

# 17 THE BALTIC SEA FRIENDSHIP RACE 1986-1989

## A UNIQUE EFFORT IN THE HISTORY OF FINNISH BICYCLE RACING

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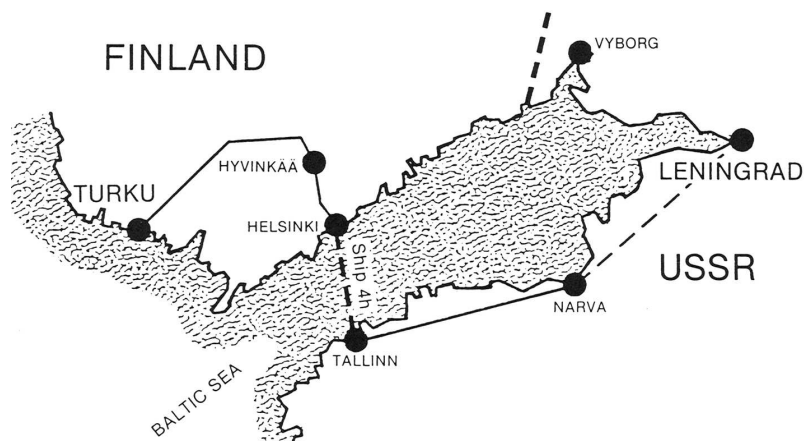
As soon as the first edition of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race started on Thursday, May 29th, 1986 with a three-kilometre prologue in Turku, a city of some 160,000 people in the South-Western coast of Finland, international cycling history was made. It was the first time that the route of a high-profile road cycling race included stages on both sides of the iron curtain.

When the race ended with a criterium stage in central Leningrad six days and almost 1,000

racing kilometres later, many prominent figures within the international cycling community had been surprised by the joint efforts of the Finnish and Soviet organisers.<sup>1</sup>

After its first edition, the Baltic Sea Friendship Race appeared in the calendar of the International Amateur Cycling Federation (FIAC) for three more years.

Fig. Laamanen-1. The route of the 1988 edition of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race. That year, only two stages in Finland and one in Estonia were ridden as regular in-line road stages. The rest were criterium races in Tallinn, Narva, Peterhof and Leningrad. The total distance of the race was 1,118 kilometres. (Copyright: Turun Urheiluliitto / Turku Athletics Federation)



The direction of the route was switched every second year. In 1987 and 1989 the prologue was raced in Leningrad and the closing stage finished in Turku, whereas in 1988 the Finns had their second hosting of the start of the race. Already in 1987, the Baltic Sea Friendship Race was raised from category A to category HC which was an honorary title only a selected few events could simultaneously hold.<sup>2</sup> It also grew in length as well as duration to cover nine days and about 1,200 kilometres. The only other category HC races at the time were the Peace Race and the Tour de l'Avenir. All three events shared the principle of welcoming national teams from both socialist and non-socialist countries.<sup>3</sup>

## BEGINNINGS

The Baltic Sea Friendship Race had its beginnings in discussions between two people, Russian Valery Syssoev who was at the time president of the FIAC, and Mr. Simo Klimscheffskij, Finnish

entrepreneur and cycling enthusiasts.<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Klimscheffskij was one of the four vice-presidents of the FIAC as well as the honorary chairman of Finland's national cycling union.<sup>5</sup> He also acted as chairman of the city council of Turku and had very well-established relations to both politicians and the business world.<sup>6</sup>

Klimscheffskij and Syssoev first came up with the idea of a race that "might start in one country and end in the other" in Moscow, apparently in late 1983 or early 1984. It was also decided very early on that the theme of race would be friendship. Apparently, at first the Soviet side had proposed "peace," but as its connections to the usual socialist liturgy were so obvious, a compromise was reached.<sup>7</sup> The would-be organizers soon started to make plans concerning the route of the race. At first, there was some interest to get even more of the Baltic countries to host the stages of the race, but it soon became apparent that practical issues prevented the route from expanding beyond Finland

and neighboring Soviet Union. The Finnish organizers found their logistical example for the event from the Swedish Postgirot Open, which Mr. Henry Sundberg, the future race director on all four editions of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race, visited in 1985.<sup>8</sup> With him went lieutenant Matti Krats from the Finnish mobile police who also would put the experience to good use. The stages of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race that were run on the Finnish side could not be raced on totally closed roads and therefore required special traffic arrangements. Lieutenant Krats was responsible for these and received much praise for his efforts.<sup>9</sup> The sheer amount of race traffic alone, including the multi-national peloton of around 100 competitors from over fifteen different teams and the race caravan, was something totally unprecedented in Finnish cycling

