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Urho Kekkonen – The Skiing President

When Urho Kaleva Kekkonen (1900–1986, in office 1956–1981) was campaigning to become the President of Finland in the early 1950s, he was known, among other things, as a former high jumper having won the Finnish Championship in 1924. But after he won the presidential elections in 1956, he became known as the "Skiing President". In this article I discuss the change in the image of Kekkonen from high jumper to skier. Furthermore, I describe the nature of Kekkonen's skiing, and discuss the meaning of cross country skiing to President Kekkonen.

Finland gained independence in 1917. The young nation tried to find international approval and status in the field of sports, especially in long distance running in the 1920s and the 1930s. There was also a strong tendency to mobilize the whole nation in the name of national defence. And even some of the Presidents of the young republic were sportsmen. P.E. Svinhufvud (in office 1931–1937) was a skilled shooter with rifle, and C.G.E. Mannerheim (in office 1944–1946) was an expert in horseback riding.

Urho Kekkonen served as the President of Finland for an exceptionally long period, in 1956–1981. In Finland the presidential term is six years. In 1973 Kekkonen refused to take part in a the next presidential campaign,

so the Parliament regulated an extension, an emergency law, to continue his presidential term still four more years without an election in 1974. This shows clearly the strong status of Kekkonen, as he was considered irreplaceable. And in 1978 all the main political parties asked Kekkonen if he would continue in the office, so he was elected for yet another six year term as the President, without participating in any television debates with his weak and this way also humiliated competitors.

However, there did remain also some political challengers to Kekkonen but he stuck so strongly to power that the rivals looked powerless and without any real chance in their faint pursuits. Kekkonen was the master mind of Finnish foreign policy. He continued the active neutrality policy adopted by his predecessor President J.K. Paasikivi. Kekkonen had an inborne ability in branding himself, and soon the Finnish neutrality policy was called with a special name, "Paasikivi-Kekkonen line". In the 1970s there was a common belief in Finland that no one else could deal with the Soviet leaders the way Kekkonen did.

There is a lot of historical research done on Kekkonen. Foreign Affairs Councillor Juhani Suomi has been treated like an official biographer of Kekkonen, focusing mainly on the political history of the "Kekkonen era". Suomi, Dr., has written the biography of Urho Kekkonen in eight volumes. He has also edited the diaries of Kekkonen, which came out in four volumes. Another historian Ari Uino has also edited and written several books about Kekkonen, but more as a human being, and also as a sportsman, not just as the President of the republic.

However, there are surprisingly few research articles on Kekkonen in English. The images of Kekkonen as a fisherman have been studied by Tuomas Kuronen, an active practitioner of fishing himself. Kuronen and Jouni Virtaharju study leadership using anthropological and visual methodological viewpoints, starting from Lévi-Strauss' association of ritual and mythology.¹ In an essay in *Management & Organizational History* Kuronen complements the methodological practice of organizational discourse studies.² He calls his approach 'visual archeology'. In yet another article with Aki-Mauri Huhtinen Kuronen studies the emergence and institutionalization of political leadership.³ In the photographs studied in these three academic articles one can see the development of the representation of Kekkonen's leadership. In a popular article in



When Urho Kekkonen won the presidential elections in 1956 he made a long skiing trip to Kainuu in the Middle of Finland. He went to school in that area as a youngster. Photo: The Archives of President Urho Kekkonen.

a politically active weekly magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* Kuronen discusses the same phenomenon. A skilled fisherman is important for his village, his society, and he is also a strong political leader.⁴

This article is based in my presentation in the international Ski-Congress in Jyväskylä, Finland on 1st of March, 2017. The Congress was held at the time of the World Championships in Nordic skiing in Lahti, Finland. I did receive major help in making my presentation from Pekka Lähteenkorva, the director of the Archives of Urho Kekkonen. Those archives consist of records donated by President Urho Kekkonen and several smaller collections of records from close associates of Kekkonen. Urho Kekkonen founded the archives in 1970. In 1995 the archives were opened to researchers and public. The archives are located in a small town of Orimattila, in the village of Niinikoski.

