

PART 3 – A COMPETITOR'S VIEW

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10. A COMPETITOR'S VIEW: IRENA ČEPON (WORLDSKILLS SLOVENIA, COMPETITOR)

For competitors, there are two main periods: preparing for competition and competition itself. These two are connected and the first one has a very big impact on the second one.

10. 1 PREPARING FOR COMPETITION

This period determines your performance as a competitor. Whether you have attended a lot of competitions before or you haven't, it's equally important. Regardless, attending more competitions can definitely improve your skills, how you handle the pressure and makes you more confident overall. This period is divided into couple of phases:

- Plan of preparation
- Physical and psychological preparation
- Analyzing Test Project (TP) with expert
- Skills practice
- Consulting after each practice
- Track and write down time spent on specific tasks
- Simulation of the competition

10. 1. 1 Plan of preparation

Plan of preparation is one of the most powerful things a competitor can have. At first, when you start writing it, it may seem overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be detailed. The key to a useful plan of preparation is to start with a rough plan and dividing it into smaller plans that are easier to manage. That way, things start to be less overwhelming and as a competitor you start to be self confident.

Layout of a rough plan can look something like this:

Rough plan of preparation for Euroskills, January-March:

- *January: analyzing Test Project (TP) on previous competitions (first two weeks), practicing one of previous TP and analyzing my current abilities (last two weeks)*
- *February: buying new equipment, working to improve my skill imperfections*
- *March: psychological training (first week), visiting masterclass (second week), practicing one of previous TP (last two weeks)*

Layout of a detailed plan can look something like this:

Date	School/job	Hobbies	Practice time	Other
17.1.2025	7:00-15:00	/	17:00-20:00	/
18.1.2025	7:00-12:00	/	15:00-20:00	12:00-14:00 shopping
19.1.2025	/	6:00-9:00 hiking	10:00-19:00	20:00- dinner

Nevertheless, you have to stay realistic when writing it. Practice most likely won't take all of your time: whether you are still in school or having a job or just enjoying hobbies, you won't totally cancel all of it- and you shouldn't. Those things are necessary for your career and personal growth. What you can do is to minimize the time you spend on hobbies and make good use of remaining "free" time.

But be careful, even though it may look like there is plenty of "free" time for preparation, you have to be aware that only efficient hours count. You can spend minutes and hours in total just to prepare for one practice and to clean after yourself after practice (if necessary). In addition, you may have to spend time in shops to find the best equipment for practice tasks. Maybe you will attend some masterclasses. All these things are necessary and you just have to take them into account when planning.

And on top of everything, you always have to plan reserve time just in case things don't go as planned- and I can guarantee that many times things won't go as planned. Being prepared for that makes you stronger and more confident, you adapt more easily and move on to the next obligation.

10. 1. 2 Physical and psychological preparation

Someone who doesn't exactly know what Skills competition demands of a competitor's physical and mental appearance, wouldn't believe that they have to be prepared similarly to professional athletes.

Physical preparation often isn't as necessary as psychological because competitors are already doing the same movements in school or at the job, so they are used to it. Psychological aspect, on the other hand, isn't as developed as needed for that level of competition. That's why, getting a good psychological coach is crucial for your best performance.

10. 1. 3 Analyzing TP with an expert

An expert is that one person who is very familiar with competition rules, all techniques and tips for the best performance and also knows ranking the best after all.

Test project (TP) is a document in which all the tasks of skills competition are described. Paired with an expert's grading scale represents the best basis for good ranking.

Proposal of analyzing TP would look something like this:

- *Roughly getting through tasks and which techniques, skills and competencies are required for them.*
- *Detailed look and analysis of each task with exact timeline for tasks.*
- *Defining current skills of a competitor and plan of improvement of poor developed skills.*
- *Consulting all of the concerns.*

10. 1. 4 Skills practice

Skills practice is often the phase of preparation that many competitors are looking forward to the most. The enthusiasm can fade after a couple of months because of all the pressure and stress that competitors start to associate with practice. In that case it's very important how competitors handle the lack of joy that practice used to give them. So, we come back to psychological preparation, which is often seen as unimportant, but comes handy in all kinds of situations. It helps competitors to reconnect with that spark in a short period of time, which leads to better practice and consequently better results.

