As an Association we strongly believe that although being a small country, our passion can lead us to achieve more if we work harder and professionally to raise our standards. We are already seeing a marked improvement and lately we have enjoyed the success obtained by both the women's national football team and that of the men's Futsal national team. I will continue to do my utmost, together with the rest of the MFA Administrative Team, to contribute towards further positive changes in local football.

On a personal basis, I would like to continue learning. I would like to learn from other people's experiences, the more I meet people, the more I learn. I am working at the Public Works Department. I joined the civil service just over a year ago. Therefore, from a professional point of view, I would like to learn more about public policies. I would also like to publish my book – *Pride, Passion, and Perseverance*, which defines me as a person who when the going gets tough, the tough gets going.

Rachel Chircop



Rachel Chircop, a 22-year-old, resides in Naxxar and works at Identity Malta. In 2020, she earned a degree in Art and Design. Alongside her passion for the arts, Rachel is a dedicated Special Olympics Malta Bowler Athlete, serving as the Secretary of the SOM Athlete Leadership Committee and a member of CRPD Youth People Disability Rights Forum.

Four years ago, Rachel joined Special Olympics Malta, finding a supportive community that boosted her confidence and courage beyond sports, positively impacting her education. Her dedication to bowling has flourished through Special Olympics, leading her to represent Malta in local competitions, including the MBA Bronze Cup, where she achieved her highest score and secured the first-place champion title.

Rachel's pinnacle achievement occurred at the Special Olympics World Games 2023 in Berlin, where she earned two silver medals in the Doubles and Single Competitions, showcasing her remarkable talent.

Rachel serves as the Secretary of the Special Olympics Malta Athlete Leadership Committee, a SOM Health Messenger, and a Healthy Habits Leader, serving as a role model for her peers.

Believing in the power of inclusion, Rachel is committed to supporting the Special Olympics mission and creating an environment that recognizes the ability and dignity of every individual. Her goal is to share her Special Olympics journey, using the joy of sports to foster understanding and respect for people with intellectual disabilities, inspiring others to achieve their full potential.

You've been a Special Olympics Malta Bowler Athlete for four years. Can you share how joining Special Olympics impacted your life, both in terms of personal growth and achievements in sports?

Joining Special Olympics Malta has had a significant impact on my life, both personally and athletically. Through the organisation, I have experienced tremendous personal growth, acquiring confidence, determination, and a strong sense of solidarity with fellow athletes. In terms of sports, it has provided me with the opportunity to improve my skills and abilities, compete at various levels, and experience the joy of representing my country in national and international tournaments. Before joining Special Olympics Malta, I've always doubted myself and questioned my abilities. But look at me today! I gradually built my confidence and managed to have a conversation in public.

Your passion for bowling has led to remarkable achievements, including winning the annual MBA Bronze Cup and earning two silver medals at the Special Olympics World Games 2023. Can you share the significance of these accomplishments in your bowling journey?

Winning the annual MBA Bronze Cup, participating in Special Olympics Malta International Games which was held in 2022, where I achieved three medals; silver, bronze and gold, and lately during the Special Olympics World Games which was held in Berlin last year, I've earned 2 silver medals. These are all significant achievements in my bowling journey. These accomplishments represent the result of years of dedication and hard work and they serve as a testament to the progress I've made as



an athlete bowler. They also inspire me to continue striving for excellence and serve as a source of motivation for other athletes, within the Special Olympics Community. Not only, but also within the community in general. What we achieve, thanks

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to Special Olympics Malta, is also an inspiration to other people with and without intellectual disabilities in our country.

Beyond your athletic achievements, you hold significant roles like Secretary of the Special Olympics Malta Athlete Leadership Committee and SOM Health Messenger. How do these roles contribute to your mission of promoting inclusion and supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities?

The creation of a more accepting and inclusive world is one of Special Olympics' goals. Through the athlete leadership, Special Olympics athletes have an opportunity to develop and extend their abilities in leadership roles. Holding roles such as secretary at the Special Olympics' Malta Athlete Leadership Committee, and Special Olympics Malta Health Messenger has been extremely rewarding. These positions allow me to actively promote inclusion and provide support to individuals with intellectual disabilities. As a Health Messenger, I had the opportunity to advocate for health-related projects. One of the projects organised by the committee involves talks and workshops related to healthy wellbeing, strong minds and healthy habits. My role in the Athlete Leadership Committee enables me to represent the voices of athletes and opinions to the overall objective of Special Olympics.

Alongside your sports involvement, you obtained a Degree in Art and Design. How do your artistic pursuits complement your involvement with Special Olympics, and how do you balance both aspects of your life?

My artistic pursuits, including obtaining a degree in Art and Design enhance my involvement with Special Olympics in a unique way. Art offers me a creative outlet and a means of self-expression, both of which are necessary for me to maintain a healthy balance in my life. It also enables me to contribute to the visual aspects of Special Olympics events and projects which further combines my passion for art with my commitment to the organisation. For example, I was asked to design a logo for the Athlete Leadership Committee and to create a sport-related artbook for the athletes.

As a role model and advocate for Special Olympics, your goal is to spread awareness and understanding through sports. How do you envision achieving this goal, and what message would you like to convey to encourage inclusion and respect for individuals with intellectual disabilities?

My goal of spreading, promoting awareness and understanding through sports is rooted in the belief that sport has power to surpass barriers and bring people together. I envision achieving this goal by continuing to participate in events, sharing my personal journey, and actively advocating for inclusive practices in sports and beyond.

My message is simple. We can build a more inclusive and comprehensive society for everybody if we embrace diversity, foster empathy, create a respectful environment, and celebrate the abilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Only in this way can we create a more comprehensive, inclusive and respectful society for all.

Ayoubah Fona, born and raised in Liberia, shares a poignant life story marked by adversity and resilience. Growing up in challenging circumstances with hard working yet financially struggling parents, Ayoubah faced the difficulty of an unstable life in Liberia. His father, a taxi driver, endeavored to provide for the family amid the turbulent situation in the country.

Tragedy struck when Ayoubah lost his father in a religious riot in Lofa county at the tender age of four. This event left a lasting impact, as he, along with his senior brother, navigated life with their determined mother, who sustained the family through a small vegetable-selling business despite the unsafe conditions for Muslims in the country.

The backdrop of tribalism and violence between Lorma groups and Ayoubah's tribe, the Mandingo, added to the challenges of his upbringing. The precarious situation and witnessing ongoing threats adversely affected his mental health. The difficulties escalated with the Ebola outbreak, claiming the life of Ayoubah's mother, leaving him orphaned and facing an even more arduous journey.

In 2019, Ayoubah made the bold decision to migrate to Europe with his family, seeking safety and a fresh start. Grateful for the opportunities afforded by the European Union, he is determined to leave his painful past behind and focus on building a brighter future. Currently residing in Malta, Ayoubah is actively involved in self-improvement endeavors and has found solace in playing for Fgura Football Club.

Ayoubah Fona



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Can you share more about your experiences growing up in Liberia and how the challenging circumstances shaped your early life?

Growing up in Liberia was a tough time because of the instability in the community. Actually, it was a difficult moment in my life because growing up in a place where there is no unity made me face a lot of challenges growing up when I was in my country.

Your mother played a crucial role in sustaining the family through a small vegetable-selling business despite unsafe conditions. Can you elaborate on the challenges your family faced during this time?

Yes, because I was raised from a poor family. Growing up as a kid, I never saw my father. When my father passed away, my mother was the only person who could feed us. She was a seller, selling vegetables for our family to survive. I was only four years old when my father passed away, and it was very hard for us to live without a father.

The backdrop of tribalism and violence between Lorma groups and your tribe, the Mandingo, added to the difficulties of your upbringing. How did this affect your daily life and interactions within the community?

I felt that it was not safe to go around because actually at that moment even the thought of going to school made me feel anxious. Therefore, I had to stop going to school. When I was still going to

school, my family had to come regularly for us at school, because the place was unsafe due to the continuous war between these two ethnic groups, the Muslims and the Christians.

We come from the Mandingo ethnic group and we are a minority in Liberia. Growing up at that time actually felt very unsafe. I could not talk or even go close to the Lorma people. I was not happy with this situation as I would have loved to have unity amongst these two ethnic groups, but unfortunately there was nothing that I could do about it.

Migrating from Liberia to Europe in 2019 was a significant step. How has this transition impacted your perspective on life, and what opportunities and challenges have you encountered in your new environment?

Actually, when leaving my country, I was very young and did not leave on my own, but I was accompanied by my brother. During the journey, I had another setback as I lost my brother and this was very sad for me. Consequently, I had to stay with people I had never seen before in my life. They were so good to me; they took me with them as when I lost my brother in the desert, I was very unhappy with the situation. I then met a friend of my brother when I was in the desert and this guy took me with him to Libya, where I stayed with him for almost one and a half years before crossing over to Malta.



Can you share more about your experiences in Malta and your involvement with the Fgura Football Club? In what ways has your involvement with the Fgura Football Club contributed to your integration into the Maltese community?

When I came to Malta, I was feeling so sad and bored because when I was growing up I was so in love with sport. After a while, when I came here, I tried to find an opportunity to continue my sporting career. I used my own mobile to search for a football academy nearby. I was living in Fgura, so I came across the Fgura Football Club. I tried to physically go there to see the youth team training centre and tried to make friends with some of the football players.

I had tried to contact the Club but they never replied so I went there directly. I then talked to the Club Manager and he offered me a trial. I had the trial for six months, where I was training in the team for this period before I could actually play an official match. Before they allowed me and they signed me with the Fgura Football Club, they helped me a lot because I did not have the official documents that would allow me to sign for any football club while I was seeking asylum.

During the first season I did my best to help to take the Under 17 team to a third placing in the league. In the same season I managed to help the Under 19 team to get promoted to the Section B. So I felt very happy with my achievements.

Albert Gambina



At 63 years of age, Albert's maritime journey intertwines a lifelong connection to the sea, a successful career as a ship's captain, and a passion for kayaking. Beginning in 1976 at the Nautical School, he progressed through the ranks, obtaining a Master Mariner's certificate in 1993. Transitioning ashore as a marine pilot with Malta Maritime Pilots Co-OP in 2002, he guides ships in and out of harbours.

His adventurous spirit extends beyond the maritime realm. Exploring unusual ports of call on a bicycle led to the purchase of a folding kayak in 2006. Joining the Malta Canoe Federation and participating in the first kayak crossing to Sicily in 2008 marked the inception of a lasting kayaking partnership with Dorian. Together, they achieved numerous kayaking firsts, including the crossing from Tunisia to Malta, unassisted traverses, and a kayak circumnavigation of the Maltese archipelago, earning special awards from SportMalta and the Malta Olympic Committee.

Despite the challenges of aging, their motivation remains unwavering. In 2021, they embarked on a gruelling adventure, paddling to Sicily and circumnavigating the island successfully. This individual's life encapsulates resilience, a lifelong affinity for the sea, and a commitment to pushing boundaries, emphasizing that age is no barrier to pursuing one's dreams. Looking forward, they remain motivated for the next exciting adventure, illustrating the enduring spirit of exploration and determination.

Your career journey, from the Nautical School in 1976 to becoming a senior pilot today, is quite remarkable. How has your maritime background influenced your passion for kayaking?

Well, to start with, the sea has always been an important factor in my life. Therefore, it was a natural progression to take up kayaking and adventure because adventure is really everything what being at sea is. When you embark on a ship, to a certain extent, you are going into the unknown. I have fulfilled that part of my life, when working on ships you encounter many people from different countries and cultures as well as visiting some exotic places too. So, continuing with kayaking was really extending my sense of adventure. While keeping my passion for the sea alive. So, obviously, it's really part of me to have continued kayaking.

Your kayaking partnership with Dorian has resulted in numerous accomplishments, including the first kayak crossing from Tunisia to Malta and circumnavigating the Maltese archipelago. Can you share some memorable moments from these adventures, and what makes your partnership with Dorian so successful?

Well, first of all, Dorian and I are like brothers to a certain extent, in that we completely trust each other and when you paddle in a tandem kayak there has to be a sense of trust, and that is certainly an important aspect. Obviously, the fact that we are friends, and that we go back a long way is quite important. You won't be able to do the things we have done unless you have that sense of partnership and friendship between you, and that was what enabled us to really embark on what seemed to be at that time



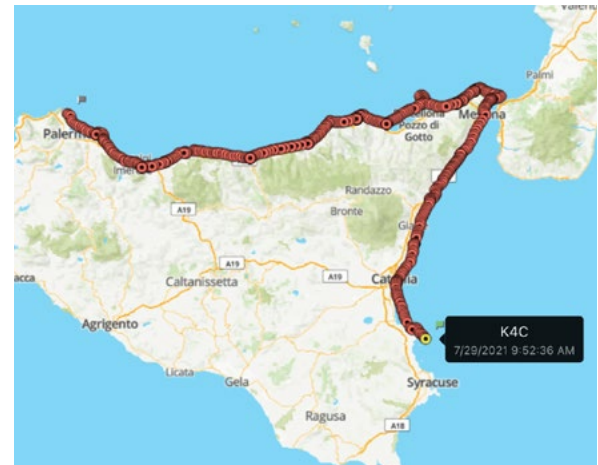
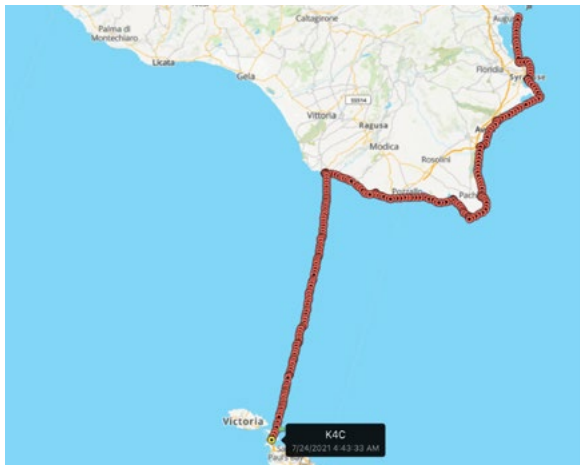
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extreme adventures. I mean on 1st September 2009 we paddled solo from Malta to Sicily, and it was something that was never done before to paddle unassisted, yet with the help of the Armed Forces of Malta, who green-lighted the adventure, we were able to do it.

We set off, in a way, into the unknown but obviously having the background that I have on ships and on the sea, it's important in recognizing what the risk factors are. It's all about managing risks. We trust each other, and if for example it is something that is related to the sea, or navigation, Dorian trusts me blindly. On the other hand, I trust him for certain decisions with the "go or not go". So it is a partnership that works very well. We've had many memorable moments notably the times we encountered adverse weather conditions. It is through sheer adaptability and team spirit that we managed to overcome these situations. There was

the time whilst paddling on the final part of the crossing from Mahdia (Tunisia) to Lampedusa. One where we had already been paddling for about 26 hours at that stage, but the last three miles the wind and swell began to constantly increase and although tired, we were fed up paddling in the shelter provided by the escort boat. Without saying to each other we decided to step up the pace and set-off to enter Lampedusa on our own.

Knowing when to stop and call it a day when paddling is another factor to take into account. This was the case on the long coastal voyages we have completed, Sicily to Rome in 2013, where traversing the Gulf of Gaeta comes to mind, and the circumnavigation of Sicily in 2021. There were also too, many memorable moments such as the school of tuna leaping ahead of us in 2009 and the beautiful beach at Tindari.





Despite the challenges, including the recent gruelling paddle to Sicily in 2021, you express a continued motivation for the next adventure. What drives you both to seek new challenges, and do you have a specific dream or goal for your future kayaking endeavours?

Well, being at the age that we are you tend to relax a bit and say... you know, I'm getting too old to do this. It's a fact that things aren't as easy as when we were younger, obviously. However, the fact that there's a goal or a dream to chase, is motivation for us to continue. We look forward to the planning and talking about the next challenge, it's the stimulus

we need to go the gym and go out paddling in our kayak throughout the year.

This year we plan to do a circumnavigation of Malta, so at the moment we are training up for it. We spend time at the gym plus on the water training whenever we can. If we manage to accomplish this latest test it would be our 20th round Malta and without sounding boastful, feel it is quite a feat, something that no-one has done before. Next year we hope that we will be able to paddle possibly one more time from Sicily to Malta. We have a project and we hope that we will be able to realise it.

Vladyslava Kravchenko



Vladyslava Kravchenko, a two-time Paralympian and distinguished advocate for Para sports, made history in 2016 by becoming Malta's first female swimmer and the first female athlete since 1980 to represent the country at the Paralympic Games. This achievement was repeated at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. In 2015, Vladyslava was chosen for the European Paralympic Committee's Youth Ambassadors programme, where she actively raised awareness about the Paralympic movement in Europe, visiting schools and promoting the benefits of Para sports on various local and international platforms.

As a member of a Steering Committee appointed by the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Malta, Vladyslava played a pivotal role in establishing the first formal legal structure for the Malta Paralympic Committee and Athletes' Council. Her leadership, initially as the Chair of the Athletes' Council and currently as the Treasurer of the Committee, facilitated the implementation of I'mPOSSIBLE in Malta—an official educational programme of the Paralympic movement—reaching over 1,500 students. She contributed as a co-author to the National Para Sport Strategy and collaborated with the University of Malta on integrating Para sports into local coach education and development.

Professionally, Vladyslava is a certified public accountant with a decade of experience in one of the Big Four professional services networks. In 2022, she graduated with distinction as a Master of Science in Sport Management, Politics and International Development from Loughborough University, supported by the Malta Sports Scholarship. Currently, she works as a consultant

with Loughborough University, focusing on developing a Paralympic performance basics framework for UK Sport. Vladyslava's remarkable contributions have earned her prestigious awards, including the Queen's Young Leader Award in 2017 and recognition for Emerging Leadership on International Women's Day Award 2023 by the International Paralympic Committee.



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Can you share with us your journey into becoming a Paralympic swimmer and your motivation behind promoting para sports with the Maltese Paralympic Committee?

My journey in sports really started before I was born, as both of my parents were professional athletes, so I got into sports really early in my childhood. My first sport was rhythmic gymnastics, and then I tried many other sports. I think the tipping point for me to get into swimming was when I got injured when I was 17. Since I had a spinal cord injury, I got into swimming as part of the rehabilitation process. I got very inspired by the London Paralympic Games and I was really keen to compete at the next edition of the Games. So that is how I got involved in competitive swimming. At that time, it was something very new, even locally so it was very much a trial-and-error process.

When I was at a competition this year, I was reflecting on how far I have come. I've seen other athletes who have been competing with me for years, and there are new ones. The whole experience now is so different than it was years ago. I got into sports basically after my injury and my main concern is contributing to the Paralympic movement locally and internationally. When I had started there wasn't really an organisation of Paralympic sports in Malta. Malta was very successful in the 60s and 70s during the Paralympic Games, we even had some medalists but there was a very long period of time where there weren't participants and there wasn't any administrative base. So even for me, if I wanted to continue the sport and take it seriously, there

had to be administrative support that the athletes cannot really do without. So that's how I got into the Executive Committee and I'm still on the board. I think by trying to help myself, I indirectly also helped others in the process.

How has participating in para sports impacted your life, both personally and professionally?

I think sports in general, makes a difference in your development. I was really lucky to be involved in sports when I was young, so it really helped me with my personal development. Building some confidence, discipline and other skills which are transferable into everyday life, and then eventually to your education and to your professional setting. I always say that I am a sports evangelist, if it was in my power, I would basically get everyone involved in sports, in one way or another. There is always something that you can learn from practicing sports.

As an ambassador for para sports, what message do you aim to convey to the community, and how do you hope to inspire others with disabilities to engage in sports?

