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Lahti International Ski City – the Development of Lahti City to Remarkable Ski Games Resort from 1920s to 1950s

The purpose of my lecture was to study and analyse how the Lahti City has developed to a remarkable Ski Games Resort from 1920s to 1950s. I am also interested in the impact of the Lahti Ski Games on Lahti City. **Lahti Ski Games (= Salpausselän kisat)** have started in Lahti town in 1923. It has been annual event ever since. The first **Nordic World Ski Championships** (= FIS Ski Congress, Rendez-vous races) were held in Lahti in 1926. Lahti City has been the most important centre of Nordic ski events in Finland. The most important winter sports events in Lahti have been the Nordic World Ski Championships 1926, 1938, 1958, 1978, 1989, 2001 and 2017. There have been held also Biathlon World Championships in 1981 and 1991 in Lahti.

Why Lahti?

Main Characteristics of Lahti – City of Industry and Sports

Lahti has been one of Finland's most prominent industrial towns in the 20th century. Carpentry and furniture industry have been important since the early part of the century but successful businesses on nation-wide scale were set up in metal industry, food processing and textiles as well. The vibrant industrial scene attracted a large workforce.

While famous in Finland for its business-friendly environment and modern impulses Lahti has not been fettered by long urban traditions. The town received city rights as late as 1905 and was long known as the youngest city in Finland. Other labels that have stuck are “melting pot of Finnish tribes” and “the most Americanized city in Finland”. After the Second World War Lahti received a new influx of people who were resettled from the territories ceded to the Soviet Union.¹

It was winter sports and a long wave radio station, which made Lahti well-known town in Finland, in Europe and in the world. Lahti City has grown quickly from a small township to Centre City. The population of Lahti grew fast: in 1905 there were 5 827 inhabitants and in 1960 population was 66 802 inhabitants.

Ski Game Spirit in Finland

Norwegians were the first to make a sport of skiing. Finns were not far behind Norwegians to arrange skiing competitions in the end of 19th century. The competitions were different from the ones in Norway because they were arranged on flat terrain and on ice. Finnish skiers had to learn new skills in order to compete on the international stage. Finland's first true “cross-country” skiing race in rough terrain took place in Kuopio in 1916. Training bore fruit in 1922, when Anton Collin became the first non-Norwegian winner of the 50-kilometre race at the Holmenkollen Games, with Tapani Niku finishing second.² Finland had just gained the independence in 1917. Sports and especially skiing became elementary part in building the Finnish identity and it became mainline national sport. Later ski jumping became also important sports especially in cities. Nordic disciplines cross-country skiing and

ski jumping were appreciated as important national sports also because those disciplines developed soldier skills.

The second Holmenkollen

In the early 1920s Finland was lacking a grand venue for international skiing such as Holmenkollen in Norway. Public supported keenly the idea to have own big international ski competition in Finland like Holmenkollen Ski Festival. In the aftermath of Finnish success at the 1922 Holmenkollen Games **Lauri Pihkala**, influential sports leader and journalist, suggested Lahti for such a place. Many things talked in Lahti's favor. The hilly terrain of Salpausselkä ridge and wooded nature was well suited for cross-country skiing. The town enjoyed an advantageous location within easy railway connections from other parts of the country and the capital city Helsinki. Winters around Lahti were longer and snowier than in major cities on the coast.

There were a few problems, however: the young town, founded only in 1905, did not yet have a ski club, a ski jump hill, a skiing arena or



Ski jumping in the first Nordic World Ski Championships organized in Lahti 1926.
Photo: Picture Archives of Lahti City Museum.

championship-level skiers, let alone ski jumpers. The first problem was solved on 3 April 1922, when Lahden Hiihtoseura (Lahti Ski Club), or LHS, was founded with heavy support from town hall and local business leaders.³ Lahti was in the 1920s small Finnish town but it has been also one of Finland's most prominent industrial towns in the 20th century. Lahti City took the huge responsibility and made big effort to make successful winter sports event.