10. 1. 5 Consulting after each practice

Getting an expert to consult after each practice is nearly impossible, so having a good mentor is very important. You can consult about current work with an expert or mentor, but the best is to consult with

both of them. This method is very effective, because you analyze and solve problems as you train. This also helps you grow a good relationship with an expert, who will be the only one allowed to discuss with you between short breaks in the competition (that was the case in our skill, maybe it varies in other skills).

10. 1. 6 Track and write down time spent on specific tasks

Tasks, described in TP (Test project) divide into smaller tasks that can be trackable. Make a spreadsheet, where you write down time spent on specific small tasks. By doing so you will have a complete overview of your progress. You will know exactly which skill you should work on (the most time-consuming) and which doesn't need that much attention.

Example of spreadsheet (for skill Painting and decorating):

	Task 1: Colour 1 area			Task 2: Wallpaper	
Date	<i>Preparing</i>	<i>Painting left object</i>	<i>Painting right object</i>	<i>Measuring and cutting corner area</i>	<i>Putting the wallpaper corner area</i>
18. 1. 2025	/	/	/	10 min	5 min
19. 1. 2025	2:30 min	4:45 min (first coat)	3:30 min (first coat)	/	/
19. 1. 2025	/	4 min (second coat)	3 min (second coat)	/	/
20. 1. 2025	2:30 min	4:40 min (first coat)	3:24 min (first coat)	9:45 min	4: 50 min

It takes some time to get used to tracking time for each task and to write everything down, but once you get used to it, it's the best thing you will have. Each week you can go through results and analyze which tasks you should work on more. In addition, seeing yourself progress through time makes you proud of yourself.

10. 1. 7 Simulation of the competition

Every competitor gets a TP (Test Project) beforehand (for following competition or from previous competitions) and an expert exactly knows the course of the competition. Once you are trained enough you can make a simulation of the competition. Train exactly as many hours as on competition, with the same breaks, maybe invite even viewers and visitors. Good way of creating simulation is in crowded areas, like shopping malls, the fair, school etc. That way you get used to noise, crowd, pressure and time frame.

10.2 COMPETITION

Competition itself lasts only a few days (two to four, depending on skill) and unlike preparation time you can't change a lot of things. Your level of physical, psychological and vocational preparation is remaining the same throughout the whole competition. All you can do is to perform at your maximum level, which is only possible if you:

- sleep well,
- have all of the tools prepared,
- have a good plan of work,
- are not nervous too much,
- are confident,
- understand all the instructions and
- react well in stressful situations.

Most of these are only possible if you train them at home, but some of them are also achievable at the competition site. Here are some tips for the best performance from my experience:

- Beforehand, connect with other competitors in different skills from your country.
- Invest in a good relationship with your expert.
- Make sure to acclimatize in the host city of the competition.
- Take a good look around the competition site.
- Connect with co-competitors.
- Always make sure to get enough food, drink and sleep.
- Have a ritual that helps you calm down and focus on the important tasks.
- After each competition day, consult with your expert (and mentor).

10.2.1 Connections with other competitors from your country

You can connect with competitors from your country and maybe invite them for coffee or just a chat on social media. The other way of connecting is through Skills organization in your country (that was the case in Slovenia), which can arrange/schedule meetings, team buildings etc, where you can make new friendships with other competitors.

This is something I believe every country should have. Other competitors actually become your friends and your safe zone if you ever feel overwhelmed, stressed or just need a hug. It's also very relaxing to have someone to talk about other things, not only about a skill, but also just about everyday things.

10.2.2 Invest in a good relationship with your expert.

I am not talking about being best friends or like brother/ sister to your expert, but just maintaining a good relationship with them. The more practices you are going to do together, the more consultations you will have, better the communication will be. An expert will know exactly your abilities, your reaction to different situations, your worries and will be able to help you when you need them.

10. 2. 3 Make sure to acclimatize in the host city of the competition.

As we all know, EuroSkills and WorldSkills competitions take place in different cities each time. Even though these events are held in September, when the weather is pretty stable in a lot of countries, atmosphere conditions can still cause you trouble. Maybe you are not used to such temperatures, humidity, precipitation or wind, which can cause you a lot of trouble. I recommend coming to a host city a few days before the actual competition to acclimatize, although it usually is the case that teams come few days before the first day of the competition.