I have been within the Paralympic movement and in para-sports for the past 10 years. I would strongly encourage the community to be more aware about accessibility. I became a wheelchair user at the age of 17 and discovered things like steps and broken lifts, which I didn't think about before as these things would not typically be in your field of vision in daily life. But once you're actually faced with them you realise how unacceptable sometimes the

infrastructure is. Being aware of it is so important because you never know, as you might be in that position tomorrow. If we are talking about sporting facilities and programmes, I think it's really important to think about how and to what extent they are accessible. While to individuals with disabilities, I would recommend being more open to the world and the world would become more open to them. You, because you will never find anything which is perfectly done, or ideal, or up to standard, but I realised it was like a two-way process. The more you engage, the more others will be willing to give you a hand.

Do you see any parallels between the discipline required in swimming and the meticulous nature of your job, and how do these aspects complement each other in your life?

I mean I would say it's very different, but swimming really helped me to get through probably the corporate environment and I have proper time-management. Sports was something that complimented my career and vice-versa, I learned a lot through my professional career.

What advice do you have for individuals juggling demanding careers with their personal pursuits and aspirations, particularly those who may be facing physical challenges?

Yes, I mean dual-career is something quite interesting and I believe it has really picked up in different countries. Obviously, the sporting systems are very different between countries, so some

countries can afford to have professional full-time athletes whilst some don't.

I think a dual career for athletes is something really important that needs to be embraced and encouraged from a young age. Sometimes, we feel that if we do not have the opportunity to train full time, it would be impossible to make it to the highest level. In reality, I have now been living for three years in the United Kingdom and I've come to realise that there are a lot of athletes who do that on a daily basis and still achieve decent results. So I think that a dual career needs to be promoted from a young age. I reckon that three main points here are: (i) setting your goals; (ii) a roadmap to reaching them; and (iii) excellent time management.

Looking ahead, what are your goals and aspirations, both in your professional career and in your continued journey as a Paralympic swimmer?

My general aspiration is to contribute as much as I can through the experiences and knowledge I've gained throughout the years, not just to the Paralympic community but to the sports sector in general because I believe it's such an important part of our society, that I applied in sport, especially within management and administration. Sports plays a massive role in building our community and it's been a great privilege having been involved in sports as an athlete and also as an administrator, for so many years. Now my aspiration is to convey that positive experience and get more people involved in sport.

mike Pace



Michael (Mike) Pace, born on May 14, 1932, has dedicated a lifetime to various domains, leaving an permanent mark in the fields of Physical Education, Bodybuilding, Voluntary Work, and Strength Training.

His journey with the Dockyard began at the age of 14 in 1947, progressing through various roles to become a Ship Fitter. Simultaneously, he commenced teaching of physical education to boarders at De la Salle College, showcasing his early commitment to education.

In the realm of Physical Education, Mr Pace officially began teaching at St Joseph Secondary Technical School in Paola on November 24, 1958. His pursuit of excellence led him to secure a British Council Scholarship for Physical Education at the Teachers' Training College of Physical Education in Loughborough, UK, from 1961 to 1962. Retiring in 1993 after 35 years of service, he had served as headmaster in three schools: Tumas Dingli Primary School, H'Attard; Boys' Secondary School, Dun Karm Psaila, Żebbuġ; and Birkirkara Primary School B. He significantly transformed the approach to physical education, advocating for a holistic experience that promotes physical, mental, and social well-being.

In the field of Bodybuilding, his interest began at 14, leading him from boxing to joining the Cottonera Barbell Club in 1951. A dedicated advocate for bodybuilding, he won numerous local and international Muscle Control and Photo Physique competitions. Serving as the Secretary of the club for 65 years, Mr Pace played a pivotal role in promoting bodybuilding as a sport, especially among the youth.

His voluntary work extended to becoming the National Coach of the Physically Disabled Rehabilitation Centre in 1962. For 57 years, he prepared athletes for the Stoke Mandeville Games for disabled persons, earning several medals. Simultaneously, he served as a trainer at the Sunny Coast Resort Spa gym in Qawra from 1984 for 34 years.

Throughout his illustrious career, Mr Pace has received numerous honours, including the Sportsman of the Year award from the Malta Amateur Weight Lifters Association in 1967, the President's Award for Volunteering in 2011, the Premju Anzjan tas-Sena in 2013, the Medal for the Service of the Republic in 2021, and the Premju Ġieħ l-Isla in 2023. His life's work stands as a testament to his unwavering commitment to education, sports, and community service.



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With over seven decades dedicated to education, bodybuilding, and voluntary work, what key moments or achievements stand out to you as particularly fulfilling?

I have always had a deep passion for physical training and sports. When you love something, any excuse is valid to engage in it whenever possible. I guess that this is what prompted me to participate in voluntary work at various stages of my career. Looking back, I have no regrets about the years I dedicated to voluntary service. Aside from the personal satisfaction it brings, it also allows you to become a role model, demonstrating that providing a service to those in need is far more rewarding than simply being paid for your work.

However, I believe the key that unlocked many opportunities for me was the diploma course in Physical Culture organised by the International Federation of Physical Culture. I was the first Maltese to enrol in this course. While I was still at the Drydocks, a colleague named Twannie Xuereb encouraged me to apply for a position as a Physical Education teacher after spotting an ad in the newspaper. During the interview process, my official qualification in the field set me apart from other candidates. Additionally, some members of the selection board were familiar with my voluntary teaching experience at De la Salle College, and they appreciated my approach to the subject. As a result, I was offered the position and began teaching

at St Joseph Secondary Technical School in Paola, becoming the first physical education teacher to secure a pensionable post with the government. This opportunity opened doors for me to further promote physical education across various sectors.

You played a pivotal role in transforming physical education from traditional, drill-based methods to a holistic experience. Can you share insights into how you pioneered this shift and the impact it had on students' well-being?

As I mentioned earlier, I have always been fascinated by training and sports, considering them essential for my personal growth, mental well-being, and physical health. Through regular training, I learned valuable skills such as goal setting, how to handle success and failure, and perseverance through challenges. These skills have proven applicable to various aspects of my life, including my education, career, and personal relationships.

Today, the holistic benefits of Physical Education are widely acknowledged. However, during my time, Physical Education was often limited to traditional, drill-based, and military-style methods. My primary goal was to change this approach, starting with my own classes. I went beyond merely providing a ball and allowing students to play football. Instead, I introduced them to a variety of sports, particularly basketball, as well as activities targeting different skills and areas of their bodies.

Transitioning from classroom teaching to a position at the Head Office of the Education Department in Valletta was a challenging decision. However, this role allowed me to further promote this innovative approach to Physical Education in more schools and provide them with the necessary resources. Looking back, I take pride in knowing that I played a part in the development of Physical Education and contributed to its elevated status today.

As a passionate bodybuilder since the age of 14, you've not only won numerous competitions, but also dedicated significant time to promote bodybuilding as a sport. What motivated you to champion this cause, and how has the perception of bodybuilding evolved over the years?

Bodybuilding faced considerable lack of appreciation. We weren't recognized as athletes, and I recall a time when bodybuilders weren't even eligible for consideration as Sportsmen of the Year. Media coverage predominantly focused on football. With all due respect, despite national football teams consistently delivering disappointing results in international competitions, bodybuilders like Armando Buttigieg, Harold Bonsfield, myself, and others who achieved prestigious honours in international competitions remained relatively unknown.

The Cottonera Barbell Club, the oldest gym on the island, has nurtured numerous accomplished

bodybuilders. Its primary objective has never been profit-driven but rather aimed at raising awareness about the importance of physical culture in the country. Consequently, financial struggles have always been a challenge. In the past, we willingly participated in balancing acts to raise funds to keep the club operational.

Despite the relative lack of sophisticated equipment, the Cottonera Barbell Club fosters a unique sense of community. Seasoned bodybuilders and advocates of physical culture are always willing to offer guidance and support to newcomers. In my retirement, I am pleased to see that the legacy of the Cottonera Barbell Club has been upheld. However, it's disheartening to witness the unfortunate trend in bodybuilding worldwide of using anabolic steroids and other substances creeping into the sport. Some individuals lack the patience to train and wait for results, seeking quick fixes, and tarnishing the reputation of this noble sport in the process.

You've been instrumental in pioneering sports for individuals with disabilities. How has the landscape of disability sports changed over the years, and what drives your enduring commitment to this cause?

In my time, persons with disabilities were often marginalised and overlooked, as if they were to be disregarded and forgotten. You can imagine what the idea of promoting sports for persons with disability

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had to face. Fortunately, today, sports for individuals with disabilities are rightfully recognized as part of their entitlement.

In addition to cultural barriers, family members, and sometimes the individuals themselves, objected to participating in sports due to fears of injury. Drawing from my experiences and training at Loughborough, where I explored various approaches to physical activity, I made a decision to offer training sessions every Saturday afternoon at the Physically Disabled Rehabilitation Centre. My goal was to challenge prevailing attitudes and assist them in building self-esteem and realising their full potential, a departure from the predominant practice of solely providing occupational therapy.

Consequently, I tailored different sports to accommodate their diverse abilities. I organised circuit training sessions to improve endurance and held competitions at the Centre to prepare them for international events. This initiative also facilitated their inclusion in national events, a concept unheard of at the time. We participated in several international competitions and even secured medals, a groundbreaking achievement for Maltese contingents at the time. Despite our successes, these accomplishments were often overlooked by the media.

You've received various honours, including the Sportsman of the Year and the President's Award for Volunteering. Looking back, how do these awards resonate with you, and what do they represent in terms of your contributions to sports, education, and community service?

While it's certainly gratifying to receive awards for one's efforts, these honours inevitably find their place in cabinets. In all honesty, the most meaningful rewards for me are the encounters with former students, athletes, colleagues, and individuals I've trained, who express that I've made a positive difference in their lives. Knowing that I've contributed to making the world a bit better fills me with immense satisfaction.

Reflecting on my journey, achieving what I did wasn't without its challenges. I encountered numerous obstacles, with the greatest being the closed mindset of others. Yet, if you truly believe in something, you must roll up your sleeves and pursue it relentlessly. I'm grateful that I had the perseverance to do just that.



Fabio Spiteri



Over 27 years in competitive sports, Fabio Spiteri's journey commenced with sprint and middle-distance track events, achieving the pinnacle with two bronze medals in the 4 × 400m relay at Small Nation Games. Calf issues led to a transition to triathlon, marking the start of a remarkable sporting odyssey. In 2013, leaving a 21-year career at Malta Freeport, Spiteri embraced coaching, allowing ample time for personal training and recovery.

In 2017, driven by a desire for greater challenges, Spiteri ventured into ultra-races, completing the triple Ironman, quintuple Ironman, and a nonstop 1000 km cycling around Sicily in 47 hours. Despite setbacks, such as failing to finish the Deca Ironman in Brazil and a crash in Switzerland, resulting in a broken clavicle and surgery, these experiences fueled his determination.

Looking ahead to the next season, Spiteri has applied for ambitious races, including 5x Ironman in Colmar, France, and 10x Ironman in Lago di Garda, Italy, aiming to break his national record.

Beyond sports, Spiteri is passionately involved in animal welfare. Launching Project 100, he aims to raise €100,000 from his races, directing funds toward food and medicine for animal shelters and cat feeders. His ongoing fundraising efforts since 2017 have already exceeded €210,000, reflecting a sustained commitment to supporting animal shelters and emphasizing the convergence of sports and philanthropy in Spiteri's inspiring journey.

What motivated you to transition from a traditional job to a focus on sports coaching and training as a triathlete? Can you share the driving factors that led to this career shift?

Basically I worked for 21 years at the Freeport which involved very long hours, including weekends. I've always loved sport, I've always trained, but unfortunately, sometimes I would not be in the mood to race in the morning, especially after a night shift, and it was a bit hectic.

Having said that, I started coaching on the side, as Triathlon was on the increase at that time, we're talking 2011. Unfortunately I lost my parents that year, so I needed a change in my life, I got my required qualifications and I started full-time coaching.

I think it was the best decision I've ever made, because it's something I love doing. It also gave me more time for myself to train, to train for my extreme sports, so basically that's how it started.

Endurance sports, especially Ironman races, often come with physical challenges and the risk of injuries. Can you share some of the significant injuries or challenges you've faced as an Ironman athlete, and how have these experiences shaped your approach to training, recovery, and overall resilience in the sport?

To be honest, I used to be a medium-distance runner competing in the 400m and 800m events, and I changed to triathlon for the simple reason that I used to get a lot of injuries from the track.

Running at a very very high speed, using the spike shoes over and over again, I was having issues with my calf, that's why I changed to triathlon. So there's more, there's a more element of injury in short distance than in long distance.

Training for an Ironman, training for an ultra-distance, is more of a repetitive movement, and I'm training in zone 1 and zone 2, at a low heart rate, and a slow pace. Well, you still get some injuries, but my type of injuries are like the recent cycling crash, when I broke my shoulder. And there's also the wear and tear during the event itself, like blisters and shoulder pain from extreme exercise, for example 16 hours of swimming.

However, as you go along, your body adapts, the mind adapts and you start going even further distances throughout the event.

As an Ironman athlete involved in fundraising for animals, how has your passion for endurance sports translated into support for animal causes?

Yes, I have two passions, which are sports and animals. I have 13 pets myself, I've always lived with pets including dogs, cats, rabbits, they were always part of my life. When I started doing these extreme races, since I'm the only extreme triathlete in Malta, I was getting good followers during my events.

Even through the messages I was getting, including phone calls, messages on Facebook, posts on Facebook. And then I said to myself, wow, this can be translated into a good fundraising event. So I amalgamated fundraising with my extreme races.

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I've been fundraising since 2017 now, and yeah, it's a good idea, and I will continue fundraising for as long as my body can take me to do sports.

Are there specific projects, events, or partnerships you are considering to further your efforts and make a lasting difference in the welfare of animals?

Yes, this year I'm taking part in the 5x Ironman World Championships in June in France, and it will build me up for the Deca the 10x Ironman, which will be in Lago di Garda in September. So I created this project 100, the target is collecting 100,000 Euro for animal shelters, and it will start from May, which is one month before my first race, up to September, which will be the last month after my second race. I'm also in the process of getting a strong team and we're going to try and organise the istrina for our animals.

As an Ironman athlete and advocate for animal causes, what message do you hope to convey to the general population regarding the intersection of endurance sports and fundraising for animals?

Yes, this is a simple statement for me, please do love your animals, especially your pets at home. Do fundraise because there are lots of shelters which are depending on our fundraising activities, and yes, obviously at least people should do some sport activity at least three times a week.

Thank you very much for this interview Fabio, best of luck.



Dorian Vassallo



Dorian J. Vassallo, a 65-year-old kayaker since 2005, shares a remarkable journey intertwined with personal resilience, sportsmanship, and charitable initiatives. His kayaking expeditions began as a response to football injuries, leading to a passion for long-distance kayaking. After his wife's cancer diagnosis and subsequent passing in 2006, Vassallo conceived the idea of paddling from Malta to Sicily to raise funds for cancer research. This initiative marked the genesis of "Kayak for Charity," raising €32,000 for the Malta Cancer Foundation in 2008.

Vassallo's kayaking achievements expanded to night crossings, unassisted solo paddles, and circumnavigations of the Maltese Archipelago. Collaborating with fellow kayaker Albert Gambina, they ventured from Malta to Linosa, Tunisia to Malta, and Pozzallo to Rome. Notably, their unassisted crossing from Malta to Sicily in 2009 marked a pioneering feat in Maltese kayaking.

The duo's commitment to charitable endeavors and adventurous challenges continued with unassisted crossings to Catania, Linosa, and a remarkable journey from Malta to Sicily followed by circumnavigation in 2021. Dorian Vassallo's kayaking legacy encompasses 19 circumnavigations of Malta, showcasing resilience, determination, and a deep connection to both personal and philanthropic causes.

His adventurous spirit extends beyond the maritime realm. Exploring unusual ports of call on a bicycle led to the purchase of a folding kayak in 2006. Joining the Malta Canoe Federation and participating in the first kayak crossing to Sicily in

2008 marked the inception of a lasting kayaking partnership with Albert. Together, they achieved numerous kayaking firsts, including the crossing from Tunisia to Malta, unassisted traverses, and a kayak circumnavigation of the Maltese archipelago, earning special awards from SportMalta and the Malta Olympic Committee.

Despite the challenges of aging, their motivation remains unwavering. In 2021, they embarked on a grueling adventure, paddling to Sicily and circumnavigating the island successfully. This individual's life encapsulates resilience, a lifelong affinity for the sea, and a commitment to pushing boundaries, emphasizing that age is no barrier to pursuing one's dreams. Looking forward, they remain motivated for the next exciting adventure, illustrating the enduring spirit of exploration and determination.



Interview

What inspired you to take up kayaking, and how did the tragic loss of your first wife play a role in initiating your incredible paddling endeavors, especially the Malta to Sicily challenge?

It's a bit of a longer story. I had never kayaked before, I got into kayaking quite by chance. In August 2005, I was asked by a friend of mine to join them in a game of canoe-polo, basically canoe-polo is a game of water polo with canoes. I enjoyed the kayaking side of it, but I didn't quite like the amount of sprinting one has to do and the toppling over, getting in and out of the kayak and all this. I was already quite middle-aged at the time, but I liked the idea of kayaking. So after that I joined the Malta Canoe Federation and I went down with them a few times to learn the ropes. I also did a couple of courses with them and we did more open sea kayaking. I am more of a cruising type of person.

After that in December of 2005, my first wife Tessa got diagnosed with cancer and I stopped all

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contact with work, sports, with everything basically, and she battled the illness for five months and on the 5th of May 2006 she passed away. A couple of weeks before, I just got this fixation of wanting to kayak to Sicily to collect funds for a cancer organisation. I didn't even have a kayak at the time, so I went online, ordered a kayak and two or three days before I got a phone call from the shop telling me that I can collect it.

Obviously, I couldn't go because she was in her final days. I called a friend of mine who paid for it, collected it, took it down to the club and left it there in storage. After she passed away, this feeling of wanting to kayak to Sicily started eating the way to my head again. So, I said look, let me calm down a bit and do things a bit more rationally, because I am a bit spontaneous in these things. I said look, let me start training first. If I can go around Malta, which is 42 nautical miles, then I will paddle to Sicily. I started training and in June 2007, I paddled for the first time around Malta.

After that, I said fine, that's it I'm going to see how I'm going to organise paddling to Sicily. I was lucky enough that a colleague of mine's father had already organised two events, one with the Mirror Tens from Malta to Sicily and one with Surfers from Malta to Sicily. This colleague of mine told me, "Listen, I spoke to my father about it and he was interested to help you", he said "would you be interested?" And I said "yes of course". So, I spoke to him, we organised it, and in 2008 we paddled for the first time from Marsalforn to Pozzallo, and Albert Gambina was one of the people who had joined the crew. Basically, that was it because after that things developed naturally.

From paddling around Malta to ambitious crossings from Pozzallo to Valletta and Tunisia to Malta, your kayaking challenges have been diverse. Can you share the evolution of these challenges and the motivation behind each significant journey?

I would say it was destiny that brought me and Albert together. I knew Albert from when we were young, but anyway when we had arrived in Sicily, the following day the group went out for dinner and as a joke I said "next one Tunisia". Everyone shot me down straight away, except Albert. He was quite in the corner and all of a sudden, he said "you know it's doable". Obviously his experience as a sea captain played a big role. He told me it's doable, he said "75 miles Mahdia to Lampedusa, 25 miles to Linosa and 75 miles to Malta, we already did about 50/55 so there's not much more." I looked at him and said "are you serious?" And he said "shall we do it? We'll do it in two years' time so it gives us time to train" and it took off from there.

Now when you put two people that are passionate about adventure and kayaking, the rest comes more or less naturally and easily, but what I think keeps us motivated and going are really I would say three things. One; the thought of being the first doing something which no one has done before, locally of course, secondly; always trying to do something different and always trying to increase the distance, and thirdly and more importantly; the people who make use of the services of the organisation who we choose to collect funds for, because when we think about the suffering these people go through on a daily basis, it gives us that energy and push and motivation to organise it and get on with the job.

From paddling around Malta to ambitious crossings from Pozzallo to Valletta and Tunisia to Malta, your kayaking challenges have been diverse. Can you share the evolution of these challenges and the motivation behind each significant journey?

