

HISTORIC EVENTS OF THE ATHLETIC CLUB ISKU

By: P. Voutilainen

Since the activities of Isku stem from the earliest times, it is probably appropriate to first recount its early stages and the social circumstances which caused its birth.

Also, the activities of the Isku have become central here in Western Ontario or the Lakehead area among Finnish athletic clubs of which there were 13 under the association in its heyday.

The actual great influx of Finns into Canada began at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. There are yet persons in Port Arthur who arrived at the end of the last century who say some Finns were already here at the time.

Although I cannot give more accurate details about the coming of the Finns to Canada or Port Arthur, I will give here several of the recollections I have heard from veterans.

The first organization established here by Finns was a temperance society, which was established in 1901 or 1902. Such an organization was found necessary because earlier there was nothing in the area but the church and the saloon.

The society had a small hall on Wilson Street, where Eatons garage was later located. At that time more immigrants began arriving from Finland, including cultural and workers organization supporters. As "godless people" were not welcome in the temperance society it was necessary to found a new organization, which was called Imatra club. It joined the Imatra league which had clubs in various parts of Canada and a headquarters in Sudbury.

The Imatra club was established on June 24, 1903. Its activity centre was situated on Dufferin Street and was known as "Torppa". The club recognized socialist ideals.

In affiliation with this organization Port Arthur's first athletic organization, "Jyry" was formed. There had been athletic activities earlier at the Wilson Street Hall and Jussi Aarnio was the first athletic director there. Heikki Roine and Hugo Karenius acted as the first directors for Jyry.

The facilities became crowded quickly and in 1909 a land lot was purchased and the construction of the current Labour Temple, built with the united energy of Port Arthur's Finns, was completed in 1910. On March 17 the opening night play "Devil's Church" was presented.

In 1911 the Imatra league ended its activities and was replaced by the Finnish Socialist Organization, which had its headquarters in Toronto.

The Imatra Club and Jyry's Activities continued uninterrupted until the year 1919.

The situation following the First World War caused a rift among Port Arthur Finns. At that time a supporting organization of the I.W.W. league was established here, in March 1920, and it gained possession of the Labour Temple. This rift brought about the termination of activities of the athletic club Jyry. In the same year the I.W.W. supporting organization's athletic club "Nahjus" was established in which A. Ojatuli was director over ten years.

About the same time the socialist club, now known as the Finnish Organization of Canada, purchased as its centre a building

next to the Labour Temple which is now called the "Little Hall". In 1924 there was established, in connection with the Finnish Organization, the athletic club Isku which today belongs to the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation.

Before this division men and women were active in different sections. Participation was lively, gymnastics in winter and athletics in the summer. The period after the rift was a lull period. After the Finnish civil war active members and athletes of the Finnish workers movement came to this area in noticeable numbers. There naturally emerged a new interest in sports. Thus, gymnastics, skiing, track and field, and even boxing were on-going. Here, and through-out Canada, this was a time when Finnish sports rose in prominence and Finns also showed the way for Canada's other language groups, which became involved in track and field sports and also skiing.

Thus as the participation increased, Port Arthur's Isku and Fort William's Karhu were the first clubs here to join the Finnish workers sports league established at Creighton Mine, March 21, 1925. As new clubs were established around Port Arthur they joined the aforementioned league and there were thirteen of these clubs - it was truly the time of ascendancy for sports hereabouts.

A recollected noteworthy sports promoter was Heikki Roine and later, in 1927, a young man from Pori, Yrjö Saivo arrived in Port Arthur, who, despite his youth was a capable artistic gymnast and in 1928 on the recommendation of Isku he was chosen as the women's gymnastics coach and later he also became the men's. In 1928 - 29 Saivo received additional training from the Finnish Workers Sports League adoptee, Yrjö Ahtio who gave gymnastic training in different parts of Canada and Saivo later gave four

courses in this area. He has been continually active and as late as 1952 he directed mixed gymnastics at the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation festival in Port Arthur. He is still active and takes part in both dramatic and choir events.