Even if the Baltic Sea Friendship Race indeed was a joint effort between the Finns and the Russians, the organizational and economical burden of the race was not shared equally. For the stages run on the Soviet side, the Leningrad Sport Committee provided the logistical expenses such as hotels, food and fuel. However, everything else was taken care by the Finnish organizers, who had delegated the main organizational responsibilities to the



Fig. Laamanen-2. The multi-national peloton with Finnish riders in the foreground waiting for the start of stage one near the Turku Market Square on May 28th, 1988. (Copyright: Turun Urheiluliitto / Turku Athletics Federation)

Athletics Federation of Turku, the home town of many of the race's key persons including Klimscheffskij, Sundberg and Mr. Paavo Glumoff, Secretary General of the race. Each year, the Finns had to secure about 75 percent of the event's total budget which increased from about \$ 450,000 in 1986 to over \$ 500,000 in 1989 when the last edition of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race was run. The funds were obtained from some of the largest Finnish companies that had business interests and operations in the Soviet Union. The Swedish-based car manufacturer Volvo was also a notable sponsor—each year it provided 40 brand new vehicles for the race caravan.<sup>10</sup>

### WHY UNIQUE?

The Baltic Sea Friendship Race can be considered a unique cycling event both by Finnish and international standards. Internationally, it had special political significance as a bridging race between the East and the West. From a domestic perspective, the defining issue is without doubt the fact that the organizers succeeded so well in bringing together and executing a race of a totally unprecedented scale. The culture of bicycle racing in Finland has never been on the same scale as e.g. in neighboring Sweden, and cycling was and still is very much is a “minor sport” when measured either by economical standards or the amount of athletes and spectators.

The brainchild of Klimscheffskij and Syssoev came into

existence after almost two years of preparations.<sup>11</sup> After its successful first edition and assurances from the sponsors to finance also the 1987 race, the Baltic Sea Friendship Race was secured on the FIAC calendar as an annual event. Its elevated, above-category classification meant that the organizers decided to enlarge the size of the peloton. A high-point was reached in 1988 when 20 teams from 17 different nations participated. As hosting countries, Finland and the Soviet Union had three teams each. However, one of the Soviet teams was an Estonian national squad. In the last two editions of the race, 1988 and 1989, stages were also held in Estonia and although the country still was a Soviet republic, the Estonians were nevertheless invited to participate with their own team that also proved to be highly successful.

Other European participants in the 1988 edition were Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Holland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland. The United States also sent a team, as it did to all editions of the race. This was of course very valuable to both organizing countries, as it helped to profile the race as a truly international event without political boundaries. The inviting of teams was Klimscheffskij's responsibility, and Syssoev made it clear to him well ahead of the race's first edition that the inclusion of a U.S. team was essential.<sup>12</sup> The longest journey was made by the Australian team, which participated also in 1989.

The inviting of several teams from countries where organized,

competitive bicycle racing was—and in many ways still is—only developing makes the 1988 edition of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race especially interesting. In addition to the numerous well-established cycling nations participating, teams from China, India, Iraq, and the Ivory Coast also trod the Finnish, Estonian and Russian Roads. For them, the race certainly provided a valuable chance to gain some experience. From the organizers point of view, inviting them can be seen as an effort to globalize the sport, something that even today

