



Interview with Tomorrow's Lithuanians

by Jenn Virškus

THE LIFE OF A TEENAGER IN LITHUANIA IS NOT unlike that of a teenager in the US; family and school responsibilities take precedence, and spare time is reserved for social activities, hobbies and sports. But in a country where basketball is the national pastime, 15-year old Ieva Januškevičiūtė is a ski racer.

As member of the Kalnų Ereliai ski team in Vilnius since she was 10 years old, Ieva has traveled Europe, speaks three languages and is a member of the Lithuanian National Team. A sport in which physical training starts in May and the last races finish in April does not leave a lot of free time. Via email and in English, Ieva took a break from her busy schedule to speak with *Lithuanian Heritage* about sports, peer pressure, and *cepelinai*.

When and where did you first start skiing?

– I think it was quite an unusual start. I was six and a half years old and my father took me to a small, flat hill

near where I live. Children were usually sledding there and there weren't any lifts on that hill.

Did you take formal lessons or learn on your own/ from parents?

– I learned the first steps of skiing from my father. My father skied quite well as a tourist and he was able to teach me so we never thought about hiring someone to help us.

What attracted you to the sport of ski racing?

– I think it was the speed, adrenaline and feeling of freedom. This sport is different from others because it requires all the muscles in your body, and you have to use your head – to be smart and think when you're racing. It is also one of the most dangerous sports in the world. That's why I like it so much.

What is your favorite place to ski?

– I like to ski everywhere where I can! But I think my favorite place is Les Trois Vallées in France. I was there



OPPOSITE PAGE: Ieva Januškevičiūtė at the Lithuanian Alpine Ski Championships in Meribel, France, January 2009. TOP: Members of the Kalnų Ereliai team in Meribel (Ieva third from left). ABOVE: During summer Ieva trains rollerslalom in Vilnius' Vingis Park.

only once but it left a deep impression on me. It's a lot of fun to ski there because there is a big choice of slopes of varying difficulty, there is a lot of sun, beautiful scenery and many other things to do.

What do you feel is your greatest achievement so far?

– I would have to say it was my result in the International Children's Competition last winter in Topolino in Italy. There were children from all over the world. I made it into the

top 60 in the first run, from more than 100 girls who started. After the second run, my result was 37th.

What are your future goals in ski racing?

– I want to reach as high as I can in skiing. I still don't know how high, I think it depends on my results in the next few years. If I have a chance to train more on snow and my skiing skills improve, I could be much better.

This is an expensive sport. Who

pays for your training?

– Almost everything comes from my parents. They pay for all the trips and equipment. This winter I got the Salomon ski company to sponsor me. I also save my birthday money and Christmas money for trips and sometimes I get skiing stuff as presents.

You spent a week in Austria this summer with coaches from the International Ski Federation. What was it like to live and train with other young racers from around Europe and how did you communicate?

– We mostly spoke in English but there were a few people who didn't speak English so they communicated in other languages. It was interesting because we shared our experiences, and it was also hard because I tried to do my best and be better than others. But we made friends and we still write to each other.

What languages do you speak/study?

– I can speak Lithuanian, English, French, and I can say a couple of sentences in Russian, but I really want to learn more languages.

How do you train for competition in the off season?

– I have three official trainings with Kalnų Ereliai per week including one rollerblade training, one training in the stadium (running, jumping, soccer, etc.), and one strength training in the gym. I also train with my father almost every weekend riding bikes, running, and sometimes participating in mountain biking, duathlon, triathlon, or running competitions.

What do you find most challenging about training? Any tips to overcome these challenges?

– Sometimes you feel that it's too much for you or you want to quit. You have to think positively, and be strong mentally. The only way to be successful is by hard work. Once in a while I can be really lazy to go to training, but I'm glad that I have

parents who encourage me not to skip it and coaches who care about us.

What advice would you give to new skiers just learning the sport?