I must also thank the kindness of journalist and author Maarit Tyrkkö, who was a trusted friend of President Kekkonen in the latter part of 1970s up to 1981. She did a lot of recordings of Kekkonen's conversations, and she was also the sub-editor of many of Kekkonen's books.

She has given me access to those invaluable recordings, in which Kekkonen tells about sport and specially skiing.

I think Kekkonen was able to create an almost mythical image of himself accidentally. He could not have thought as a young athlete that jumping higher than anyone else would advance his later political career. He was just enjoying the sport. And he could not think that making 30–50 km skiing trips as a President would make him look like a tireless and an ageless super figure. He was just enjoying the sport. But somehow the image of Kekkonen took advantage of this love of sports.

In 1981, after serving as the President for a quarter of a century, Kekkonen started to have more and more symptoms of arteriosclerosis disease. He had some balance and memory disorders, of which the latter one gave him some trouble occasionally already in the first half of the 1970s, as we have later learned. He made his last skiing trip to Saariselkä in the Easter time in 1981. Kekkonen visited the brand new Kiilopää centre but this time skiing was not any more his main pleasure as he needed the ride of a snowmobile quite often.

Kekkonen made his last fishing trip to Iceland in August 1981. Journalists were not allowed to follow Kekkonen to the river. Instead, they were entertained a couple of kilometres away from the actual scene. Reports of the "obtained fish" were mediated by the President's adjutant Lasse Wächter by phone.

This was Kekkonen's swan song, last visit abroad, and his last public act as President of the republic. Back home he was ordered almost immediately for a sick leave, and later the same Autumn he signed his resignation.

As a courtesy from the Finnish nation, Mr. Kekkonen was allowed to stay in his presidential home Tamminiemi. The former castle of power changed into a private nursing home. Kekkonen lived there quietly and isolated for the rest of his life, until he passed away in 1986. He did not give any more interviews after his tragic camouflage fishing trip to Iceland.

Presidential heritage: 44 pairs of skis

There are altogether 44 pairs of cross country skis in the National Museum of Finland from the estate of the late Urho Kekkonen. The historians have written massive volumes of Kekkonen's political career but

none has paid attention to this extraordinary collection before. Most of skis belonged to Mr. President himself, some of them were gifts that were never used, like the pair of skis from the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. A couple of pairs belonged to President's son and grand daughter.

But still this amount of cross country skis make a revealing testimony of the values of Urho Kekkonen. He was a person who loved outdoor life. For him skiing was the best way to cope with the stress from his work as the head of state. Kekkonen did also love fishing, and he did take part in the hunting trips to chase elks, wild boars, rabbits and wildfowl.

Kekkonen did say that when he was skiing, he did not think of any particular topics. And yet it was possible that he could unconsciously solve problems while skiing.⁵ We can think that Kekkonen used sauna for the same purpose as he was a big favourite of Finnish sauna.

Kekkonen was born in 1900 in a small village in the Central Finland. During that time Finland was the Grand Duchy under the hard rule of the Russian Tsar. As a school boy Kekkonen lived in a small rural town of Kajaani, situated almost 600 km from Helsinki. There it was just natural that people used skis during winter time if they had to go to different places like school or fishing or hunting.

This was the heritage that Kekkonen acquired. He was competitive by nature, so soon he took part in local competitions. When he was 11 years old, he found his name printed in the local newspaper after a successful skiing competition. This was very encouraging and during the summer he took part also in running, jumping and throwing competitions.⁶ During winter time skiing was a sport but it was also great fun and a way of moving from one place to another.

Finnish territory was lucky to stay out of the battles of the World War I. Finnish own army units were abolished at that time. But there were almost 2000 Finnish men who were secretly recruited to the German army. For the Finns, this was a way of getting military training of a Jaeger, light infantryman. The dream was to get eventually rid of the Russian rule with these trained soldiers.

In 1917 the Russian Revolution dismantled the Tsarist autocracy and led gradually to the rise of Soviet Union. For the Finns, these were inspirational times. The dawn of independence was getting closer and closer. 17-year-old Kekkonen was one of the youngsters who were ready

to leave their home and travel to Germany in order to get military training. But just when he was about to leave in December 1917, there came a secret message that no more youngsters were recruited. Those, who were in Germany, started to plan for their homecoming. They became the core of the the White Army in January 1918.

