

COMING TO THE POINT: AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL HEIKKILA

By Robin Saunders

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Robin Saunders is a BAF Senior Coach (UK Athletics Level 4) in 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay.

Bill Heikkila is widely regarded as being one of the world's leading throws coaches and during the past 30 years he has acted as a personal coach to many of Canada's best javelin throwers. He was appointed Canada's National Team Coach on several World Championship teams and has coached at Olympic, Commonwealth and Pan American Games level. As a Level III NCCP coach, Bill is considered to be an excellent teacher as well as a coach and enjoys working with athletes of all ages and abilities. As an athlete, Bill is a former Canadian javelin record holder, was several times National champion, became an All-American and represented his country in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City and the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh.

Q: What is your own sporting background?

I was virtually born into a Finnish-Canadian athletics club in Toronto called *Yritys*, which means effort or endeavour that had formed in 1906. Although the club had had its heyday twenty or thirty years earlier, I managed to catch the tail end of its activities in the 1950's and 60's which, by then, was limited to track and field and gymnastics. In earlier days, it had offered not only these sports but also, cross-country skiing, wrestling, boxing, ice hockey, table tennis and more. There were actually more than eighty such clubs in Canada during this period of mass immigration and, in many ways, these immigrants were far ahead of the rest of the country in terms of the value of sport and the need for better coaching and the support of Canadian athletes.

In summertime, kids were introduced to track and field by the age of four or five, training and competing in the same meets with athletes who were in their prime as well as those in the veteran categories, all in a spirit of fun and sportsmanship, with officials who were probably as competent as any in the country. In winter, we were taught gymnastics on Sunday mornings at our hall in downtown Toronto and all of this fundamental training gave me a preparation that few kids get these days due to school programming cutbacks and other factors.

As a child growing up in Canada, I was keen on playing hockey and rose to quite a high standard as a sixteen year old playing for the Toronto Marlboros which, in the early 1960`s, was a farm team for the famed Toronto Maple Leafs. Although we practised in Maple Leaf Gardens and won the all-Toronto championships, I concluded that my hockey prospects were somewhat limited and, the following year, I reverted to the track and field events that I had been introduced to in earlier life.

A year later, I set a new Canadian Juvenile record in javelin and, due to one of my mentors, Lloyd Percival, I received a scholarship at the University of Oregon where I was coached by the legendary Bill Bowerman, the co-founder of Nike. Also attending the university at that time was Frank Dick, with whom I worked in a local plywood mill on occasion in order to make ends meet. While at Oregon, I managed to break the Canadian national record and place second in the 1967 NCAA Championships in Provo, Utah. Through that performance, I became an All-American. The following year, I returned to the University of Oregon to study for my Masters degree in physical education and prepare to try and make the Canadian Olympic team but, although I competed in Mexico City, I didn't make the final. I retired from competition after competing at the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh in 1970.

Q: How did you become involved in coaching?

The year following the Mexico Olympics was spent at the Ontario College of Education at the University of Toronto, where I obtained my certificate for a planned career in teaching at high school level. At about this time, my Oregon team-mate Harry Jerome, who was world record holder in the 100 metres and bronze medallist at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964, was working in Ottawa trying to convince our federal government to support a program in which a number of Olympic athletes were to travel across Canada for a year, visiting around 300 schools to encourage students to take part in gymnastics and track and field events. The Cross-Canada Sports Demonstration project was approved and this led to me spending a year on the road, along with Harry Jerome and Olympic decathlete Gerry Moro, experiencing our vast country from coast to coast as few get the chance to do. The success of the project persuaded the Minister of Sport to offer me the opportunity to work for the federal government instead of following a career in teaching.

After retiring as an athlete, coaching javelin became a convenient outlet for pursuing my passion for sport as well as my preparation for teaching. I have to say that, as an athlete I always felt much more suited for endurance activities rather than for javelin, which is arguably the most explosive of all track and field events. I feel there are countless youngsters in all parts of our country who could throw a javelin much further than I ever did, if they could be taught how to throw properly and how to train appropriately for the event. My experience and coaching record only serves to support this contention.

Q: Who, would you say, is the most impressive athlete you have worked with, and what qualities set him/her aside from the rest?

Giovanni 'John' Corazza, whom I met in 1975 when he was studying at the University of Ottawa and training on his own for javelin. At that time, his PB was in the mid to high 60 metres range with the old-rules javelin. One of my athletes had seen him in the weights room at the university and we invited him to attend our next training session, which involved a series of physical tests using sprinting, bounding and medicine ball throws. His explosive strength capacity was so impressive that, in doing five double-leg bounds from a standing position, he jumped one or two metres further than any of the other athletes in the group.

