



• SPECIAL REPORT •

FROM FINLAND TO THE WORLD

*Javelin has officially broken out of its northern European heartland, with major medallists emerging from countries as far away as Kenya, Trinidad and Tobago and Egypt, whose Ihab Abdelrahman El Sayed produced the world leading throw in 2014. To find out what's behind the event's growing globalisation, **Mirko Jalava** travelled to Kuortane, Finland, to meet the discipline's most in-demand coach at a centre that has welcomed IAAF scholarship holders from around the world and put them on the path to success... »*



Photography: Mark Pain



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Left: Welcome to Kuortane, population 3,734. Major industries include pine tar and javelin champions

Kuortane's IAAF accredited centre, which features full-size indoor and outdoor tracks, has been serving athletes for more than 50 years

Piironen's stable of Kuortane-based throwers varies in number from month to month, usually including a significant proportion of overseas hopefuls

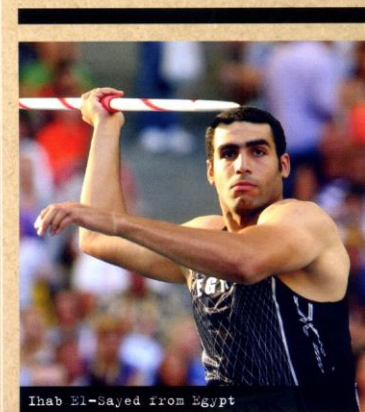
Kenya's pioneering field star Julius Yego is among Kuortane's best known overseas students. Dozens have travelled to western Finland to eat, sleep and drink javelin at the residential centre, where the 54 rooms each include an en-suite sauna



Finland is easily the most successful country in the history of men's javelin throwing, both in terms of medals and athletes in the world's yearly top 10. Sweden and Norway were also top javelin countries in the early years after the event was added to the Olympic programme in 1908. Germany, Hungary, and the United States followed with the Czech Republic, Great Britain and, of course, the Soviet Union also joining the javelin elite.

When the Soviet Union was dissolved, the newly independent countries of eastern Europe then began to win javelin medals in their own right, an earlier era of javelin globalisation that stopped after 1996.

In fact, the last new country to appear in the world top 10 in that period was Greece thanks to a 23-year-old thrower called Kostas Gatsioudis who won the Olympic qualification round in Atlanta with 87.12m, ranking him ninth in the world that year. The young Greek finished 10th in the final, and went on to win a World Championships silver the following year in Athens in front of his home crowd, before taking another silver in Seville 1999 and a bronze in 2001.



Ihab El-Sayed from Egypt



SPECIAL REPORT



After Gatsioudis, however, there was a 16-year gap before throwers from any other 'new countries' appeared in the top 10. That began to change in 2012 when Ukraine, through Olympic silver medallist Oleksandr Pyatnytsya, and Turkey, with Fatih Avan, a finalist at the 2013 World Championships, entered the list.

In 2013 Kenya made a breakthrough when Julius Yego finished fourth at the Moscow World Championships with 85.40m. And in 2014 two more countries shook up the order: Egypt, thanks to world leader Ihab Abdelrahman El Sayed, and China, via world No2 Zhao Qinggang.

The first indication that strong throwers from unprecedented countries could fight for worldwide medals came at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Yego was already noted for being the first Kenyan ever to throw beyond the 80-metre line after his 81.12m national record in Kuortane that July, his last competition before the Games. Then he produced three very good throws in the Olympic qualification round, reaching 79.10m, 79.33m and another national record of 81.81m to win a historic place in the javelin final, the first ever for a Kenyan thrower.

Finishing behind Yego in the qualification round was another newcomer, a 19-year-old from Trinidad and Tobago called Keshorn Walcott who, of course, then shocked the world in the final by winning the Olympic gold.

Yego had learned his javelin technique by watching YouTube videos of the world's top throwers, but his rise to international success started in September 2011. Inevitably, this being a javelin story, there were Finns involved.

After finishing third at the 2010 African Championships and seventh at the 2010 Commonwealth

Games, Yego won his first major title at the 2011 All African Games in Maputo when he threw a national record of 78.34m. The javelin competition in Mozambique was held on 15 September and the next day was the Van Damme Memorial Diamond League meeting in Brussels. The Finnish manager, Jukka Härkönen, was there, looking at the results of the African Games and wondering how a Kenyan in Maputo had thrown further than one of his athletes, Ari Mannio, at the Van Damme meeting.

Mannio finally did beat Yego's mark with 79.88m, but this was the start of a big change in the Kenyan's career. Härkönen contacted Yego shortly afterwards and the Kenyan arrived at Kuortane on an IAAF scholarship in December 2011 to find "very cold weather".

TURNING POINT

The IAAF-accredited training centre in Kuortane is a place where javelin throwers are made. Petteri Piironen, Yego's personal coach, underlines that it's not him, personally, who produces javelin throwers, but the training centre, which has been doing so since long before his time.