– Don't stop skiing, even if it gets hard. After you get some experience and confidence, you will be proud that you can ski, and skiing is so much fun! From this sport you can learn other important skills for your life.

Can you give some examples of important skills you can use in other areas of your life?

– You learn a lot from skiing, from the minute you wake up, to the minute that you get back home or to the hotel. You learn responsibility and how to focus. You can't forget anything and you can't be late. Sometimes you have to suffer cold or stand on the hill for hours if the start is delayed so you learn how to be tough and adapt. I'm thankful for everything I've learned.

What are some things you enjoy doing outside of training and competing?

– I love to try new things; sports or even art. The sports I like are mountain biking, rollerblading and soccer. Actually, I think all sports are fun!

What has been your greatest outdoor sporting achievement?

– I have won several mountain bike races, and one time I won a duathlon race. But it's not so important for me to win other sports. I like to do them because you can learn new things about yourself and you get a whole new sports experience that you can use in skiing, since all sports are somehow related. For me, my achievements in skiing are more important. Of course it is always great to win something, especially when you put a lot of energy into it and endeavor for the win.

On a day typical off from training and school, how do you spend your time?

– I enjoy meeting friends, listening to music. Also I really enjoy read-

ing and watching movies and cartoons.

What are some of your favorite books or movies?

– I love a lot of films, but my favorites include "Troy," "Pride and Prejudice," and "Ratatouille." The books I like the most are "Pride and Prejudice," all the Harry Potter books and some by Agatha Christie. I also like to read autobiographies about sportsmen, especially Hermann Maier and Lance Armstrong and I adore historical books by Philippa Gregory. I read a lot and I love it.

Where do you usually meet with your friends and what do you like to talk about?

– School and training is usually where I meet them but sometimes they come to my house, or we meet in town. As far as talking, it depends who I'm talking to, but the most common things are school, anything interesting happening in our lives, hobbies, films, books, music, or current events happening in the world or Lithuania.

What are your favorite subjects in school?

– I like English, math, history, and literature but I always try to find some attractive things in my other subjects because then it is easier to learn them, especially in the subjects I'm not good at.

Ski racing requires a lot of travel time. How do you balance school and skiing?

– It's hard, but I do try to study during the trips. When I'm at home I spend a lot of time doing homework and other school projects. Until now, everything has been pretty good, but now that I'm in high school I'm sure it will be much harder for me. I hope teachers won't be mad with me because it also makes additional work for them.

High school can be a difficult time, with a lot of peer pressure to drink, try drugs or get into mischief. Do you feel this pressure

around you, and how do you deal with it?

– I don't feel the pressure. I'm in a good school and it is my problem if I do something. I feel like it is my responsibility to save myself from drugs or drinking. Also, you have to pick good friends to be around you.

You are lucky in that you have had the opportunity as a young girl to travel all over Europe. How has this impacted your life and what have you learned?

– Yes, I'm very lucky. I've learned more about many other countries and I've seen a lot of new things that I haven't seen in my own country. People in other countries have some special habits, and I've gotten to see how they live, and also how people my age train. In international race camps abroad I found many new friends.

Would you say that you are a "typical Lithuanian girl"?

– I support the Lithuanian national basketball team and that's the first thing which typical Lithuanian girls do, and I like *cepelinai* and other Lithuanian food. But I suppose I'm not so typical because I'm a ski racer. There are people who ski in Lithuania, but when I say that I'm a ski racer, they always get confused and I have to explain. I guess I'm somewhere in the middle.

Finally, what do you want to be when you grow up?

– It's really a hard question for me, I still have not decided. I have some dreams, but dreams do not always come true.

◆ If you would like to help support Ieva this season, or for more information about the Kalnų Ereliai ski team, please visit the club's website: www.kalnuslidinejimas.lt/ereliai. LH

Jenn Virškus is a freelance photographer and writer from Colorado, who has been working with kids in Lithuania since 2005. She is spending the winter in the U.S., but hopes to return to Lithuania soon.