

Myrskylä/MyrskyLasse,Finland:Lasse Viren Et Al

Myrskylä, or place of storms; is a beautiful, small Finnish village, with scattered patches of rolling woods, roads, trails, barley, rye, wheat fields, some rock outcrops. Verdant, pastoral beauty is everywhere, along with many species of mushrooms and edible berries. A beautiful white, wooden church is centrally located, with a small cemetery and a big, beautiful lake behind it. Small farms and some small family businesses are there: Viren Trucking, Safu Fish Company, as well as, a famous red granite quarry. Typical fauna includes moose, rabbits, deer, small birds...and on rare occasions, a bear/karhu, or perhaps a wolf/susi. In essence, a setting analogous to what the American poet, Robert Frost, or the Finnish writer, Aleksis Kivi captured in their writings. Aleksis Kivi's famous book, *Seven Brothers*, could well have taken place in Myrskylä.



Old, beautiful church in central Myrskylä.

On August 25, 2011, I had the grand honor of visiting Myrskylä for the first time. This small village is approximately 1 hour northeast of Helsinki, capital of Finland, and is home to about 2,000 inhabitants. This summer also happened to be Myrskylä's 375th anniversary.

Vicariously, I had been to Myrskylä several times since first reading and hearing about it after the 1972 summer Olympics in Munich, Germany. Since then, I no longer thought of Myrskylä, as a place of storms, but rather, Myrskylä, the perfect storm: Lasse Viren!

This serendipitous, “chance in a life time” meeting, was due to an old Finnish running friend, Henrik Sandstrom, former mayor of his municipality, Siuntio, and former international runner. For the past years Henrik has worked as managing director of a recreation area organization in the Helsinki region.

The purpose of the visit was a business meeting with 2 special people. The first was the mayor of Myrskylä, Jouko Asuja, a tall, slim, kind man with a warm smile, bushy eyebrows, and glasses. He also has the physique of a long distance runner, but “attributes it all to genetics.” The 2nd was Myrskylä’s “favorite son”: Lasse Viren, 4 time Olympic gold medalist. His Tour de Force: 5K and 10K gold in Munich in 1972, and again in Montreal in 1976...Surreal!!!



Left to right: Lasse Viren, Pablo Vigil, Mayor Asuja

The main topic on the agenda was to discuss the possibility of collaboration between Myrskylä and the recreation area organization.

The meeting was to take place in the mayor's office around noon, but Lasse was running late, no pun intended.

I admit, I was nervous meeting Lasse after having first met him back in 1977 in Boulder, Colorado. At that time, I trained with Olympian Frank Shorter, winner of the gold and silver in the marathon at those same summer Olympics in Munich and Montreal.

Boulder, at the time, was a bubbling synergy of running talent, and continues to the present. Other Olympians, international runners, and national runners lived and trained there; for example: Garry Bjorklund, Mike Slack, Ric Rojas, John Gregorio, Mike Peterson, Guy Arbogast, Mary Decker, John Cossick, Michael Sandrock, Mark Johnson, Dick Quax, Bruce Gomez, Mike Ruffato, Mark Weeks, Skip and Ruthie Hamilton, Steve and Sheryl Flanagan, Steve Floto...ad infinitum. Oregon's Steve Prefontaine also made several guest appearances, along with Bill Bowerman, Kenny Moore and Bill Dellinger.

Regarding Lasse's visit to Boulder, Colorado in 1977: Finnish long distance runners in Colorado have a deeply rooted tradition, going back to the 1960s. The first migration of Finnish running stars arrived in Alamosa, Colorado in 1967 to run for Adams State College, under the coaching guidance of Dr. Joe I. Vigil/Chef des Chefs/Coach of Coaches. These early runners included Juha Vaatainen and 2 other Finns. Years later, the Finnish migration would continue; for example: Martti Vainio, Jurgen Salo, Sinikka Keskitalo, Hakan Spik, Jari Nurmista, Tuija Toivonen, Arto Bryggare, Ari Paunonen, Harri Hanninen, Henrik Sandstrom, Tommy Ekblom, Sari Essayah, Valentin Kononen. Recently, Lasse Viren's son also trained in Alamosa.

Historically, Finnish runners have been big proponents of high altitude/high mileage training. Alamosa's 7,543 feet/2,299 meters, infinite sunny days, dirt roads, great facilities, and great support by the community and Adams State College, have attracted Finnish runners for years. Equally, countless of other runners from all over the world and

the USA have trickled to Alamosa. Runners such as Gelindo Bordin and Stefano Baldini, both Olympic marathon winners, as well as Buddy Edelen, Juma Ikangaa, Laura Fogli, Jeff Turningheart, Greg Meyer, Chuck Smead, Jim Ryan, John Esquibel, Tony Niemczak, Rick Roybal, Pat Porter, Deena Drossin-Kastor, myself included, have trained here. Alamosa, Colorado has really been an international/national revolving door of phenomenal running and athletic talent...and continues to the present.

