

Dr. Richard C. Nelson: A Facilitator and Door Opener

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Dr. Richard Nelson contributed to the development of sport biomechanics by being an international facilitator. Together with Dr. Jürg Wartenweiler, he contributed the necessary support and input that allowed the field of Movement and Sports Biomechanics to develop and flourish.

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Professor Jürg Wartenweiler invited me to join his Biomechanics Laboratory at the ETH Zurich in 1971. When I joined the group, Professor Richard Nelson was a visiting professor at the Laboratory. Richard Nelson was in Zurich to learn about the European research groups and to discuss the development of the—at that time—very young new research topic of biomechanics. In 1967, Jürg Wartenweiler had organized the first international Symposium of Biomechanics in Zurich, a result of his world view of research cooperation. When Richard Nelson and Jürg Wartenweiler met, 2 personalities with a wide horizon connected, and the result was, in the long term, a successful and friendly cooperation between international researchers in the field of biomechanics.

For me with no background in biomechanics (one could not study biomechanics at that time!), this initial contact with Richard Nelson was extremely fruitful and an extraordinary eye-opener. I was often driving him to research centers in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany, and during these long drives, we became good friends. I experienced him as a generous and very positive colleague and our friendship lasted over his whole lifetime.

He always was concerned about the worldwide development of the discipline of biomechanics, which became obvious during the biomechanics congress in Penn State, which Richard Nelson organized with his research group in 1973. During this Congress, an attempt was made to establish the International Society of Biomechanics (ISB). Involved in the discussions were leading scientists from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, and North America. Jürg Wartenweiler was leading the discussions. However, what the participants did not realize was that the rules of discussions are different in Europe than in North America. Consequently, the discussion deviated to a rather unorganized exchange of statements, and it was only the diplomatic interventions of Richard Nelson, which at the end allowed a positive result and the formation of the ISB. One of the main reasons that Richard Nelson was able to solve this aggressive situation was probably the sabbatical leave in 1971 that Richard Nelson spent in Zurich, where

he learned that the rules of collaborations were different in the different continents, and that concessions needed to be made. In any case, the ISB was founded with Jürg Wartenweiler as its first president and Richard Nelson the first Vice President (president elect). It is fair to state that the positive outcome was a result of the excellent personality of Richard Nelson.

In his scientific work, Richard Nelson rather soon realized that there is a young crop of scientists emerging with completely different education and technical knowledge. He realized that his lab needed one of those young scientists, and he appointed one of the most brilliant young biomechanists, Peter Cavanagh, as a young assistant professor. With this reinforcement, Penn State was for a long time at the forefront of biomechanical research of human locomotion worldwide.

In 1976, my wife and I invited some biomechanical friends and their wives to our mountain chalet for a biomechanical workshop. The biomechanical invitees were Richard Nelson, Jim Hay, Paavo Komi, Gunter Rau, Wolfgang Baumann my engineer, Peter Neukomm, and myself. We would ski for half of the day and discuss biomechanics the other half of the day. Each of us had 2 hours to talk about current projects and 2 hours about future plans. It was interesting that Richard Nelson spent the second 2 hours entirely on talking about ideas related to the ISB. He did it with such enthusiasm that we all got excited, and it is no accident that 5 of us served later as presidents of the ISB.

In the 1990s, Richard Nelson and I myself worked with the International Olympic Committee Medical Commission. Our primary project was the International Olympic Committee-Olympic-Price. We worked on the concept, the discussions with potential donors, and the 4 first-prize winners. It was a pleasure working with my friend, Richard Nelson, and the successful end of the project was a price for science related to movement and sport of USD 500,000.

Richard Nelson was a special person with a wide-open heart and many contributions to the world of biomechanics. It was a privilege to be his friend.

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