Leaders in Business and in Sports

One of the most important resources behind the early growth and subsequent success of the Lahti Ski Games has been the active part played by several key figures of the Lahti business scene in the local ski club LHS and the organizing committees of the Games. Business executives contributed not only by their own leadership experience, connections and language skills but often also by providing financial support from their companies and workforce from their employees. Many of them also wielded political influence. City leaders, starting from mayor Otto Lyytikäinen back in 1923, have also understood the importance of the Ski Games to the national and international image and visibility of the city. The local press has likewise actively contributed to the success of the Games ever since the beginning.⁴

The most important figure at the start of the Lahti Ski Games was factory manager of carpentry enterprises and Lahti city councillor Juho Hillo. He served as the first Chairman of the Lahti Ski Club from 1922 to 1928 and was instrumental in founding of the Lahti Ski Games and building of the skiing stadium. When The Finnish Skiing Association was founded actually in 1931, Juho Hillo was elected its first President and served until 1937. In 1932 Hillo also became a board member of the International Skiing Federation FIS. He played a decisive role when FIS awarded the Rendez-vous races of 1926 and the World Championships of 1938 to Lahti.⁵

The Development of the Lahti Ski Games

The Beginning of the Lahti Ski Games

The first Lahti Ski Games took place in 1923. The aftermath of the Civil War of 1918 was still visible: until the end of the Second World War skiers representing the Workers' Sport Federation (TUL) were banned from participating. The paramilitary White Guard and its female support organization Lotta Svärd played an important part in organizing and catering for the Lahti Ski Games in the 1920s and the 1930s.⁶

No foreign competitors took part in the first three editions of the Lahti Ski Games. The Ski Games gained international attention in 1926 when they coupled as "Rendez-vous races" of the International Skiing Federation.⁷ They were posthumously awarded the status of World Championships in 1965.⁸ In addition to international competitions the program of the early Lahti Ski Games included national races, junior and veteran competitions and between 1927 and 1933 a 5-kilometre race for women.⁹

Established Ski Games in 1930s – The First Nordic Ski Worlds in Lahti

Lahti Ski Games confirmed their position as the most prestigious winter sports event in Finland in the 1930s. An evening ski jumping competition traditionally followed by fireworks was added into the program in 1934. In their first ten years the Ski Games had grown into a true popular festival. The number of visitors at the Lahti Ski Games kept growing in the 1930s. On Sundays the attendance fluctuated between 16 000 and 30 000. The number of participants peaked at 650 before the war.¹⁰

Finland and Lahti got the right to host the Nordic World Ski Championships in 1938. First official World Championships were held in Chamonix in 1937. The ski arena in Lahti was enlarged to an outdoor stadium with room for 60,000 people. Construction works on a new ski jumping hill with critical point of 62 m had already been started and were completed in December 1937. Special trains could bring tourists straight to a new station building erected next to the gate of the ski stadium. The total attendance at the 1938 Nordic World Ski Championships was more than 100 000, and the number of tickets sold was almost 60 000.¹¹ 74 foreign journalists present at the championships sent home

shining reports on the excellent facilities, organization and enthusiasm of the Finnish people, putting Lahti on the world map as the second capital of Nordic skiing.



The French poster of Nordic World Ski Championships in Lahti 1938. Designer: Hans Björklind. Photo: Lahti Poster Museum/Picture archives of Lahti City Museum.