Yes, as I said before, I knew Albert from when we were young but then as normally happens in life, people take different paths and we sort of didn't meet up. Coincidence or destiny made us join the Malta Canoe Federation, more or less at the same time. Albert, after he had finished his service and me after my wife had passed away. His experience obviously on the sea is crucial and is everything to us and I am fortunate to say that had I not started

paddling with him as a team, I wouldn't have probably done all that we have done.

We paddled from Malta to Sicily unassisted for the first time in September 2009, and then in 2011 together with another two Maltese; Michael Gellel and Mark Bugeja, two Italians and two Sicilians. We paddled from Malta to Catania unassisted as well. So, his experience on the sea is definitely very important. The fact that we have been organising these events together since 2008, I think speaks for itself and is testament to the bond that has developed between us. For me and I'm sure I speak for him as well, we see ourselves as brothers more than best friends.



Jake Vella



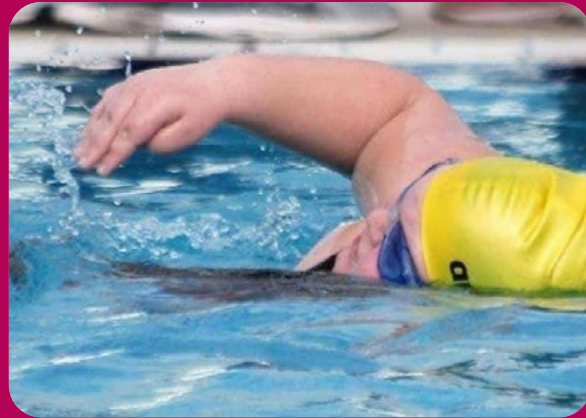
Jake Vella, a 14-year-old residing in Birzebbuga, Malta, is currently enrolled in Year 10 at St. Michael School, where his favourite subjects include Maths, Accounts, Economics, and ICT.

At the tender age of 5, Jake began facing a unique challenge—he rapidly gained weight despite attempts at incorporating sports and healthier eating into his routine. Concerned, Jake's parents consulted with doctors, leading to a series of tests and a life-altering diagnosis. Jake was found to have Rohhad Net Syndrome (ROHHAD), a rare disorder affecting respiratory control, autonomic nervous system regulation, and involving endocrine system abnormalities.

In 2015, following the diagnosis, Jake embraced the world of triathlon, initially practising swimming, cycling, and running. However, due to leg discomfort, he transitioned to cycling and swimming, dedicating three years to triathlon and an additional two years to cycling and swimming.

Jake's resilience extends beyond personal achievements. He has undertaken numerous charity initiatives, notably organising swims to raise funds for the Association for Abandoned Animals. One of his most notable accomplishments was a 100 km swim in a 25 m pool over 20 days, coinciding with his mother's 20-day radiotherapy sessions, completing it in an impressive time of 33 hrs and 15 mins.

Over the past two years, Jake orchestrated a paw walk around Mater Dei for the Association for Abandoned Animals, and together with Dr Lydia



Abela, he initiated a Christmas Tree at the Main Entrance of Mater Dei, collecting pet food for animal sanctuaries.

Jake gave us a powerful motivational message: "Always believe in yourself, never give up, and never let your disability hinder your goals." His story serves as an inspiration to us all.

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Interview

What inspired you to take up triathlon training despite facing challenges associated with Rohhad Net Syndrome, and how has the sport impacted your life?

I was gaining a lot of weight, and so initially started training football, however, I didn't like it and stopped after only three days. Eventually, I ventured into triathlon training like my father, engaging in events that encompass swimming, cycling, and running, and I found genuine joy in this multisport discipline. However, I found running hard due to the weight gained because of my condition. Yet, it's a sport that continuously fuels my motivation.

Dealing with Rohhad Net Syndrome can present unique challenges. How did triathlon training help you overcome obstacles both in sports and daily life?

Triathlon holds great significance for me. It assists me in maintaining excellent physical condition and overall health.

Your fundraising runs for animals are making a positive impact. Can you share a memorable experience or accomplishment from your fundraising efforts, and how do you feel about the contribution you are making to animal causes?

I have a deep love for animals. In 2020, amidst my mother's chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments at hospital, I embarked on a 20-day



challenge to swim 20 km in a 25 m pool to raise funds for abandoned animals. Over the past two years, Dr Lydia Abela and I have organised the Christmas stall at the main entrance of Mater Dei Hospital. We collected food for abandoned animals and also organised a walk around Mater Dei hospital. Both initiatives were highly successful, and I am immensely gratified to contribute to the welfare of animals in need through these initiatives.

What advice would you give to other young children facing health challenges who aspire to pursue sports or engage in charitable activities?



I encourage other children to participate in sports, learn to play an instrument, or to explore other activities, while promoting both mental well-being and physical health.

How has your personal journey shaped your perspective on overcoming obstacles and making a difference in the lives of others?

I believe I have inspired many others facing similar circumstances as mine.



Tommy Wallbank



Tommy Wallbank, an 18-year-old student reading for a B.Sc in Sports and Physical Activity at the Institute for Physical Education and Sport at the University of Malta, has centred his athletic focus on long-distance running. His passion for running was sparked by a personal experience, particularly a significant event: a 1000 km run undertaken in memory of his late friend, Rebecca Zammit Lupi.

Tommy commenced running about a month before this challenge, driven by the desire to enhance his fitness. The 1000 km run not only served as a personal challenge, but also as a means to raise funds for Puttinu Cares, a charitable organisation supporting families facing the challenges of cancer. The endeavor successfully garnered just over €10,000 for the cause.

Beyond running, Tommy has been dedicated to karate for approximately 10 years. Additionally, he has engaged in football and tennis, showcasing a diverse range of athletic interests that contribute to his overall active lifestyle.

Interview

Your passion for long-distance running was sparked by a significant personal experience. Can you share more about the journey that led you to take up running, especially the 1000 km run in memory of your late friend, Rebecca Zammit Lupi?

When I started running, it wasn't something where I said Ok, I want to start running! It was sort of me deciding to go out, maybe for a run. Then it transpired into something bigger. When it came to honouring Rebecca's memory, I wanted to plant a tree in her memory to remember what she had given throughout her lifetime.

Together with the school we put forward the idea to plant this tree. However, I believed that although this was a good idea, nothing ever came of it. So, then I wanted to take the matters into my own hands and do something in memory of her that she would be proud of.

Your 1000 km run not only served as a personal challenge but also raised over €10,000 for Puttinu Cares. How did this experience impact you personally, and what role do you believe sports can play in making a positive difference in the community?

Even though it was difficult at times, I did enjoy the challenge of running on a daily basis, starting running from close to practically nothing. It impacted me very positively, both mentally and physically.

I believe that when it comes to charity work, it shows that this can be done through sports and that great

things can come through sports not just for the community but also from a personal perspective. I hope it inspires other athletes to go out and do something for the community, even if it is not through their sport but through other areas. It would be great if more people could work together for the benefit of the community.

Currently studying Sports and Physical Activity, how do your academic pursuits complement your passion for sports?

When it comes to learning, academic pursuits do complement my passion for sports. I chose to study at the Institute for Physical Education and Sport at the University of Malta mainly because I would love to become a Physical Education teacher and also a running coach in the near future.

What I tell myself when I go running and when I go training is that I am not only doing it for myself and my passion, but also for my future career and gaining further experience.

Are there specific aspects of your studies that you find particularly beneficial to your athletic journey?

For sure. When you learn about the anatomy, nutrition, and certain bodily functions that we learn in various study units, it really does help as it teaches you stuff that you didn't know before and which you can apply to your running techniques and to other areas of life. All that I have learned so far, has been very useful.

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Looking ahead, what are your aspirations and goals in the field of long-distance running and other sports?

When it comes to this, I really just want to keep on improving as a runner, becoming the best runner I can possibly be. Not only that, but also turning into the best possible athlete I can be, being a bit more of an all-rounder as well. That means participating in other sport disciplines but obviously the main focus being on running, thus trying to get a little stronger, more flexible as these aspects are going to help in other areas of life as well. Hopefully these can be transferred towards coaching in other areas of life.

My target is to run a 5K in under 15 minutes one day and maybe try and win a few titles. That would be really nice.



INTERVIEWS

Slovakia

Žaneta Csáderová



Since 2014, Žaneta Csáderová has been serving as the director of the Slovak Anti-Doping Agency. She graduated from the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports at Comenius University in Bratislava, with a degree in Physical Education – Geography. She completed her doctoral studies at the Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, Comenius University in Bratislava, defending her dissertation titled "Doping in Sport and Anti-Doping Measures." In 2019, she successfully passed the rigorous examination with the defence of her rigorous thesis titled "Direction of Anti-Doping Strategy in Slovakia." She is a member of the Slovak Society of Sports Medicine. She actively participated in the Anti-Doping Committee of Slovakia, where she worked as a doping commissioner since 1999.

Significant projects in which she has participated:

Erasmus +, project number 400603273, EAC-A05 - 2017, EACEA, "National Observer of Anti-Doping Governance" until 2020,

Erasmus + Sport program "Education and Commitment as a strategy to fight against doping" 622258-EPP-1-2020-1-ES-SPO-SCP, Erasmus + Collaborative Partnership. Call for Proposals 2020.

In the realm of the dynamic world of anti-doping, where integrity and fairness stand as pillars of athletic excellence, there exists a select group of individuals who not only embody these values but also champion them at every turn.

Today, we have the esteemed privilege of introducing one such luminary. Meet Žaneta Csáderová, fondly referred to as Žanetka, the distinguished director of the Anti-doping Agency of the Slovak Republic. She embodies a unique fusion of expertise in antidoping issues and an unwavering commitment to the ethos of sportsmanship.

As part of our ongoing "Inclusion First" project, Žanetka graciously extends an invitation to explore the intricacies of her sports and professional journey. Through our dialogue, we embark on an expedition to uncover her profound insights into the realm of sports and the indispensable role of inclusion within its tapestry.

Interview

Žanetka and sports – how would you characterize yourself from this perspective? What does sport mean to you?

As the first thoughts that come to mind, words like fun and joy emerge. However, upon deeper reflection, we see the importance of rules, which are crucial for sports to function. Respecting the rules ensures integrity and fairness in sports. It teaches us patience, overcoming obstacles, perseverance, and mutual solidarity.

I have come to understand that hand in hand, there must be a system in sports to protect against the negative phenomena brought about by modern times. Balance is important so that sports do not lose their meaning and do not become merely a machine for producing records at the expense of health and values.

Could you take us closer to your professional sports journey? How and why did you personally enter this dynamic field?

It has been 25 years since I, as a graduate of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, decided to address the topic of "DOPING IN SPORT AND ANTI-DOPING MEASURES" and continue my doctoral studies in sports humanities. This is where my career as an anti-doping commissioner began. I do not even know exactly what led me to this topic in sports, but I am glad that I can be part of the anti-doping community. It is a challenging subject and encompasses many interdisciplinary areas.

Working as an anti-doping commissioner has taught me the importance of empathizing with the athlete and working to ensure the best conditions for them during doping control. I also worked at the National Sports Centre in the field of sports diagnostics,

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where I gradually learned that there are many differences in the sports disciplines themselves, which we currently use in setting up effective targeted testing of athletes. Ten years ago, I became the director of the Anti-Doping Agency of the Slovak Republic, and gradually, I became more and more convinced of the need to ensure education for athletes and sports professionals. Due to the easier accessibility of prohibited substances in organized sports, we can say that anti-doping education penetrates into the realm of public health in society as a whole.

Ten years ago, I became the director of the Anti-Doping Agency of the Slovak Republic, and gradually, I became more and more convinced of the need to ensure education for athletes and sports professionals. Due to the easier accessibility of prohibited substances in organized sports, we can say that anti-doping education penetrates into the realm of public health in society as a whole.

From a broader perspective, what is your opinion on the role of sports in society? Do you believe that sports can contribute to inclusion and diversity?

These days, I see sports as pivotal in influencing society, provided it maintains all the values upon which it was founded. It is crucial to capture and perhaps influence children's behaviour from a young age through playful means, emphasizing values such as equality, inclusion, and respect. By experiencing these values through sports activities, individuals can later be guided towards making the right decisions and thus help maintain the integrity of sports.

In your opinion, what is the essence of inclusion through sports?

In understanding what inclusion actually entails. Activities, such as those included in the "Sport values for every classroom" program, can explain the behaviours that children perceive, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of understanding inclusion as a result.





Which sports values are close to you? How has sports influenced you the most?

For me, rules and processes are very important as they show us the way to properly address tasks and provide us with boundaries. Equality and

honesty are crucial, ensuring that what we do is done under the same conditions, without making exceptions to achieve our goals unfairly. Teamwork is another value that helps us in our organisation to collaborate with other partners in spreading the ideals of clean sport. Overall, the brand of the Anti-Doping Agency represents values, and together we strive to protect them.

If you were to name three values that sports have taught you, what would they be? Why?

Fun, fair play, solidarity. In my opinion, relaxation and enjoyment, which sports bring, are crucial for mental health and motivation to progress both in sports and in life. Adhering to the rules set by sports and society maintains balance, fairness, and equal conditions for all participants.

Solidarity and inclusion are important because there is a certain diversity where we are all different, but we all strive for the same goal, which is respecting basic rights and individual success.

What has sport given you besides just participating in sports?

A lot of friends, good examples for solving various life situations. And above all, patience in achieving small and big successes in both personal and professional life.

We have chosen you for our publication as the face of the VALUES domain, given your esteemed authority in the field of anti-doping, where fair play is the driving force behind all initiatives. How do you perceive the values of sports and your role as the director of the Anti-Doping Agency of the Slovak Republic?

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It is a demanding role that does not bring financial or material security to the sports movement, making it challenging to explain the need and significance of anti-doping in sports. The importance and purpose of anti-doping rules need to be embodied in examples and in prominent sports figures.

For me, as the director, teamwork at the agency and the message for the next young generation of athletes, who will be symbols of clean sport, are crucial.

How can sports contribute to promoting international understanding and cooperation?

International sports federations and organisations serve as examples of collaboration in organizing significant international events, where we see athletes, coaches, and officials from different countries. We observe various political orientations, religious and ethical values, as well as gender and ethnic diversity. What is common is that every sport aims to present itself as a unified community, seeking to provide entertainment and joy in achieving sporting success. I perceive sports as a means through which we can positively highlight emotions and demonstrate international understanding and cooperation.

Žanetka and sports competitions - which sports races or competitions do you consider as your highlight?

As a child, I regularly participated in athletic sports competitions. Corresponding to my age, I experienced individual sporting successes that

certainly had a significant impact on my life. Over time, there were fewer of these competitions, but I still occasionally participated in various corporate and friendly sports activities. That feeling of joy and fun is still present.

What achievements do you value the most? Do you currently have any sports challenges?

I value several achievements in my life. My family, who supports me, is a private success that I cherish. As for professional success, holding the position of director of the Anti-Doping Agency is significant, where I could utilize my education and experience. As for sports challenges, they are modest but existent. It mainly involves regular physical activity appropriate for my age and capabilities. For example, I engage in activities like yoga, Pilates, walking, and other seasonal sports such as skiing and hiking.

To conclude our interview, we would like to ask for your opinion on the current sports program of the European Union. What else should the European Union do to encourage more young people to embrace sports as a lifestyle?

In my opinion, the sports program and the topics addressed by the European Union are sufficient. It is up to each country to implement and utilize the EU's potential. Different cultures prioritize different aspects, as we can see in the strategies for sports development in individual countries. Let us start from within to emphasize the need for embracing sports as a lifestyle in our country, and let us use the EU for education and sharing best practices in this field.

Stojka Dubenova is freelance teacher of English, interpreter, translator.

Education:

- Graduated from Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski, Bulgaria, with a degree in Russian Studies.
- Further specialized in English language and literature at Comenius University in Bratislava
- Engaged in numerous lifelong learning activities, particularly in language learning and teaching, including seminars organized by the British Council and participation in the American Studies Institute for Secondary School Fulbright Commission and ITD-Amherst.

Work Experience:

- Extensive experience as a lifelong teacher, indicating a dedication to education over a significant period.
- Served as the Head of the English department, demonstrating leadership skills and expertise in language education.
- Responsible for leading and coordinating the professional development of the department, highlighting commitment to ongoing improvement and learning.
- Played a crucial role in contributing to the development of the entire school curriculum, showcasing a comprehensive understanding of educational objectives and standards.
- Successfully implemented both local and national curriculum objectives, ensuring alignment with educational standards and goals.
- Acted as a school coordinator and author

Stojka Dubeňová



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of Erasmus+ projects K1 and K2, illustrating involvement in international educational initiatives and project management skills.

Interpreter Experience:

- Served as an interpreter at significant events such as the 5th summit of CE presidents in Levoča and meetings of CEFTA members, indicating proficiency in multiple languages and diplomatic communication.

- Also provided interpretation services during official visits of Bulgarian National Assembly delegations in Slovakia, demonstrating versatility and diplomatic skills.

Interests:

- Hiking, yoga, reading books, gardening, swimming, and cold-water immersion.
- Fluent in multiple languages including English, Bulgarian, Russian, and Slovak.

In the realm of English language teaching, a distinguished group of individuals not only excel in their field but also leave an indelible mark on the essence of sportsmanship. Today, we have the esteemed privilege of introducing one such luminary. Meet Stojka Dubeňová, a distinguished guest with a lifelong dedication to teaching English across various fields and levels. As the former head of the English department within the State Language School in Bratislava, she embodies a unique fusion of expertise in English language education and an unwavering commitment to the ethos of sportsmanship.

As part of our ongoing “Inclusion First” project, Stojka graciously extends an

invitation to explore the intricacies of her sports and professional journey. Through our dialogue, we embark on an expedition to uncover her profound insights into the world of sports and the indispensable role of inclusion within its tapestry.

Interview

Warm greetings, Stojka! It is with genuine pleasure that we welcome you to this exclusive interview for our publication, “Run and Smile.” Your esteemed reputation as a pillar in the community of English educators precedes you, celebrated for your steadfast dedication to embodying

core values such as camaraderie and excellence, qualities that resonate deeply within the world of sports as well. Today, we are particularly eager to delve into precisely these topics. Let’s jump right in with our first question.

Stojka, how would you describe your perspective on your sports career?

Reflecting on my sports career, I must admit that it was never a deliberate pursuit from my childhood. Instead, it seemed to unfold through a series of fortuitous events that led me down unexpected paths.

Firstly, I was fortunate to have a physical education teacher in secondary school who was also a renowned handball coach. This connection led me to join the university handball team during my studies, marking the beginning of my involvement in competitive sports.

Additionally, while working part-time as a tourist guide at the archaeological museum, I became involved with an archaeological club and participated in archaeological expeditions. This experience sparked my passion for hiking, opening up new avenues of exploration and adventure. Another unexpected turn came when my daughter became involved in synchronized swimming, aiming to become a national champion.

As we devoted countless hours to training and perfecting techniques, I found myself drawn into the sport as well. Eventually, I was offered the opportunity to become a judge, leading me to officiate at international competitions across Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

A further serendipitous moment occurred when I was approached by the national football association to teach English to a group of talented football

referees via Skype. Despite the initial challenge of mastering the intricacies of the Laws of the Game, this experience immersed me in the world of football for eight fulfilling years. Witnessing the growth and success of these aspiring referees, many of whom went on to become FIFA officials, was incredibly rewarding and inspiring.

Lastly, my journey into yoga began unexpectedly when I covered a class for a colleague and was introduced to a remarkable yoga instructor teaching at the Indian embassy. This encounter ignited a new passion for yoga, leading me to embark on yet another transformative journey of self-discovery and physical well-being.

In hindsight, I realise that my sports career has been defined by a series of chance encounters and unforeseen opportunities. Each experience has enriched my life in unique ways, teaching me valuable lessons about discipline, perseverance, and the boundless potential for growth and exploration in the world of sports.

From your perspective, what defines the essence of inclusion in sports?