Again followed a new era and this was called "Bennet's era of prosperity". It was actually an era of unemployment. Work was totally unavailable. This resulted among the Finns in the "Karelian fever". Isku also lost participant strength as result of this. The Finnish organization purchased from one departee to Karelia (in East Finland) an area of land four miles from the Port Arthur boundary along the North Branch river in 1930, which was named Red Park. Currently it is known as Isku Park (or "puisto").

Unemployment increased and the jobless men gathered increasingly together into "jungles", as these groups of unemployed were called. They were able to pass the summer months by the North Branch River and in the winter they slept in "sisters bed" at the hall. There was plenty of time and part of it was spent in bumming, in cleaning the park, in sports and trips were even made to participate in events in Toronto by "beating". Thus Red Park developed to be pleasant and memory filled although hunger and despair for the future haunted many. This did not discourage them but they grasped the spirit of sport.

They organized races and practiced daily because there was time and it is recalled that in 1931 at Isku's national track and field competitions, in the men's pentathalon event alone 62 athletes participated, in addition to which were the youth and women's events. Also in the B-class championship competitions at Red Park there was strong participation.

Winter was spent on the ski trails, as well as in gymnastics and wrestling, in which participation was always good. Visitors frequently took part from other areas, as far as Toronto. Also our athletes travelled outside their own area. Travelling in winter was done by freight train, and therefore it was not expensive. Cold and hunger were frequently suffered en route, but it failed to waive the enthusiasm.

Mass immigration to Soviet Karelia also affected the sports - life in Western Ontario. Among those who emigrated were many central sports figures. When, for example, Oiva Maunu of Tarmola's "Väkevä" left for Karelia, the clubs' activities began to wane and the organization shortly died. Isku also lost many central figures among those who moved to Karelia. The vast driving forces of Isku, however, went to the Spanish Civil War, for example Yrjö Kyyny, Ilmari Sippola, Matti Rasmus, and many others. Yrjö and Ilmari found their rest in the Spanish soil and a part of those who returned are in other places. Isku began to suffer from lack of blood and fell asleep entirely when during the Second World War a padlock appeared on the hall door. A similar wave of paralysis has travelled from club to club.

Isku's preceeding epoch had left a good trail and developed many good athletes. The most remarkable of Isku's athletes was Jussi Niemi. He began on the Red Park field and developed his conditioning in a short period, becoming in his time a decathlon and a long-time shot-put champion. Kalle Kaarela earned championships especially in the 21 years class, and later achieved the 55 in. mark in the javelin throw, which, however, due to the carelessness of an official was not noted as a record for that time. T. Ponsen was amongst us in his time, a many-sided athlete, a

combined event competitor, a competent middle and short distance runner, and also among the best wrestlers in his class.

After the Second World War Isku was revived once more and the founding meeting was held May 6, 1946. At the meeting 17 persons were present and all joined as members. The former name of Isku was adopted and it was decided to join the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation. A five-man board of directors was chosen with Sam Pukkala as ^{ha} chairman and Laila Pennanen as secretary. The club entered into brisk activity and as early as June of the same year a gymnastics course was organized under the coaching of Jack Hylander. And thus Isku has since been continually active and Sam Pukkala deserves much of the credit since he has always given his helping hand to club affairs and continuously held the position of chairman. Later on Ahti West-erback, Salme Pitkänen (now Mrs. Salme Westerback), Kalevi Juvonen and many others would be worthy of mention but that would take column space. These unseen helpers merit everyone's thanks.

The next noteworthy happening for Isku was the assigned responsibility for organization of the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation's annual festival in October of 1952. By then the name of Red park had been changed and now it is well known by the name of Isku Park. At this Federation festival the group gymnastics was directed by Yrjö Saivo who also gave other performances with the athletes.