Meanwhile, the minutes ticked away in Mayor Asuja's office as we waited for Lasse. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by a loud noise coming from what sounded like a large vehicle just outside the window. Lasse had finally arrived, having driven a large cargo truck, the kind used to haul really heavy rocks, lumber, maybe even elephants. Minutes later there was a soft knock at the door and in walked Lasse. I introduced myself and told him about first meeting him in Boulder, Colorado in 1977.



Lasse and his prized cargo truck.

The meeting started and before long, the only thing I could focus on was how beautiful and soft Finnish sounded as opposed to other languages I was familiar with. During most of the 20 minute meeting, I sat politely,

as quiet as a mouse, not knowing, nor understanding a single Finnish word. Obviously, no Finnish bad words were spoken, since I would have definitely recognized them. After the meeting, I humbly confessed to Lasse and Mayor Asuja that I neither spoke nor understood Finnish, with the exception of 5 popular bad words. After saying this, it suddenly occurred to me that they might ask me to elaborate on the 5 Finnish bad words and to ask how I had come to learn them. Luckily, they didn't ask, but out of the corner of my eye I noticed that my friend, Henrik, had turned beet red and looked embarrassed. He was one of the culprits for my bad Finnish vocabulary!! After confessing my ignorance of the Finnish language, Lasse quickly pacified me by looking at me with a twinkle in his eyes and a half smile saying, "Finnish is very easy, even the very small children speak it!" I admit I did feel better after this, especially since this comforting comment came from Lasse Viren himself.

After the meeting, we walked from the mayor's office to a local restaurant to eat lunch. As we walked along, I kept thinking of what an amazing and surreal experience this was, how blessed I was to be walking in Myrskylä with great company and Lasse Viren, and just across the road was a statue of him.



*"Sisu" allegory, Myrskylä, Finland

The day had started off cloudy and overcast and now the sun was shining brightly on Myrskylä.

While walking to the restaurant, during our lunch, and while walking back from our lunch, I noticed that not a single person took a second look at Lasse, or even really acknowledged him. I seemed to be more of a curiosity than Lasse. This incident seemed very surprising to me, maybe even odd.

*Sisu is a Finnish term analogous to "guts", bravado, perseverance, tenacity, "will to win", etc...in essence, the "Finnish spirit".

The Finnish lunch turned out to be a typical one: great salad with beets, lettuce, choice of dressings, real mashed potatoes, a thick gravy/broth with big chunks of real chicken and cooked vegetables, choice of rye,

white, wheat bread, real butter. Really a wholesome, nutritious meal, typical of Finnish cuisine! Lasse also had extra butter and two glasses of milk. I drank some kind of burgundy-colored, semi-bitter, berry juice, but tasty. During our lunch we talked about different topics, but nothing really having to do with running and training. Better yet, we talked about our children, wild animals in the area, grandchildren, Lasse's problems with his kitchen floor, the roof at his family's trucking business, his phone. He spoke of his childhood in Myrskylä, driving a semi-truck...etc. I confess, I did ask Lasse one running question: Did he currently run for fitness? He confessed that he had run maybe 5 times in the last 2 years. This was hard to believe. He looked amazingly fit: the same lean, small torso, extra long, lean legs and arms, same small, slender shoulders, long fingers, big feet. His once long flowing, sandy-brown hair was now very short and salt and pepper colored. His once Quaker-style, sandy-brown beard was gone, replaced by a full, salt and pepper, short beard, glasses covering his sky-blue eyes. He wore a pair of worn white Asics training shoes, semi dress black pants, a short sleeved, navy blue, worn "Bolder Boulder 10k" shirt with a collar. In other words, despite his alleged lack of training and appearance, I'm convinced that he could still do some serious butt kicking...and I wasn't about to challenge him!!!!



Lasse, still looking great years later!

After lunch we had coffee, which is typical of many European countries. The Finnish coffee is notoriously strong, compared to most wimpy, American coffee. Per capita, Finland consumes more coffee than any other nation in the world. Furthermore, Finnish coffee has been known to wake up the dead and kill the living...man, woman, or karhu!!!!

