



Foreign minister Alexander Stubb:

“An Hour of Sports Gives Me Two Hours of Working Time”

Balance and time management: First week at the job but not too busy to test the brand-new triathlon bicycle that was waiting for him at a bike shop.



"I'm always trying to strike a balance between work, exercise, nutrition, family and friends," says Finnish foreign minister Alexander Stubb, 40, a leading figure in Finnish politics' new wave. His goals are high in both political life and the triathlon.

On a rainy early-summer evening, 20-plus miles from the centres of Finnish power, the foreign minister gets into a wetsuit and steps into the cool water of a small lake. Around him are a handful of other participants.

He smiles. Not self-confidently as he usually does, but more with the flavour of "My, my, do I have to be here?" Perhaps he felt the same way when he landed, as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's chairman, at the bomb-stricken Tbilisi airport during the war between Georgia and Russia.

Stubb is embarking on his first triathlon competition. It's been a couple of months since his predecessor as foreign minister, *Ilkka Kanerva*, fell victim to a text-messaging scandal, and the fatherland called Stubb, who had been elected to the European Parliament with a huge number of votes, to take up the foreign affairs portfolio.

In his career he has churned forward at a dizzying pace, but until this summer - he had never swum an open-water race of even a few hundred metres. Although taught by professionals, he isn't even a good swimmer. After the triathlon race, he claimed that he had a panic attack while swimming.

"A confessed sports nut"

Stubb has been going in for sports and competing athletically his whole life. During his school days he played ice hockey, football and handball. Now his sports have changed, but he says he's still "a confessed sports nut" and an enthusiastic sports spectator.

"I follow all sports ardently, except darts," he says.

He inherited his ardour for sports at home. His father, *Göran Stubb*, was a sports reporter and the managing director of Helsinki's successful, tradition-rich IFK ice hockey club, and of the Finnish Ice Hockey Association.

In 1982 the younger Stubb travelled with a Helsinki team on an unforgettable trip to Moscow. The journey had impacts on many things that he was unaware of at that time. At 14, he was now at the summit of his ice hockey career. At the time, the Soviet national ice hockey team was known as the Red Machine. Stubb found out why on the rink, and especially from the scoreboard. He's convinced that, on that trip, Karl Marx lost his chance to become his ideological guru.

From ice hockey to golf

Thereafter he began to enjoy himself more and more on the golf course. His father did

not oppose the change of sports. In golf the younger Stubb got onto the Finnish national boys' team, and then the national men's team. Then, on the strength of a golf scholarship, he moved to the United States.

Much later, he reflected on why his father was so easily satisfied, at the time, with his son's change of sports. In time he realized that his father - today one of the NHL's key European scouts - had an eye for ice hockey. He had perhaps observed something that his son, who had been aiming at a professional career, had not yet realized himself.

At South Carolina's Furman University, the younger Stubb did well in golf, but not so well as he was supposed to. He noticed that the university had a few golfers better than him. From this he concluded that golf wasn't the right choice for him after all.

At that juncture a chance occurrence intervened in a major way. Under the guidance of Prof. *Brent Nielsen*, Stubb became acquainted with the European Union. He underwent an academic awakening and swapped golf's European tour for the European Union. He threw himself into his studies with the same zeal he had previously devoted to sports. Four years in the States' Baptist belt was an instructive time in other ways, too.

Taking its first steps in the EU, Finland lacked experts. Stubb soon landed in a position at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He wrote his dissertation at the London School of Economics - "Flexible Integration and the Amsterdam Treaty: Negotiating Differentiation in the 1996-97 IGC". The opus didn't gain an avid popular readership, but Stubb's street cred was already ample. His promotion to the staff of European Commission president *Romano Prodi* established Stubb's prominence once and for all. In the European Parliament elections of June 2004 he garnered more than 115 000 votes, an overwhelming total.

Pencilling in time for sports

In spite of the vertiginous rise in his career fortunes, sports have kept pace with Stubb's life all the while. He's a familiar sight in city marathons. Before becoming foreign minister he trained eight hours a week. Nowadays he tries to get in six.

"An hour of sports gives me two hours of working time," he says. Even when travelling, he generally pencils in time for sports in his cramped daily programme. He adapts his practice routine to the situation. During a visit to Tadjikistan he took a short run in the garden of the state guest house. In Kazakhstan's Astana, he divided an hour equally between swimming, an exercycle, and a running mat.

"In among 50 or 60 calendar notations there are always five notations for sports," he says. He still plays "a few rounds" of golf a year.

"I'm a selfish exerciser. If I've got four hours, I don't go to the golf course. I go out for a run or spend the time with my family."

In Brussels he took his longest bike rides on weekend mornings after six. To conclude his outing he'd buy fresh bread for his family's breakfast table.

"I'm always trying to strike a balance between work, exercise, nutrition, family and friends."

Evening activities have been reduced to a minimum, and hosts always get precise instructions on the content of his breakfast and lunch.

Dreaming of the Ironman

A physiotherapist who had cared for his back, which got sore during marathon racing, introduced Stubb to the triathlon. On 15 January 2008 he had his first swimming practice. His objective was Finland's oldest and most famous triathlon competition, held in Joroinen, deep in the Finnish heartland, in July. The distances in Joroinen are half those in Hawaii's legendary Ironman Triathlon: a 1500-m swim, 90 km on a bike and a 21.1-km run.

His arrival in Joroinen turned the contest into a media event and led to a resurgence for the triathlon in Finland. As the competition began, heavy clouds collected above Lake Valvatusjärvi. Only a scattering of spectators followed the foreign minister as he walked to the starting point for the swim.

During the cycling it rained cats and dogs. Stubb rode steadily and convincingly at 36 km an hour. His pulse stayed below 130 the whole time.

He took just over five hours for the whole competition. At the finish line, on an old brick-dust sports ground softened by the downpour, he gave a television interview.

"This is the best thing I've ever experienced in sports," he said, and gave a grin filled with shiny white teeth, as if he'd just come out of the shower.

In August the Helsinki city marathon entered the stream of things. He planned for a time of 3:15, but his speed slipped after the halfway point. His best marathon time of the season was 3:31.

Next summer's programme is already taking shape - skiing, at least one marathon and a few half-distance triathlons.

"My dream would be to do a full-length triathlon some day," he says. He adds that no decisions as to time and place have yet been taken, but, knowing him, it may happen very soon - perhaps as early as next summer in Roth, Germany.