**REPORT**

**‘Challenges of the Champs: How minority athletes rise from adversity to victory’** by Çelen Oben and Sheila Riikonen

In Finland where finance and politics are no longer barriers to achieve star status in sports, what challenges do minorities face? Do female athletes, persons with disabilities, or those coming from immigrant backgrounds have equal opportunities with the majority?  
  
Meanwhile, in spite the politics that asks winning athletes of the Republic of North Cyprus to sing the national anthem of another flag, what are their hopes and dreams to represent TRNC? Will their valiant spirit and courageous streak continue to sustain and enable them to reap triumphs and rewards, in the process building their self- identity?  
  
This story is written as part of a project report for the EU and Council of Europe´s programme for [Diversity and Social Integration of Minorities in Europe](http://mars12mm.wordpress.com/). The authors Celen Oben (South Cyprus, North Cyprus, and Turkey) and Sheila Riikonen (Finland, Philippines) travelled in Finland and Cyprus to interview sports figures from a minority background in a span of 10 days in December 2012 (see picture slideshow “Love from Finland”.)  
  
**In North Cyprus, they interviewed athletes, coaches, and mentors from the fields of Football tennis, Wheelcha**i**r basketball, Running, Taekwondo, and Billiards as well as policy makers and advocates of sports.**  
  
TRNC´s football tennis amateur federation president **Şevket Songur** just came back from his year’s major victory – a bronze medal for triples held in Budapest, Hungary. Human relationships are the essence of sports – Sevket said.  
  
‘Three years ago nobody (here) played football tennis but in 2010 we (our federation) hosted the competitions and organized the 12th youth congress with 12 countries. İn 2014, we will host the World Championship in North Cyprus – by that time we hope to finish the sports hall.‘  
  
For many young North Cypriots, travelling abroad is an incentive, but the competition threw some of our good athletes into unknown elements, Sevket revealed. ‘In Budapest, there was too much pressure, there was a pipe that busted in extreme cold and one of our very good player ‘forgot ‘ how to win. ‘We told her this is just sports, you just need to play your game.’ Sevket looks forward to play a major role in FIFTA- at 48 years old, he believes, he has more to give.  
  
‘So what are we? European or not?’ Wheelchair basketball Coach **Orçun Kamali** asked when I interviewed **Aliye Kocasoy** – wheelchair basketball player during their practice break.  
  
‘Ask this question to them. If they consider us a European, they have to show it. Do not use ‘us’ when needed to show off – ‘look we have equality in EU’. ‘What does EU want from us – to show the difference between members and non-members’, he admonished.  
  
‘Finland has nice salmon and nice beach’, the coach recalled. Orçun was in Helsinki once for the symposium of the European Football Coach Association. ‘We participated as Turkish Cyprus Football Coach Association, apart from the Cyprus Football Coach Association…see the difference? ‘  
  
Aliye started Wheelchair Basketball in 1996 at 15 years old – she contacted polio at 8 months old. Aliye grew up in Turkey and was selected in the top five best athletes to compete. She is also training as a lawyer. ‘At first my parents discouraged me from playing athletics. ‘You can walk; you don’t need to do this’ they said but I persisted’.  
  
Today, Aliye is a role model for young girls with handicaps. ‘But when they got married, they don’t want to compete anymore’, she acknowledged. ‘My goal is to compete more, but right now I’m not happy with the support for international competitions. I’m doing this (sports) only for my health’.

While playing wheelchair athletics, Aliye felt that she did not get enough incentives from the sports ministry officials when asking for a wheelchair. Referring to the government support to sports for persons with disabilities, Aliye was also skeptical. ‘They (TRNC government) helped (normal) people get into the (Turkish) national team, but if it’s disabled people, they don’t want to.’ Wheelchair basketball Champ Aliye remarked.  
  
On the same day, we met **Meliz Redif**, 23-year old multi-awarded female runner for the Turkey National Team. She finished 3rd in the recent European competition that she considers as her personal best. She is still in her form and spoke of her experiences in Finland.  
  
**Levent Ilgin,** Meliz’s Coach/Trainer recalled a dramatic scene in mid-2000 when after a winning performance, the North Cyprus flag was raised but was immediately asked to be taken down when the Greek ambassador demanded it from the officials of host country, Finland.   
  
