

An environment that is cleaned up personalises the environment each of us lives in

On hockey, the environment and children **A r t ū r s I r b e**

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In your daily life, does spring and the change in seasons introduce any changes?

During my childhood, it seemed to me that winter was the best time of year, because then there was snow and ice and I was able to *properly* have fun and play „hockey”. In years gone by, I always associated spring with the biggest and most intense sports activities and hockey matches and the greatest battles. It was the time when we won medals and cups. Now it is different. I have spent many years in North America where I never really had the chance to enjoy a genuine winter and where spring was quite relative. In Carolina, where we lived, there some peculiar trees which kept their leaves and the proceeded to fall until new ones blossomed in their place. I have always enjoyed living closer to nature. The city is a large „stress machine”, in which one can *nicely* master all the sensation which cause stress in a person’s life.

What are your future professional plans?

Right now, there is not much point in planning or making decisions. This requires motivation. Earlier in my life, this took place chronologically, I knew what I had to do in order to make sure that this and that would happen in the coming year and where I would find myself at specific moments in time. Currently, I am no longer setting out any specific future plans. The Olympic Games took place last year and Riga hosted the World Championships. This year is emptier and I am quite clearly encountering the reality that is not worth doing something investing not quite the full 100% or doing so half-heartedly. In some ways, this has been a good lesson – a new school in life.

If you were 18 years old today, would you choose to link your future to sport and to hockey?

Most definitely! The gratification and inner satisfaction that I have derived from sport would be very difficult to attain in any other realm of life.

Thinking about the opportunities for young people then and now – maybe today the approach and thinking would be much more rational?

Yes, of course. However, I still think that everybody is presented with opportunities. I look at what young people get up to in the vocation that is dearest to me. In my opinion, much more could be done. Formerly, we had our own kind of system which helped us to prepare for major hockey. The current system is continuing to function on the basis of the inertia acquired previously. However, that could all grind to a halt. Countless halls have been built and many more boys have the opportunity to get involved in hockey. When I started training there was only one artificial ice pitch in the whole of Riga.

Now we live in a capitalist system which cannot quite be described as fully-fledged capitalism. It brings with it not only opportunities, but also a certain form of responsibility. Responsibility rests not on our children, but on the people nearest to us - parents, schoolteachers and trainers. It is one area where we should seriously consider the question of investments. Otherwise, we will only be able to engage in recycling. Young people must be given an impulse, otherwise everything will come to a standstill and we can expect the future to be quite grey.

Are you ready to share in your experience?

Most definitely. However, in life one must know how to set priorities and each person is an egoist – to some degree. In this case I am thinking not of myself, but rather of my children and my son. At present, I have to devote my time to his life and upbringing. It is very important that I am alongside him at this time when his personality will crystallize.

Does he also play hockey?

He plays football, however, he also very much wants to play hockey. It is not that I don't allow him to do so, but he has to make the decision himself and to really want to do so. In my opinion, gently steering him in some direction only works, for example, in the area of music when gratitude for such only comes after a number of years. In regard to sport, a child himself must demonstrate initiative and desire.

During which stage of your life, have you most often encountered nature conservation issues and problems – living in Latvia or outside Latvia?

I sense these problems more at home – because this environment is closer to me. In Europe's most developed countries, the environment is perhaps overly well-ordered than it is in North America. For us it is a genuine problem, because our society is still in its formative stages.

How significant is a sense of belonging to a specific place, environment or country? How significant is this sense of belonging in sport and in the establishment of a sense of awareness regarding the environment?

We have not as yet established a public culture in which we not only have the rights about which we are talking all the time, but also duties. The field of the environment is one of those where it is possible to establish that sense of duty and responsibility in events that establish a sense of togetherness, such as that created, for example by *Footprints*. This is most wonderful model regarding how can later attain

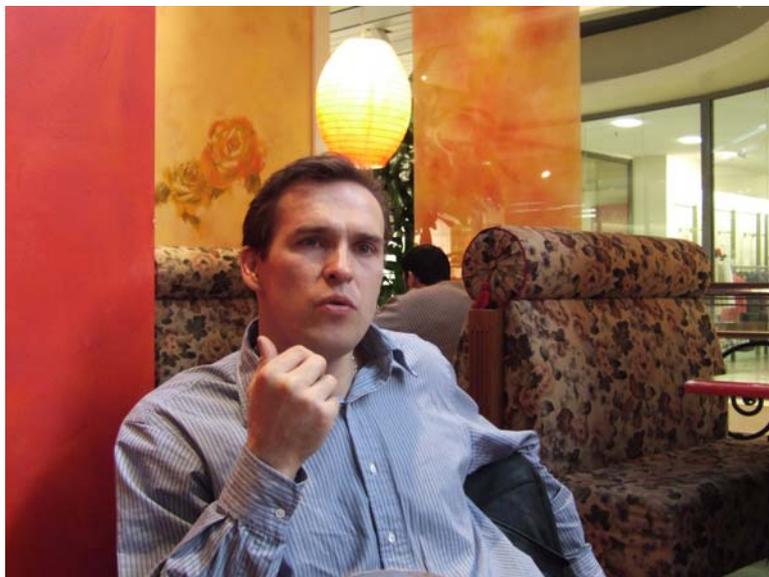
achievements in our subsequent lives. Co-operation with others is an integral element within our lives. We are not Robinson Crusoe on a lonely island with a group of Fridays.

Can you imagine that at some time in the future you could move to a life away from civilisation living in a lonely house in the middle of the forest?

I've had such a thought many times. I need to escape from the city and to spend some time in an environment that humans have not transformed with their own hands – to go back to the very beginning to ensure that there is a contrast in life and also to soak up some energy that the city is not capable of providing. Comforts often cause problems for people, because they have to be taken care of.