For me as a Bulgarian who lives in Slovakia inclusion means a lot. It means creating a culture of acceptance, belonging, and mutual respect where everyone has the opportunity to participate, thrive, and fulfil their potential, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

The essence of inclusion in sports lies in creating environments and opportunities that embrace



diversity, promote equity, and ensure that everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, feels welcome, valued, and respected.

Inclusive sports programs provide equal access to participation for all individuals, regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, or any other characteristic. This means

removing barriers such as financial constraints, physical accessibility issues, discriminatory practices, or limited opportunities for certain groups.

What sports values resonate with you the most? In what ways had sports the greatest impact on you?

Sport holds diverse meanings for individuals, shaped by their unique experiences, cultural influences, and personal perspectives. For me, sports resonate as a source of passion and joy, contributing significantly to my identity and sense of belonging.

Engaging in sports not only keeps me physically active but also propels me forward in both literal and metaphorical senses. Physical activity enhances my opportunities for personal growth and achievement, fostering the development of essential life skills such as goal-setting, resilience, and perseverance. The process of setting goals, overcoming obstacles, and pushing my limits in sports brings a profound sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and fulfilment that transcends into other areas of my life.

Moreover, sports serve as a wellspring of inspiration through the extraordinary achievements of athletes and teams. Witnessing displays of determination, resilience, and triumph fuels my own aspirations and motivates me to pursue my dreams relentlessly. I aspire to emulate the dedication and spirit of those who have achieved greatness in their sporting endeavours, hoping to inspire others on their own journeys.

In essence, sports have had a profound impact on me, shaping not only my physical well-being but

also my personal growth, resilience, and aspirations. I believe in the transformative power of sports to inspire, uplift, and unite individuals, and I strive to embody these values in my own journey, aspiring to inspire others along the way.

Stojka and sport competition – which sport competition you regard as a highlight in your sporting life?

Reflecting on my sporting journey, I regard any competition I have won against myself as the highlight of my sporting life. These internal battles have led to profound personal growth, self-discovery, and inner fulfilment.

Each victory in these internal competitions represents a journey of self-improvement, resilience, and empowerment. Through overcoming personal obstacles, pushing through self-doubt, and achieving personal milestones, I have emerged stronger, wiser, and more self-aware with each challenge I have faced.

This journey is not just about personal success; it is also about inspiring others to pursue their own paths of self-discovery and growth. By embracing the transformative power of inner competition, I have learned to celebrate my victories and continue challenging myself to reach new heights in my sporting endeavours.



Andrea Gondova



Andrea Gondova works as a Finance Manager at Mondelez European Business Center in Slovakia. Mondelez is a global food company focusing on the snack food and confectionery business, and its portfolio includes iconic brands in various categories like Oreo, Milka, Cadbury and Belvita. Before Mondelez she worked at Dell Technology as Finance Controller.

She graduated from the University of Economics in Bratislava and achieved ACCA certification.

Meet Andrea Gondova, a vibrant embodiment of excellence in both the world of finance and the realm of sport. As a Finance Manager at Mondelez European Business Center in Slovakia, Andrea's journey into the world of sports was not merely happenstance; it was a deliberate choice driven by a thirst for personal growth and vitality. In her thirties, she embarked on a quest to refine her swimming technique under the guidance of a renowned coach, recognizing the transformative power of disciplined training. Today, swimming stands as a cornerstone of her fitness regimen, offering a blend of physical challenge and mental rejuvenation.

With a lifelong dedication to physical activity, she exemplifies the harmonious balance between professional acumen and personal well-being. Born and raised amidst the picturesque mountains of Slovakia, Andrea's affinity for sports was ignited at an early age. From exhilarating ski adventures to invigorating morning runs, she embraced the outdoors as her playground and nurtured a passion for an active lifestyle. From the euphoria of crossing the finish line to the serenity of a sunrise jog, she finds solace and strength in the rhythm of her footsteps and the beat of her heart. Through sports, Andrea has discovered invaluable lessons in patience, perseverance, and discipline - virtues that transcend the worlds of sports and enter every aspect of her professional journey.

Interview

Charming, young, and beautiful lady who always delights her fellow runners from Železná studnička with her pleasant approach and kind words. As part of the Inclusion first project, Andrejka allowed us to peek into the backstage of her sports and professional life. It was a pleasure for us to chat with her about her perception of sports and inclusion through sports. As we delve into Andrea's insights on the intersection of sports

and finance, we are invited into a world where rules, standards, and teamwork converge to shape success. In this interview, Andrejka draws parallels between these seemingly disparate domains, revealing the symbiotic relationship that exists between sports and enterprise. We believe that you will be inspired by her approach as well. Andrejka, the floor is yours!

We have selected you for our publication as the face of the FINANCE area. How do you perceive the connection between these two worlds?

The linkage between sports and the financial world highlights the importance of rules, standards, and teamwork in both worlds. I would like to mention the following key parallels:

Adherence to Standards – In the financial world, adherence to reporting standards ensures transparency and comparability of financial results among different companies. Similarly, sports have defined rules and regulations that create a level playing field for all participants.

Performance and Results Orientation – Both sports and the financial sector are focused on performance and achieving results. In sports, athletes strive for personal and team victories, while in the financial world, the aim of companies are positive results and financial success.

Preparation and Training are critical components in both sports and the financial industry. Athletes undergo training to enhance their performance and physical condition, just as professionals in

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finance engage in continuous learning and skill development to navigate the complexities of their field.

Team Effort in Collective Sports and Corporate World – Team sports emphasize the importance of collaboration and collective effort. Similarly, in the corporate world, teamwork is crucial for achieving organisational goals. While individual performance matters, the synergy of a well-coordinated team often leads to the best results.

Leadership and Strategy play pivotal roles in both sports and finance. A coach or team captain provides direction in sports, while corporate leaders and executives formulate strategies to guide their organisations toward success.

Could you tell us how you entered the world of sports?

I was encouraged to engage in sports from a young age, fostering a lifelong appreciation for exercise. As I grew up surrounded by mountains, I used to ski and enjoyed the ice skating during the winter and in summer it was hiking, cycling and running. It helped me to stay committed to be active throughout the whole life. The decision to enhance my swimming technique with the guidance of a professional coach, especially after my thirties, reflects a proactive approach to personal development and fitness. Now I consider swimming as an excellent full-body workout.

Establishing a morning routine that begins with training, whether it is running, weight training, or

swimming, is commendable. Starting the day with physical activity has numerous benefits for both physical and mental well-being. The fact that I miss it when circumstances prevent me from participating in sports highlights the positive impact it has had on my life.

Andrejka and sports competition – which sports competitions do you consider your personal highlight?

I found motivation to enhance my swimming skills specifically due to participation in the “Challenge Prague” short triathlon race which was really an exciting and challenging event. Triathlon indeed offer a unique blend of three distinct disciplines – swimming, cycling, and running that require endurance, versatility, and effective energy management. The sense of accomplishment and the personal highlight I experienced during the race reflect not only physical resilience but also mental strength. The combination of swimming, cycling, and running adds variety to the training routine and fosters a holistic approach to fitness.

Engaging in recreational cross-country races and various running events, such as marathon relays, night runs, and women's runs, shows my commitment to continuous improvement and a willingness to challenge myself in different settings. Competing in events within my category provides an excellent opportunity to gauge my performance and celebrate my achievements within a supportive community.

**What significance does sports have in your life?
What does sports mean to you?**



Sports and physical activities are deeply ingrained in my lifestyle, contributing not only to physical health but also to personal growth and a sense of accomplishment. I would like to keep embracing the challenges and enjoying the journey of pushing my limits in various sport activities. Starting the day with physical activity is indeed a powerful routine that can set a positive tone for the entire day.

Clearing head and sorting out thoughts through sports are the therapeutic aspect of my physical activities. I recognize sports as a means to recharge energy and overall, the physical activity not only

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provides a burst of energy but also enhances overall vitality and resilience.

If we look at it from a broader perspective, what is your opinion on sports in general?

The positive effects of sports on overall health and well-being that come with an active lifestyle are numerous. Regular physical activity contributes to cardiovascular health, muscular strength, and flexibility. It can also aid in weight management and improve sleep quality. Beyond the physical benefits, engaging in sports has profound effects on mental health. The release of endorphins, often referred to as “feel-good” hormones, during exercise can contribute to a more positive mood and improved mental clarity.

How do you like the world of sports?

Honestly, my preference is to actively participate in sports rather than passively watch sports broadcasts. Engaging in sports provides us not only physical benefits but also a sense of personal achievement and fulfilment. Choosing to actively participate in sports, even at a recreational level, allows to experience first-hand the joys, challenges, and personal growth that come with physical activity. It is a dynamic way to stay fit, enhance skills, and build a strong connection between the body and mind and others. While watching sports broadcasts can be entertaining and a way to appreciate the skill of professional athletes, the active participation reflects a deeper engagement with the values and benefits that sports bring to

individuals. The passion for the active aspect of sports, whether it is running, swimming, cycling or any other activity, is a wonderful way to maintain a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.

If you had to name three values that sport has taught you, what would they be? Why?

I realised that patience, perseverance, and discipline are crucial for success. These qualities or values are indeed universal and applicable across various aspects of life, including both sports and the professional area.

Patience because in sports, progress often takes time. Whether it is mastering a new skill, improving performance, or recovering from an injury, patience is key. The same applies in professional life, where long-term goals and career advancement may require patience as we navigate challenges and opportunities.

The ability to persist in the face of challenges and setbacks is fundamental to success. In sports, it might mean pushing through tough training sessions or overcoming losses. Professionally, perseverance helps navigate obstacles, learn from failures, and continue working towards goals even when faced with adversity.

Discipline is the bedrock of consistent performance. In sports, adhering to a training regimen and maintaining a healthy lifestyle are essential. In professional life, discipline involves effective time management, work ethic, and adherence to ethical standards.

Is there anything we have not asked you about that you would like to share with us within the scope of this interview?

In this sense, I believe that there is a certain transfer of discipline ingrained in sports training, which seamlessly translates into adept task management and organisational skills, further enhancing one's professional capabilities.



Michal Guttman



Significant national contributor, well-known European patent attorney, with thousands of inventions patented in the field of chemistry and pharmacy, who contributed enormously to the several international project outcomes under the leaderships of the Slovak Republic.

Michal Guttman is an enthusiastic runner, responsible for the work with senior categories within the sport club. Former high-level runner, he is an advisor on matters of active aging and inclusion of seniors into sport activities within the project EU Sport Values Diplomacy.

In the world where science meets athleticism, there exists a unique convergence of disciplines embodied by individuals like Michal Guttman, Also known as Miško. A connoisseur of both the scientific intricacies of chemistry and the world of sports, Miško's journey is a testament to the harmonious coexistence of these seemingly disparate realms. Selected as the face of SCIENCE for our publication, Miško unveils the symbiotic relationship between his passion for innovation in chemistry and his dedication to sportsmanship.

From his early days as a fervent sports enthusiast to his illustrious career delving into the depths of chemical discoveries, Miško's narrative is one of perpetual motion, both in the laboratory and on the field. Join us as we delve into Miško's reflections on the intersection of science and sports, unraveling the profound impact of physical activity on his professional endeavors and personal ethos.

Through Miško's lens, we explore the profound significance of sports as a cornerstone of his lifestyle, shaping not only his physical well-being but also instilling invaluable lessons of perseverance, fair play, and teamwork. His journey from the playgrounds of his youth to the international stage of marathons mirrors a life dedicated to pushing boundaries, both in the laboratory and on the track.

As we navigate through Miško's insights on inclusion through sports and the transformative power of athletic endeavors, we uncover a vision for a society where the ethos of sportsmanship transcends boundaries, fostering a culture of inclusivity and empowerment for all.

Join us as we embark on a journey through the dynamic intersection of science and sports, guided by the wisdom and experiences of Miško, a true embodiment of the synergy between mind and body, innovation and athleticism.

Interview

Hello Miško, we are very pleased that you have accepted our invitation for an interview for the publication Run and Smile.

We know you from our shared training sessions as an exceptionally diligent and highly reliable person. You are our role model when it comes to sports ethics, but also a great source of knowledge and inspirational ideas.

Discussions with you are always fruitful, so we are even more excited about today's interview. The floor is yours!

Miško and sports – how would you characterize yourself from this perspective?

Since my youth, I have been an enthusiastic sports fan and athlete.

We have chosen you for our publication as the face for the field of SCIENCE. How do you perceive the connection between these two worlds?

From my perspective, it fits excellently. I have been dealing with inventions and discoveries in the field

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of chemistry and pharmacy all my life. Practically every day, I had a new invention from various parts of the world in my hands, which I had to evaluate, or develop a patent application for and defend it or solve its practical use, including addressing any disputes related to it. I studied organic chemistry and technology at the Technical University in Bratislava and subsequently law at the university. Both were immensely useful in my work. Sport taught me that improvement in performance comes only through systematic training and perseverance, regardless of what performance level you are at. And in the profession, continuous education is necessary, an effort to understand new solutions, and training resilience to stress.

Did sports and physical activities have an impact and influence on your work?

The daily stress and 60–70 hours of work per week brought the need for certain compensation, and morning runs were greatly helpful for over forty years. Occasional participation in running races allowed me to meet other people besides researchers and inventors and at the same time compete with friends, peers, or even myself. From a certain age, of course, I could not improve anymore, so maintaining performance or a slight slowdown was satisfying.

What significance does sport have in your life? What does sport mean to you?

Sport is part of my lifestyle; I introduced it to my son, and now also to my grandchildren. Watching races in athletics, swimming, and of course in ball games, especially in football, has always brought



me joy, although I had little free time. Now, in my advanced retirement age, it is much better with free time, so I can watch, but I must approach my own sports activities more cautiously. Health does not let go.

Could you tell us how you entered the world of sports?

I used to live opposite the presidential garden, which used to be full of various playgrounds where I spent several hours daily after coming home from school. I played football every day, not even snow in winter was an obstacle; there was also athletics track and a swimming pool. From the age of ten, I started competitive swimming in Slovan Bratislava. Until the end of November, we trained in an open pool, in winter already in the old Grossling pool.

I managed it until I was seventeen when I realised that weekly 12 swimming training sessions and 2–3 dryland sessions were no longer manageable health-wise. Today, I know that elite training is not for everyone, but only for exceptionally physically gifted people who should also see regular improvement. Although I was in the pool 3–4 times a week during college, I was more involved in teaching swimming to students. I used to joke that when evaluating my sports performance, I was probably the best runner among swimmers and the best swimmer among runners when I occasionally got mixed up among athletes.

Miško and sports competitions – which sports competitions do you consider the peak of your sporting career so far?

An enthusiastic amateur in swimming and running probably should not talk about peaks in their sports career, rather about a good feeling after finishing races, sometimes not immediately, for example after finishing a marathon, and occasionally I was satisfied with the achieved time. Fifteen completed marathons are not many, but the satisfaction after finishing several major marathons in Košice and Budapest will stay with me for a long time. After the revolution in 1989, I still ran regularly, but it was not enough training to complete marathons, so I only participated in shorter races, at most half marathons.

In your opinion, what is the essence of inclusion through sports?

By inclusion through sports, I imagine an effort to attract to sports those groups of children and adults whose access to sports is limited or disadvantaged for any reason. For children, it is primarily children from minorities and from socially disadvantaged population groups.

We should not forget about our disabled fellow citizens, whether children or adults. I still believe that in mass sports, quantity is more important than quality. The more people we get involved in regular sports, the better it is for society.

Sports facilities for mass sports should exist everywhere, whether in villages or cities. We only need elite sports where appropriate conditions exist, i.e., a sufficiently broad base of athletes in a given sport and established facilities and clubs with continuous support from public funds.

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If you had to name three values that sports have taught you, what would they be? Why?

Perseverance and a strong will to overcome obstacles and willingness to explore one's own limits. Competitiveness and adherence to fair play. The journey is the goal, not just the results. Furthermore, it is functioning in a sports team - respect for other athletes and coaches. These and similar values need to be adopted before reaching adulthood, adhered to in the productive age, and passed on to one's family.

Which sports values are close to you? How has sports influenced you the most?

Those that I mentioned above. Through regular sports, one meets many people from various professions, and communication with them and shared experiences have pleased me and significantly enriched me. Even though one doesn't think about it during the work process, meetings with people during sports are extremely important even in retirement because it fills the void left by daily work contacts.

Do you currently have any specific sports challenges?

I certainly do not have any sports challenges anymore, but I try to slow down mental and physical decline through movement, which is also a quite ambitious goal. Simply put, I try to have as many relaxing days as possible.

What has sports given you besides the sport itself?

Professionally and privately, I have visited many countries, and practically in each one, I have been interested in the conditions for sports in schools from elementary through high schools to universities and how they are financed.

I was particularly interested in various support for athletes at universities, including foreigners studying at these schools. It certainly helped me to gain a more truthful picture of life in many countries. Today, when I have more free time, I am interested in following sports management and the influence of PR and mass media on the development of sports in society.

In conclusion of our interview, I would like to ask you, what is your opinion on the current sports program of the European Union? What else should the European Union do to encourage more young people to adopt sports as a lifestyle?

The European Union should lead member states to more significant support for physical education and youth sports in schools of all levels and at the community level in towns and municipalities. And

project proposals should be linked to projects aimed at monitoring the health status of children and youth, so that even less understanding local politicians see a direct connection between youth sports and improving their health and that investing in sports support will definitely pay off.



Elena Malíková



Elena Malíková works at the Government Office of the Slovak Republic and has extensive managerial experience in civil service. Former Director of Department of Education and International Affairs at the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2007–2017), Chair of the Council Working Party on Sport under the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2016), Head of Department of Education at the National Sport Centre in Slovakia (2004 – 2007).

Non-governmental work comprises both professional and voluntary activities, notably within the International Modern Pentathlon Union – an appointed member of the Pierre de Coubertin Committee and elected member of the Business Affairs Committee (2004–2008), Secretary General of the Slovak Modern Pentathlon Association (1993–2003), Chair of the Slovak Olympic Academy (as of 2021).

Awarded by Trophy of the International Olympic Committee on Olympic sport and literature (2001), Editor-in-chief of the National Sport Centre Revue (2004–2007), Jury member of the EU #BeInclusive Award of the European Commission (2017) and the EU #BeActive Award of the European Commission (2022), author of publications and press articles on sport, social inclusion, values and Olympic education.

Passionate for intercultural dialogue, sport diplomacy and foreign languages, fluent in English, French, Russian, with sound knowledge of Polish, German and Japanese. Interested in sport and health enhancing physical activities, notably swimming and



running, inclusive marathons. Proud finisher of three marathons in New York, USA (2005), Treviso, Italy (2006) and Bratislava, Slovakia (2007) and a half marathon in Cancale Saint Malo, France (2005).

Former high-level modern pentathlete, member of the national team of Czechoslovakia, later of Slovakia (1988–2000), a multiple national champion and World Cup finalist, participated in numerous foreign camps, including an educational and training camp at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas (1990).

Graduated at the University of Economics in Bratislava, educational background covers post-gradual French language specialisation "Le Français du sport" at the Université Michel de Montaigne in Bordeaux and studies in sports management at the University of Poitiers, France focusing on Executive Masters in Sports Organisation Management – MEMOS programme guaranteed by the International Olympic Committee.

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In the realm of sports diplomacy, individuals often play a pivotal role in bridging cultural divides, fostering international relations, and promoting cooperation on a global scale. Today, we have the privilege of conversing with Elena Malíková, a distinguished figure in this field, celebrated for her unwavering commitment to utilizing sports as a tool for diplomacy. Join us as we embark on a journey into Elena's sports career, exploring her contributions to sports diplomacy, sport virtues and social inclusion through sport values.

Interview

Hello Elena, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with you! You have played a pivotal role behind the scenes of numerous remarkable sports events, whether at the governmental or non-governmental level, overseeing their organisation with your meticulous attention to detail. You are widely recognised as an active, determined individual who relentlessly pursues goals while staying grounded and practical. Your wellspring of breathtaking ideas and boundless creativity never fails to inspire those around you.

