



By MIKA HILSKA

Tero Taitu is the hottest name in Finnish floorball. His speciality is clinching matches. Particularly in tight situations. In extra time in the world championship final, he clinched Finland's first world title when he knocked the ball into Sweden's net.



Photo OLLI LAUKKANEN

Tero Tiitu, Match-Clincher

Tiitu, 27, corresponds in many ways to the image of a top player in the young sport. He's intelligent, ready to talk, and well educated - and, like many another top name, he learned his playing doctrines elsewhere in Finland before switching to a top side in the Helsinki area. In one respect, however, Tiitu is in a class of his own. As a clincher of matches he has no equal.

It was admittedly the team that set the table for the world championships' gold medal shot, which Finns voted 2008's most thrilling sports moment. That team included goalie *Henri Toivoniemi*, who had just turned aside a seemingly certain Swedish goal. Likewise *Mika Kobonen*, who took two opponents out of the play with a brilliant feed. *Rickie Hyvärinen* led the last Swedish defenceman off in the wrong direction just before he offered up the ball to Tiitu, who'd been left open.

But it was Tiitu who scored. Tiitu, who, in extra time in the world championship final two years before, had hit the post. Tiitu, whose clinching goals have piled up over the years.

"It's a huge oversimplification to say that clinching a match is one man's business," the man himself reminds us. "It's also a matter of chance and that you're getting to play on a good team, although you can increase the chance's probability with your own actions."

No stranger to moments of decision

Tiitu plays the forward's position near the goal as well as he plays the defenceman's spot, where there's more room for a shot. With his iron condition, he's at his most dangerous at the end of the match, when weaker players are already tiring out. And his shot crowns it all. Like the best goal-makers, he plays with his right hand lower on the stick, so that the ball leaves from the other side relative to the majority of players. The shot is quick, hard, and accurate.

In the last analysis, the players who are stronger mentally decide the matches. By that yardstick Tiitu set himself apart as early as the spring of 1999, when the Josba club, in eastern Finland's Joensuu, was playing the final for the national junior championship at the local house of sports. The prolonged match finally had to be decided by a shootout. "Nine hundred spectators had squeezed into the stands and I put in the final penalty shot. Gradually, over the years, experiences like that have accumulated, and when you think about them on the night before a match, say, or in the middle of the summer, you get cold shivers. You like those moments and you want to relive them, and that's why you feel at home at moments of decision."

One can prepare for making decisions mentally, but floorball has yet to make use of programmed psychological coaching.

"We don't have any actual headshrinkers, but with a top coach the mental side is always heavily involved. For example, the national team's head coach, *Petteri Nykky*, is a golf coach by occupation, and golf is a very mental sport. For players who've been

involved for a long time, a culture of winning has taken shape that is starting to feed on itself."

From Joensuu to the big city

Like many others, Tiitu, who was born in Helsinki but who moved to Joensuu as a child, became interested in floorball in a school sports club.

"We'd try out different sports there, but in the end we only wanted to play *säbly*," he recalls, referring to the recreational form of floorball. "I also played ice hockey with the Joensuu Kiekkoopijat club, and football, but in the end the sport that carried me away was the one that felt nice."

By the start of the 1990s, Joensuu was already a lively floorball town, and in 1993 Tiitu, then in the fifth form at his elementary school, was showing up at practices of the city's number-one team, Josba. The youngster's gifts were noted, and success came in increasingly older age groups. In the spring of 1999 Josba and Tiitu won the Finnish championship in the A and B junior divisions. The young man got an invitation to join the club's league team.

By his second league season he was already playing on the Finnish men's national team, and the spring of 2002 culminated in the world championship final, in front of more than 13 000 spectators at Helsinki's Hartwall Areena. At that point his mandatory military service was waiting for him in Lahti, and he joined a league team closer to his place of service - the Espoo Oilers.

With the army behind him, the new reserve officer, reservist athlete of the year and Finnish floorball champion returned for one more winter to Joensuu, but his future plans had begun to take shape.