Winds of Change in the 1940s

World of skiing quieted down for many years in wartime 1939–1944. During the Second World War the Lahti Ski Games were also cancelled twice, in 1940 and 1942. After the war the Ski Games changed in many ways. Women were taking part in the international competitions in Lahti Ski Games after 1947. National skiing races for women and veteran skiers were discontinued as side events of the Ski Games in 1934. Women's skiing made its comeback in 1947, by now as an official international competition. The first women's official major championship race took

place at the Olympic Winter Games of 1952 in Oslo. Skiers representing the Workers' Sport Federation (TUL) were allowed to participate in Lahti Ski Games in the end of the 1940s. Participating in the Games became equal to all Finnish skiers.¹²

The Golden Years of Nordic Skiing in the 1950s

The 1950s were golden years for Finnish skiing. Ski jumping and Nordic combined joined cross-country skiing as regular medal sports for Finland at major championships. In 1952 a total of 82,000 people witnessed Finnish athletes win all the competitions at the Lahti Ski Games.¹³ Ski jumping enjoyed a phenomenal boom in Lahti in the 1950s and has since remained a marquee sport in the town. Every boy seemed to want to join the legendary "red shirts" of the Lahti ski club LHS.¹⁴

The ski stadium was modernized by building new spectator stands, restaurant facilities and a radio commentators' booth. More parking space was built for motor vehicles, and the train station was moved even closer to the stadium gate. The ski jumping hill had been enlarged a few years earlier, and now allowed jumps of over 70 meters. After the improvements the ski stadium could easily accommodate more than 100 000 people.¹⁵ Foreign athletes and journalists, visitors from all parts of the country and schoolchildren enjoying a week's leave enlivened the town of Lahti during the championships to a degree never seen before. The Finnish public could not complain much about the success of their athletes either. Ski jumping in particular had conquered a place in the hearts of Finnish sports fans. Bright future was predicted for Finland in that sport. The World Championships of 1958 ended in ample praise for the organizers but the competitions were not a financial success.¹⁶

Impact of the the Lahti Ski Games

Financial Benefits of the Lahti Ski Games

There was a lot of local industry combined with winter sport, for instance, Esko Järvinen Ltd ski factory, shoe and boot factory of Mononen (well-known of its skiing boots) and later Luhta factory which began to produce winter sports and outdoor clothes. The Lahti Ski Games



Lahti Ski Game spirit and ski stadium in 1957. Photographer: Erkki Halme.
Photo: Picture archives of Lahti City Museum.

and the Nordic World Ski Championships boosted to the economy of Lahti City. It has cost a lot to build the Ski Stadium again and again, but also the competitions have brought currency to companies and by tax paying to Lahti City. The Lahti Ski Games and the Nordic World Ski Championships were usually financially successful but not always to the organizers.

Social and Cultural Impact of the Lahti Ski Games

Lahti is known of winter sports and the Lahti Ski Games, they are the brands of Lahti. Lahti City has succeeded in building functional winter sports facilities for athletes but they has been useful also to the Lahti inhabitants. Lahti became more international city with the Ski Games

than without. The Games and its happenings were good meeting point for especially young people and place for many kind of novelties. Taking part and working as a ski game official in the Lahti Ski Games was an important tradition in Lahti.

Elements of the Successful Ski City

It is interesting to study which are the meanings and impacts of the Ski Games on Lahti and what kind of growth and development happened in Lahti. There are many interesting impact, for example, the social, cultural, financial and environmental transformations. Sports Centre with its great ski jumping hill and large forest area with ski tracks for skiers has shaped much to the landscape and the scenery of Lahti. Lahti became much more international city with the Ski Games than without them. The Ski Games, set up in such a short time in the 1920s, contributed by making sports an important factor in local identity.

Lahti Ski Games was considered a matter of honour for all people of the city. The organisation of the annual Ski Games and World Ski Championships would not have been possible without active support from city administration and business companies of Lahti. Co-operation with the local media was also important. Lahti Ski Games are a window for the city and people of Lahti to the outside world. The international elite of Nordic skiing has gathered in Lahti every year around the turn of February and March since the 1920s. The Games have become a show of force for the city and business life of Lahti. Winter sport is the brand why Lahti City is known. The positive sides are in the majority in the Lahti Ski Games and the Nordic World Ski Championships and that is why Lahti City and the Lahti Ski Club will be proud hosts to the Games also in future.

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