However, the recent rise of throwers from 'outsider' countries does have a lot to do with Piironen. Yego says that the main aspect he needed to change was his technique, but at least as big a part of his improvement was the fact that in Kuortane "they love the sport. Everyone wants to help you, and coach you in any way they can," he says.

Of course, the Moscow 2013 Worlds was a turning point for the 25-year-old who was only one throw away from becoming the first Kenyan medallist in any field event in the history of the World Championships. In

Left: The highly-equipped centre is part of a vast, multi-discipline sports resort including top-class medical, sports science and testing facilities

Gymnastics-based strength preparation is a core element of training for Kuortane's top throwers. Here, delegates at the World Javelin Conference observe Piironen's drills in action in the centre's world-class gym

'THEY LOVE THE SPORT OF JAVELIN IN KUORTANE. EVERYONE WANTS TO HELP YOU, AND COACH YOU IN ANY WAY THEY CAN'
- JULIUS YEGO, KENYA



the end, Russia's Dmitriy Tarabin pushed Yego out of the medals with his last effort of 86.23m. After those few moments, when a medal had loomed for Yego, this was a major disappointment, but it didn't stop the subsequent questions: how was this possible?

In fact, Yego wasn't the only thrower making his mark in Moscow for there was a surprise in the women's competition too when 18-year-old Swedish thrower Sofi Flink made the final with her first attempt. Flink had burst to prominence at the previous year's World Junior Championships when, aged just 17 years and three days, she became the first Swede to throw over 60 metres with the new javelin. She'd moved from third to first, improving by 2.5 metres in the final round.

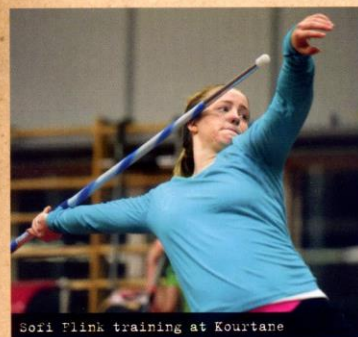
By 2013 it was clear she was 'the real deal', although it was not public knowledge then that she had already trained in Kuortane and consulted Piironen several times. To make Kuortane's part in the Moscow shake-up even more amazing, there was a second surprising athlete in the men's final – the Egyptian Ihab Abdelrahman El Sayed, who had trained in Kuortane a few years earlier, also on an IAAF scholarship, and received help from Piironen.

Abdelrahman first visited Kuortane in 2009, although their co-operation ended for a few years, largely because Abdelrahman lacked financial support from the Egyptian federation. For the next four years he worked with a coach who only concentrated on his physical development. But after 'winning' the B qualification group in Moscow, with a big national



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Sofi Flink training at Kuortane

record of 83.62m, Abdelrahman finally got the support he needed, and Piironen became his personal coach late in 2013.

The results came quicker than anyone could have expected. After opening his 2014 season with 80.06m in Tokyo, the 25-year-old unleashed a huge 89.21m bombshell in the first round at the Shanghai Diamond League meeting on 18 May, a throw which remained the world's leading effort until the very end of the season. His form dipped a bit after Shanghai, but Abdelrahman finished the season in style by winning the Continental Cup in Marrakech.

That victory ended a great year for Piironen for although Yego didn't improve his personal best in 2014, he capped his first year among the javelin elite by winning the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the African Championships in Marrakech, before finishing fourth at the Continental Cup.

Meanwhile, Piironen took over as Flink's personal coach, having advised her during Kuortane training camps in the past. Flink's summer was largely ruined by back, ankle and knee problems, but she still managed to add a World Junior silver in Eugene to her 2012 gold from Barcelona, again lifting herself from bronze with her last attempt.

Justifiably regarded as a tough competitor, Flink could well be the first female thrower under Piironen to rise into the world's elite, the latest member of javelin's new world order: ■

Below: The modest Petteri Piironen is Kuortane's top javelin coach



PIIRONEN AND THE KUORTANE REVOLUTION

Petteri Piironen was a prominent javelin thrower himself in his youth before his career was ended by injuries. At 19, he threw a personal best of 76.38m and won a silver medal at the Finnish junior championships. Coming from Imatra, he also played ice-hockey for the local Ketterä-club, and only decided to become a javelin thrower at the age of 16.

He started coaching at the Kuortane centre in 2001 when Kari Ihalainen moved from the academy to work full-time as national team coach. At the start, his job was to coach high school students and his first accomplishment as a coach came in Tampere in 2003 at the European Junior Championships when Teemu Wirkkala won the title with 79.90m. Wirkkala went on to finish fifth at the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

The first non-Finnish athlete coached by Piironen was US thrower Rob Minniti in 2005, but his real breakthrough with 'foreign' throwers came more recently, and the rise of the 'new nations' was confirmed in 2014 thanks to the success of Julius Yego, Sofi Flink and Ihab Abdelrahman El Sayed.