Also, let's not forget about drinks and food. Some countries have drinkable tap water, others don't, some countries serve you sparkling water if you don't specify, some may have spicy food etc. I recommend you to find food that matches your eating habits and your tastebuds.

10. 2. 4 Take a good look around the competition site.

This may seem as an unimportant thing to do, but it can save you a lot of trouble before it even arises. Let's say that you have a 15 minutes long break and you urgently need a toilet. Not knowing where the toilet is and looking for it can cause you a lot of stress, additionally you can lose a lot of important minutes for resetting your brain before the next task. And this doesn't only apply to the toilet, it also applies to the canteen, first aid area, bus, taxi station etc.

10. 2. 5 Connect with co-competitors.

This may seem odd, but in my experience that connection was very positive. We all came to the competition site and were waiting for chief experts to let us prepare. All of the competitors were really nervous and to break the tension in the air we just started talking: about our feelings, our journey to EuroSkills (WorldSkills), our hobbies etc. Throughout the conversation you realize everyone is having similar feelings and is prepared on the similar level as you. That calms you and gives you back the confidence you may haven't felt because of nervousness.

10. 2. 6 Always make sure to get enough food, drink and sleep.

This may sound like absurd advice but it is really important. Besides being nervous because of competition, being hungry or sleepy is just adding to it.

10. 2. 7 Beforehand, make a ritual that helps you calm down and focus on the important tasks.

Regardless of your preparation for competition, it's almost impossible not to be nervous before performing. Sooner you calm yourself down, more effectively you will start working on your tasks. That's why having a ritual, which calms you, is very important. You create it a few months before competition and use it regularly, modify it if necessary to help you the most.

10. 2. 8 After each competition day, consult with your expert (and mentor).

It's recommended to talk about work you have done and make a plan for the next day. That way you can set realistic expectations so you won't feel as much pressure as you would with unachievable goals. You will learn through practice with your expert that in most of the marking schemes mistakes can cost more marks than unfinished work. Planning ahead and modifying a plan according to circumstances is also going to make you feel like you have everything under control. That way, you feel confident finishing whatever you set out to do.

10. 3 PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Some may say that your performance doesn't depend on your personal characteristics, which is partly true: vocational skills of different competitors (in the same skill) are similar, regardless of their character. However, your reaction to any situation is deeply connected to your character. There is no formula or recipe to prepare you for every situation, but you can train some characteristics for better, quick and effective reactions.

Characteristics I think every competitor should have (important in our skill, maybe it varies in other skills):

- Patience
- Quick problem solving
- Precision
- Cautious confidence
- Respect for profession, used tools, materials etc. and other competitors

10. 3. 1 Patience

Even though WorldSkills and EuroSkills competitions are high-level competitions and schedules are tight, you have to be patient while you work. Rushing can cause more problems than you may think and it most certainly won't help you. It's always better to leave some things undone and just the way they should be than finished and full of mistakes. Marking schemes are different for every skill, but for sure mistakes can cost you a lot of important marks.

10. 3. 2 Quick problem solving

Problems are always part of competitions and no one can avoid them so it's better to anticipate them than to blindly believe everything will proceed as planned. It will not be as ideal as your practice and complications will arise. However, you cannot prepare for every situation, but you should know that some of the complications are pretty predictable. Here are some relevant to a skill Painting and decorating:

- noise,
- crowd always distracting you and even asking you questions,

- draught, causing paint to dry quicker than it should; insects on freshly painted surfaces,
- too warm, too cold or too humid etc.

Even though these are predictable, you cannot prevent them, so just take them into account and still make the most out of your performance. From my experience, it's really good to create these conditions also in your practices. One practice day, you can invite friends and family to watch you perform (simulation of conditions: crowd, noise), the other day you can train in a warm/cold practice room (conditions: warm/cold and maybe humid) and so on. That will force you to think of innovative ways on how to deal with them without sacrificing too much time or quality of your work. Creating these kinds of scenarios, even in your head, can help you to think outside of the box and somehow prepare you for any situation.

10. 3. 3 Precision

This is a skill that not everyone has when they start their Skills journey, but I think it's the most important one to develop through practice. The hard truth is that co-competitors have also mastered your skill, just as you did and there is no room for an imperfect base of skill. Precision is the first thing you want to achieve and after that you can start working on velocity to get into the estimated time frame, used in competition.

