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EXCLUSIVE: WORLD NO.1 JUSTINAS KINDERIS, “IF YOU HAVE A DREAM YOU SHOULD NEVER GIVE IT UP.”



Following a string of quality performances which culminated in victory at the World Championships last year, 28-year-old Justinas Kinderis etched his name in the pages of history and realised a childhood dream by becoming World No.1. This however seems to be only the start of a new chapter in the career of the unassuming Lithuanian.

Last season's elite Modern Pentathlon competition, which proved both exciting and unpredictable in equal measure, had several contenders to the top position but it was Kinderis who made his mark. His renewed focus and coolness under pressure giving him the edge in the race for the number 1 spot.

The Lithuanian is guaranteed to be challenged by his rivals this year, with many hell-bent on dethroning the current champion, but he is determined to hold on to his status of top dog. The strength in depth of the current crop of talented pentathletes and Kinderis' steely determination will

ensure another explosive campaign this time around.

We were keen to get his thoughts before World Cup #2 and caught up with him in Colorado.

Q: You have just come through an intense 3-week training camp in Colorado, how are you feeling?

JK: I am feeling very good and strong. Training was intense. Was feeling the effects of the extra load and was a bit tired after the first week but I recovered fast and feel like I got my fitness to the next level in the last two weeks. The high altitude was a good experience for me. My conditioning for this season is coming along well. It was the first time that I trained at altitude (Colorado is at 1839m or 6,035ft above sea level) and it will help with my swim and run times this season.

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Q: 2013 was a big year for you, how do you look back upon it?

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JK: It began with big changes; I changed my coach of 11 years in February. It wasn't an easy decision for me after so long but in hindsight it was the correct decision. I needed a new approach to my fencing. I owe him a lot but since the switch, my fencing improved a lot and I noticed it especially at the World Championships, when it gave me the perfect platform with which to go on to win. Chinese Taipei was a big moment for me but I see it as only the beginning of a new chapter in my career.

Q: What made you become better?

JK: We have some good athletes in Lithuania and also former champions now coaching, like Andrejus Zadneprovskis, who is now national coach. I have been able to observe them at close quarters and learn. They have helped me a lot, both in physical preparations but also on the mental side. Being around former World and Olympic Champions has given me good knowledge and their experiences of big moments, of big competition, has given me a good insight into a champion's mind-set. They helped me a lot, they knew how to become world champions and I listened. Thank you to them.

Q: Being World No.1 and the reigning world champion must be a great

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feeling, do you feel any added pressure?

JK: Being No.1 is good, unexpected. If someone had asked me in the early days of my career, I would have answered that I never expected to get to that level although it was always my dream. There are so many good athletes competing who are more than capable of being No.1. There is no added pressure for me except the one that I put on myself. In a way however, I am more relaxed, being in this position has instilled in me real self-belief. I believe that I can now go on to achieve even more. My dreams have come true. After Olympics Games, the objective was to become either a European or World Champion and I have achieved this. However I am now hungry for even more success. I want to reach a new level and defend my position and title.

Q: How will you deal with your new status of World No.1?

JK: I don't think as a number 1, I just want to do my job. Being world champion is in the past. I look to the future. If you think too much you put pressure on yourself. So one step at a time. You have to stay modest and grounded. Pentathletes respect each other and we have a good camaraderie between us, no one is treated different even if they are the No.1. So again I feel no added pressure.

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Q: How has the reaction been in Lithuania?

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JK: There was real surprise as my victory was unexpected. Everyone thought that Laura (Women's London 2012 Olympic Champion Laura Asadauskaite) would win, but not many predicted a victory for me. I have changed a lot of opinions, and now people believe in me. The reaction has been very positive.

Q: Where do you go from here, what is the next step?

JK: If you reach your goal and achieve what you set out to achieve then you must set yourself new goals, new targets. I have a new perspective now: greater focus, greater motivation. Deep in my mind now is Rio 2016 and an Olympics medal.

Q: For now, what is your ambition for 2014?

JK: I want to prove that I am a worthy No.1. There are doubters out there so I want to show that my title was not lucky but a result of hard work and a renewed approach to my training. For the early part of the season, as I am not travelling to Cairo, am concentrating on World Cup #3 in Chengdu. China has so far been a lucky country for me, I had some good finishes there, a couple of podium places, and a sixth place. My aim next month is to finish in the top 6. The World Cup Series is all about consolidation for me but the main focus is the Europeans and the Worlds, where I want to be at my best level.

Q: Who do you see as your main rivals this year?

JK: Russia's Aleksander Lesun is very strong. He is getting better all the time so I expect him to be a big rival for me this year. The whole French team is very strong, Valentin Prades and me are on the same exact number of points in the ranking. The Hungarians for sure, with Adam Marosi of course, and Robert Kasza, who is coming back after injury. All the top 10, even the top 20 is very strong. Anyone can beat anyone. The level is so high, so it is really exciting to be able to test yourself against such good opponents. No one expected me to be world champion and it has given belief to other guys that they can go on and win and be the top pentathlete. For sure, it will be not easy for them as I want to stay No.1.

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Q: Tell us about your training

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JK: With Pentathlon you have to tailor your training and practise a lot. It depends on the time of the season but normally I train 40-50 hours a week, 6 days a week with a rest on Sunday. Saturday's session ends at around 2pm so the schedule is pretty full the rest of the time. Days begin at 7am. I like to replicate the structure of competition so I normally fence in the morning. At my training camp in Colorado there was no riding and the focus was on swimming and running mainly. At home I have 3 riding lessons a week, Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday. I mainly practice jumps but also do several other exercises with the horse. In winter, the riding is inside so I always look forward to the warmer month when we can move outdoors.

Q: Which facet of training do you enjoy most?

JK: Fencing is my favourite, the one I enjoy most. It is the first discipline in competition and with the importance to start the day good, it helps to motivate you when you do well. Swimming and running are almost the same because you compete against yourself, your times never vary too much so you know what performance you will have in those disciplines. Shooting I have improved and is all about being calm and relaxed. The real difference comes in the fence, you go head-to-head against the other athletes, so it is a real battle for position. It is very fast and very exciting.

Q: Tell us about your diet, do you eat anything special?

JK: For me there is no real surprise when it comes to eating. No special meals. I just try to make sure that I always eat a healthy and balanced diet. I allow myself a coke once in a while but mainly I eat vegetables and meat.

Kinderis

Q: What would you tell young people starting their sporting career?

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JK: My advice is chase your dreams. If you want to achieve something, you can. I never got a medal as a youth or a junior but I always worked towards my dreams, and I became World Champion. It has made me so happy and proud, proving that if you dig deep, work hard and believe in yourself, you can become what you want. Do what you love and never stop. If you have a dream you should never give it up.

World Cup #3 will take place from April 16-20 April at the Pierre de Coubertin Modern Pentathlon Stadium in Chengdu, China.