Beyond your professional prowess, you possess a gentle soul and a positive outlook, with a remarkable ability to lighten the mood during challenging times. Working alongside you has always been a delight thanks to these endearing characteristics and your unwavering commitment to excellence. Despite your

pragmatic nature, you often describe yourself as a dreamer, unafraid to reach for the stars and envision grand possibilities. While some may perceive this as merely building castles in the air, I see it as a testament to your visionary spirit and willingness to explore uncharted territories.

My first question naturally is – who is Elena Malíková? How would you describe yourself?

Your introduction and question is indeed thought-provoking, and I am delighted to reflect on my lifelong connection to modern pentathlon. While my active participation in modern pentathlon may belong to the past, the impact of this captivating sport continues to resonate deeply within me. Reflecting on your question, I recognise that modern pentathlon has played a role in shaping my identity. It has instilled within me the spirit of a dreamer, encouraging me to pursue ambitious aspirations with tenacity and courage. Moreover, it has fostered a sense of adaptability and versatility, equipping me with the skills to navigate life's challenges with resilience and grace.

In essence, modern pentathlon has become an integral part of my identity, shaping me into the person I am today – a dreamer, a versatile individual, and a steadfast believer in the power of discipline and determination.

What significance does sport have in your life? What does sport mean to you?

Sport is my life, my love. My father introduced me to it and from the outset, I explored a wide array of physical activities, including swimming, skiing,

skating, and hiking. While success in sports initially seemed distant and unimportant, it gradually became a defining pursuit through years of dedicated training.

The journey toward sporting achievements was a gradual one, marked by daily practice sessions that gradually became an indispensable part of my routine. Through this process, I learned the invaluable lesson that with patience and professional guidance, almost any skill can be mastered. This principle, honed through countless hours of training, not only fuelled my athletic accomplishments but also proved instrumental in navigating professional challenges and endeavours.

You are the face of this publication for the area of DIPLOMACY. Is there a connection between sport and diplomacy?

Certainly, the intersection of sport and diplomacy became clear to me only later in my career. I discovered that sports serve as a powerful platform for fostering dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among nations, transcending political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Through sports, diplomatic relations are strengthened, contributing to peace, development, and mutual respect on a global scale.

Moreover, I had a unique opportunity to address this topic at the EU level during my tenure as the Chair of the Council Working Party on Sport in 2016. Leading the EU Member States to consensus on the conception of sports diplomacy at the EU level was the most significant professional experience of my career thus far. I take great pride in our collective efforts, culminating in the adoption of the Council Conclusions on Sport Diplomacy during the Slovak



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Presidency of the Council of the EU. I believe that this document remains highly relevant today and recommend it to anyone interested in sports diplomacy.

In your view, where does inclusion through sports lie?

Building upon my previous reflections, I am steadfast in my belief in the profound and transformative potential of sports to promote inclusivity. One poignant example of this is evident in my weekly Sunday morning running sessions with friends from diverse backgrounds. Through these gatherings, I have come to realise that sports go beyond mere camaraderie, acting as a catalyst for forging meaningful connections and fostering understanding among individuals of varying origins.

Furthermore, through our collective efforts in numerous international projects centered around social inclusion through sport, we have experienced

first-hand the dissolution of barriers related to age, race, ethnicity, and ability. In these endeavours, we have witnessed how sports provide a common ground where all participants are united by a shared passion and purpose.

Could you share which sports values resonate with you the most, and how has sports influenced you personally?

The values of discipline, teamwork, and resilience ingrained in sports have indelibly influenced my character and perspective on life. Sports have imparted upon me the significance of perseverance and adaptability, qualities that have proven indispensable in navigating both personal and professional challenges.

However, the ethos that resonates most deeply with me is the concept of "embracing the joy of effort." This principle has been integral to my life philosophy since my teenage years and continues

to be a guiding force in all my endeavours. It serves as a perpetual wellspring of inspiration, propelling me forward in my daily pursuits.

Do you still have any sporting challenges?

Yes, I do, although with age, I have let go of many and even completely abandoned some of them. I probably will never skydive or try paragliding, which tempted me for many years. I have not gathered the courage for it yet, and with age, I probably never will. Nevertheless, I still find immense pleasure in running and occasionally join various races, which continue to bring me joy and satisfaction. Lately, swimming, cycling, and hiking have also found a place in my routine. I approach these activities with moderation, guided by a personal system and inner voice that prioritizes their benefits in supporting my journey of 'aging gracefully'.

In any case, I consistently find immense pleasure in standing atop the podium in running races within my age category, spanning not just national but international events as well. I hold deep gratitude towards the remarkable achievements of my fellow competitors, as their presence serves as a motivating force that enhances our collective enjoyment in these races.

Is there anything we have not asked you about that you would like to share with us in this interview?

Indeed, during this interview, a memory resurfaced that I am grateful to share. My former horse-riding coach always emphasized the importance of keeping one's chin up, heels down, and a smile on the face while riding. He believed this was crucial for progress and quality performance. As a teenager, I did not fully grasp the significance of the smile. Finally, it was not until later that I realised the uplift it brings,

often aiding in perseverance and progress during tough times. Over the years, I have come to see how integral a smile is in my everyday life. As 'SMILE' is in the title of this publication, I am thankful for the chance to contribute. Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts. It has been a pleasure conversing with you.



Marcel Matanín



I was born in Vranov nad Topľou in 1973, but I grew up in the small village of Tovarnianska Polianka, where my physical education teacher introduced me to sports. It was here that I began my athletic journey, particularly focusing on running.

After completing elementary school, I attended high school in Humenné, later transferring to the Eight-Year Sports Gymnasium in Košice, where I truly dedicated myself to running under the guidance of a professional coach. It was through the mentorship of one of my coaches, Miroslav Okál, that I reached the Summer Olympics in Athens in 2004.

Following the conclusion of my competitive running career, I briefly dabbled in local governance in the village where we eventually settled. However, my passion for sports persisted, and I received an offer from the organizers of the ČSOB Bratislava Marathon to join them. This opportunity led me to become the sports director of the ČSOB Bratislava Marathon, prompting me to relocate to Ivanka pri Dunaji, where I have been living with my family ever since.

I am a multiple-time champion of Czechoslovakia and Slovakia in various running disciplines, including track, cross country, half-marathon, and marathon events.

Projects I have collaborated on:

ČSOB Bratislava Marathon
 PTS Athletics Meeting
 European Cross Country Championships - Šamorín 2017

Challenge Šamorín
Telekom Night Run
High Tatras Night Run
Carpathian Triathlon

Significant Sports Achievements:

Olympic Games:
2004 Olympic Games in Athens: 82nd place

Cross Country Events:

2004 European Cross Country Championships in Thun, Switzerland: 63rd place
2005 European Cross Country Championships in Ljubljana, Slovenia: 42nd place
2006 World Cross Country Championships in Faro, Portugal: 86th place
2006 European Cross Country Championships in Malmö, Sweden: 50th place

Mountain running:

European Championships Sestriere, Italy 6th place
European Championships Ebensee, Austria 4th place
World Championships Innsbruck, Austria 7th place
European Championships Trento, Italy 8th place
World Masters Championships Zagreb 1st place
World Masters Championships Poland 1st place

Personal Records:

800 meters: 2:00:00
1500 meters: 3:55:39
3000 meters: 8:21.60
3000 meters (steeplechase): 9:20.59
5000 meters: 14:35.48
10,000 meters: 30:18
10 km road race: 29:14
Half-Marathon: 1:05:14
Marathon: 2:17:22



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Our first encounter took place in Athens, albeit not in the traditional sense of meeting face-to-face. Marcel had just completed his Olympic marathon to thunderous applause at the Panathinaikos Stadium. As I sat among the spectators, a surge of pride swept over me, knowing we hailed from the same country. The emotions stirred by that moment remain vivid to this day. Marcel Matanin, the final runner of the 2004 Olympic Games marathon, crossed the finish line amidst an electrified stadium

As the closing ceremony prepared to unfold on the opposite end of Athens, Marcel stood as a beacon of endurance and determination, representing the epitome of a marathoner from Slovakia. Despite his accolades and achievements, Marcel remained remarkably modest, yet undeniably determined and always exuding high spirits. Our paths crossed multiple times, thanks to the whims of fate. Each interaction with Marcel left an indelible mark on me, propelling me forward in my own journey. I am confident that this interview with Marcel will likewise leave a lasting impression on you, offering insights and inspiration that resonate long after reading.

Interview

Warm greetings, Marcel! From your current professional endeavours in Luxembourg, we extend heartfelt salutations. It is an honour to have you join us on our online platform for this exclusive interview featured in our esteemed publication, "Run and Smile." Your illustrious journey as a marathon runner has captured the hearts of many, earning you recognition for your unwavering dedication to pushing boundaries and epitomizing the true spirit of sportsmanship. Today, we have the privilege of delving into the depths of your remarkable career and gaining insights into the guiding principles that have fuelled your extraordinary success. Without further ado, let us embark on this enlightening journey with our first question

Marcel, let me start by asking how you perceive your active sports career?

Well, I must say, I perceive it quite positively. I have been a multiple-time Slovakian champion, participated in world championships, European championships, and Olympic Games, which I consider my most significant achievements. Therefore, when I reflect on it, I definitely see my active sports career in a very positive light.

What was it like at the 2004 Olympics?

Yeah, I still get goose bumps just thinking about it. It was not easy. I had stomach issues, and things did not go as smoothly as I had envisioned or trained for.



However, I coped with all those obstacles and managed to overtake many people who were struggling even more. As I later found out, everyone I passed eventually dropped out. Yes, the applause at the finish line was incredible. I did not realise I was finishing last, but the spectators did, and perhaps that is why they cheered so enthusiastically for me.

Stefano Baldini still jokes when we meet, saying that I achieved far greater success than he did, even

though he won the Olympic marathon. Maybe he is right. The Olympics itself cannot be compared to anything else. Although I have participated in much larger and more prestigious events with more participants, such as the New York Marathon, the Olympics are the Olympics, and nothing else can compare.

Why did you establish Marcel Matanin's Running Academy?

At that time, there was nothing like it in Ivanka, the village on the outskirts of Bratislava, where I currently reside. My goal was to concentrate my efforts on promoting physical activity among children in the area. My daughter showed an interest in sports, initially following in her father's footsteps (I mean mine), although certainly also influenced by her mother. Her desire to train sparked a chain reaction – first, a couple of her friends joined in, then a few more, until our group grew in numbers. It was like a natural progression, akin to a flowing stream, prompting us to conceive the idea of establishing a sports academy. While running serves as the cornerstone of our activities, our program encompasses a broader spectrum, including overall physical preparation, jumping, and a javelin-like throwing exercise.

Where do you believe the essence of inclusion through sports resides?

Sport transcends mere physical activity; it instills vital values such as self-discipline, respect, and camaraderie. Take, for example, the enduring friendships formed over three decades with fellow marathoners like Robert Štefko, Miroslav Vanko or

Vladislav Lipovský. These enduring bonds exemplify the profound impact of sports in my life, fostering connections that endure through time. While performance and training are crucial components, the true essence of sports lies in its multifaceted offerings, which I have come to appreciate more deeply over time.

What is it like to have a Marathon Major? Which races are included in this category?

The Marathon Majors represent the pinnacle of achievement in the running world, encompassing six prestigious marathons across the globe. My journey with these iconic races began in Berlin in 2014, a moment that ignited my passion for long-distance running. Initially, I had not set out to conquer all six majors, but after experiencing the electrifying atmosphere of the New York City Marathon in 2016, I found myself eager to pursue further challenges.

Chicago in 2018 and London in 2019 provided exhilarating tests of endurance, each race adding layers to my love for the sport. The anticipation for Boston in 2020 was palpable, yet the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic forced a postponement, extending my wait until 2022. Despite the delay, the resilience of the running community prevailed, and I eagerly awaited my chance to tackle the historic Boston course.

Completing the Marathon Majors collection became a personal milestone, culminating with the Tokyo Marathon in 2023. What brought me immense satisfaction was not just the completion of these races but the fact that I qualified for five out of six marathons with the required time limit. Even for the

sixth one, with a time limit of 2:44, I knew that with further dedication and training, I could meet the challenge, having previously surpassed a limit of 2:49 in Kosice.

However, for my final marathon, I made a conscious decision to run for a greater purpose, dedicating my race to support a foundation for children battling cancer. While it required financial investment on my part, the opportunity to contribute to such a noble cause far outweighed any monetary considerations. I have no regrets for this choice, as it enriched my marathon experience with a deeper sense of fulfilment and meaning beyond personal achievement.

What achievements do you value most?

When reflecting on my most valued achievements, participating in the Olympics stands out as a pinnacle moment in my athletic journey. Alongside this prestigious accomplishment, I cherish the memories of earning medals in mountain running as part of a team, as well as clinching two individual titles and securing silver medals in Masters mountain running events.

Another source of pride stems from my dominance in cross country running, clinching the national championship title an impressive nine times consecutively. This consistency is a testament to my dedication and perseverance in the sport, a feat not easily achieved by many.

One particularly memorable highlight occurred during the 2003 Košice Marathon, the oldest in Europe and second oldest globally. Despite it

being my first-ever marathon, I stunned myself with a fourth-place finish, clocking an impressive time of 2:17:55, thus meeting the B standard for the Olympics. Marián Šimo, a renowned Slovak sports journalist, reached out to deliver the staggering news. I was in disbelief – I had not dared to dream of such an outcome, nor had I tailored my training specifically for this achievement. This unexpected achievement reshaped my goals, leading to further successes, including confirming my qualification for the Olympic Games with a time of 2:17:22 in Zurich.

Following this significant milestone, I embarked on a natural progression in life, completing my university studies in May 2004 before representing my country on the grand stage of the Olympics in Athens, marking the culmination of my competitive career.

When it comes to present challenges, Marcel, are there any new athletic goals you are pursuing?

In terms of my current challenges, I am focused on maintaining a balanced approach to my athletic endeavours, ensuring that I prioritize both physical health and enjoyment. As for my future aspirations, I am keen on exploring different avenues within sports, whether it is trying out new activities or honing my skills in familiar ones. Ultimately, I aim to continue deriving fulfilment from my sporting pursuits while embracing whatever opportunities come my way.

Is there anything I have not asked you about that you would like to share with us in this interview?

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to express my heartfelt appreciation to my coaches, whose guidance and support have played an instrumental



role in shaping me into the runner I am today. I owe a significant debt of gratitude to two remarkable individuals in particular – Pavol Madár and Miroslav Okál. Their unwavering dedication, expertise, and belief in my potential have been invaluable throughout my athletic journey. Their mentorship not only honed my physical abilities but also instilled in me the resilience, determination, and passion necessary to overcome challenges and achieve my goals. I am truly fortunate to have had the privilege of learning from such exceptional coaches, and I will forever be grateful for their invaluable contributions to my development as an athlete.

Viliam Novák



Viliam Novák, born on 14 August 1942 in Považská Bystrica, Slovakia. Sport achievements: finisher of 119 marathons plus 7 ultramarathons. Personal best in marathon: 2:57:21 at IBUSZ Marathon Budapest in 1998. During 40 years of running, he covered over 80,000 km that is nearly twice around the Globe, in average 2100 km per year and 175 km per month. He participated in five out of six Marathon Majors – NYC Marathon 1997, Chicago La Salle Marathon 2001, Boston Marathon (five times), Real Berlin Marathon 1990, Flora London Marathon, 1999. The most iconic were Sydney Host City Marathon, Australia, 2000 and Athens Classic Marathon 2000. Regarding to Olympic track in Sydney Viliam Novák is the fastest Slovak on this Olympic track; being the first of three Slovaks runners with his time 3:28, while the Slovak Olympian Robert Štefko was DNF (did not finish) in the Olympic race. This was given as a joke by his son Broňo, who is also a runner, but it is true!

His 64 marathons were performed abroad, in comparison to the 56 finished in Slovakia; among the most impressive were US Marine Corps Marathon in Washington D.C. 2004, 2009, Paris Marathon 2002 and Košice Peace Marathon, which he likes the best of all, and he ran it already eight times. Moreover, he considers Prague Int. Marathon as a great experience as well.

Viliam Novák finished first in the age group at Moscow Int. Marathon 2012 (M70), Regensburg Marathon 2015, Budapest Marathon 2015, Lublin Marathon 2013, Ljubljana Marathon 2012, Copenhagen Marathon 2019. Among the best results in marathons, he considers the first place in Moscow, and the third place in Boston marathon 2018 (M75);

notably considering that the Boston marathon is the world oldest and most iconic one.

In addition, he achieved four times the first place in the age group (2015, 2018, 2019, 2023) at the oldest European road race in Bechovice – Prague, which is organised since 1897, similarly to Boston Marathon.

Another success is the title of World Vice-Champion

in mountain running 2017 and World Champion in mountain running of teams with V. Bašista.

In accordance with Viliam Novák, the most important in sport, and running particularly, is its relaxation and regeneration effect leading to good health and improved ability to do our duties. Camaraderie is another significant effect of running that counts the most.

Step into the world of Viliam Novák – a life intricately intertwined with the pursuit of athletic excellence, particularly in the realm of running. For Viliam, sports are not merely a pastime; they represent a profound journey of self-discovery and resilience, shaping every facet of his being.

Viliam's affinity for sports blossomed amidst the scenic vistas of his upbringing, where the tranquil ambiance of Kremnica provided the backdrop for his formative years. Here, amid the rugged terrain and snow-laden slopes, the seeds of his passion were sown, laying the foundation for a lifelong commitment to athletic endeavour.

Throughout his storied career, Viliam's pursuits extended far beyond the boundaries of conventional academia and ordinary member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. As a dedicated scholar at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, his quest for knowledge mirrored the rigor and discipline of his athletic pursuits. From the intricacies of water management to the complexities of scientific inquiry, Viliam's endeavours exemplified the harmonious convergence of intellect and athleticism.

As Viliam reflects on his journey, he recognizes the transformative power of sports to uplift, inspire, and unite

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across generations. From the relentless pursuit of personal bests to the enduring camaraderie of the running collective, each chapter of his story serves as a testament to the timeless allure of athletic pursuit.

Join us as we unravel the tapestry of Viliam Novák's sporting legacy – a testament to the enduring power of sports to ignite the human spirit and propel us toward new heights of achievement.

Interview

Hello Vilko, it is always a pleasure to connect with you. We understand that you perceive the true essence of sports to extend beyond mere physical exertion; it serves as a profound catalyst for mental rejuvenation and social connection. Amidst the demanding pursuit of academia, you have found solace in the rhythmic cadence of your footsteps, with each stride bearing witness to your indomitable spirit and unwavering resolve. Together, we have shared countless workouts and races, fostering bonds that transcend mere competition. Our hours spent engaged in intriguing discussions about everything and nothing have enriched our lives. Now, we are eager to hear your insights today. Let's begin with the first question. Sport and Vilko – what does sport mean to you?

Sports activities, especially running, are an integral part of my life; it is not merely a saying – sports form a significant component of my daily routine,

primarily as a means of relaxation. My involvement in sports began in early childhood, during my school years. I spent my school years, up to eighth grade, in Turiec, a small village near the springs of the Turiec River, in Dolný Turček.

We children spent our free time outdoors, in the forests or meadows around the village. Naturally, we got around by running. Whenever us boys gathered for various games, we would exclaim, "let's go run." Thus, good fitness was ingrained in me from a young age. Moreover, it had practical significance as well because we had chores at home and in the garden, such as preparing firewood for heating, where "running" was not only enjoyable but also useful.

What are your thoughts on the intersection of sports and work?

I spent my entire active life at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV) and very recently, I was elected for my professional achievements as ordinary member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. Many people think that it mainly involves sitting at a desk or experimenting in the laboratory. In many cases, it is true, but I worked at the Institute of Hydrology SAV, and the problems I contributed to solving were related to the movement of water in nature, quantifying it depending on the properties of the environment. The movement of water in nature is studied in a scientific discipline called hydrology. Consequently, a significant portion of our research activities take place in nature. That meant field trips, digging holes, taking soil samples, and conducting field measurements of ongoing processes.



