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OLAV KOSS**

When children play the World wins! This simple and short, yet sound and clear statement perfectly summarizes the mission of Right to Play. And when one says Right to Play, you immediately think of Johann Olav Koss, the founder, inspirer, president and CEO of the organization and famous Norwegian multiple Olympic and world skating champion. Proximus Marc Theeboom already mentioned some of the achievements of this multi-talented man in the short video we just saw, but I am glad to share some more with you.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel celebrated its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year and decided to give 9 honorary doctoral degrees in different fields for this special occasion. One of this nine very special people that were nominated, is Johann Olav Koss. As an academic, I am very pleased with this choice, for two reasons. The social meaning of sports has always been the main subject of my scientific work. And I was the initiator of top-class sport and study – Topsport en Studie in Dutch - a unique program that made it possible for hundreds of top-class sportsmen and women to obtain a university degree. So it is a real honor for me that the great sports champion Johann Olav Koss is here today.

1. Sport career

Taking a closer look at his sport career, Johann definitely is one of the most legendary winter athletes ever, with four gold medals at the winter Olympics in speed skating. In Lillehammer in 1994 he was at his best, winning three gold medals at the 1,500, 5,000 and 10,000 meters. Besides, over the course of his career, he broke 10 world records, won 3 World All-round Championships, as well as numerous World Cups and national championships.

In 1994, he also received the distinction of "Best Norwegian Olympian Ever" and the Norwegian Olympic Committee's highest award: The Fearnleys Honorary Award. Johann is also a recipient of numerous international distinctions including "Sportsman of the Year" by US Sports Illustrated, the "Jesse Owens Award" and the "International Athletic Foundation Award" in Los Angeles.

2. Other roles in sports organizations

Ladies and gentlemen, besides his great athletic achievements, Johann Koss is also very active in other sport-related areas. In 1997, he was appointed Chairman of the 'Norwegian Government Forum against Drugs and Doping'. He also is on the board of an organization called MOT in Norwegian or 'Courage', which mobilizes Norwegian athletes in the fight against drugs and doping. He was a member of the Athlete's Commission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from 1998 to 2002 and served as a founding and executive board member of the World Anti-Doping

Agency where he initiated the Athlete anti-doping passport. He even was asked to coach the Norwegian Olympic skating team in the take off to the Olympic winter games in Vancouver beginning this year.

### 3. Olympic Aid and Right to Play

Next to being a world class athlete and his active involvement in the fight against drugs and doping in sport, Johann has always been very socially moved. After the Lillehammer Olympics of 1992, he donated the prize money of his 1,500 meters victory to Olympic Aid and challenged other athletes to do the same. This way, he managed to collect a total of 18 million US dollar with which 5 projects were realized: a hospital in Sarajevo; schools in Eritrea; a mother/child program in Guatemala; a refugee program in Afghanistan; and a support program for children with disabilities in Lebanon. In 1996, Olympic Aid established a partnership with UNICEF and collected 13 million US dollar for the vaccination of 12,2 million children and more than 800,000 women.

In 2000, Olympic Aid, which later became Right to Play, made the transition from a pure fundraising to a non-governmental organization, implementing sport and play programs in vulnerable areas around the world.

Since Lillehammer, Johann has dedicated himself to turn Right To Play into an internationally-recognized NGO and a leader in 'Sport for Development'. The term 'Sport for Development' refers to the use of sport and play to enhance a healthy physical and psychosocial development of children which are a victim of war, poverty, famine or social conflicts. Right To Play also works with local leaders and trainers thus building stronger local communities. Today, Right To Play develops and implements child and community development programs in 23 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, working with UNICEF, with the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, with GAVI, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, and with the World Health Organization (WHO).

Right to Play is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The most vulnerable groups amongst them including girls, disabled, HIV or AIDS contaminated youngsters, street children, former child soldiers or children living in refugee camps, are targeted with specific programs. All children have the right to play, thus getting a chance to participate in society in a positive way and building their own and their community's future.

In addition to its sport and play programs, Right To Play is established as a pioneer in international advocacy on behalf of every child's right to play, and it is actively involved in research and policy development in this area. Their vision is to engage leaders on all sides of sport, business and media to ensure every child's right to play. Being the president and CEO of Right to Play, Johann Koss uses his networks, leadership and enthusiasm to encourage governments and major companies to support the different projects running internationally.