"I knew I wanted to study in the Helsinki area, but there wasn't a school spot for me yet. So I boosted my matriculation exam marks and retook the maths completely."

His determination was rewarded when the doors to higher study opened in Espoo, a Helsinki suburb. At the same time he again became an Oiler, which he would remain for the next three seasons.

Technology and finance

Tiitu is studying in sectors to which many aspire but few gain entry. He's grinding away at production economics at the Helsinki Institute of Technology and also studying business administration at the Helsinki School of Economics. Both courses of study put him on a management track. The combination of these two degrees especially represents a big step towards top positions in the business world.

"I've made my choices because they interest me, not because they'd look good on a C.V.," he brushes off the glib stereotyping.

"In the Production Economics Department I'm studying in an interdisciplinary programme in which we don't have any secondary technology subjects at all. Instead, we have for example communications at the university, courses in philosophy, sociology and aesthetics. I wanted to get under the surface in understanding the economic system, too, and the School of Economics seemed like the best place for that. In time a working career somewhere will open up, I suppose, but I think that, if you take care of the schooling, so far as that's concerned it's what sort of person's involved that will weigh the most when the time comes."

Among other things, his studies in Japanese indicate that he's striving to develop himself more than to rush into a career pipeline with blinkers on.

For a long time floorball was considered a sport for university students, but the situation is changing. "This isn't any matter of university oddballs swinging sticks around. Sure, university students can combine playing and daily life better than someone who works from nine to five, but from what I know they're a minority of the players. Most of the players have gone to work after finishing secondary school or a polytechnic."

Amateurs, training like pros

"We're amateurs but we largely practice like professionals," Finland's premier floorball star summarizes the routine for a top player.

"During the season, a normal week is such that during the week we practise and on the weekend we play two matches. On Monday there might be running practice, often in small groups, according to what part of the area each person lives in. Tuesdays and Wednesdays there are floorball practices, on Thursday there's a rest day and on Friday there's another floorball practice, before the weekend's matches. All told we have five, six joint team events in a week."

In his opinion, the number of practices couldn't really be increased without gainful employment and studies suffering.

"From the perspective of professional sports, our practising isn't quite optimal, but for amateurs the amounts are pretty maximal. If the amounts were increased from what they are now, it would pretty quickly eliminate the older players and the players with families, who wouldn't have enough time any more. If we were pros, we'd practise twice a day and you'd get more out of the practices. Drills that we now do at the floorball practices would be allotted to one of the day's two practice sessions."

Hard training requires regular rest, but students often have to pinch additional time from their night's sleep.

"Sometimes you get these three-, four-hour nights, unfortunately, but when there are elimination matches I try to prioritize the rest more."

Into the top three?

Tiitu has himself been involved in floorball's rise from a marginal sport to matches with thousands of spectators, and to the television screens. He believes that the growth can still continue, but he doubts that the sport will become Finland's national game during his playing career.

"Floorball has a shot at getting into the top three, though, within the next few years. We're hardly going to overtake ice hockey or football, but floorball could be the most popular and most-followed indoor ball sport. We've got the ball rolling, and in recent months the attitude towards floorball has become much more favourable. Something's still lacking, though, for the stands to be bursting at the seams at an ordinary Finnish league match, and I myself can't say what that something is."

The sport's pluses are obvious to its top star.

"Floorball has many nice features that could make it a big deal worldwide. The threshold for starting is easy, but the requirements for being a top player are still varied and tough. Compared to ice hockey, say, respecting the opponent is a central thing in the sport. We still haven't succeeded completely in benefitting from these nice things, but we're headed forward and the development of the sport in Finland is going hand in hand with the international development."

Three golds

In the spring of 2007, Tiitu moved on from Espoo's Oilers to the sport's other powerhouse club, SSV, to develop further as a player and seek new challenges. The 2007-08 winter brought him a Finnish championship, and this past season afforded even greater success. To follow up the December 2008 world title, Tiitu and SSV celebrated victory in the Finnish Cup in January and the Finnish Floorball League championship in February.

The clinching goal in the final match came from the stick of Tero Tiitu.