

An Interview with the Danish Team at Japan Open 2017

Grundfos has been supporting the Danish national badminton team for the past two years. For this issue, we sat down with two team members and their coach – Christinna Pedersen, Kamilla Rytter Juhl, and Kenneth Jonassen – for an interview. The three recently visited Japan for this year's Japan Open.

Christinna and Kamilla represented Denmark at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016, at which over 90% of pumps installed were from Grundfos. At the Olympics, Christinna and Kamilla won a silver medal after a grueling deciding match against the Japanese team of Ayaka Takahashi and Misaki Matsumoto. However, three weeks later, the Danish team beat the Japanese team at the Daihatsu Yonex Japan Open.

A former professional badminton player, Kenneth has been supporting Christinna and Kamilla as their personal coach since 2013. He is also the Danish national badminton team's head coach, and he previously coached the Danish representatives to the 2012 London Olympics.

In this interview, the three discuss their careers in badminton thus far, as well as their experiences and observations while traveling the world for badminton competitions.

Q: When and how did you start to play badminton?

Kamilla: I was born in Skagen, the northernmost part of Denmark. My parents and my brother were very active in the local badminton club, so it was natural for me to play from an early age.

Christinna: I was born south of Skagen in Aalborg, the fourth largest town in Denmark. Like Kamilla, my parents were strongly involved with the local badminton club, and all our friends were club members. I started playing badminton when I was six years old.

Kenneth: The social aspect is properly the most important factor for Danish youngsters to start playing badminton. All over Denmark, there are public badminton clubs that are very easy to join. While my schoolmates went on summer vacation, I went to the nearby badminton club, which was open 24 hours a day.



Q: How did you decide to become a professional athlete?

Kamilla: When you're good at something, you naturally develop a strong interest in it. I watched older badminton athletes on TV and dreamt of being like them. When I was invited to join the Danish national badminton team in Copenhagen, I just had to follow my dream. Being professional gives you a chance to improve yourself to the utmost.

Christinna: Badminton started as a hobby, after which I gradually got opportunities to play increasingly challenging games. I was also following badminton on TV, and was especially interested in getting a chance to play against Asian athletes, as they generally dominate the badminton scene globally. Just to be able to play on their home turf was a big dream for me; I was not even thinking about winning at that time. I also had a dream to play at the Olympics. To realize those goals, you have to become professional.

Kamilla: The downside is the personal sacrifices you have to make. Like Christinna, I had to move to a suburb in Copenhagen, far away from friends and family. There have been lots of missed family gatherings and hard choices.

Christinna: Still, it has been worth it. To be able to play against the world's best players gives us

great satisfaction.

Kenneth: After playing professionally, I became a coach because coaching is the next best thing to playing badminton. As a coach, I can help younger players realize their ambitions and dreams. This is not something that all professional athletes can do, because good coaches convey knowledge with words.

Q: Which tournament are you most proud to have won?

Kamilla: The most memorable match was when we participated in the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016. We won over a Chinese team in the semi-finals, and then we lost the gold medal to the Japanese team of Ayaka Takahashi and Misaki Matsumoto.

Christinna: We would, of course, love to replay the last five balls of that game. Still, it is the best game we ever played, and we have good memories about it. It was a grueling game. We played our utmost best for a medal in the Olympics. It was a dream come true and a privilege.

Q: How did it feel to join the Rio Olympics and to win silver medals?

Kamilla: Standing at the podium with our silver medals was a fantastic feeling. At that moment, it felt like the color of the medal didn't



Kamilla Rytter Juhl (33)

Born in 1983, Kamilla started playing badminton at the age of 4 at the influence of her mother, who was a coach for a junior badminton club. At the age of 20, she joined the Danish national badminton team. She has been paired with Christinna Pedersen in women’s doubles since 2010. In 2013, the pair won a bronze medal at the BWF World Championships.

matter. I am truly happy just to have participated in the Olympics.

Kenneth: You just have to give it to the Japanese team – they played extremely well and made no mistakes. In sports, there are always winners and losers. When you lose, your true feelings come to the surface, and you have to work through them, but you normally come out stronger.

In this respect, I think I have an important role to play as a coach. I want my players to win, but even if they don’t, as long as they give all they have, I can’t ask for more. It’s great to be number one, but less than that is also a huge accomplishment, especially when you’re playing professionally against the world’s best.

Q: What does it take to win a professional badminton game?

