

## **Building Foundations: Insights on Coaching, Culture, and Development in Estonian Women's Football**

*JJV Podcast Talks with Alexandra Ševoldajeva, Head Coach of the Estonian Women's National Team, on Leadership, Growth, and the Changing Face of Football*

---

### **The Coaching Journey: From Player to Leader**

In the latest episode of the JJV Podcast, host Jouko Riihimäki sat down with Alexandra Ševoldajeva, head coach of Estonia's women's national football team. Their wide-ranging conversation explored her path into coaching, the development of women's football in Estonia, and her insights into leadership in a rapidly evolving sport.

Ševoldajeva's coaching journey began with a passion for team sports. Originally a tennis player, she became captivated by football after watching European tournaments as a child. The game's tactical depth and sense of camaraderie drew her in, and the transition from player to coach felt like a natural next step driven by a desire not just to develop players, but to build strong teams and thriving communities.

---

### **The Growth of Women's Football: Estonia in Context**

Reflecting on her 15 years in coaching, Ševoldajeva noted that women's football both in Estonia and across Europe is still in a developmental phase. She described a "big rise" in professionalism over the past six to eight years, with improvements in athleticism, league organization, and the presence of professional clubs. "Even top countries are only now launching fully professional women's leagues," she explained, emphasizing the need to understand Estonia's progress within the broader timeline of both its national history and the global growth of the women's game.

Estonia has made meaningful strides: more youth leagues, growing player pools, and enhanced infrastructure for women and girls. Still, challenges remain, especially in cultivating a deeper football culture and identity.

---

### **Football Culture: Building More Than Just Teams**

A central theme in the interview was the role of football culture and its connection to wider societal values. In contrast to countries where football is woven into the social fabric, Estonia's club culture is still taking shape. Attending matches or supporting clubs is not yet deeply embedded in everyday community life.

To change this, the Estonian Football Federation is working to strengthen club communities—not just through growth initiatives, but by focusing on the well-being of those already involved. Ševoldajeva summed it up well: "If the people in the club are really, really

happy... that spreads around." A positive environment builds loyalty and attracts newcomers in a natural, sustainable way.

---

### **Coaching Philosophy: Playing to Strengths, Leading with Empathy**

When asked about her coaching philosophy, Ševoldajeva emphasized putting players in roles where they can succeed, by recognizing and building on their individual strengths. She used the well-known metaphor: "Don't judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree." A coach's job, she argued, is to identify not only talent, but potential and to design systems that help each player thrive.

Her broader leadership values center on kindness, honesty, and empathy. While football is inherently results-focused, she believes the process is even more important. Coaches must create spaces where players feel safe to grow, take risks, and learn from their mistakes.

---

### **Modern Football: Structure, Freedom, and Adaptability**

The conversation turned to tactics and the nature of today's game, which is faster and more dynamic than ever. Ševoldajeva noted a move away from rigid formations toward flexible, principle-based play. The best teams, she said, have both structure and the freedom to improvise during unpredictable moments.

Training, therefore, should balance order and creativity. Less experienced players may need more structure, while highly skilled athletes often perform best when given room to make their own decisions. "The less your players are capable of, the more structure they need; the more they're capable of, the less structure they need," she explained.

---

### **Communication and Emotional Intelligence**

Throughout the interview, the importance of communication and emotional intelligence came up repeatedly. Ševoldajeva reflected on her own growth from being bluntly honest to adopting a more thoughtful, relationship-focused approach. Trust, she said, is the foundation: players are far more open to feedback and change when they feel genuinely connected to their coach.

Her parting words offered a powerful reminder: "Most of the games, you don't even remember the games, but you always remember how you treated someone, and how they treated you."

---

### **Final Thoughts**

This episode of the JJV Podcast painted a rich, thoughtful portrait of a coach committed to the holistic development of players, teams, and the wider football community. In Estonia and

beyond, the future of women's football will depend not just on talent and tactics, but on culture, care, and adaptive leadership. **Ševoldajeva's message is clear: true progress starts with people.**