Also typical for Right to Play is the fact that both Olympic athletes and other elite sports figures are acting as Athlete Ambassadors. Surely, they are all inspired by Johann's own good example after the Lillehammer Games! These top athletes are important and inspiring role models for children and youngsters. Besides, they also help in raising the international awareness on Right to Play and make

it possible to partner with a wide variety of private sector funders. Sufficient funds and support are essential to give the projects a sustainable basis and a chance to reach its social goals.

#### 4. The unique approach of Right To Play

The approach of the Sport for Development programs of Right to Play is innovative and useful in many parts of the world, because both play and sports have a low threshold and make use of a universal body language and appeal to the 'homo ludens' which is inside every human.

Sport and play also require very little material and accommodation. Some open space, a nice red ball (which is one of the symbols of RTP) and an inspiring coach, is often all that it takes!

A major outcome of the Right To Play programs is the formation and support of local volunteers. But next to the individual capacity building, a lot of energy goes to developing sustainable partnerships with local community leaders such as teachers, medical practitioners or people co-operating with other non-profit organizations.

Right To Play uses sport and play as a powerful means to contribute to health education, education in general, peace and safety in a country. The final aim is to generate a change in the behaviour of people. They need knowledge, but also skills such as self-confidence, learn to deal with stress and group pressure, conflict resolution skills, etcetera. The Right To Play ambassadors, family, coaches and friends play an important role in making sure that values and skills that children learn during sport and play, can also be used in other settings and other moments of their lives.

Also important is the principle "Think global, act local". The organization starts from a very clear global and worldwide vision and strategy on the role sport can play for development, but tailors it to local and specific needs and opportunities in a specific region. Therefore, Right To Play co-operates with local communities, small companies and people from the communities. This way, the local awareness and involvement increases, also improving the sustainable embedding of the programs and the chances for a successful outcome.

#### 5. 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Right To Play

Ladies and gentlemen, 2010 is a special year for Right to Play, because it celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The organization has developed since its foundation in 2000 to a solid, well-known and worldwide fundraising and implementing non-governmental organization (NGO), with agencies in the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

Today, Right To Play has almost become a synonym for Sport for Development. The sport and play programs, special events and festivals of Right to Play have reached more than 1 million children worldwide over the last 10 years. Every week, almost 700,000 children are active in one of the programs and all that, thanks to the dedication of more than 13,000 local coaches and teachers, who all act as a volunteer.

I call this impressive figures and I wish Right to Play a long lasting life and an even better future.

## 6. Other merits

Ladies and gentlemen, let me guide you back to the merits of founder and source of inspiration of Right to Play Johann Koss. Besides the earlier mentioned sport-related awards, in 1994, Johann was also appointed “Special Representative for Sport” for UNICEF International. He was also given the “Child Survival Award” in 1996 by the Carter Center in Atlanta and, later that year during the celebration of UNICEF’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he received UNICEF’s Honorary Award. Johann was also declared “One of 100 Future Leaders of Tomorrow” by TIME Magazine, and “One of 1000 Global Leaders” by the World Economic Forum.

Johann completed his undergraduate medical training at the University of Queensland, and completed his executive MBA at the Joseph L. Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. He also got two academic awards for his work with Right to Play. In 2005, he received a Doctor of Laws Honorary degree from Brock University, followed by a second doctor of Laws Honorary Degree from the University of Calgary in 2009.

One might say that Johann, being a former sports champion who always wants to get higher, faster and stronger, probably wants to break his own record receiving more academic awards than he won Olympic gold... So that means two more doctoral honorary degrees to go Johann!

Ladies and Gentlemen, our university offers two kinds of doctoral honorary degrees: either to academics that made an important contribution to knowledge and science or to public figures, civil servants or artists whose leadership, inspiration and passion in one way or another contributed to society.

I think the long list of merits and achievements - and I am sure I have forgotten some - shows that Johann Olav Koss is not just a regular sportsman and that he definitely deserves this academic award. A university has the noble aim to educate people so they can make tomorrow’s society a better place. Johann Koss and Right to Play actually do the same: they use sport as a means to make people and local communities stronger and more self-supporting, thus creating a better world for children to live in.

For all this reasons, it is with great pleasure that the Vrije Universiteit Brussel has decided to offer this Doctoral Honorary Degree to Johann Olav Koss. And by giving this academic degree to figurehead Johann Olav Koss, we also want to honor the many local volunteers, trainers and athletes, that try to make sports and play indeed a right for every child, everywhere in this world and everyday again and again.

Thank you Johann, thank you Right to Play.