I remember running from our workplace around the Welding Research Institute in Bratislava to the forest on Kamzík and back with branches of beech and hornbeam trees necessary for measuring the critical moisture and critical water potential of leaves. Interestingly, when a branch with leaves is broken off a tree, that broken part of the tree doesn't immediately realise it's been detached. It only realises later when the leaf moisture decreases and its water potential increases; they respond by closing the leaf stomata to reduce transpiration and increase their chances of survival. Our goal in this matter was to measure leaf moisture when the stomata begin to close, or in other words, to measure the critical moisture of the leaves. The

relevant measurements were made in the laboratory in a wind tunnel. My better-fed colleagues could not understand why I ran up and down, an activity "undignified" for a scientific worker... However, they could not advise me on a better method to get tree branches into the laboratory.

That is just one part of the positive effects of good fitness on my work. The most important impact is the mental regeneration of the body. Anyone who has worked "mentally" knows that even if they have not exerted themselves physically, after a day's work, they feel mentally drained, lacking the desire for anything (except food) and needing more time to mentally recover and be able to focus on work



again. That is when it's time for sports regeneration. Whenever possible, I ran into the Small Carpathians and ran a few kilometres; after an hour of running, I felt like a different person. Though tired and sweaty, mentally refreshed, charged with energy. That is how I regenerated and "recharged" throughout my life. So, I owe sports not only for fitness, health, but also for good results at work.

How significant is sport in your life?

It could be answered very simply: sport is significant for my life. Why? When I ask myself why sport is so important to me, I realise that there are several

reasons. Perhaps the most important one is that I enjoy running, I find joy in running. When I go out into nature and run a bit, I feel good about how my body functions, I feel joy in how everything works.

The second reason is good running company. The method of natural selection among runners works in such a way that over time, groups of runners (and of course, female runners too) are formed who are close not only in running abilities but especially in their views on life. Thus, groups are formed that run together for decades, and they are always glad to meet and talk; of course, during the run... In our running group, some have been running together for

four decades, and we still enjoy it. During the run, we share our views on the world, but also on current events. It is pleasant and enriching at the same time. Moreover, within running groups, trips to races at home, to European countries, and even overseas are organized. A proven group ensures pleasant moments during sports stays. The social dimension of running is perhaps dominant. Runners are, in most cases, people accustomed to exertion, tolerant, so groups formed on this basis are cohesive and last for decades.

Also, an important consequence of sports is good fitness and, above all, increasing the body's resistance to diseases because of "training" all internal organs, which are extremely stressed during runs (especially marathons), thus making them resistant to external influences. And as a bonus, there is a slim figure and a good appearance of a runner. I do not think that runners run to lose weight; people who run to lose weight are "non-runners," and in such cases, it is a phenomenon that usually ends after a few weeks because running "hurts," and losing weight is not as fast as some "runners" imagined.

What about your "entry" into the world of sports?

I truly immersed myself in sports during high school in Kremnica, where we moved from Dolný Turček, a small village near the springs of the Turiec River. At Kremnica High School, besides excellent teachers in various disciplines, we also had a great physical education teacher, Vojto "Pico" Rahl, who graded us based on how we met the limits set for each sports discipline. Basically, whatever you could run,

jump, or throw, you got a grade for it. Only a few of us had the PPOV badge (prepared for work and defence of the country), and it was never missing on the lapel of our coats; we even wore it on dates. In winter, we exercised with equipment. And it was tough, indeed. The teachers' uncompromising approach to grading meant that we went to the gym in the evenings to practice equipment routines and in summer to the athletic field. I have the impression that Kremnica was perhaps the only town in Slovakia with a specialized athletic stadium. No combination with a soccer field: just athletics. The track was, of course, cinder; half of the field was on a slope, so it slightly bent, but that was not a problem. Because I did not belong to the robust students, I focused on running; it was acknowledged that I would not excel in shot put. I remember in the tenth grade, I ran a kilometer in 3:35, which was an A (the limit was 3:40), there were about three of us who achieved this. That is why the teacher nominated me for local youth competitions, possibly a two-kilometer run, where I did well (how exactly, I do not remember), and that motivated me for future running activities. A young person needs some impulse to get hooked; they must feel they can be successful; it's hard to talk about a love for sports in the beginning, it comes later, after one has "run," "won," and so on.

Moreover, Kremnica was the center of cross-country skiing in the fifties and sixties; names like Čillík, Fusko, Párička, Slosiariková, still ring a bell for at least the older generation. I want to say that sports were an integral part of young (but also older) residents of Kremnica. Basically, everyone skied; I did too. However, I was a newcomer from Turček, and at thirteen, I was already "too old" to be a

promising skier. I envied my peers proudly parading in tracksuits with the letters ŠŠD, which stands for sports school for youth. These were my sporting beginnings, which laid the foundation for later endurance running.

After graduation, I applied and was accepted at the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering of SVŠT in Bratislava; it didn't suit me (not that I was a weak student, no, but there was less math and physics, and I missed that), so the four of us transferred to the Faculty of Civil Engineering, specializing in Water Management, aka "water," which I really enjoyed and still do.

On this faculty, in the same "circle," there was also Vojto "Čičo" Kovačič from Pezinok, who ran orienteering races. When he told us about the races, I remarked, "I used to run in high school too"; it was more than two years ago. Really? Vojto was surprised. Come to Pezinok with us; we have an orienteering section. Why not? I bought some sneakers and went to Pezinok with Vojto. The team there was excellent; orienteering is incredibly interesting; I found plenty of good friends there and experienced my first failures, but also victories. Orienteering has the property that you run for hours and hours and do not even notice the time; you train heaps, and it does not hurt. Great preparation for marathons, which I did not even dream of back then. And another advantage: the Pezinok section was called Lokomotíva Pezinok, which meant we got free tickets for races across Czechoslovakia, arranged by the excellent organizer Pišta Chovanec. It was a big advantage for students. Pezinok was a top-notch team; we had the national champion Gusto Barták among us. Simply put, Pezinok was

great. But all good things come to an end; I got married, children came, and there simply was not time for training and racing. Plus, work. I went through the admission process for a study stay at the former Institute of Hydrology SAV and had to (if I wanted to be successful, there was no other way) work systematically; what I did not finish at work, I had to finish at home. Saturdays were not free yet, and leaving the kids on the only free day, Sunday, was not an option. So, whether I liked it or not, I had to give up racing. Not sports, though. I ran as much as I could, cycled, did hiking.

It was not until just before turning forty that I basically ran the Devín – Bratislava race without preparation; I simply could not resist running it... And there I met a group of runners from the informal Železná studnička Bratislava club; it was a group of runners who, already in 1986, regularly trained three times a week, and many of them were marathoners... I joined them, and that is how it started. I realised that I was not any worse than them, and if they could run the marathon, why could not I?

How would you characterize your running experience and achievements?

Right from the start, I must say that sports have been (and still are) a hobby for me; I never had ambitions to achieve top performances in running, and it must be said that I did not have the predisposition for elite sports. During the critical years between my twenties and thirties, there were plenty of runners around me who were better and faster than I was. It is true that with age, I "relatively" improved, and I often found

myself on the podium in veteran age groups. I started dedicating myself more intensively to sports (or more precisely, running) after my thirties when the kids grew up, and I had more time for sports. Despite work and "family" commitments, I continued to be active in sports, running, cycling, and cross-country skiing, but I did not participate in races, except for the White Trail of the SNP, where I completed more than 15 editions of these ski races.

What do I value most from the achieved results? It is definitely my first marathon with a time under three hours (2:57:20), completed at the Small Carpathian Marathon in Trnava in 1987 at the age of 45, and (for interest's sake) the same time I achieved a year later at the IBUSZ Marathon in Budapest. In my veteran age, I won marathons in Ljubljana, Regensburg, Copenhagen, Lublin, and Budapest. I highly value the victory at the Moscow International Peace Marathon in Moscow in 2012, in the M70 age category with a time of 3:36; another success (for me) is the 3rd place in the M75 age category at the 127th edition of the oldest marathon in the world in Boston in 2018. The time was not remarkable (4:17), but reportedly it was the toughest conditions in the history of this marathon. It was cold (4 °C), pouring rain, and a strong headwind. Perhaps my favourite marathon is the MMM in Košice; after all, it is the oldest continuously held marathon in Europe. Unfortunately, I could not run it under 3 hours (best time 3:00:40). Overall, I completed 119 marathons, the last one in 2019 in Copenhagen. I value the fact that I finished all the marathons I started.

To the most cherished results, I would perhaps add four starts and four victories at the oldest road race on the continent, Běchovice – Prague. It is as "old"

as the Boston Marathon, and in 2023, the 127th edition was held. Of course, we are talking about victories in the respective age category.

However, what I value the most is that despite being born in 1942, I am still on my feet and can enjoy running in the company of good friends.

What is your understanding of "Inclusion through Sport"?

Most collectives are formed and optimized for the purpose of achieving a predetermined goal; this is how work teams are formed; in such cases, the opinion of a collective member is not important, but rather their ability to be a valid part of it.

"Non-working" collectives usually come together spontaneously because their members share common interests. One of the possibilities that bring people together is sport, in this case, running. "Running" collectives are most often formed by chance contacts during running races, during nature runs, where kindred spirits agree on common training sessions. Such groups of runners last for decades. One of them is also a group of runners forming an informal running section called Železná studnička.

We have been running together for over 40 years, the members of the group change, but the core group is still here. What is interesting about groups of male and female runners is that they informally bring together a wide range of runners, regardless of age, gender, or occupation. This is another "added" value of informal groups of runners; we meet runners of different ages, occupations, and

backgrounds. This has created a rare opportunity for me to meet fellow runners whom I would not have met under other circumstances. For me as an athlete, this is enriching; I could see the world through the eyes of a bricklayer, or a bus driver, or a civil servant. Running allows you to explore the world through people with different life experiences, yet we understand each other. Running is truly a miraculous elixir that brings together diverse people into one whole.

What three values have you learned from participating in sports?

Nothing in life (or in sports) comes for free. If you want to be successful, you must work hard (train). A good (sports) team is motivating and enriching (not only in sports) life. You can achieve much more than you think; mentality is important, and it is shaped in races and training.

How has sports influenced me the most?

Sports (especially marathons) have taught me not to give up. I have realised that success can only be achieved through hard work; this applies even outside of sporting activities. Even strenuous training can be enjoyable in a good team. Sports (and running in particular) may be an individual sport, but it is the running collective that makes it what it should be; a social event, so a good team is essential for running to become a source of enjoyable experiences. I enjoy going to training mainly for that collective spirit; otherwise, I could run alone at a time that suits me.

Do I have any sports challenges?

I realise that I will not improve anymore, and my personal record times are gone. I would still like to run for another year, and I would be glad if the condition of my body (and soul) allows it. Above all, I would like to run half marathons in Bratislava, Rajec, and Kosice. How long will I continue to run? I do not know, but I will try to stay "above water" for as long as possible.

What did sports give me besides just playing sports?

I am convinced that thanks to sports, I have been successful in my career, and sports have contributed to (until now) good health. Sports also allowed me to see the world because I completed more than half of the marathons (64) abroad, including 12 in the USA. Mental relaxation through sports is a great thing, and I recommend it to everyone. Moreover, I found my best friends among runners. In work, there is still rivalry; there is not that natural (voluntary) selection of team members as there is in voluntary activities like sports. Of course, there is also great rivalry in sports, but it is friendly rivalry. Even if I lose (to someone), I am happy to sincerely congratulate them, and we remain friends. So, running is not just a tough battle for the best results, but it is a social activity that brings me (us) joy from sports and from a good team, and ultimately from life.

What are your thoughts on sports and the EU?

I am glad that the EU supports sports activities. Just the positive attitude of the EU towards sports

means that society also looks at sports positively. Sports is no longer just a waste of time and energy but an activity that improves society, strengthens the health of athletes, and directs youth away from unwanted activities towards sports. Especially important are programs to support sports in schools because young people need someone to encourage them and allow them to join a team where sports are practiced. Finally, sports are also a significant component of the economy and a source of entertainment for a large part of the population on Earth.

What additional thoughts or topics would you like to share that we have not touched upon yet?

I thought about why I run, even though I will not improve anymore, quite the opposite, the farther I go, the slower it will be. Eventually, I will have to stop running because as time goes by, the body degrades, injuries or illness come. However, thankfully, this is not yet relevant for me. So why? I need running; it has become a part of my life, like eating, sleeping, reading books, listening to music. If I do not run for several days, I am nervous, something is missing. After appropriate training, I am happier and can comfortably engage in other activities.

Running is (in my case) probably an addiction. Just as "workaholics," smokers, gamblers, or alcohol users cannot do without their "hobbies," it seems that we runners are also addicted to running. This addiction, unlike others, has a positive impact on life, starting with better fitness, good health. And I am not talking about "a fuller wallet" because running is still an "inexpensive" sport. And lest I

forget, our "Železná studnička" running collective is also motivating for me, where pleasure is combined with usefulness...

How do you view the role and significance of sports as individuals mature and enter higher age brackets?

Sports in mature and higher age have their specifics, which stem from the permanent degradation of the body. Consequently, the body of an older athlete is not able to absorb training loads as well as a younger one. This means that the intensity and volume of training for older runners must be lower than for younger athletes.

How much lower? That depends on the specific athlete. I know cases of once excellent athletes who try to maintain (or even increase) their training loads because they have more time and high ambitions. They try to compensate for the decreased quality of their bodies with increased training loads.

However, the body is not able to absorb high training loads, leading to permanent fatigue, poorer race results, and injuries. In summary, it is necessary to adjust (reduce) training loads proportionally to age.

For example, running every other day helps, and one day should be reserved for rest. In older (running) age, rest is at least as important as training. The idea that the more you train, the better you will be does not apply here. Therefore, I try to find a suitable balance between qualitative and quantitative training parameters and rest; so far, I am succeeding.

Jordana Palovičová



Jordana Palovičová has studied piano at the Conservatory in Bratislava, the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, the Royal College of Music in London and the Musikhochschule Lübeck. She holds the position of Associate Professor at the Department of Keyboard Instruments of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. She has won awards, as both a soloist and an accompanist, in a number of national and international competitions such as Slovak Conservatories Competition, Virtuosi per musica di pianoforte, Johann Nepomuk Hummel International Piano Competition, Concertino Praga International Radio Competition, Talent of the Year, Chappell Gold Medal Competition.

In 2016 she received the Ján Cikker Prize for active promotion of composer's work. Her recordings have appeared on MUSICA, Music Fund, Pavlík Records, REAL MUSIC HOUSE, Academy of Performing Arts labels, Slávik Slovenska, Konvergencie, Slovak Radio & Television, Czech Radio & Television, Norddeutscher Rundfunk.

Jordana Palovičová has also performed extensively as a soloist and a sought-after chamber music player in a number of major Slovak and international music festivals e. g. Bratislava Music Festival, Melos-Ethos, New Slovak Music, Music Spring in Košice, Festival of Nice Music, Convergences, Indian Summer in Levoča, Viva Musica!, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Music Days, Harmonie Starego Miasta Lublin, Duettissimo!, Cambra de Música, Cheltenham International Festival of Music, Sibelius Week, ARMONIE DELLA SERA.

She has collaborated with a wide range of artists and chamber music ensembles respectively and performed as a soloist with a number of leading Slovak and international orchestras, including Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra, Slovak Radio Symphony

Orchestra, Cappella Istropolitana, Slovak Sinfonietta Žilina, State Philharmonic Orchestra Košice, VŠMU Modern Orchestra, Moravian Philharmonics Olomouc, Prague Philharmonia, Lambeth Orchestra, RCM Sinfonietta Orchestra and Lübecker Philharmoniker.

Today, we have the pleasure of delving into the multifaceted world of culture and sport with Jordana Palovičová, fondly referred to as Jordanka, a distinguished Slovak pianist and a prominent figure in both national and international music circles. Renowned for her musical prowess and laurels garnered from numerous competitions, Jordanka's journey into the realm of sport might seem unexpected at first glance. Yet, as we delve deeper, we uncover a fascinating intertwining of disciplines, passions, and personal histories that have shaped her perspective.

Jordanka's journey into the world of sport is not merely happenstance; it's a narrative woven intricately into the fabric of her upbringing and professional pursuits. Embracing sport as a lifestyle, she emphasizes its universal appeal,

whether as a participant, spectator, or educator. But what truly captivates her is the profound connection between sport and culture, where diplomacy transcends boundaries, uniting individuals through shared experiences.

A pivotal figure within the Slovak Olympic Academy, Jordana Palovičová serves as the Coordinator of the Working Party on Culture and Sport, a role that might raise eyebrows given her background in music. However, her journey into this domain traces back to her childhood, influenced by a mother who herself was deeply rooted in athletics. From early memories of Olympic fervour to collaborations with esteemed figures like Elena Malíková, Jordanka's immersion in the world of sport has been a natural evolution, fuelled by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge.

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But what lessons does a world of sport offer to a classically trained musician? As we explore Jordanka's insights, we uncover invaluable qualities – joy of effort, solidarity, and fair play – that resonate not only in the realm of athletics but also in the pursuit of artistic excellence. Drawing parallels between her roles as an associate professor and a board member of the Olympic Academy, she imparts wisdom garnered from years of nurturing young talents, emphasizing the importance of holistic development, and embracing the values epitomized by the Olympic ethos.

Jordanka's passion for languages further underscores her commitment to cultural exchange and diplomacy, transcending linguistic barriers to forge connections across borders. In a world increasingly shaped by digitalisation, she advocates for a return to physical activity, urging European leaders to prioritize initiatives that promote health and social interaction, especially among the youth.

As we delve deeper into our conversation with Jordanka, we uncover not only her profound insights into sport diplomacy but also the serendipitous moments that punctuate her journey – a testament to

the enduring power of human connection, whether through music, sport, or the shared joy of a simple phrase uttered in childhood tongue. Join us as we embark on a journey of discovery, exploring the intersections of culture, sport, and diplomacy with one of Slovakia's most eminent cultural ambassadors.

Interview

Today, as we sit down with Jordana Palovičová, we are presented with an intriguing tapestry of talents, passions, and perspectives. Welcome, Jordanka! We are eager to hear your story, which undoubtedly holds a wealth of experiences, from your illustrious career as a leading Slovak pianist to unexpected journey into the realm of sports diplomacy. We cannot wait to explore with you the challenges of culture, sport, and the unifying power of humanism.

You are known as a leading Slovak pianist, laureate of many national and international competitions. What does sport mean to you?

Sport is a lifestyle, you can join the world of sport as a professional, as an amateur, as a fan, as a teacher with the same result – being active, motivated, and happy.

Taking it from a wider perspective, what is your opinion on sport? Is there a link between culture and sport?

Definitely. From a wider perspective culture and sport are key elements of diplomacy connecting people sharing a very special experience both physically and emotionally. From a closer perspective, there are striking parallels e. g. musicians start playing their instruments very early on, in order to succeed they have to practise regularly, they need to stay focused and disciplined (a quality I learned as a teenager 😊), they have a special regime (not always close to the outer world...).

You are Board Member of the Slovak Olympic Academy, more precisely Coordinator of the Working Party on Culture and Sport within this institution. It is a surprising position for a professional musician. How did you enter the world of sport?

My pianist-turned mother started as a basketball player and 800m runner (being called the local Wilma Rudolph). As a child I have wonderful recollections of following enthusiastically Olympic games, watching ice-skating competition or basketball matches. My mother even planned a sport career for me (being inspired by her Bulgarian roots) – a career of a rhythmic gymnast. Unfortunately, I was told I am too tall...and pursued a career in music instead 😊. I have been involved more actively in the world of sport since working with Ms Elena Malíková, the Chair of the Slovak Olympic Academy, participating in several excellent initiatives, including Erasmus+ transnational projects called "Coubertin Academy – Social Inclusion through Sport Values" or "Run – Swim – Learn! In the spirit of Coubertin". We have met as students at the

1st Language School in Bratislava studying English and immediately hit it off. Although coming from seemingly different worlds we have realised there are so many astonishing similarities.