What followed was a bitter Civil War between the Whites, and the workers, the Reds. Urho Kekkonen took part in the fighting in the White Army. Some of those military manouvers, like scouting, in which Kekkonen participated, were done on skis.

Although Kekkonen was on the winning side, the experience of war was very traumatic for him. He was only 17 year old and lacked military training. But he was used to physical strain as he had already done log floating and lumbering to earn some money to cover his school expenses. Kekkonen was a talented writer and he did write quite a lot to the local newspaper called *Kajaanin Lehti* about his war experiences, sports and other things.

In Kekkonen's ski collection in the National Museum there is a pair of very old skis, which could remain from those strenuous days of the Civil War. The length of the skis is three meters, typical for that time. And the width of one ski is 7 cm, as the skier had to be able to go skiing in the forest in deep snow without a trail.

The change from a high jumper to a skier

In 1922 Kekkonen had already moved to the southern capital Helsinki as he was studying law. He continued writing to newspapers, and in one of his most spirited articles he emphasised the meaning of skiing for all those people who were participating in the municipal policy-making.⁷

When Kekkonen had become Prime Minister in the early 1950s, they made a short film in which Kekkonen is skiing towards his office, then he takes off the skis, does some paper work, and leaves soon after to take his skis once more. Here he was proving that he lived the way he had preached already in 1922.

I wonder why Kekkonen wanted to take skiing as his closest sport during his presidential years? Kekkonen had served for two decades as the chairman of the Finnish Athletics Federation. But there was some

controversy during his presidential campaign. A very close friend of Kekkonen Kalle Kaihari, commercial counselor, had gathered a list of names of famous sportsmen who supported Kekkonen. When Kaihari gave the names to a newspaper advertisement supporting Kekkonen's campaign, some of the sportsmen withdrew or protested, as they were not asked if their names could be published. Soon after there was another incident, when the Finnish right wing sportsleaders did protest Kekkonen by trying to kick his friends from their key positions in the national sports federations.

Fair enough, thought Kekkonen after his temper had cooled down. And then he went skiing. Of course, I can not argue that skiing was any kind of a reaction from Kekkonen at this particular point. But when he was skiing, he was not in the political playground, and he was not talking sports politics either. Instead, he enjoyed the slow tempo of cross country skiing and let his mind travel where ever it might go. This was very relaxing, like meditation for him.

In 1970 Kekkonen wrote an article under a pseudonym "Liimatainen" where he described that skiing is the national sport of Finland, but track&field is a matter of the heart.⁸

Kekkonen was a man of the people. And skiing was a way of getting to a close contact with ordinary people. When he went to see athletics meets, like Finnish Championships, he was surrounded by sports leaders, the elite. But when Kekkonen went skiing, there was always a possibility to meet just common people.

Skiing and Foreign Politics

Heikki Roiko-Jokela, Ph.D., concludes⁹, that Kekkonen used sports as a vehicle in rebuilding his Estonian relationships after Second World War. I believe that President Kekkonen, as an old sportsman and Estophile, was well aware of the possibilities of sports in this matter. He did soon realize that cross country skiing can be more than a hobby, even part of his foreign policy.

In 1961 Kekkonen and Olav V, the King of Norway, did make a nice skiing trip on the tracks of Holmenkollen. Kekkonen wanted to go on af-

ter 10 kilometres, but the Holmenkollen Games were about to start, so Mr. President and the King had to step aside. Kekkonen had been President for five years but he hadn't been to the USA yet. As Norway had close ties with the USA, the presidential ski trip was soon part of the news also in America. Later that year Kekkonen did make his first American visit as a President.

It may be too audacious a conclusion to say that Kekkonen did the skiing with the Norwegian King in order to prepare for his visit with President John F. Kennedy. But I would not count this possibility out. In the late 1950s Kekkonen had stabilized the Finnish-Soviet relationship, but the Western relationship needed yet to be rebuilt.

The previous time Kekkonen visited USA was in the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1932. At that time he was the leader of the Finnish track&field team.

