

Paavo Komi

Renowned international researcher and scientific leader

Professor of biomechanics, Paavo V. Komi, passed away on the 10th of October 2018 at his home in Uurainen, at the age of 78. Paavo always had a very international outlook in his work, which earned him a great deal of respect from the scientific community. It is no exaggeration to say that Paavo Komi put the University of Jyväskylä and its sports faculty on the global map.

After obtaining an MSc degree in Sports Science from Jyväskylä in 1966, Paavo received an Asla Fullbright Doctoral scholarship to the University of Iowa in America. He received his PhD from Penn State University in 1969. His time in America was, in Paavo's own view, a decisive factor in the progression of his scientific career. In 1971, Paavo returned to the University of Jyväskylä, initially as an Associate Professor of anatomy and kinesiology. In 1979 he became a professor of exercise physiology, and later a professor of biomechanics. He also served as the head of the Department of Biology of Physical Activity for a quarter of a century, until 2004.

Paavo Komi was known as a strict leader and PhD student supervisor. Typically, a manuscript was only considered to be ready for submission after the 11th version. In PhD seminars, presentations were practiced conscientiously, with an emphasis on correct English pronunciation. Congress presentations were always required to follow the "KISS principle". Many of Paavo's former students have since passed on these same principles to people in different parts of the globe.

PhD seminars were sometimes arranged at Paavo's home in Uurainen, where in addition to PhD students, many international guests enjoyed the hospitality of Paavo and his wife Raija. Congress practice sessions in Uurainen naturally ended with dinner and a visit to the sauna. Before that, there was always a chin-up competition, which to the disappointment of numerous young scientists, was usually won by Paavo. The plot of land where Paavo and Raija's Uurainen home now stands was bought in 1966. A summer cottage was initially built, and Paavo later expanded it (partly with his own hands), and turned it into the family home. His Uurainen home became a very dear place to Paavo, and after his frequent international trips, he was always eager to return there.

Paavo's research focused on the mechanisms of neuromuscular function in relation to movement. As a scientist, Paavo was open-minded and innovative. His research, particularly regarding the stretch-shortening cycle, was pioneering. He developed methods of measuring tendon forces during movement, first using buckle-type force transducers, and later using optic fibres. These innovations brought many international scientists to Jyväskylä over the years.

Outside of work, Paavo was also very active in the sports community, particularly with regard to cross-country skiing. He was a passionate skier and an active member

of the Finnish Ski Association. He sought to professionalise the discipline of coaching in skiing, and spoke passionately in defence of the need for education, which was part of the foundation on which the 1980's success of Finnish skiing was built. Paavo was involved in numerous research articles about cross-country skiing and ski-jumping, and he led data collection at several major competitions.

From a very early stage in his career, Paavo understood the significance of international conferences as a means of promoting dialogue and networking, and he also saw the benefits of hosting such events. He brought the first large international biomechanics conference to Jyväskylä in 1975. Paavo subsequently led the organisation of numerous other large sports-related congresses, the last of which was the International Olympic Committee's Sport for All World Congress in 2010. Paavo played a significant role in several scientific organisations. He was a founding member of the ECSS, and hosted the ECSS congress in 2000 and 2007. He also served as ECSS president from 1997 to 1999. In addition, he was the President of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (1991–1996), and President of the International Society of Biomechanics (1981–1985), as well as an honorary member from 2005.

Paavo received numerous international awards and honours throughout his career. In 2001, he received an Olympic Order Award from the International Olympic Committee. In addition, he was awarded no fewer than 7 honorary Doctorates from prestigious universities all over the world.

Paavo led by example in creating a 'can do' working culture. Every problem was approached by exploring all possible solutions. He particularly emphasised the need to study the literature and develop a solid scientific basis when seeking innovative solutions. However, his 'can do' culture did not mean that science always had to be serious. Paavo had a fantastic sense of humour, which was appreciated by his wide circle of friends both at home and abroad. Over the years he became known for his wise and often humorous sayings, which he took great enjoyment in sharing, often with a twinkle in his eye. But these sayings usually also contained a more serious message. For example, "are we having a meeting or are we getting work done?", was a familiar question posed by Paavo. A few years ago, a biography was written about Paavo's life, and one of his nuggets of wisdom was used as the title, which roughly translates to: "There are no shortcuts along a straight line".

As well as his home, Paavo's family were very dear to him, and he always spoke warmly of them. A few years ago, Paavo summarised his life with his wife Raija in a beautifully written text: "We have lived a rich life; a natural consequence is that we can be very proud of our children Kirsi, Olli and Paula, and our five grandchildren".

Janne Avela
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The writers are Paavo Komi's former students, colleagues and friends