Global warming – sometimes it seems that this is something with which to frighten the children, but which adults don't really believe in themselves... at least judging from human conduct. Do you personally sense it in your daily life and are you attempting to do something to address the problem „in a positive manner”?

I recently visited some friends in Austria and I saw that people are thinking about it very seriously over there. Evidently something serious has to be done, which is not only an abstract notion, but something that is altogether real. The effects of *El Niño* on the oceans and the most recent winter are very real examples. Once it was possible to go ice skating on a lake in October and November. At present, there are no such opportunities. My son and I only had one opportunity to build a snowman. This too is a pointer. Children put things in place very quickly. Then we have to think about priorities. Parents and teachers have to set an example and then children believe in them.



When did you become aware of the necessity for human responsibility towards nature and the environment?

Most directly, this has come from my family. Sporting discipline, correct rest and nutrition – this all came from my father. This was drilled into me so that I was as aware of it as the alphabet. My sense of responsibility towards the environment comes from my mother. We were three children in our family and my parents split up which

I was a teenager. My mother had to find a job that would give her the chance to both earn money, and also be present to see the children off to school and to await their return. To ensure that they were both well-fed and looked after to prevent them from going astray. My mother began work as a janitor. It is a wonderful school – to be the child of a janitor. To understand what pollution of the environment means. Occasionally, I found myself helping my mother in winter to manage all the snow and ice and to clean up our courtyard during the summer. All those cigarette butts and spit upon pavements – left me with a queasy feeling which don't really observe passing by. This affected me very personally. Overall, a janitor's work is very demanding and I take my hat off before such people.

So the idea of cleaning-up is not unfamiliar to you?

My most prominent memory is of a school clean-up operation when I was in second or third grade during which jumping over a bonfire; I managed to melt a nylon sock to my foot. There have all sorts of clean-up events. These are memories from my earliest life which I wanted to demonstrate to my children. How *nice* it can be when you pick up that big pile which is so soft that one can jump on top of it and disappear. We had beautification clean-up events with the children in North Carolina. Understanding of what a cleaned-up environment is only comes at a certain age.

Whilst maintaining the mystery regarding which of the forthcoming clean-up events organised by *Project Footprints* it will be possible to meet you at, tell us, why, bearing in mind how busy you are, you are prepared to donate your time to such activities?

It could well be that at any moment; I will have to make the journey, for example to North America where I still have links to the NHL and my children. However, my life is linked to here. The environment which is being cleaned up personalises each individual's personal environment in which we live. The fact that it is your courtyard, your city, sea shore or forest where you choose to spend time provides an additional impulse. I am very well aware of the beautification of forests and the sea shore from my own personal experience.

In contrast to „measurable“ individual goals and results in sport, it is much more difficult to assess results which come from individual activities in the field of nature conservation. What in your opinion do these two fields have in common?

In sport, major achievements can only be achieved by those for whom success comes from the heart. Talent in itself is not decisive. He who approaches his challenge in a heartfelt manner will definitely go much further in his chosen field of sport. It is the same in nature conservation. Tutors, teachers, managers, parents – their children's attitude towards the environment depends on them. If one has discovered and learned to care about the environment during childhood, it is almost impossible to change this. People who care about our environment are fanatics for whom the environment is a question of tremendous significance. Nature conservation should definitely not become politicised. Sometimes, I look at *Greenpeace* – it is a political organisation. This is no longer nature conservation. The idea is correct, but its fulfilment and application „smell of burning“. Simpler campaigns such as those carried out by *Footprints* cannot contain any politics. Here we are only talking about fanatics who care about our environment and who attempt to pass on their feelings to others, inspiring the rest.

Laziness is one of the most natural human characteristics the overcoming of which is crowned with certain achievements in our life. What is your „magic formula” for overcoming laziness?

Sometimes after matches and difficult season, I want and need to take a break. However, if this lasts for more than a week or two then laziness makes a person ill, both physically and morally. The human body, the organism is like a little motor, a mechanism that usually requires a battery and the oiling of its parts. When I have performed some sort of physical activity during the morning, during the day I have energy even though notionally I ought to be tired and short of energy. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who have never experienced this in their lives and they do not realise that in this way they can not only improve their physical condition, but also their productivity in all areas. Therefore, sometimes it is healthy to pressure oneself and make oneself suffer – it provides unique results and as a consequence gratification in life.

In some ways, many people consider you to be one of Latvia’s symbols What would you choose as Latvia’s symbol in establishing Latvia’s image globally?

Latvia’s symbol cannot be a single person, but rather that which people leave behind them; with those of their activities with which they have affected the lives of other people. Latvia’s image is very important. An advertisement was broadcast on CNN featuring Latvia’s blue cow, nature and eco-tourism. This has to be combined with the other thing we have –very beautiful cities. Cities are those places where people arrive and get their first impressions. Everything must commence from a beautified city where it is pleasant for people to arrive. Afterwards, they can go for a walk along a beautified beach, through a beautified forest and drive along beautified highways. Such *Footprints* are a link to Latvia’s symbol and future.

What would you wish to *environmental fanatics*?

Wherever possible to turn such campaigns into mass movements! To talk to everybody; to take any potential person by the hand and get them involved in this project. Such clean-up events and joint activities become a certain form of infection. They are a source of far greater gratification than that to be had from the performance of some specific project, a job for oneself, for one’s own personal welfare. This is most amazing idea possible – a campaign in which families embark on clean-ups to beautify our environment. The fact that families and teachers can find themselves hand in hand – that is wonderful. If these three people – the father, the mother and the teacher can be present and show an example, then we can be sure that this person, who will later have his own children will have an interest and every opportunity to raise them as mindful representatives of their nation who respect the environment.