10. 3. 4 Cautious confidence

Confidence comes with mastering the skill and it's a very powerful characteristic. A confident person knows what they are doing at every moment of work and does not compare themselves to anyone else. But there is an important addition to that confidence. As a competitor in such high-level competition you have to always be cautious. It means that you are always ready for possible difficulties, which can affect your work.

10. 3. 5 Respect for profession, used tools, materials etc. and other competitors

The profession, in which you are competing, has probably been developing for many years, even decades. It started with bad equipment and no knowledge. Craftsmen and workers became experts in their profession; equipment, procedures and materials have been developed and here you are, many years later, a competitor in the same skill with all the knowledge they contributed. Everyone knows that you can't stay indifferent to this fact. You develop deep respect for craftsmanship or skill and you start to feel the need to understand every aspect of it. Why such equipment is used, why is something made that way and not the other, why is this material used and not the other, why is atmosphere important for specific procedures etc.

As always, there is also a respect for other competitors. These are just like you, young masters, who have a lot of knowledge regardless of their years. Even though some may not be as skilled as you are, they are still performing in the best version of themselves, for which they worked hard.

10. 4 AFTER THE COMPETITION

Right after the competition you don't know what to do, because you spent most of the time preparing for the competition and now suddenly all of this is over. But don't worry, you will get a lot of opportunities inside and outside your professional field. You can cooperate with new people, start working on projects you never thought you would and generally get a really good reference (the competition itself) for your career.

It is important for you to not get scared of these opportunities. Some of them may come again in the future, but a lot of them will be a one time opportunity and it depends on you to "sort" them out and take the ones that will help you grow the most. Look up for these types of projects:

- one project, where you try something new in your professional field with people you already know,
- one project, where you work with something you are familiar with in different places (other city, abroad...) and maybe different people
- one project, where you work with kids, who are interested in your profession, by showing them your work and processes, leading them to try and do something and at the same time being an ambassador of your profession
- one project, where you work in totally different profession that enhances skills you also need in your profession

10. 5 OVERALL ADVICES

1. Do not be scared.

Explanation: When you first start preparing for a Skills competition, you will probably get scared of complex tasks, criticism, failure, tight schedule, social interactions etc. While this may scare you and make you wonder if this competition is really for you, I can assure you: it's completely normal to feel that way. You have to be aware of the fact that everyone started somewhere, even the best masters, and you are on the start of a similar journey.

How to: Discuss your feelings to mentor, expert or maybe previous competitor. They will understand you and therefore will be able to help you. Start practicing and experimenting with procedures and materials, go to masterclasses and learn as many things relevant to your skill performance as possible.

2. Make a good plan of preparation.

Explanation: As written in chapter 10. 1. 1 (Plan of preparation) a realistic and structured plan can help you develop all necessary insufficient skills in time you have for preparation.

How to: Like already written, you have to talk to your expert and mentor, with whom you write down the plan. There is no obligation to strictly stick to the plan, consider adapting and changing it if necessary. It's better to view it as a really good recipe that can be modified according to available ingredients.

3. Eat, drink and sleep enough through preparation.

Explanation: The workflow can start to feel overwhelming and while you try to catch up with work you forget to eat and drink without even realizing it. The most intense preparation takes place in summertime

with high temperatures, which increases risk of dehydration. Getting enough sleep is also crucial for your highest performance.

How to: The best way to drink enough water through your preparation days is to make a plan with constant breaks (every 30 minutes), between which you always take at least a sip of water. The same goes with food, which should be refreshing and your meals must be balanced. To get proper sleep, you follow these tips: go to sleep soon enough, no caffeine in the afternoon, no alcohol three hours before bed, no screen time the last hour before bed etc.

4. Take breaks.

Explanation: Breaks may seem as interruptions through your workday, but are very important for you to step back, calm your mind, look at work you have already done and think of ways to improve it. As already written above this paragraph, breaks are important for your hydration and eating enough food.

How to: Make a plan ahead in which you should include breaks. It depends on the work you do, but let's say that short breaks (2 to 5 minutes) are the best every 30 minutes and long breaks (30 minutes) should be taken every 3-4 hours. If your body says it needs a break, listen to it, even if that means a few days. In the last case you just have to take into account that this can postpone your planned progress.

REFERENCES:

EuroSkills Competition Rules (EuroSkills Herning 2025)