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ENG

Own the arena – building the winning culture

Stepping into the role of Head Coach for the Finnish national cross-country ski team is both a privilege and an honor. I take on this responsibility with full energy and enthusiasm, but also with a clear understanding of what the role demands.

Cross-country skiing is one of the most followed sports in Finland. It has strong traditions and a deep connection to the Finnish people, extending far beyond the competition arenas. Being part of this and contributing to the next steps in the sport's development is a task I approach with great respect and motivation.

At the same time, this is not about a single individual. For me, leadership is about creating an environment where performance grows through collaboration, structure, and shared responsibility.

A Team with a Shared Direction

One of the things that brings me the most joy and confidence at this early stage is our coaching team. We have brought together a group with strong and complementary expertise – and most importantly, a shared direction.

We have a coach with a PhD in exercise physiology and extensive experience at the highest international level, as well as a coach with a background as a top athlete in the Finnish national team and several years of coaching experience.

This gives us a strong combination of:

- analysis and experience
- theory and practice
- an understanding of structures and performance.

But the most important thing is not our coaches' backgrounds, but the fact that we believe in the same things and work toward the same goals. We are one team with different roles – but a shared responsibility.

Significant Potential, Clear Direction

Even after a relatively short time together, we can see that the team has significant potential. A lot of good work has been done over time, and the foundation is strong. At the same time, we see that relatively small adjustments can make a significant difference in the long run.

This involves areas such as:

- technical details
- training content and load
- progression
- reflection and monitoring.

Looking at the big picture, it is clear that our team's capacity is extremely high, and in many areas, the potential is even greater than we initially assessed when starting this work. This gives us confidence that our chosen direction is right and belief in what we can build together over time.

"Own the Arena"

One expression that has quickly become central to us is "owning the arena". This can refer to the competition arena – stepping up to the starting line ready to deliver a top performance. But it is equally about our daily work:

- owning your own development
- taking responsibility
- contributing to the team.

We also strive to own our circumstances by creating functional structures, ensuring high quality in daily training, and building a strong team around each athlete.

We don't just compete. We own the arena.

The Environment We Build Together

The environment is crucial. We want to create an environment that is learning-oriented, challenging, and clear. Such an environment allows us to challenge each other, learn from each other, and make each other better.

We strongly believe in:

- clear goals that drive the process forward
- energy and joy in daily operations
- strong individuals who build an even stronger team.

The atmosphere should be open and conversational, but we must also set high and clear expectations for one another.

Leadership, Relationships, and Culture

We operate based on performance-based leadership. This means focusing on what actually drives results over time – not on hierarchy or old traditions. This requires structure and clarity, but also something more fundamental: relationships.

The relationship between the coach and the athlete is at the center of everything. That is where trust is built and the foundation for development is created.

Communication is also a key part of our performance. We strive to provide clear feedback, listen to truly understand, address challenges early on, and stand up for each other. We talk to each other – not about each other.

Sisu, Identity, and Responsibility

Wearing the national team uniform is both a privilege and a responsibility. We represent our country, our sport, and the people who follow us.

Here, the Finnish concept of Sisu is central. It means perseverance and resilience when things are at their most demanding. It is not just something we hope for or lean on. It is a trait we actively want to develop and strengthen in our daily work.

The Team Behind the Team

Our work does not happen in a vacuum. We are supported by a highly committed and driven organization encompassing management, marketing, communications, and other areas of the association. Their work is invaluable.

They create the framework that allows us to focus on what we do every day – developing our athletes and our performance.

But the team extends even further. Around each athlete, there is a strong service and support network, our partners, and the resources of the Finnish Olympic Committee.

Together, we bring together a wide range of expertise:

- physiology
- medical support
- research
- psychology
- nutrition
- and last but certainly not least, the service team, where the waxing team plays an absolutely critical role.

The waxing team is key to our performance. Their work directly impacts the results on the track and requires extremely close collaboration with both athletes and coaches.

For us, this is about working together – closely, seamlessly, and with a shared direction. It is a central part of our goal to own the arena. We work with clear decision-making models and defined responsibilities. This creates transparency, builds trust, and ensures quality in our daily routines.

Only when all these pieces work together can performance truly become sustainable in the long run.

Training Environments – Where Everyday Performance is Built

An important part of our future work is to strengthen collaboration with our training environments around the country. Vuokatti, Rovaniemi, Helsinki/Espoo, Vöyri, Kuopio, and others – they all play a crucial role in the development of our athletes.

Performance is built in the everyday. Therefore, we want to work even closer with these environments, create a shared direction, and ensure high quality in daily training – day in and day out. This work has already begun through the development of High Performance Training Centres, where we bring together training, monitoring, expertise, and resources.

Our goal is clear: to create environments where development is continuous and where the conditions for performance are present every single day.

Forward – Together

What we are building now is about the long term.

We are a High Performance Team where we utilize our collective strengths, work together, and share the responsibility.

We are a team where we develop as individuals – and deliver results as a team. Through our actions, we build trust, especially when it matters the most.

In Conclusion

It is not about changing everything. It is about fine-tuning the details that truly make a difference in the long run. And when we do that together, with the right attitude and direction – then it is no longer just about performance.

Then it is about growing into a team that doesn't just compete – but truly owns the arena.



Joakim Abrahamsson,
Head Coach of the Cross Country Ski Team Finland