In Girne (Kyrenia), we met with teens **Pinar Akarpinar** – Taekwondo medalist and World Champion – Songül **Yildirim** – also a female taekwondo player. The two teens resided in the hotel where they found work for **Eyüp Zafer Gökbilen** – President National Olympic Committee. Both eagerly shared their hopes and dreams and their journey to feel at home in North Cyprus, although coming from Turkey. Asked how it is to live in their current seaside city home, Pinar smiled and said without hesitation “We love it!”

Meanwhile,we interviewed **İlkay Yorganci** – a retired female athlete who now works in the University (in Famagusta) in Girneye after living in exile in England for over a decade. Her daughter, who is half-British, presently shows star quality in tennis playing under the British flag.

İlkay narrated her determination to succeed as a runner when there was political turmoil between North and South Cyprus and her difficult decision to try her luck in England in her teens. Combining a day job, sports, and her studies as a teenager living in a strange city without her family was a major feat. “I had no choice – but I was strong and determined and I succeeded.”

Finally, **Tuncer Tuncergil** – EMU (Eastern Mediterranean University) Vice President Coordinator of Social and Sports recounted how students from all parts of the world converge in the university and understand each other in the name of sports. We were shown the new gymnasium where flags from countries the students came from are proudly displayed. We respect people and encourage them to excel not just in studies, but also in sports, Tuncer said.   
  
**In Finland, they spoke to athletes and coaches from the fields of Wheelchair racing, Running, and Handball.**  
  
Over a million TV viewers witnessed the [Finnish Sports Gala](http://www.suomenurheilugaala.fi/) organized at Hartwall Arena in Helsinki last December. For the historical fourth consecutive time, a woman won the Athlete of the Year title in an election of Finnish sports journalists.    
  
In the same event, Finnish Sports Gala Association's Special Awardee **Toni Piispanen**, Finland's Paralympics wheelchair racing champion in London 2012 was recognized. Çelen Oben for Star Kibriss published a full-page [report](http://www.starkibris.net/index.asp?haberID=139083) of Toni, whom the authors interviewed in Lahti.  
  
Toni, born in 1976 and currently the world record holder, won wheelchair racing T51-grade gold at 100 m.

At 17, while performing in full contact karate show, he fell over and broke his neck. He was graduating from college on the same year, but this unexpected accident made him graduate a year later.   
  
He was treated for three months in a hospital where government workers visited him and gave psychological support, convincing him to go back to sports. They also asked him to meet other disabled sportsmen but he would not agree. “Before leaving the hospital, I needed a wheelchair. I asked them where I could buy one. They told me they had already bought one for me. I got very emotional.”  
  
The government sent him to a course where he learnt how to use the wheelchair and receive therapy. Toni said he had always wanted to be a sports instructor but due to his condition he studied Sports Sciences in Jyvaskyla University instead. Toni started to play professionally in Wheelchair Rugby and joined Tampa Florida.   
  
“Because I am fast on my wheelchair, my coach led me to athletics. He said ‘You are fast, you can do’ and I tried”. More energy is consumed, as style is different for the wheelchair. The Finnish Athletics Federation gave me two coaches — to do the training and to show the optimal seating arrangement. However, ‘the important thing is the seated position’ he said.

His first success as a runner came in 2010 at the Italy Emola Race. He became World champion in New Zealand in 2011, won a Silver Medal in 100 m and Bronze in 200 m, breaking the world record. Finally, He became a champion in London 2012 Paralympic games.   
  
He now works as a sports coordinator. Although he is disabled, he cannot get an absence leave for his sports practices and gets a salary cut if he does. In spite of this, he still does not miss a single practice, practicing 10 times a week.  
  
After work, he goes to Espoo and trains in a 400-m track hall. After training, he spends time with his two daughter, ages 4 and 8, and his wife. He also goes to night training for approx. 2-2.5 hours.  
  
Toni said it is difficult to find a sponsor. If the Olympic committee says OK, the government pays them 20,000 euros. He managed to get four sponsors and received between 2-10 thousand euros from each. “Sponsorships are not enough for a professional sportsman and because of this, to go on in life, he needs to work.”  
  
Toni commented on an important issue plaguing Finnish sports recently.

“Doping is a guarantee for users to finish their careers. The public who watches these users on media do not support them either and their careers come to an end. I have never heard a wheelchair user use doping and I hope I never do.”   
  
He also observed it’s more difficult for women to take part in sports. “Women are more into their families. Especially after having kids, they get more attached to their homes and children and when the kids grow up, they start having monetary problems, so they break away from sports’. He said Finland takes care of female and male disabled sportspeople and believes in them; they can do all. He said it´s very good that disabled people can ski in Finland.  
  