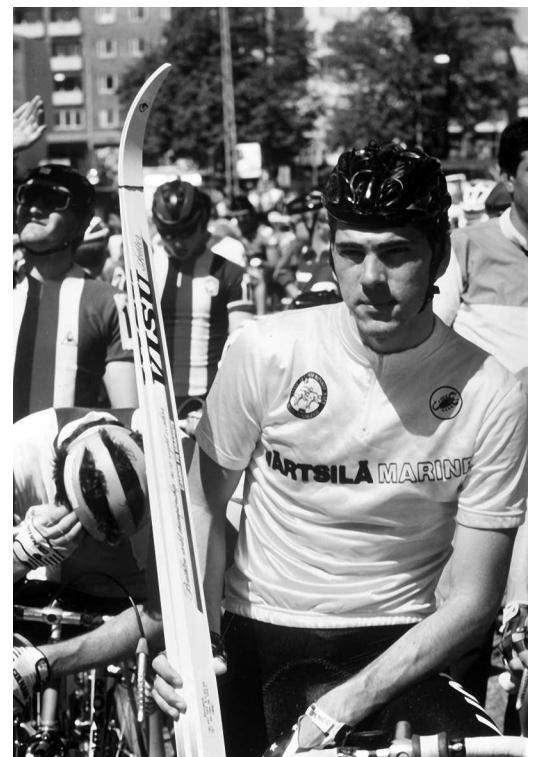


Fig. Laamanen-3. Only in Finland: 1988 prologue winner Francisco “Frankie” Andreu of the U.S. team waits for the start of stage 1 in Turku on May 28, posing with the pair of skis he was awarded for his win. Today (2008), Andreu works as sports director for the US-based Rock Racing cycling team. (Copyright: Turun Urheiluliitto / Turku Athletics Federation)

remains a top priority of the International Cycling Union (UCI). The specific background for these somewhat surprising invites are however more complicated, and it is clear that the Baltic Sea Friendship Race gave vice-president Klimscheffskij an opportunity to return some old favours and gain support for his country as well as himself inside the FIAC.<sup>13</sup>

Because the Baltic Sea Friendship Race was a category A/HC event, all the expenses of participating teams were covered from the race budget. Therefore, it can be concluded that there wasn't a shortage of willing entrants and that Klimscheffskij had some freedom of choice on whom to give his invitations. However, the race also overlapped with a few other important events on the FIAC calendar such as the Milk Race (Tour of Britain), and consequently some prominent European cycling countries such as Great Britain didn't feature on the list of participants

on any edition of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race.

### EXOTICISM AND HIGH-LEVEL RACING

The combination of very powerful teams—especially the Soviet Union—and significantly weaker squads such as India meant that while the level of competition was very high for the top placings, the organizers had to deal with problems that arose when complete teams were dropped off the peloton's pace. In 1988, the whole Indian team abandoned the race already during the first road stage from Turku to Hyvinkää. However, the organizers took them by bus to the stage finish and decided to let the Indians to continue in the race albeit they didn't appear on the rankings of future stages. After all, the more exotic countries were in the race in the spirit of "development co-operation," as

newspaper Turun Sanomat reported.<sup>14</sup>

The chance to compete with African or Asian teams was of course a rare chance for most of the participants in the Baltic Sea Friendship Race. But for many, riding a bicycle race inside the boundaries of the Soviet Union must also have been an exotic experience by itself. According to race director Sundberg and secretary general Glumoff, even the Finnish organizers didn't really know what to expect when the racers—not riding their bikes because the border crossing had to be made between stages—and the race caravan entered the Soviet Union on June 2nd, 1986.

The Russian organizers had assured them that everything was in order, but detailed information about anything was scarcely given.<sup>15</sup> That year, the Russian hosted three stages: a criterium in Vyborg, an regular road stage from Vyborg to Leningrad, and a criterium in central Leningrad. In the end, almost everything played out smoothly. According to Jyrki Terävuoto, badly deteriorated roads that caused a lot of flat tires turned out to be the main concern for most of the riders. On a



Fig. Laamanen-4. The Ivory Coast was one of teams that couldn't compete for top placings in the 1988 edition of the race, but they certainly added to its variety. Their participation had been in doubt until the last minute when they accidentally flew from Moscow to Paris instead of Helsinki. The car on the background is part of the race caravan and is equipped with the sign of Turun Sanomat, local newspaper and one of the race's sponsors. (Copyright: Turun Urheiluliitto / Turku Athletics Federation)

more positive note, the crowds turned out to be big. Most of the stages raced in the Leningrad area and especially in Estonia in the 1988 and 1989 editions were criteriums, where challenging courses and enthusiastic crowds brought about an unforgettable atmosphere.<sup>16</sup>

Because the Baltic Sea Friendship Race was on the amateur calendar, the teams that cycling federations of most of the non-socialist countries sent to compete in the event consisted of young and often still inexperienced athletes. In contrast to the West, where the most promising young cyclists were soon offered professional contracts, the Soviet and East German teams were extremely strong.<sup>17</sup> In 1986, one of

the Soviet teams even included the 1980 Moscow Olympics gold medalist Sergei Sukhoruchenkov, although the top placings were usually contested by athletes of the younger generation.<sup>18</sup>