Their programs continued and the members of Isku have always readily performed at diverse functions, participated in dramatic activities, and assisted the areas athletic activity. Isku has gained noteworthy support from people in the environs of Port Arthur.

Isku, at its meeting on August 9, 1954 wrote to the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation and submitted that Paavo Voutilainen become director of a gymnastics course and the matter was realized in the course held very successfully in October of the same year. And so Paavo, the undersigned, remained here. The whole of this time I have spent amongst gymnasts during summer and winter and the more advanced athletes have always given their assistance. Although our membership is not large Isku has done much praiseworthy work. Children living in the areas surrounding our hall have received gymnastic and athletic training which has given our organization the trust of our community. As can be seen from the preceeding it is not the fault of our group, but the fault of wars, be the wars of whatever kind such as the post-war Cold War which has one way or another effected the growth of our membership.

Accomplishments during the last ten years are difficult to account because there is no appropriate scale to measure them and not everything can be measured with a yardstick. At any rate during this time many youths have received many practice hours which have been helpful in starting their travels on this many curved road of life. Some have athletically risen to very high achievements.

Isku's adoptee Aili Kaarela attained an achievement for us in artistic gymnastics and performed to good advantage at the Canadian Gymnastic championships in Saskatoon. Her brother, Karl Kaarela, was our club's best high jumper and the Federation champion. He reached the height of 185 m. in 1964. Margit Hamäläinen has won some of our organization's best championships in throwing events. As coach she has directed our group hand in

hand with Aili in numerous grand festivals. Also the other language speaking July Ferguson, one of our federation's best, has won championships in short distance running and in jumping.

Also we received into Isku from Finland a foster child of the Workers Athletic League, Anja Havu (now Mrs. Saari) who had already competed in artistic gymnastics in Finland and was on the Workers Athletic League team. Anja gave a good stimulus to this women's new-style apparatus gymnastics. Therefore Isku was invited by the Kiwanis Club to appear at the annual Sportsmen's Show at the Fort William Gardens on four days, twice daily. Participating in this exhibition were Anja, Aili and 10 year old Linda Öström and Holly Ferguson. The girls performed to the delight of the audience on the bars and on the floor, the performance was seen by 27,000 paying viewers. This gave Isku external recognition and aroused interest in the community, so that in the spring of 1962 with the co-operation of Isku and the Port Arthur Board of Education a district wide gymnastic competition was held in which over 100 gymnasts participated, both boys and girls. When competitions are held on the Isku field each summer large numbers from other language groups have joined in.

Because the North Branch Elo club has always had close co-operation with Isku it was proposed by Elo that it should join Isku and this was accepted in the fall of 1964. By that time Alfred Widgren, the active operator of club Elo was elected as a chairman and also a new united board of directors.

Alf Widgren is one of the pupils of our club. He was a good athlete from the days of his youth and has always been known in various age class competitions until this day. Alfred is one of the best among the activators and now-a-days he is active with our local Canadian ski club, especially with cross-country skiing and he was sponsored by the ski club to take a part of the training course in Vancouver in 1963. On behalf of Isku I want to say many thanks for their devoted help over many years.

In recent years Kalle Kaarela (pop Kaarela) has still taken part on the ski tracks and in summer sports and he has inspired young people into sports.

We also have the late Antti Kari who was known as a writer. (Losojätkä.) He was one of the discoverors of Isku after World War II. He was an eager friend of young people and because of his good example we can say that in spite of an advanced age one can make progress in youth work when there is willingness and generosity.

So the veterans have done valuable work although it sometimes seems that the work has somehow gone with the wind, but that is not the case as it has stayed alive in every case.

When writing this kind of historical I must conclude by saying this is the way we have worked in past and the future will show what will come. In any case, there is no reason to be pessimistic because there is not yet excessive physio-culture and especially now when everything is turning so fast towards automation, people don't have that much opportunity to move about. Sports and plays will become necessary if we want to be healthy and improve the condition of the nation which will lead people to a better style of life. Therefore we will have greater need of clubs, built-