Christinna: You must believe in yourself and the possibility of winning. You also need to believe completely in your partner, as you have to win together. Kamilla and I send a lot of “mental wi-fi” to each other when we play.

Kamilla: And then, you must enjoy the game. At the Olympics, smiling was our “trademark,” because we are conscious about radiating happiness at games. If our happiness rubs off on the audience, we get extra energy, which I think also makes games more interesting for spectators. We simply love to play and to train for bad-

minton, although it can be very demanding.

Kenneth: Apart from technique, you need to be in good physical shape. We have worked a lot on this ever since I became their coach. I also help Christinna and Kamilla work better together, as teamwork is a must. We come up with ideas, work out strategies, and discuss strengths and weaknesses. For instance, it’s important to know your own limitations when under stress. Getting to know yourself can be an emotional and uncomfortable process, but that’s normal. You have to be honest with yourself.

Q: What distinguishes badminton from other sports?

Christinna: Mixed-doubles badminton is a combination of individual skills and teamwork. You have to be good, but you also have to look out for your partner.

Kamilla: Sometimes, it’s more difficult to play as a pair, but when we find the right beat, it’s great. Finding that rhythm and solving challenges together is very satisfying.

Kenneth: Badminton is a fast sport; you constantly have to change your position very quickly. In this case, being tall can be a disadvantage compared to shorter and lighter players.

Kamilla: If you’re a runner in a competition, your opponent, the distance, does not change. In badminton, our opponent is a moving target. Even if we play against the same team, the challenges are different. Our opponents



Kenneth Jonassen (43)

Kenneth decided to become a coach after a career as a professional badminton player. In 2012, he coached the Danish men’s singles representatives to the London Olympics. Last year, he was promoted from assistant coach to head coach of the Danish national badminton team.



Christinna Pedersen (31)

Born in 1986, Christinna started playing badminton at the age of 6 due to her parents’ enthusiasm for the sport. At the age of 20, she joined the Danish national badminton team. She has been paired with Kamilla Rytter Juhl in women’s doubles since 2010. In 2013, the pair won a bronze medal at the BWF World Championships.

definitely keep changing their strategy – and so do we.

Christinna: For instance, just three weeks after we lost to Ayaka Takahashi and Misaki Matsumoto at the Olympics, we beat them at the Daihatsu Yonex Japan Open.

Kenneth: Each badminton court is also different. In Denmark, we rarely use air conditioning, but it is quite normal in Asia. Players have to take into consideration that the wind generated from air conditioning can affect the ball. It’s the same feeling as playing on grass or gravel in tennis.

Q: How popular is badminton compared to other sports in Denmark? How about in Asian countries where you play?

Kenneth: Badminton used to be very popular in Denmark, but then it had a bit of a downturn. Now, it’s the fifth or sixth most popular sport in terms of number of players. I feel that it’s more difficult to maintain the interest of young players, as young Danes like to try different sports. However, recently, interest has revived, thanks to Kamilla and Christinna’s performance in Rio de Janeiro. Danish people identified with them.

We are up against hugely populated nations where badminton is a national sport – for instance, Indonesia, Malaysia, or China. I reckon the number of badminton players in China alone is about as much as the whole Danish population of around 5.5 million. In this re-

spect, Asian countries have a much larger pool of potential professional athletes.

Q. What are your impressions of Japan?

Kamilla: I've been to Japan more than ten times, and it's always a great experience. People are friendly; some say hello when we walk around. Everything is convenient.

Christinna: Japanese food is tasty; we have some favorite restaurants near our hotel.

Kenneth: I first visited Tokyo in 1997. I feel that the country and its people have become more open to foreigners since then. I still enjoy walking down the street and seeing all the friendly faces. It's heartwarming how older people are generally respected.

The Japanese audience is kind to cheer on Danish teams whenever we play in Tokyo, and the Japanese national badminton team has improved tremendously over the past 10 years. I'm impressed that it's now a superpower in the badminton world.

Q: How was your experience at this year's Japan Open?