Meanwhile, **Nooralotta Neziri**, female runner in her early 20´s talked about what inspired her. “I started running at the age of 7. My inspiration was my uncle who encouraged me to join a running club to get friends as we moved to a new place. My family and parents are very proud of me and they never doubted my goals. They are always very supportive.”  
  
Nooralotta studies Master of Economic Sciences in Pori. Describing her career, her biggest records are the U20 European Championships Gold medal, U18 European Olympic Festival Gold medal and own national senior record 13.10. Other achievements are National Champion 2012, U18 World championships 5th, U20 World championships 5th, and Youth national record.   
  
Sponsors and big companies do not mean the same thing, she said. “Yes, they are big companies here, but the amount of money isn't too big yet.  Last year I made the contracts myself but nowadays I have a manager to do those things. So I don't have to use my energy to them.”  
  
We spoke to her about some countries for example North Cyprus, when female athletes get married and have children; they stop running - what is her case? “Usually, in Finland it's the same. But I think it shouldn't be over if you have a good motivation to continue training after giving a birth. There are many female athletes winning a medal in the Olympics who are mothers. It's about your own motivation and how supportive your family is.”  
  
Drugs is sensitive issue where top-level athletes have been penalized.  “I would never even consider using that. I think it's unfair towards others. And I wouldn't risk my health with drugs. I believe I can become a world champion without ever seeing them, “ she said.  
  
Nooralotta’s dad is a Macedonian Albanian while her mother is a Finn. “So I'm 50% Albanian 50% Finnish. I think that's my strength, I have always been a bit different from everyone else and I think it so cool! I’ve learned to like my difference. My goal is to be the best hurdle runner in the world!”

Due to the fact that women marry and have children, female athletes take career breaks in almost every country in the world. Finally, we talked to "mother players" of handball in Siuntio, 100 kms from Helsinki.  
  
**Helena Lonn** is a 55-year-old grandmother and a real sports lover. After playing in Siuntio 1F handball club for 25 years, she continued as a coach and administrator.

Helena rediscovered her passion for sports after she became a mother. Her handball career began at 15. When her daughter was growing up, she took her to the halls. “All women athletes must have understanding friends, families and especially a husband to continue their sports lives after having kids.”

Helena´s daughter **Linda Olin**, 24, now has kids and returned to the halls within a month of giving birth. "We almost always talk about handball with my daughter and I give her advices from my experiences. But never tell her what to do in the game because the coach would surely be for her," said Helena. They as a family, all have passion for sports. Her husband played handball for 30 years and is now a team manager.

Linda started handball at 5 and played for 24 years. "When I was pregnant, I looked forward to the day that I would deliver my baby and go back to the halls. And that day is today. I came today for my first practice, three weeks after birth. “ Linda said with joy in her eyes.

Linda said women leave sports after having children due to housework and childcare. “Work life is busy and women take sports out of their lives. I´m not working, but I think I will still keep sports in my life even after I begin’ she said. Linda said husbands should help their wives so that they keep doing sports.

Another mother who plays for Siuntio 1F is **Emmi Perovuo,** who said handball is an indispensable part of her life. "I´m here -- I do sports and meet my friends".

Emmi, whose son is just 2 months old said, "When my son grows up, I will bring him to the halls. Caring will not be a problem.’’

Emmi’s husband, **Joel Perovuo,** said he is happy his wife is continuing sports, but he does not know what will happen when she will start working.

The 27-year-old plays football for 7 years now and belongs to Helsinki’s HOEKO team. The couple´s training hours are different but when they coincide, they ask Joel's parents to help. He brings their baby to the practices, so she can breastfeed. Joel added he would help her as much as he could after she starts work again.

In summary, the Media Work Exchanges by two journalists who have never met was a challenge but is well worth it. The authors expect there will be long-term effects of these projects from the European Union and the Council of Europe.

The 10-day marathon interviews gave the authors understanding of the big task Europe is facing, and the struggles and success of diverse minorities in athletics.

While there are challenges in everyday life and seemingly insurmountable odds in international competitions, the athletes persevered. Families and relationships are big factors in their success. The role of mentors, clubs, and society in the athletes' lives cannot also be undermined.

A passion for sports and healthy lifestyle are enabling factors to survive and persevere– whether it´s political, economic, social, psychological, and others.

Finally, may the advocates of sports, diversity, and integration be united with the media in their shared passion to search and discover unique heroic stories, which touch the human spirit and inspire us all.

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