Have you been involved in sport sector for a long time? How do you like a world of sports?

Being curious and studious, I enjoy the variety of world of sport, many inspiring stories behind many races and matches respectively, sport's beneficial effect on health, as well as the socialising aspect. Moreover, André Agassi's memoir OPEN is one of my most favourite books.

If you have to name THREE valuable qualities that sport has taught you – what are they? Why?

In 2022, I had the rare privilege to represent the Slovak Olympic Academy at the 15th International Session for National Olympic Academies and National Olympic Committees' Delegates in Olympia in Greece. A glimpse at the stairs leading to the Pierre de Coubertin monument in Olympia sums up several valuable qualities: joy of effort, solidarity, peace, fair play, respect, friendship, excellence. We can apply them not only in the world of sport but also in the world of culture and most importantly in everyday life.

You are associate professor at the Department of Keyboard Instruments of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. What values do you teach the students you work with and are there any similarities with a field of sport how to acquire them?

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In my opinion, years spent at the Academy are one of the most formative years. I work with students, fragile musicians' souls from the age of 18. To follow their transition between their 1st and last study year can be a really beautiful journey both artistically and personally. Not everyone will necessarily become an internationally acclaimed virtuoso, but everyone can become an enthusiastic, sensitive, cultivated, well-educated and well-behaved human being. I would quote famous pianist Ferruccio Busoni: "Being a great artist primarily includes intelligence, culture, comprehensive education in music and literature and in the matter of human existence," stressing the matter of human existence. And how to acquire these values? Just take a look at the Olympic values 😊.

There is a significant importance of foreign languages in a development of diplomacy as such. Could you tell us how many languages do you speak and what is your view on this topic?

I love learning new languages as well as speaking them and meeting people from all over the world. It is one of the best means to broaden one's mind, make new friends, stimulate one's brain and become an open-minded human being 😊. Personally, I try to encourage my students to attend a language school as I think it is much more difficult to find a proper time later in life and the younger you start, the easier it gets to learn new words. I must confess, I have met many students from my field who do not have a good knowledge of foreign languages compared e. g. to their non-field age peers. As for your second question, I speak English, German, French, a little bit Spanish, Russian and

Bulgarian (and of course, being born and raised in former Czechoslovakia, I can speak Czech too 😊).

Is it common also for the other people from a cultural environment to speak so many foreign languages?

On the one hand, they say that music is a universal language. On the other hand, travelling as a musician, working often with colleagues from abroad inspires one to learn foreign languages. I'd say, nowadays English is the most spoken language among members of my community, but musicians also need German (as many fantastic books on music are written in German), Italian (especially singers and collaborative pianists; French or Russian, at least basics, can be also very helpful for them when working on opera arias and so-called lied repertoire by an wide array of world composers).

Do you have any sports challenges nowadays?

Walking.

Finally, in order to conclude our interview, what is your opinion on the recent European Union sport agenda? What more does the European Union need to do to encourage more young people to embrace sport as a way of life?

European Union should encourage young people to reduce the time spent on social media, at the computer, mobile phones and promote healthy lifestyle indoor and outdoor based on positive effects of socialising (especially after the bleak time of social distancing due to corona). The upcoming



era of intense digitalisation could be very tricky, luring people spending more and more time in virtual reality, lacking physical activities, losing their jobs, and becoming more and more depressed, staying isolated, not interacting with other people... The European officials need to step in and motivate people to stay positive and grounded through sport activities.

Is there something you would like to tell us on sport diplomacy and we did not ask you?

Sport diplomacy can bring together individuals from all over the world sharing their specific culture and habits. Some of these encounters can blossom into

wonderful friendships worth cultivating and lasting a life-time... Some sport diplomacy-orientated projects can bring about even amusing situations. While in Bulgaria, homeland of my grandparents, I was spontaneously invited to well-known Varna based Radio Darik. The main topic ought to be our very dear project "EU Sport Values Diplomacy", headed by Kristina Kazandzhieva, Yanka Dimitrova and Elena Malíková. Suddenly, at the very end of our interview I was asked to communicate in Bulgarian, a language I have spoken mainly as a child, and reveal some of the words I remember. My spontaneous reply: "Stork is in the water," accompanied by some basic introduction sentences 😊. I hope stork will make it one day to the Bulgarian Olympic Games 😊.

Dušan Poláček



Dušan Poláček is a successful coach in modern pentathlon, who had a significant impact on multiple generations of athletes and was behind great achievements of Czechoslovak and later Slovak modern pentathlon, including Olympic Games.

A former high-level modern pentathlete, represented Czechoslovakia at numerous major sport events, such as World Championships and European Championships. Olympian, being a member of the national team of Czechoslovakia at the Olympic Games in Moscow 1980. A multiple national champion in modern pentathlon, winner of various national and international trophies. A former Slovak Universidad record holder in swimming, he has achieved several significant sporting results in shooting as well.

Education background:

Graduated the Comenius University in Bratislava with specialisation on coaching and physical education (1981). Numerous life-long learning activities within modern pentathlon, swimming, fencing, shooting, horse-back riding, and athletics. Certified international referee within the International Modern Pentathlon Union (UIPM).

Work experience:

Professionally works as Secretary General of the Slovak Modern Pentathlon Association in Bratislava, Slovakia. During his fruitful professional career as a coach from 1982 till 2017 achieved with his athletes many significant results at major sports event for Czechoslovakia, later Slovakia, including medals from the World Championships and European Championships.

Long-term specialist and lecturer at master's degree programme in modern pentathlon at the Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Tutor within dual careers of athletes and support of postgraduate studies of the Slovak and Czech modern pentathletes.

Professional experience:

Responsible for many national initiatives linked to sport and physical education, notably in modern pentathlon, swimming, fencing, shooting, horse-back riding, and athletics. In charge of training of coaches in Brazil within the International Modern Pentathlon Union (UIPM) in 1988 upon appointment by the President of the International Modern Pentathlon Union (UIPM). Based in Prague, he

was in charge of preparation of national physical education curriculum in the field of sport in former Czechoslovakia. Currently is a Chairman of Sport Club VEGA, Slovakia.

Interests:

Cycling, fishing, trekking, nature, photography, history. Active contributor to Pentathlon News, a national modern pentathlon journal of the Slovak Modern Pentathlon Association. Being responsible for nation-wide policy development in modern pentathlon, he was invited to numerous international conferences abroad.

Foreign languages:

English, German, Russian



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In the world of sports, the role of a coach is often revered for its impact on athlete development, strategy, and team dynamics. We had the privilege to sit down with Dušan Poláček from Slovakia, successful coach of modern pentathlon with years of experience across various sports disciplines.

Currently working as the general secretary of the Slovak Modern Pentathlon Association. Former successful athlete, respected coach, international referee, sports expert, and official. Here are the insights gathered from our interview, offering a unique glimpse into the world of coaching.

Interview

Duško, good afternoon and welcome. We are glad that you could make time for us! In this interview, we would like to primarily delve into your sports career, the outstanding achievements you have attained as both an athlete and a coach, as well as your views on sports values and the essence of sports itself.

Let's start with the first interview question - how would you describe your perspective on your sports career?

In reflecting on my sports career, I perceive it through three distinct time dimensions. Firstly,

during my youth as an active athlete, my focus was primarily on the satisfaction derived from self-realisation, visibility, and other features that young individuals typically strive for. I believe these features are crucial during this developmental stage as they contribute to shaping one's identity.

Secondly, during what is commonly referred to as middle age, when I transitioned into coaching, my involvement in sports became a blend of passion, personal fulfilment, and the satisfaction of achieving the goals I had set for myself.

Finally, at present, my sports career evokes a sense of contentment, knowing that I have realised the aspirations I once envisioned. This fulfilment allows me to shift my focus to pursuits that were previously side-lined due to my involvement in sports.

Among your sports accomplishments, which one holds the most significance to you, and what makes it particularly meaningful?

I evaluate the outcomes of my endeavours, spanning from my time as an athlete to later roles as a coach, by considering whether I reached or at least approached my full potential. This assessment encompasses both general achievements and successes in major sports competitions that culminated in medal performances. Reflecting on my journey, I firmly believe that I have approached my maximum capabilities in both capacities. As a result, I find contentment and fulfilment in what I have accomplished, without any exceptions or specific preferences.



As a coach, you have had a significant impact on multiple generations of athletes. Is there a particular period in your coaching career that holds a special place in your memories?

Each and every generation of athletes that "passed through my hands" was different, specific, possessing its own unique qualities and characteristics. This presented a continual challenge for me, as I endeavoured to unlock each individual's maximum potential in alignment with my coaching philosophy. It was always a challenge for me trying to get the maximum potential out of the athlete based on their

abilities, or at least get close to them, and such a work always fulfilled me completely. In this way, each generation has been an immensely rewarding experience. I deeply hope that my coaching career contributed to personal growth and development of athletes I used to work with.

From your perspective, what defines the essence of inclusion in sports?

I think I have already indicated many things in the previous answers and articulated a compelling point. Indeed, sports uniquely offer opportunities

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for all individuals, regardless of their circumstances or disadvantages. Sport is a space that gives and creates opportunities for everyone, without exception, even in the case of various disadvantages. It allows people to meet in a common space, as equals, on the same starting line. It serves as a platform where people from diverse backgrounds can come together on equal footing, sharing a common space. This inclusivity is unparalleled, providing a space where everyone can participate and thrive, regardless of differences. In a world where such inclusive spaces are often rare, sports stand out as a beacon of unity and equality. Where else can you find such a space for inclusion?

What sports values resonate with you the most? In what ways had sports the greatest impact on you?

Engaging in sports demands a profound respect for it as a phenomenon governed by rules, regularities, emotions, and values. In my opinion, you cannot truly practice sports without acknowledging and honouring all these elements.

Whether consciously recognized or not, sports exert a profound influence that extends far beyond the playing field, shaping individuals throughout their lives. This transformative power of sports is often overlooked in contemporary society, yet its impact is immeasurable. Sports have the ability to transform individuals, contributing to their personal growth and development in profound ways. It is an invaluable quality of sports that many fail to realise, particularly in today's so-called "developed society." This transformative effect is profound, enriching lives in ways that surpass mere physical activity. Sport has

a power to change individuals, forming them into better Persons. Yes, the Persons with a capital 'P'! Sport has a power to make individuals better in all aspects of their lives.

Do you have any future plans involving sports? How do you envision the role of sports in your life after you retire from competitions and active coaching?

It is likely that I will never fully part ways with sports, even as this chapter of my life gradually draws to a close. As I have previously expressed, when you have a deep love for sports, it becomes ingrained in your

being for life. It permeates your thoughts, actions, and mind-set, leaving an indelible mark on your identity.

Aside from actively participating in sports, what other benefits or experiences have you gained from your involvement in sports?

Sports have given me more than just the physical act of participation. Beyond the active practice, it has provided me with a profound sense of fulfilment. Knowing that I have chosen sports to be an integral part of my life brings me immense contentment.



Tomáš Poláček



Tomáš Poláček epitomizes the synergy of law, sports, and sustainability, carving a trail of innovation and impact within Slovakia's dynamic sports landscape. As a Project Manager and leading figure within the "Inclusion First" project, co-funded by the European Union, Tomáš spearheads transformative initiatives across all Work Packages. His visionary leadership is further accentuated by his pivotal role as Chairman of ŠK Mladost', where he champions inclusivity and sportsmanship, fostering a culture of community and camaraderie.

In the legal arena, Tomáš is a steadfast advocate for integrity and excellence as a Legal Counsel at HB Reavis. With a profound understanding of M&A, Legal Compliance, and Corporate Law, he navigates complex legal terrain with finesse, ensuring compliance and ethical practice at every juncture. Tomáš's academic odyssey, characterized by the pursuit of a Master's degree and subsequent attainment of a Doctorate in Law from Comenius University in Bratislava, underscores his unwavering commitment to academic rigor and intellectual pursuit.

Beyond the confines of boardrooms and courtrooms, Tomáš's engagement transcends personal gratification, as he actively enriches the legal community as an external lecturer at Jagellonian University, Poland. A true aficionado, Tomáš finds solace and passion in the realm of sports, where his pursuits in swimming, running, shooting, and golf not only attest to his dedication to physical well-being but also epitomize his profound reverence for the sporting ethos. Here,

he imparts invaluable insights and wisdom to the next generation of legal professionals, nurturing a legacy of knowledge and mentorship.

With an unwavering commitment to innovation, integrity, and sustainability, Tomáš Poláček emerges

as a transformative figure in Slovakia's legal and sporting arenas. His tireless efforts and visionary leadership serve as catalysts for positive change, leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of society and inspiring generations to come.

In the world of sports, the principles of sustainability and inclusivity stand as guiding lights, illuminating a path toward a brighter, more equitable future. At the forefront of this movement stands Tomáš Poláček, a Legal Counsel at HB Reavis and the esteemed Chair of SK Mladost'. With a blend of legal acumen and a fervent dedication to green initiatives, Tomáš is leading the charge in effecting positive change within the sporting arena.

In his role as a driving force behind the "Inclusion First" project, Tomáš champions the cause of accessibility, ensuring that sports transcend barriers and embrace individuals from all walks of

life. However, his vision extends beyond mere inclusivity; he intertwines

sustainability into the very fabric of the project's operations. From eco-friendly transportation to the utilisation of ethically sourced materials, every decision reflects Tomáš's unwavering commitment to nurturing a greener, more sustainable sporting landscape.

Join us as we embark on a journey through Tomáš's inspiring endeavours, delving into his profound dedication to sustainability, his innovative approaches to fostering inclusivity, and the pivotal role of sports in shaping a future that is both equitable and environmentally conscious.

Interview

Welcome to our interview, Tomáš. It is a pleasure to have you on the premises of ŠK Mladost', where

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the echoes of sportsmanship and inclusivity resound through the corridors. Your presence here is particularly esteemed, given your distinguished expertise in both legal matters and sustainability within the realm of sports.

As we delve into the intricacies of your journey, it is truly fascinating to uncover the layers of your multifaceted role within SK Mladost'. Your leadership and commitment to fostering a more inclusive sporting environment through initiatives like the 'Inclusion First' project are commendable. It is evident that you not only bring legal prowess but also a deep-seated passion for sustainable practices to the table, propelling positive change within the sporting community. Let us dive straight into the heart of our discussion, focusing on the core topics that drive our conversation today.

Tomáš, could you elaborate on how sustainability and green initiatives are integrated into the operational field of the project?

In addition, we were committed to utilizing exclusively eco-textiles and adhering to a fair-trade approach for all gadgets and eco-administrative materials used throughout the project. By choosing environmentally friendly materials and supporting fair-trade practices, we not only reduced our ecological footprint but also contributed to ethical and sustainable supply chains. Furthermore, we have made a de

liberate decision to organize transnational project meetings primarily in outdoor environments. This approach served multiple purposes.

Firstly, it helped to reduce electricity consumption and carbon footprint associated with indoor venues. Secondly, it provided participants with an opportunity for active engagement, including physical activities in the fresh air, promoting well-being and connection with nature.

Moreover, conducting outdoor project activities mitigated the risk of virus infections, which was particularly crucial considering the ongoing challenges posed by pandemics. By prioritizing outdoor settings and adhering to relevant health restrictions, we aimed to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants while maintaining the momentum of our project activities.

It is impressive to see such comprehensive efforts to integrate sustainability into every aspect of the project. How do you foresee these green initiatives contributing to the overall success of "Inclusion First"?

The incorporation of green initiatives into the "Inclusion First" project aligns with our overarching goal of promoting inclusivity, diversity, and social cohesion through sports. By prioritizing sustainability and eco-friendliness, we not only minimize our environmental impact but also set a positive example for other projects and organisations to follow. These green initiatives demonstrate our commitment to responsible and ethical practices, enhancing our credibility and reputation within the community.

Moreover, by organizing outdoor project activities and utilizing eco-friendly materials, we create a more engaging and immersive experience for participants,



fostering a deeper connection with the project's objectives and values. This holistic approach to sustainability not only benefits the environment but also enhances the overall effectiveness and impact of our project activities.

In essence, sustainability is not just a standalone aspect of the "Inclusion First" project; it is woven into the fabric of every initiative and decision we

make. By embracing sustainability as a core principle, we are laying the foundation for a more inclusive, equitable, and environmentally conscious future.

Tomáš, beyond the environmental aspects, your involvement in sports extends to promoting values, ethics, and inclusion. Can you elaborate on how sports can instil important values in individuals and communities?

Absolutely. Sports have the remarkable ability to foster values such as teamwork, discipline, perseverance, and respect. Through participation in sports, individuals learn the importance of cooperation, goal-setting, and resilience, which are invaluable skills both on and off the field.

Moreover, sports can promote inclusivity and diversity by bringing people from different backgrounds together, fostering understanding and empathy. Overall, sports serve as a powerful platform for promoting positive values and shaping ethical behaviour.

Ethics in sports is a topic of increasing importance. How do you approach ethical considerations within the realm of sports, particularly in your role as the Chair of SK Mladost??

Ethics in sports is indeed a critical issue, and it is something we take very seriously at SK Mladost'. As the Chair, I am committed to upholding the highest standards of integrity, fairness, and sportsmanship in all our activities. This includes promoting transparency, accountability, and respect for the rules and regulations governing sports.

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Additionally, we strive to create a culture of ethical conduct among our members, emphasizing the importance of honesty, integrity, and respect for opponents. By prioritizing ethics in sports, we not only uphold the integrity of the game but also contribute to the positive development of individuals and communities.

Inclusion is a central theme in your work, particularly through initiatives like the "Inclusion First" project. How do you ensure that sports are accessible and welcoming to all members of society?

Inclusion is indeed a cornerstone of our work at SK Mladost' and the "Inclusion First" project. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in sports regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances. To ensure inclusivity, we actively engage with marginalized communities, provide resources and support for individuals with disabilities, and create accessible pathways for participation. Additionally, we prioritize diversity in our programming, promoting representation and inclusion of individuals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. By fostering an inclusive environment, we not only enrich the

sporting experience for all participants but also promote social cohesion and unity.

With your expertise in both law and sports, how do you see the relationship between sports and the European Union evolving in the future?

The relationship between sports and the European Union is complex and multifaceted, encompassing various aspects such as policy development, funding, and regulation. I believe that the EU will continue to play a significant role in shaping the future of sports through initiatives that promote inclusivity, sustainability, and innovation.

This includes supporting grassroots sports programs, investing in infrastructure development, and addressing issues such as doping, match fixing, and discrimination. Additionally, the EU has a role to play in promoting good governance and transparency in sports organisations, ensuring accountability and integrity in the administration of sports.

Overall, I see the EU as a key partner in advancing the values and principles of sports in Europe and beyond.

Looking ahead, what do you envision for the future of sports, particularly in terms of sustainability, inclusion, and innovation?

The future of sports holds immense potential for positive change, particularly in terms of sustainability, inclusion, and innovation. I envision a future where sports are not only a source of entertainment and competition but also a catalyst

for social change and environmental stewardship. This includes leverage technology and data analytics to enhance performance, improve athlete safety, and promote fair play.

Moreover, I see a growing emphasis on sustainability in sports, with organisations prioritizing eco-friendly practices, reducing carbon emissions, and promoting environmental conservation. Additionally, I believe that sports will continue to serve as a powerful tool for promoting inclusion and diversity, breaking down barriers, and fostering social cohesion. Overall, I am optimistic about the future of sports and the positive impact it can have on individuals, communities, and the planet.

Thank you, Tomáš, for sharing how sustainability and green initiatives are integrated into the "Inclusion First" project. Your commitment to promoting inclusivity and environmental stewardship is truly inspiring.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these important aspects of our project. I am excited to continue our efforts to make a positive impact in both social and environmental spheres.