In 1976, following the Montreal Olympics, I arranged for John to visit Finland for two weeks, living on the potato farm of Mikko Paananen, the coach of 1964 Olympic Champion, Pauli Nevala and 1968 Olympic silver medallist and world record holder, Jorma Kinnunen. Although he only threw in the low 70`s in the meets he competed in, when John returned to Canada he was a changed man in terms of understanding and appreciating his own considerable talent compared to the Finnish throwers, who were throwing much further than he was. His new-found confidence was evident in our fall `testing` sessions, where he improved on virtually all of his previously best results in the whole battery of field tests we were employing at that time. The following summer, he exceeded 80 metres for the first time in his career while placing second in the World Cup Trials, in Guadalajara, Mexico.

The next couple of seasons were very frustrating for John, due to a nagging elbow injury that wasn't diagnosed properly by a local orthopaedic specialist and, in two years from 1978, he only competed five times. Understandably, he began to question the point of continuing if there was no prospect of solving the elbow injury problem. Somehow, I learned of Dr Robert Galway, who was orthopaedic consultant to the Toronto Blue Jays, and his initial examination led to minor surgery to excise a bone spur that had been the cause of John's intense pain during the violent release of the javelin.

Now cleared to resume training, and with the support of his wife, John quit his job and committed to training twice a day to try and compensate for all the preparation he had missed during the fall and early winter. He was on his way back from a spring warm-weather training camp when he learned that Canada had joined the US boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. Not being allowed to compete in Moscow was particularly cruel to track and field athletes, given that the World Championships didn't exist until 1983 in Helsinki. However, the Canadian government did provide our Olympic team members with financial support to compete in the so-called "Olympic alternative" competitions in Düsseldorf, London, Oslo and Paris and, in these events, John showed his competitive abilities in spectacular fashion by improving his personal best three times to 84.34 and winning two silver medals and a bronze along the way! His

throw of 84.34 was exactly the same distance thrown by the Finn, Pentti Sinersaari, who placed sixth in Moscow.

In 1980, John had achieved 17.50 metres in the five double-leg bounds from a standing position field test, which was his best result ever. Some twenty years later, when Finnish Head Javelin Coach, Kari Ihalainen, provided me with a set of testing norms for javelin throwers which gave a predicted throwing distance based on sprinting speed, jumping ability or distance achieved with various throwing implements, I became curious to know how John's result of 17.50 would fare in terms of his predicted throwing distance. The Finnish norms for this test showed that a 95 metre javelin thrower should be able to jump 16.80 metres or, conversely, if you can jump 16.80 metres, you have the capability of throwing 95 metres. In other words, John's 17.50 metres result is right off the chart, both literally and figuratively!

In three years, John had competed in less than twenty meets and, had he not retired in that Olympic year at the age of 26, one can only imagine how far he might have thrown.

Q: Who has been your greatest influence, as a coach?

Jorma Kinnunen was my hero as a javelin thrower and he influenced me in the initial stages of coaching as well as in the final stages of my career as an athlete. His "hell for leather" style of throwing conveyed an attitude towards the event that I believe is necessary in order to get everything out of the athlete on the day of the competition. With his rather small stature of around 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighing 175 pounds, it somehow did not make sense for him to have broken the world record at 92.70 in 1970 in Tampere, Finland, but he did. His nickname in Finnish is 'Pikkujattilainen' or 'Little Giant', which he certainly was. He had attitude, technique, speed and a great spirit that willed the javelin to fly far.

In fact, the strongest throw I ever saw was Jorma's 5th round throw in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City in which he totally missed the point, causing the javelin to stall badly and lose its initial high velocity very quickly. This spelled disaster with the old aerodynamic javelins of the day, yet it somehow flew to 85.82 metres and clearly would have been a World Record had he hit the point. His coach Mikko Paananen told me that not only did the point rise way too high to cause the stall but from his vantage point from behind the thrower, the javelin also travelled initially to the right of the sector and finally landed close to the left line. Jorma then produced an effort of 88.58 metres in the sixth round that vaulted him into first place until Janis Lysis' final throw of 90.10 which took the gold medal and left Jorma with silver. Jorma's throw of 88.58 metres was a PB and Finnish record at the time.

On my first visit to Finland in August of 1970, I had the extreme good luck to be

taken by a policeman to the same residence where athletes from 6 nations were being housed prior to the European Cup Semi-final meeting which was occurring over the following two days. When I renewed my acquaintance after breakfast with Jorma, who was team captain for this international competition, he asked me what I was doing in Finland and upon hearing my response told me "When the meet is over tomorrow, come with me to my home and I will teach you how to throw the javelin." For the next 10 days I lived with Jorma and his family in Aankoski, including his later to be world champion son Kimmo who was 2 years old at the time. I went back for a visit 3 years later and by this time, Jorma was teaching Kimmo how to throw sticks of different shapes and sizes and giving the then 5 year-old hell because he was not yelling (as his father had done) on each and every throw! Kimmo went on to set incredible age class records with the 400 gram javelin, including 44.90 metres at the age of nine, 49.84 at ten, and 61.86 as a twelve year old! These results demonstrate to me the fundamental importance of technical training and good teaching of basic skills between the ages of 5 and 10.