We then got in Mayor Asuja's car and started off to see a beautiful trail and area on top of a small hill just outside of town. On the way out, Lasse pointed out the house where he grew up. I asked if we could stop for a quick photo. I quickly jumped out of the car and snapped a picture, only to have an older man come after me shouting "What are you doing here?". It turned out to be Lasse's older brother, who also happened to be a retired policeman! Oh, great!! The possibility of being thrown in jail in Myrskylä for trespassing quickly flashed through my brain. Luckily, Lasse called out the car window to his brother. I then quickly shook Lasse's brother's hand and took his picture. Also, next door to Lasse's childhood home was an old, red, quaint log home, which Lasse told me was where his grandfather used to live and at one time had a berry-juice business. Naturally, I had to have a picture of Lasse's grandfather's

home. What a rare, prized moment! After this exciting ordeal, we zipped off to a nearby beautiful wooded area on top of a small hill with a winding, beautiful trail: Lassen polku/Lasse's trail. This great trail curves around the rim of a small hill and wooded area full of tall, slim pine trees, lots of wild mushrooms, and delicious blueberries, which Lasse and I couldn't stop eating. I think I got the best of him by eating the most blueberries. This trail also winds around for about 3.5 kilometers over soft, sandy ground covered with mossy, forest vegetation, with some slightly rocky areas. All in all, Lassen polku is the kind of trail that most runners and hikers drool over, or dream about. Along the edge of the rim is also another trail, that branches down about 80 meters over 800 meters in length. Lasse trained here countless times, so he knew this area like a wild karhu. On another side of the trail rim beautiful cliffs appeared. Meanwhile, the sun shone like wild honey as we walked along stopping sporadically to eat wild blueberries. Along the way, Lasse also pointed out vestiges of an old, 300 meter track, now overgrown with forest vegetation and once used by Finnish soldiers during WWII to maintain fitness.



Lasse at Lassen polku/Lasse's Trail...still looking like a "lean and mean running machine". Finland, fitness/running, are synonymous and nothing new. Per capita, Finland has produced some of the greatest distance runners ever: Wille Ritola, Paavo Nurmi, Juha Vaatainen, Martti Vainio, Hannes

Kolehmainen, Pekka Vasala, Tapio Kantanen, Kaarlo Maaninka, are just a few.

As we continued to walk along, Lasse, Mayor Asuja and Henrik stopped periodically to view a detailed forest map of the area. Lasse also told us another interesting story regarding a small plaque and monument in one end of the forest. The gist of the plaque read: This memorial is in gratitude of all the Finnish women and their generous contributions during WWII. During WWII, Finnish women had not only worked as nurses, cooks but also as sentries.



Left to right: Mayor Asuja, Lasse, Henrik Sandstrom at Lassen polku.

While at Lassen polku, I asked Lasse if he had encountered any wild life during his training runs in the woods and trails in the area. I was imagining and expecting great stories of wild bears, or wolves, or the possibility of Lasse fighting off a bear/wolf, then sprinting off to safety. What crazy thoughts, but I felt compelled to ask Lasse these stupid questions. Lasse simply answered that he has only seen bears in zoos. What??? And what about a wolf/susi??? He replied, "I have never seen one and I hope I never see one!!!!" So much for my stupid questions and imagination. I got what I deserved, albeit, disappointing!!

After this, we drove back to Mayor Asuja's office where he presented both Henrik and me with a beautiful book about Myrskylä. This special book contains copies of old black and white photos taken in the 19th and 20th century, along with recent ones in color. Both Mayor Asuja and Lasse signed our books, plus Lasse autographed several postcards of himself wearing his 4 Olympic gold medals. I then followed Lasse to his monster cargo truck and asked for one last photo. The last photo taken, I thanked him for his generous time and hospitality and... most of all, his inspiration.

One thing for sure: next time I visit Myrskylä, I will definitely insist on Lasse showing me how to drive his cargo truck, after all, he assured me that driving a big truck was easier than driving a smaller vehicle. Again, Lasse seems to have a way of making many things look and sound easy...maybe even winning 4 Olympic gold medals??? Furthermore, I think Mayor Asuja and I need to have a meeting ASAP concerning my idea for a name change for Myrskylä: I was thinking of changing Myrskylä to MyrskyLasse....It is only a simple change of 3 extra letters!!!

PS: Special kiitos/thanks to Henrik Sandstrom, Mayor Jouka Asuja, and Lasse Viren for my 1st visit to Myrskylä...home of the perfect storm: Lasse Viren!
Kiitos! Kiitos! Hyvä! Hyvä!...Sisu!!!!!!



Author contemplating future “MyrskyLasse” sign change...only 3 extra letters!!!

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Figure 1