In 1964 Kekkonen made an official state visit to Poland. During the visit he did some cross country skiing in Zakopane. On the way home he made an interesting unofficial stop in Estonia, which was under Soviet occupation at that time. This meant that Kekkonen had asked the permission from Moscow to make this unofficial stop. As the permission was finally granted Kekkonen became the first Western head of state to visit Estonia after the World War. And Kekkonen did also cross country skiing in Estonia. There is a funny story, that Kekkonen was such a good skier that the KGB security could not keep up with his pace.

The most interesting part of Kekkonen's skiing is still his skiing in the Finnish Lapland. Gradually those trips became a trademark for Kekkonen. He went to Lapland and took his entourage of Finnish Generals, journalists, and CEOs of major companies to the wilderness. The entourage was joined by local border Jaeger units, as many of those skiing trips were made close to the national border. Without much attention, between the lines, the question of national security and zero tolerance in relation to border violations were underlined during these remote skiing trips. And also, someone had to make the skiing track for the presidential entourage.

For an outside observer those skiing trips to Lapland may have looked as if the leader of the pack was marking the territory of his land. Lapland has always been only sparsely populated. From time to time there have been questions whether this remote area can be properly con-

tolled and protected by the Finnish Army. For Kekkonen, Lappland was holy land, wilderness, where he could enjoy his physical ability compared to his dear quests. And also, one of Kekkonen's best friends, Kaarlo Hillilä, was the Governor of Lappland. As Kekkonen did not have so much to do with Hillilä as a President, he took care that he could stay in live contact through these skiing trips until Hillilä passed away in 1965.

Promoter of Finnish ski industry

After the Second World War there were more than 30 ski factories in Finland. Most of them were quite small, but as there was plenty of raw material in the forest for skis, some of the farmers in the countryside used the long winter months making skis. Those who could afford to invest in mechanization, grew bigger. In 1950, there remained only 10 ski factories. The amount of people manufacturing the skis halved, so that only 314 could be registered in the field of ski manufacturing.¹⁰

There is an interesting detail explaining why the big ski manufacturers grew bigger. Military compensation industry played key role in the growth of the Finnish ship manufacturing industry after the War. There was also at least one big order for the ski manufacturing. The deal in 1953 secured that Finland manufactured 8000 pairs of skis to the Soviet Union.¹¹ This deal was closed while Kekkonen was Prime Minister.

One way of marketing one's ski making ability was giving premium skis to dignitaries. For example, Juho Jaakonaho from Haapajärvi was a former Olympic bicycle racer. He was an able craftsman and a pair of skis that he made in the 1930s were given to President Kyösti Kallio. In 1939 cross country skier Jussi Kurikkala gained third prize in the Holmenkollen Games with skis made by Jaakonaho.¹²

In January 1954 former Prime Minister Urho Kekkonen received also a pair of skis from Jaakonaho, who was 71 years of age at the time. Those skis were still quite long, 224,50 cm, in relation to today's standard but completely in accordance with the old tradition. And the width of one ski was still prominent, 6,5 cm.

There was certainly some marketing value for a local manufacturer if he could tell that the President received with pleasure the new skis.

As already mentioned, Kekkonen did write quite a lot, so he did write quite a few letters too, in order to say thank you for the donors. At the time Järvinen had become the leading ski factory. In the World Championships in Falun 1954 all the medalists used skis made by Järvinen.¹³

At the same time Lampinen ski factory became a strong competitor to Järvinen factory. When Kekkonen made his first skiing trip as president to Lappland in March 1956, there emerged a question of proper skis. In October a well-known hunter and gamekeeper Tauno V. Mäki wrote a letter to Kekkonen telling that director Rainer Lampinen promised to make such skis that could be useful in Lappland. He would use glue to attach hickory-edge to the ordinary skis.¹⁴ And early in 1957 President Kekkonen did receive a pair of skis with hickory edge from Lampinen ski factory.

In the 1960s the craftsmen of the area of wooden skis had become old, and the manufacturing of those modern, and lighter, slate skis was done in the bigger factories. When Kekkonen received a pair of wooden skis from Kajaani area in 1961, he sent a warm thank you note to Fredrik Heikkinen, who could still produce old fashioned pair of skis.¹⁵ For Kekkonen, this way of paying respect was genuine as he did highly respect the old ski maker. And this was also politics, because Kekkonen had his strongest supporters in the country side.