Q: Given, then, that Jorma was a comparatively small athlete who had great success, how would you describe the ideal physique of an elite javelin thrower?

I have a current real life example of this in the person of Scott Russell who, in 2005, broke the Canadian record with a throw of 84.41 metres in Ottawa. Scott, who is in his mid-twenties, is 6 feet 9 inches tall and is very athletic. Once he learns how to throw properly he has all the potential to throw well over 90 metres, as does Tero Pitkamaki of Finland, who has already passed the 90m mark several times.

All things equal, (although, of course, they seldom are) the bigger and stronger the athlete, the better...BUT, you have to be an ATHLETE first and foremost.

Q: You said earlier that you regard the javelin as arguably the most explosive of all athletics events. Could you give an example of what makes it so explosive?

Yes. A world-class throw of around 90 metres in men's javelin requires the athlete to convert his incoming running speed of about 5-6 metres per second to produce a javelin release velocity of around 30 metres per second after the left foot touches the ground on the throwing stride, between right and left for a right-handed thrower. The active distance to pull on the javelin is probably less than two metres and this action occurs in approximately 0.15 seconds. That's what makes it such an explosive event!

Q: What advice would you give to a less experienced coach who came to you seeking the benefit of your experience?

The best thing a novice coach could do is try to hook up with a more experienced coach to act formally or otherwise as mentor coach. The best way to learn is not simply by reading or attending lectures but by actually doing the tasks involved in quality coaching and, over time, becoming competent in doing them. Having the opportunity to learn from someone on the field and in the gym is the best way for this to occur.

The coach is an educator who should try to make the athletes as independent as they can possibly be for it is they who are on the field during the competition and they need to be able to draw from the resources that they have come to 'own' through their hard work and dedication to mastering the event and developing a better understanding of self.

Learning to throw the javelin and learning how to teach it effectively can be a lifelong pursuit and it really fascinates me that even after so many years of involvement, there are always new things to learn and to use in helping the next athlete or group of athletes under your direction. A healthy thirst for pursuing such knowledge and gaining valuable experience over the long term is probably a prerequisite for success.

Q: What should a talented and ambitious athlete look for in a coach?

Here in Canada, in the javelin event, someone with a pulse and a pinch of interest and knowledge would be a good start. That's part of the reason I coach as well, for to find someone else who wishes to learn how to coach and have fun in the process is really exciting to me. The coach as well as the athlete has to have a thirst for learning and continued learning about the event as well as about themselves. Also, it has to be fun. If it is not, it is probably not worth doing.

Q: What do you regard as your greatest achievement, in coaching terms?

Just being around for as long as I have, which is about 35 years up to now, is probably the biggest achievement given the obscure nature of the event and the lack of recognition for it and the work that one does as a volunteer, which actually costs quite a bit of money.

My wife and children have been very supportive of this hobby of mine and most of the athletes I have coached remain close family friends, many now with their children. As such, javelin has been the vehicle for something actually bigger and more important and sustaining than just sport. There is still a lot of good work to be done and now that Ottawa has been blessed with the first and only 400 metre Mondo track covered by a dome structure, we will finally be able to offer a program that could be extremely exciting.

Q: And your biggest disappointment?

The retirement of John Corazza at age 26 when on the verge of becoming a truly world class athlete was a great disappointment, probably more so with the benefit of hindsight and the full realization of his unparalleled talent. Also disappointing are the relatively infrequent instances when an athlete with already good throwing results despite poor technical execution relocates to Ottawa and I have not been able to help them progress. A case in point was Sandy Taylor who was Canada Games champion from Nova Scotia who really did not know how to throw technically well but who still had a personal best of some 52 metres. I was convinced that she could get up to at least 55 metres but for what ever reason, my coaching interventions were not able to help her.

Q: Would you say there is a difference between the motivation that drives you as a coach and that which you experienced as an athlete?

There are big differences here. As an athlete you want to be as good as possible but as a coach you want the athletes to be as good as they can be. Every athlete you coach is different in terms of their talent and dedication to succeed and you can see what their potential is from your perspective. On occasion you will be surprised by overachievement or underachievement by the athlete but the main goal as a coach is for them to have had a positive experience at the end of the day and this does not necessarily include winning medals in the Olympic Games or World Championships - in fact, very few ever achieve such lofty goals.

At the end of the day, the athletes' involvement has to be seen by themselves and by the coach as having been a net positive experience. And that is all.

Q: Finally, Bill, how would you wish to be remembered by the throwing fraternity?

Simply as a javelin man, both as an athlete and as a coach and teacher.

Published in The Coach (Summer, 34) July 2006