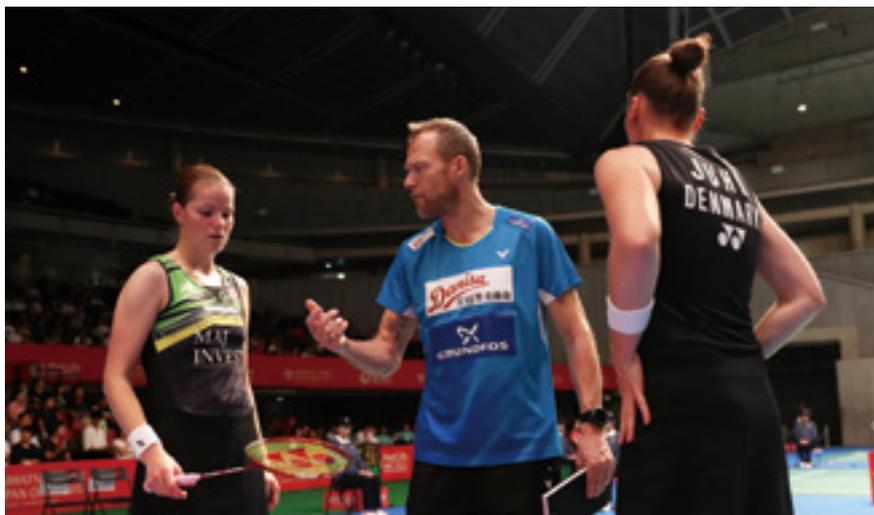
Kenneth: Unfortunately, we lost our first game to a South Korean team consisting of Chae Yoo Jung and Kim So Yeong.

Q: Grundfos has been sponsoring the Danish national badminton team for nearly two years now. What are your impressions of the company?

Kenneth: Both Grundfos and the team have their roots in Denmark, a small country with few natural resources and a small pool of potential talent. However, like the national badminton team, Grundfos still manages to compete on a global scale against much larger companies and nations. Doing so requires constantly being innovative and open to new ideas – and of course, giving your best all the time. Just like our badminton players, Grundfos has ambitious employees who believe in teamwork. In many ways, the same set of values drives corporations and sports teams, so I think that Grundfos and the Danish national badminton team are a good fit.

Q: Is it important for you to have a sponsor like Grundfos? Why?

Christinna: This is the first time for Kamilla and me to play with Grundfos' direct support, and



Kamilla and Christinna receiving advice from Kenneth at the Daihatsu Yonex Japan Open 2017

I'm grateful for the opportunity.

Kamilla: Now that we're established, we've been invited to play around the world. We also win prize money from time to time. However, for our less established colleagues in the Danish national badminton team, private sponsors are even more important. This increases their chances to play around the world.

Kenneth: Having a private sponsor increases the possibilities of supporting the players. Danish athletes do not get the same economic support compared to athletes in many of the countries we play against. Young Danish professional badminton players often live in rather spartan conditions. The possibility to win prize money is a very big motivator, but you need economic support to get started.

Q: It's important for Grundfos to continue developing core competencies in delivering safe water to the world's most vulnerable. Do you have any problems with drinking water when you travel around the world?

Kenneth: In Denmark, our players are used to the water, so they drink from the tap, but elsewhere, we cannot take any chances, so they always drink bottled water.

Q: Grundfos is proud that you will be playing with the company logo on your shirt at the China Open in November, and that you are attending customer meetings. What typically happens at these meetings?

Kamilla: We always look forward to meeting our sponsors and their international customers. It's encouraging that they are interested in our national badminton team.

Christinna: Often, we will make a small introduction about the Danish team and ourselves, after which we take questions from the audience and occasionally mingle with them. We try to be as open as possible and to answer questions interestingly.

Q: To conclude this interview, Kenneth, do you, as a coach, have any advice and insights to share with aspiring badminton athletes?

Kenneth: As a coach, I'm not a dictator; I'm a sparring partner, so don't hesitate to ask "why." It shows that you're engaged and interested.

You cannot live out other peoples' expectations; you must stick to working on whatever you yourself can change. But don't be too hard on yourself, either. It's impossible to be in top condition every day. Sometimes, you can be physically or mentally down. It might be difficult to see the ball, or you might move slower than usual.

Teamwork is crucial. When your partner is down, you can't just take over by catching all the balls; you have to adjust to your partner's pulse. The three of us all work together to realize an ambition and a dream – to win. When we do win an important tournament, we reflect on our victory and rejoice before focusing on the next challenge, because in professional badminton, tournaments come successively and very quickly.

Badminton is a personal journey with ups and downs; it should be enjoyable despite all the hardship. For me, if you're passionate about badminton, it will give you good energy and happiness whether you win or lose.