Kekkonen liked to use Järvinen-skis in the early 1970s, when he still trusted the wooden and slate skis. But when he changed to plastic skis after the death of manufacturer and commercial Councilor Esko Järvinen in 1976, he used more often skis made by Karhu, another famous Finnish ski trade mark.

We can say that Kekkonen played a role in the marketing of skis, since there was hardly any better marketing agent than the President. If he was pleased with the skis, and if he used them, there could not have been any better advertizing campaign than the word-of-mouth "campaign" by the presidential entourage.

For Kekkonen, skiing in Lappland and in Central Finland, meeting people who lived in remote villages was best politics for the next elections. Furthermore, Kekkonen did create a superman image of himself as his skiing trips were quite long, and he was usually the first man on the trail. The other skiers found their places in the line of the skiers, after Kekkonen.



President Urho Kekkonen visited Estonia in 1964 and did some cross country skiing in the Kääriku area near Tartu. Photo: The Archives of Urho Kekkonen.

Skiing for health

Finally, it is time to study the quantity of skiing and discuss the meaning of skiing for Kekkonen's health. Luckily Kekkonen wrote down the kilometres that he covered. Already in the 1960s he did ski around one thousand kilometres a winter.

Here is a listing of annual skiing kilometres of Kekkonen from mid-1960s to mid-1970s:¹⁶

1966–1967	1010 km
1967–1968	930 km
1968–1969	1040 km
1969–1970	680 km
1970–1971	620 km
1971–1972	750 km
1972–1973	740 km
1973–1974	980 km
1974–1975	1027 km

When Sylvi Kekkonen, the spouse of Urho, died in 1974, Kekkonen filled the empty time with skiing. At that time he had found a nice hide-away place in doctor Sotamaa's home near Jyväskylä. He did not have to travel 1000 kilometres to Lapland, as he could find excellent ski tracks in the Middle of Finland.

In the mid-1970s, Kekkonen gave valuable support in creating of the Peurunka rehabilitation centre close to doctor Sotamaa's home. As a result, the dome of the sports hall became known as the UKK-dome, after the initials of Urho Kaleva Kekkonen. Photographes of Kekkonen, without a T-shirt, pedalling the exercise bike in Peurunka rehanilitation centre became well known in the Finnish press.

Kekkonen continued to ski around 1000 kilometres a winter untill up to the end of the 1970s. Kekkonen did write down in his diaries that he skied 394 km also in his last presidential winter 1980–1981. We can think of this critically. He was already an old, sick man. Nevertheless, he did keep up skiing, although his pace was now slower; the kilometres he covered became shorter and shorter. Still, skiing remained a part of his presidential routine. Kekkonen did give an example for the whole nation as the number one fitness model. He did emphasise the meaning of fitness and good condition in several presidential speeches. He wanted to be a true example for his nation.

When a young reporter Maarit Tyrkkö came close to President Kekkonen, a trusted friend, in the middle of the 1970s sub-editing several books of Kekkonen and taping his discussions, she took also part in some of the skiing trips. Skiing played such an important role in Kekkonen's life that if one wanted to come close to the President, skiing was a very good way of communicating this wish.

And Kekkonen was known for his love of cross country skiing also abroad. When Soviet Union appointed a new Ambassador to Finland after Viktor Maltsev in 1973, it was not an encumbrance that Vladimir Stepanov knew how to ski. He was the only foreign diplomat who could follow Kekkonen in those long, 30–50 km a day, skiing trips in Lapland.

If we think the meaning of "Kekkonen the Skier", as a role model for his nation, we can recall that when he celebrated his 80th birthday, he was presented "the biggest book" in the world. It was a collection of

signatures of ski tour participants the previous winter. Altogether, the book consists of 225 000 names. The weight of the book is incomprehensible, 32 kg. This is a heavy document of the importance of skiing to the followers of Urho Kekkonen. At the same time, we can see here the meaning of skiing to Kekkonen himself.

In way of conclusion we can say that Kekkonen loved outdoor sports. He wanted to stay fit to be able to lead his nation in the best possible way during the years of Cold War. Furthermore, skiing, fishing, and hunting were ways of relaxing, and representing the ability of a strong leader.

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