Vladimír Uhrín



Vladimír Uhrín's career trajectory is impressive and diverse, showcasing his expertise in financial management across multiple industries. His experience in sectors ranging from healthcare services, digital broadcasting services to transportation and logistics services and FMCG demonstrates his adaptability and ability to excel in dynamic environments.

His multilingual proficiency in English, Russian, and German opens doors for effective communication and collaboration in international settings, reflecting his global mindset and cross-cultural competence. Beyond his professional achievements, Vladimír's passion for sports, particularly triathlon, underscores his commitment to personal development, physical fitness, and mental resilience.

His involvement in the Slovak Baseball National Team, indoor football, and yachting further highlights his diverse interests and adventurous spirit.

The pursuit of new challenges such as freediving showcases his willingness to push boundaries and embrace new experiences, reflecting a lifelong dedication to growth and exploration.

Overall, Vladimír Uhrín's combination of professional expertise, linguistic abilities, and passion for sports and adventure makes him a well-rounded and dynamic individual.

Greetings, esteemed readers. Today, we are honoured to host Vladimír Uhrín in our interview series. With a distinguished background in financial management spanning various industries, Vladimír brings a profound understanding of both business intricacies and the world of sports.

His journey, from representing the Slovak Baseball National Team to conquering Half Ironman races, epitomizes a commitment to excellence and personal development.

Join us as we engage with Vladimír, exploring his insights on the symbiosis between business acumen and athletic prowess, his educational journey, and the core values that define his professional and sporting endeavors.

Interview

Hello, Vlado! Welcome to our project team. We are thrilled to have you join us for this interview for our publication titled "Run and Smile."

While we have known each other for years through our shared passion for running in Železná studnička, we are excited to delve into various aspects of your life and experiences, starting with your professional journey.

Where do you work, and what are your professional challenges?

I work as a Financial Manager for Mondelez, covering the European region with headquarters in Zurich, focused mainly on the financial planning activities. The multicultural environment and the opportunity to collaborate with smart and talented individuals is incredibly enriching.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work dynamics has been significant, and it has influenced the workplace dynamics also within our company. The breaking down of barriers between various levels of seniority was a notable shift, allowing for more collaboration and interaction across different organisational levels. This change fostered a more inclusive and collaborative work culture.

While the pandemic disrupted many in-person activities, including sports and networking events, it is impressive to see how online opportunities within the company have replaced some of these activities. The ability to adapt to change, both in my professional role and personal activities, demonstrates resilience and flexibility. Online platforms have become essential for maintaining connections and facilitating work interactions during these challenging times.

I started my career within a company dealing with broadcasting services, satellite pay TV, and digital infrastructure within the Slovak Republic. It was a monopoly company, which often operate in tightly regulated environments, requiring a deep understanding of compliance and industry standards.

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The cross-functional collaboration broadened my understanding of how various departments and sectors contribute to the overall success of the company.

Participating in the expansion of Pay TV services to different markets was an opportunity to improve the project management across borders that involves navigating diverse regulatory landscapes, cultural considerations, and market dynamics. Regularly joining Board meetings and bankers was a testament to my strategic involvement and the recognition of expertise, which gave a strong background for further career opportunities in the Transportation and Logics company when I spent a couple of years again in the business and finance environment, which means strategic financial planning and business valuation.

Could you also elaborate on your educational background, please?

I graduated at the University of Economics in Bratislava, achieved a master's degree in Finance, Banking, and Investments. The diploma thesis "The financial aspects of nuclear energy in Slovakia within the European Union" helped me to explore the intersection of finance and nuclear energy and to understand a complex and crucial aspect of national and global concerns.

The fact that I spent considerable time with Jozef Zlatňanský, a distinguished gentleman and professional working at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, was remarkable. The IAEA, being an organisation under the United Nations, plays a critical role in promoting the

peaceful use of nuclear energy while ensuring safety and security. Being able to see and interact with professionals and experts from various countries within a global organisation like the IAEA, was a powerful and enriching experience with unique cultural and professional exposure.

It is not a surprise, that my interest in nuclear energy, focused on National Safety and Security, with a sustainable aspects, directed me to get to know the basics of research and development to know more about WANO, IEA or State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom (ROSATOM), so my next steps headed to Eastern countries, where I spent several months in Russia attending language schools in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, which was an incredible and enriching experience.

I had an opportunity to enjoy Russian culture first-hand that goes beyond language learning and interact with people from various parts of the world, representing different cultures such as Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Europe or USA. The memories and insights gained during this period contribute to a broader worldview and will stay with me throughout my life.

Vlado and sports – how would you characterize yourself from this perspective?

My sport journey started from sprinting as a child to later joining a baseball club. Baseball is indeed a dynamic and strategic sport that requires a combination of skills, including sprinting, batting, and precise ball throwing. Maybe, it seems boring to some viewers but the need for accuracy, quick reaction time, and continuous engagement without



much downtime makes it a challenging and exciting collective sport that I really loved mainly the strategic element of baseball, with athletes communicating through secret signals.

Being a part of the Slovak National baseball team gave me an opportunity to participate in various competitions. I will remember forever the one in the Netherlands where I achieved the best statistical rating among the 300 competing players from Europe. Sport is a substantial part of my life, particularly baseball, has been a significant and rewarding part of my life, contributing not only to my physical fitness but also to the development of teamwork, strategic thinking, and quick decision-making.

During my studies at the University, I spent couple of years playing indoor football with friends also from different countries, like Algeria or Tunis.

My active participation and success in company games and challenges, especially in winning the step challenges with over 5000 participants from different countries, showcase not only my personal commitment to a healthy lifestyle but also my ability to motivate and lead a team towards achieving goals as I was nominated as a captain of the team who won the competition. I influenced my team members to improve their sport capability and inspired them to join the swimming lessons with a professional coach.



Have you participated in, or are you planning to participate in any sports competitions? Do you have any specific sports challenges?

In recent years, I participated in triathlon competitions, including completing the demanding "Oravaman"- the Half Ironman with a significant 3000m elevation in the mountains of Slovakia. I completed the Half Ironman in Budapest and in Prague. Obviously, there were a lot more sport competitions, which prepared me for the more recognized ones.

As preparation for the race, I committed to improve my swimming skills by training with one of the

best coaches in our country, whose students have reached World Championships and the Olympic Games. Training alongside swimmers who served as inspiration for eight years underscores the long-term dedication and discipline required in competitive swimming.

What is beautiful and inspiring is that you can go to the race all by yourself and you will always meet new people and it is not a coincidence, that many times these people will become friends for life.

What I would like to emphasize, that people who are involved in sports are mostly very friendly and warm. It does not matter what country a person comes

from, it does not matter what their native language or religion is, you understand each other with a smile on your face.

I have one very nice example, during the Ironman competition in Budapest, where I met a group of women sitting at breakfast, speaking in English, already dressed for the race, so we started talking to know more about each other. To be honest, the lady was not the lightest athlete and I wondered if she was really going to compete, but I put my prejudices aside and we got to know each other.

After a while we were enjoying our breakfast with a smile. The lady came from California to see her parents, she flew half of the World, just for this competition, to hug her mum from Slovakia and prove to herself that the impossible just does not exist.

This woman completed the Half Ironman, albeit as the last one, but with the biggest applause with a champagne and congratulations from the entire Ironman organisational team, as well as from the race organizer himself. When I think back about it, it was the perfect example, how we can break social barriers through sport. It is exactly about that moment, about sports diplomacy, about overcoming barriers and making the world and people happier and healthier.

We have selected you for our publication as the face of the BUSINESS area. How do you perceive the connection between these two worlds?

Acknowledging that both sports and business come with their share of ups and downs underscores the importance of resilience. From my perspective the

importance of perseverance and determination are required to achieve goals. Whether in sports or business, staying committed to the journey and pushing through obstacles is essential. Each day is an opportunity to move closer to goals and consistent, small steps can lead to significant progress over time. It is important to stay committed to aspirations and the long-term vision and the dedication needed to reach desired outcomes. Consistent effort and dedication are key elements in both sports and business endeavours.

Triathlon is such a demanding and rewarding sport, and it is amazing how the lessons learned from pushing my limits in triathlon can extend to all aspects of life. The mindset of not giving up and believing that anything is possible help me overcome obstacles, achieve my goals, and continuously strive for improvement in all areas of my life.

The perseverance and determination required to complete a triathlon, especially when faced with physical and mental challenges along the way, are invaluable qualities that greatly benefit me in my personal and professional life.

Triathlon teaches you to embrace discomfort, adapt to adversity, and keep moving forward, which are all essential skills for success in any endeavour. While advertising and brand promotion are important for visibility and attracting customers, they are only part of the equation. Just like giving a product a new look or upgrading equipment in sports, sometimes what is truly needed is a substantive improvement in the product itself or dedicated effort and practice to enhance performance.

In product development, it is crucial to not only focus on marketing but also on continuously refining the product to meet the evolving needs and desires of users. Similarly, in sports, while having top-notch gear is nice, it is ultimately the dedication to training and improvement that leads to real progress in performance.

This mindset shift, from simply dressing up products or relying on external factors in sports, to actively improving their core aspects, is what can truly drive long-term success and satisfaction for users and athletes alike.

Another aspect that sport has for a person is to be fit, healthy and in a good condition. Little is said about it, but there is a higher risk of cardiovascular mortality than cancer mortality. Junk food, sweetened drinks, Snacks blinking on us on every corner, full of sugar and carbohydrates, is literally killing people.

We see a high impact of overweight people and obesity on cardiovascular health, as well as its effects on social interactions and self-esteem, especially among young people. Overweight and obesity pose significant health risks, including cardiovascular problems, and may also lead to feelings of isolation, low self-confidence, and social stigma.

Engaging in sports and physical activity play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Sport not only promotes physical fitness and helps manage weight but also fosters social connections,



teamwork, and a sense of belonging. Participating in sports can provide opportunities for individuals of all shapes and sizes to come together, build relationships, and support one another in achieving common goals.

Moreover, sports have the power to break down barriers and challenge societal norms and stereotypes. By promoting inclusivity, acceptance, and diversity, sports can create a supportive environment where individuals feel empowered to pursue their passions and overcome obstacles, including those related to weight or body image.

In your opinion, where does inclusion through sports lie?

Inclusion through sports is a platform where people of all abilities, backgrounds, and identities can come together to engage in physical activity regardless of any barriers or limitations they may face. Everyone, regardless of age, gender, race, ability, or socioeconomic status, has the opportunity to participate and enjoy the benefits of being active.

Sport boosts self-confidence, improves physical health and mental well-being. Sport also creates opportunities for social interaction, collaboration, and teamwork, helping to bridge divides and promote inclusion.

If we limit sport to simple jogging or running, there is nothing better, than if you have a chance to have a conversation during the sport activity, to know each other better, it is a perfect moment to share thoughts and ideas, to learn and grow, which in the end will conclude with the social and emotional rewards. It is also about the creation of a welcoming and inclusive environment where people of all backgrounds and abilities can come together and enjoy sport with the Smile.

Which sports values are close to you? How has sports influenced you the most?

Fair competition is the number one. It is essential not just in sports like triathlon but also in various aspects of life, including business and finance. In sports, rules and regulations are in place to ensure that competition is fair and that all athletes have an equal opportunity to succeed based on their own abilities and efforts.

In triathlon, drafting behind another cyclist to gain an unfair advantage is against the rules and can result in penalties. This rule helps maintain fairness and integrity in the competition by ensuring that each athlete is responsible for their own performance and is not unduly benefiting from the efforts of others.

Similarly, in the realm of finance and investment, adhering to standards like the Global Investment Performance Standards (GIPS) helps ensure fair and transparent reporting of investment performance. By following these standards, investment firms provide accurate and consistent information to investors, promoting trust and confidence in the market. The other important value is Respect for oneself, teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, and the rules of the game. It promotes fair play and positive relationships both on and off the field. The Respect is closely linked to ethical conduct in business. Treating others with respect involves acting with honesty, integrity, and fairness in all business dealings.

Julián Vojtech



GENERAL PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND:

Julián Vojtech started a professional career at the National Sport Centre, where working from 2005 until 2008 as a Head of ICT Department. Currently a freelancer, with a close affinity to sport, working with significant sport stakeholders, such as the Slovak Olympic and Sport Committee, Slovak Olympic Academy, Slovak Pierre de Coubertin Committee, National Sport Centre, just to mention a few of them. Technically and digitally supported all the sports events organised in the framework of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2016.

ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Leading and directing many national initiatives in ICT and physical education, including curriculum and qualifications development, Olympic related matters and presenting internationally and nationally. Being responsible for policy development for ICT and physical education/sport, invited to numerous international conferences abroad. Close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in the field of creating unified information system for sport and physical culture.

TROPHIES, AWARDS, JURY, PUBLICATIONS:

Published nationally and internationally, including publications within Erasmus + projects funded by the European Union. On the editorial board of national physical education journal of the Slovak national sport centre entitled Športinform.

INTERESTS, HOBBIES, FOREIGN LANGUAGES:

Table-tennis, football, Nordic walking, nature, traveling, capturing new places through photographic lenses. Lifelong philosophy is in doing things together in a transparent and efficient way for everybody involved. Fluent in English and Russian languages.

SPORT RELATED ACHIEVEMENTS:

Sport career focused on football, an expert in ICT and digital skills. Blending sport with nature,

connecting sports and technology, blending real and virtual life challenges, focusing on platforms, youth, sports and education.

EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS:

Graduating University of Žilina in Slovakia, with specialisation on applied mathematics, 2004. Numerous lifelong learning activities within the Slovak national sport centre in the field of management, marketing, finance, media, negotiation, and presentation skills, including communication training.

In the world where the digitalisation of sports meets captivating graphic design, Julian Vojtech stands as a luminary figure. Originating from Slovakia, Julian is renowned for his expertise in harnessing digital technologies to enhance sporting experiences and his skill in crafting visually stunning graphics that leave a lasting impression.

With a career spanning over two decades, Julian has been a driving force behind numerous remarkable sports events, both at governmental and non-governmental levels. His dedication

to advancing the intersection of sports and technology has earned him widespread recognition as a reliable and competent partner in the digital realm. Moreover, his creative genius shines through in his exquisite graphic designs, adding a touch of aesthetic brilliance to every project he undertakes.

Today, we have the privilege of delving into Julian's multifaceted journey, gaining insights into his personal connection to sports, his thoughts on the evolving landscape of digital technologies in sports, and the profound

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impact of physical activities on both his professional and personal life.

Join us as we uncover the fascinating story of Julian Vojtech, a visionary at the forefront of innovation in the world of sports and design.

Interview

Hello Julo, it is my great pleasure to conduct this interview with you. We have known each other for a very long time, and I am very grateful to you for supporting numerous amazing sports events over the past 20 years, whether organized at governmental or non-governmental levels. It has always been a pleasure to collaborate with you. We all know you as a very reliable and competent partner in the field of digital technologies and also as a creator of beautiful graphic designs. However, this time we would like to get to know you from a more personal perspective, especially in connection with your activities in sports and promoting physical activities. For this reason, I would like to start our interview by looking behind the scenes of your sports performances, results, and goals.

What does sport mean in your life? What does sport represent for you?

Sport, for me, is primarily an irreplaceable source of daily movement, through which I balance the mental aspect of my work. However, I perceive it as entertainment, which has brought me pleasure, joy, relaxation, inspiration, and later also stress relief since childhood. It can be said that sport has also changed my view of the world. Another dimension of sport is its impact on personality. Looking

back, I realise that sport has always shaped me mentally and personally. Victories, failures, humility, disappointment, recognition, challenges, patience, emotions... and much more, including sporting ideals, have been transferred from sport to everyday life, thereby influencing my overall personality.

From a broader perspective, what is your opinion on sport itself? Is there any connection between sport and digital technologies?

From my point of view, the connection between sport and digital technologies is very close, and it always has been. Sport is a phenomenon into which there has always been an effort to implement new things. And so it is with digital technologies. Although the extent to which technology should interfere with sport itself is always questionable, overall, I believe it pushes it forward, enhances it, brings attractiveness, thereby opening up completely new possibilities.

Could you tell us how you got involved in professional sports in your work? How did you enter the world of sports?

As I mentioned, sport has been a part of my life practically all my life. From a young age, I was involved in competitive table tennis and later in football, both as an active player and in club management. However, all of this was only at the regional level, and I came into direct contact with professional sports in my very first job after studies. Perhaps subconsciously, I was drawn to these spheres, and when I saw an advertisement seeking an information analyst for the National Sports Centre, I knew this was exactly for me... And it was 😊

Does sport still have an influence and impact on your work?

Certainly yes. As I have outlined several times, I practically live with sport constantly. However,



in recent times (perhaps directly proportional to increasing age 😊), I increasingly realise the importance of physical activity – ergo movement is life. Feeling healthier, having more energy, being in mental and physical harmony, I perceive all of this as benefits derived from sport. Through this somewhat longer introduction, I finally come to answer your question: well, the impact of sport on my work is indeed significant. For my work, I need to constantly draw inspiration, ideas, and stimuli, and I have found that it is much easier when sport is part of my lifestyle.

How do you like the world of sports?

The world of sports has fascinated me since the moments when I can't even remember... 😊 Many of my initial memories are associated with watching the

Olympics or other sports broadcasts, where I always found my role models and idols. I mentioned my childhood sports activities in the previous question, and they gradually transferred into adulthood – in active or passive form. My enthusiasm for sports is deeply rooted in me. In the course of my involvement in sports organisations, I have also met several great and interesting people, for which I am also very grateful to have known them. This also forms a part of my world of sports, which in some cases has a strong influence on my everyday professional, or personal life.

In your opinion, what is the role of inclusion through sport?

As I mentioned in one of the answers, sport is a phenomenon. It can bring people together across

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various areas, even where it is very difficult under other circumstances. Whether it is political, racial, gender, or even age or mental barriers. Especially in this period, support for inclusion is therefore extremely important, not only in sports.

**Which sporting values are close to you?
How has sport influenced you the most?**

Hmm, a challenging question, although it may not seem so at first glance 😊 There are indeed many values that I have taken from sports and also embrace. I would say that it is a continuous process. However, I would mention those fundamental values that have influenced me since childhood. Sport has taught me mainly respect for others, as well as for myself, humility, patience, and how to accept possible defeats or face new challenges.

If you had to name three values that sport has taught you, what would they be? Why?

Respect, because without it, sportsmanship cannot exist. Discipline, because it is the foundation of progress and success in any field, including sports. And perseverance, because it is often the determining factor between giving up and achieving one's goals.

What has sport given you besides just playing sports?

Since I consider sport as a lifestyle, it is evident that it extends beyond the boundaries of physical activity alone. Thanks to sport, I have met many people in life (from early childhood to the present), many of whom have become good friends or acquaintances. In addition, sport gives me a different perspective on the world, precisely because of the values mentioned in the previous question. When I think about it, sport influences me quite significantly.



Have you participated, or are you planning to participate in any sports competitions? Do you have any specific sporting challenges?

Excellent question 😊 I have to laugh because you are the one who motivated me to try something again in a competitive manner. So the answer is yes, I am trying to prepare for running races,



which I have been focusing on primarily in recent times. It is a real challenge for me because I run more for my own pleasure than for performance. But in everyone who has ever participated in sports, there is a bit of a competitive spirit, so thank you for inspiring me to take this step 😊

In conclusion of our interview, I would like to ask your opinion on the current sports program of the European Union. What else should the European Union do to encourage more young people to embrace sports as a lifestyle?

Well, that is not an easy question at all. There is probably no universal solution to encourage young people to engage in sports, but in my opinion, something different works for everyone. Therefore, it is all the more important to constantly introduce new modern projects and topics that can appeal to various groups of young people. Then there is a greater likelihood that some of them will be inspired to the extent that sport becomes their lifestyle with immense benefits.

Is there anything we have not asked you that you would like to share with us in this interview?

I am thinking about what to add at the end; perhaps just to say that I would like to thank you very much for allowing me to share my perspective on sports 😊

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Photos and Pictures:

- Archives of members of the project consortium, private archives of authors and inspirational personalities interviewed for the publication.