When the doors of professional sport opened to Eastern Europeans in the 1990s, cyclists such as future Giro d'Italia winner (1996) Pavel Tonkov, two-time Olympic champion (1988, 2000) Viatcheslav Ekimov, Tour of Flanders winner (2004) Steffen Wesemann, three-time Tour de France green jersey winner (1991, 1993, 1994) Djamolidine Abdoujaparov, and Tour de France yellow jersey holder (1999) and multiple stage winner Jaan Kirsipuu had already had some early career successes in

different editions of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race. All four editions were dominated and won by the Russians, with Mikhael Sveshnikov in 1986 and Asiat Saitov in 1987, 1988, and 1989. However, individual stage wins were accumulated also by riders from various other countries including the United States and Canada. The only Finnish stage winner was Kari Myyryläinen, but he achieved his success on perhaps the best possible moment—the 1986 prologue in Turku, on the first day of the race's first edition. Myyryläinen also soon became Finland's first professional cyclist.

#### SUMMARY OF RESULTS

##### 1986

Start: Thursday, May 29<sup>th</sup>, Turku

Finish Wednesday, June 4<sup>th</sup>, Leningrad Total distance: 982 km

Prologue, 4 regular road stages, 2 criterium stages, 1 individual time trial The top five: 1. Mikhael Sveshnikov (USSR)

2. Aleksandr Krasnov (USSR)
3. Viatcheslav Ekimov (USSR)
4. Jan Schur (DDR)
5. Leonid Arkhipov (USSR)

##### 1987

Start: Thursday, May 28<sup>th</sup>, Leningrad

Finish: Friday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, Turku Total distance: 1,215 km

Prologue, 5 regular road stages, 3 criterium stages, 1 individual time trial The top five: 1. Asiat Saitov (USSR)

2. Viatcheslav Ekimov (USSR)
3. Pavel Tonkov (USSR)
4. Djamolidine Abdoujaparov (USSR)
5. Arne Aadnøy (Norway)

##### 1988

Start: Friday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, Turku

Finish: Saturday, June 4<sup>th</sup>, Leningrad Total distance: 1,118 km

Prologue, 3 regular road stages, 5 criterium stages, 1 individual time trial The top five: 1. Asiat Saitov (USSR)

2. Aivar Murd (Estonia)
3. Toomas Kirsipuu (Estonia)
4. Ralf Schmid (DDR)
5. Andres Lauk (Estonia)

##### 1989

Start: Saturday, May 27<sup>th</sup>, Leningrad

Finish: Sunday, June 4<sup>th</sup>, Turku Total distance: XXXX km

Prologue, 6 regular road stages, 2 criterium stages, 1 individual time trial The top five: 1. Asiat Saitov (USSR)

2. Frank Augustin (DDR)
3. Björn Stenersen (Norway)
4. Steffen Wesemann (DDR)
5. Kari Myyryläinen (Finland)

## A PAST PHENOMENON

For a cycling event, the Baltic Sea Friendship Race achieved an exceptional amount of publicity in Finland. All four editions were broadcast on national television and race coverage was provided by two helicopters—something that is almost unimaginable nowadays. The race was a big exception from the normal situation where media coverage of competitive cycling is clearly in the margin. But in proportion to that, also the sheer size of the race was very different than anything else that ever had or has since taken place in Finnish cycling.<sup>19</sup>

While the racing itself wasn't about politics—if some examples of efficient co-operation between the Soviet and Eastern European teams are not taken into account—changed political realities led to the decline of the race after four successful editions. The economic instability of the Soviet Union caused the race's potential sponsors to back off and without them, the plans for a 1990 race had to be scrapped already in late 1989.<sup>20</sup>

The Baltic Sea Friendship Race would not have been possible to organize without its special political value to both the Finland and the Soviet Union in general. But equally important were the

good personal relations between key persons on both sides of the Finnish-Russian border and inside the FIAC. Both race director Sundberg and secretary general Glumoff have stressed out that the role of “Chairman of the Organizing Committee” Simo Klimescheffskij was very active and in many ways unique, as he was determined to realize a project that had to be started very much from scratch.

Good co-operation and strong grass-roots-level commitment by local cycling clubs was also important, as although the budget of the race was substantial, most of the logistical and practical work during the stages held in Finland had to be done by volunteers. In fact, this led to some criticism in the newspapers and the issue was acknowledged by the organizers also. Hopes to increase the amount of personnel working full-time for the race were maintained from year to year, but in the end the situation didn't change very much.<sup>21</sup>

A cycling event that could be compared to the Baltic Sea Friendship Race is very hard to imagine in Finland today. Although hopes for a high-level international race have endured over the past two decades, the

actual organizational interest and capabilities are lacking.

During the years of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race, its Finnish organizers established good personal contacts especially with the Estonian and Russian cycling federations.<sup>22</sup> However, both the collapse of the Soviet Union and the passing of time itself have significantly diminished the value of these contacts as the people have either been replaced with others or passed away. Thus the organization of an international race would have to be started from scratch once again. In addition to this, it has to be acknowledged that the high-profile doping scandals of recent years that have stressed the public image of competitive cycling mean that the times are hard for the sport in general.

The Baltic Sea Friendship Race can justifiably be described as a past phenomenon in Finnish bicycle racing. It has long since made its transformation from a current event to a unique, if somewhat forgotten, piece of sports history. At its time, however, the race was the high-point of the season for most of the Finnish cyclists, and in many ways a special experience for its various entrants from all over the world.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Michael Aisner, “Made in the USSR and Finland” in *Winning: Bicycle racing illustrated*, 1986 (the specific issue is regrettably unknown to the author of this article). Offpress: Allentown, PA, USA, 1986, p. 48.
- 2 This was reported e.g. in the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* on February 4th, 1987.
- 3 Basic facts about the Peace Race and the Tour de l'Avenir can be found on-line in English e.g. in Wikipedia: “Peace Race—Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace\\_Race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Race)>; “Tour de l'Avenir—Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tour\\_de\\_l'Avenir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tour_de_l'Avenir)>. Viewed October 26th, 2007.
- 4 Interview with Mr. Henry Sundberg, Director of the Race on

- all four editions of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race, April 12th, 2007. Simo Klimesheffskij passed away in 2002.
- 5 *Cycling and Olympism*. “Part II—The administration of the FIAC”, p. 542. Electronic document from the LA84 Foundation’s digital archive. <<http://www.la84foundation.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1984/ore201/ORE201v.pdf>>. Viewed October 26th, 2007.
  - 6 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Paavo Glumoff, Secretary General on all four editions of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race 1986–1989, September 19th, 2007.
  - 7 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007; Aisner 1986, p. 48.
  - 8 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; Helsingin Sanomat, May 29th, 1986.
  - 9 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Jyrki Terävu, participant on all four editions of the Baltic Sea Friendship Race, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007. The traffic arrangements were given much praise also in the Finnish newspapers. The Postgirot Open was a professional stage race that was run each summer between 1982 and 2002. Its winners include Tommy Prim (1982, 1983), Gilbert Duclos-Lassalle (1986), Erik Dekker (1994, 1995) and Thor Hushovd (2001). (Past winners courtesy of Cyclingnews.com, <<http://www.cyclingnews.com/road/?id%202002/jun02/tourofsweden02/default>>.)
  - 10 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007. The economic aspects of the race were also widely reported by Finnish newspapers as well as Michael Aisner (1986, p. 49).
  - 11 The Finnish newspapers reported somewhat differently on the length of preparations, varying from 18 months two years. See Helsingin Sanomat and Turun Sanomat, May 29th, 1986.
  - 12 Interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007; Aisner 1986, 48.
  - 13 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007.
  - 14 Finnish daily newspapers *Aamulehti* and *Turun Sanomat*, May 29th, 1988.
  - 15 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007. See also Aisner’s article for his vivid description of the border crossing (1986, p. 50–51).
  - 16 Interview with Mr. Terävu, April 12th, 2007.
  - 17 The best example of this is the 4th stage of the 1986 edition, where seven riders of the Soviet teams, along with two Polish, one Czechoslovakian, and one East German rider broke away from the main bunch early in the stage and won the stage by over 10 minutes. See e.g. *Turun Sanomat*, June 2nd, 1986.
  - 18 Sukhoruchenkov was part of the “USSR 2” team (there were three Soviet teams in total), and managed to win stage 6 (Vyborg to Leningrad) of the 1986 edition.
  - 19 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, April 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Terävu, April 12th, 2007.
  - 20 Interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007.
  - 21 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, Aril 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007. See also *Turun Sanomat*, June 4th, 1988.
  - 22 Interview with Mr. Sundberg, Aril 12th, 2007; interview with Mr. Glumoff, September 19th, 2007.