

A Patriotic Man

A Patriotic Man ([*Isänmaallinen mies*](#), 2013, 97m, [6.3](#)) is a Finnish comedy-drama following one man's journey in balancing morality with patriotism while complicit in a serious doping conspiracy, loosely based on a true [true scandal](#). It centres on Finnish Nordic skiers' doping strategy to come out on top after a few years of unsuccessful results in their national sport. Their Olympic ski team discovers and subsequently hires an average, recently unemployed man with particularly iron-rich blood to serve as an emergency doping bank for their athletes, lavishing him with gifts and guilt to keep him on hand as needed. Pressures from his wife to be someone she can be proud of encourage him to tuck his morality away as he does "what's best for the country", ergo the title. Eventually he's visiting strip clubs and dealing with drug traffickers, becoming embroiled in an affair with the nation's sweetheart skier, and even almost dying through a botched blood transfusion in a tale that still manages to pull off a near-Disney ending.

Some context first: [blood doping](#), the "drug" of choice here, is the injection of extra blood cells before competition to increase muscular oxygen supply. It was a very useful technique because it was nigh undetectable since the athlete was often injecting concentrated volumes of their own blood back into themselves. And then there is guilt and shame: the first is the acknowledgement of fault, the second is the blow to self-worth resulting from it and, in the case of Finland, largely based on the perceived perceptions of the world.



Finnish headline reads “Shame” over Jari Isometsä, one of the disgraced skiers. I cannot imagine the pain of living through something like this.

The movie is lighthearted but it must be underlined that the blow the original scandal dealt to Finland was huge, with the country reeling still a [decade later](#). [Jari Isometsä](#), a national legend, was the first to be caught, but he built up a plausible story explaining his use of a banned substance. But then a bag with doping supplies was found, spiraling Finland into a deep state of communal shame, with [Mika Myllälä](#), one of the other legends involved, never [fully recovering](#). Mika battled alcoholism, unsuccessfully tried to re-enter the sport without any real success, ultimately going through a divorce just four years before dying at the young age of 41.

The country [had built](#) a precarious national identity around her sporting power to cover up something approaching an inferiority complex regarding the rest of Europe: Finland only attained autonomy in 1809 and independence over a century later, didn't really have a particularly rich history full of

glorious exploits and no real tradition of fine arts, and had developed a tendency of accepting “European” (mostly Swedish) stereotype of themselves, but in the worst possible form. For example, their honesty became stupidity, their excellent work ethic workaholicism, their modesty a lack of civil mannerisms. It was therefore natural that athletic prowess, the one remaining cultural marker, became a solid rallying point in developing a national Finnish identity. Of all the sports the Finns excelled in, skiing was the biggest deal because of its association with the [Winter War](#) and with the Finnish philosophy of [sisu](#), a persevering quality that what must be done will be done, regardless of cost. Just reading how this perfect storm formed, I wouldn't be surprised if *sisu* might well have been an element that drove these top-level Finns into the scandal to begin with.



Aino, the skier at the heart of the movie.

Now a few thoughts. First, on the unfortunate leapfrog cycle of doping, alluded to by Aino in the film: that passion and skill is what brought her to the national level, but at a certain point she plateaued. It was then that she starts noticing murmurs of other skiers taking performance enhancing drugs, leading her to the rational conclusion that that's her

next step too. "If they're cheating and winning," she justified, "and I don't stand a chance otherwise, then I need to do what they're doing because it's working."

She takes a first substance, then a second to mask it, then a third to augment the first, then a fourth, fifth, sixth... until she's "on a locker-room bench, watching them pour blood into you. And always you're afraid you'll be caught. And when it falls apart, you're a traitor and the media spits on you." We quickly see how this skier's personality and lifestyle choices are shaped directly by the cutthroat atmosphere of elite sport: she juggles relationships as resources, with only a near-death experience bringing her true colours out in a moment of real vulnerability... but she immediately creeps back into the shell of success she's built for herself, her castle of support. And the strange thing is, you feel happy for her. She's selfish, but also an underdog throughout the whole film. And this somehow makes a difference.



Toivo and Aino hook up for gold.

This points to a previous [allusion](#) I've made: is not some blame to be laid on us, the public, for demanding ever more from our athletes? Or on the systems creating disparity in the world, driving athletes in desperate situations to close their eyes, grit their teeth, and make some very risky moves in

hopes of huge payoffs? I really think so. That the [strategy](#) to stop doping in the event that inspired the movie was based on surprise capture rather than on developing practices to reduce doping itself points to our world's reactive rather than preventative approach, an approach that I think needs revision. Why not create programs where athletes are taken and shown the serious, comprehensive facilities where drug testing occurs? This alone might deter many of them.

Wrapping up this point is the interesting phenomenon of doping often occurring bottom-up: top tier athletes often are playing catch-up with those below vying for a medal, reminiscent of the [Pumping Iron](#) line, "the wolf at the bottom of the hill is not as hungry as the wolf at the top":

In the end perhaps the world should balance the Olympic [hendriatis](#) with de Coubertin's own alternative Olympic motto: "The most important thing is not to win but to take part!"

And now onto patriotism. I've examined related issues before: [cultural identity](#) and the almost evolution-driven [competition](#) that results when these fight for prominence. As I continue critically examining the issue, I see these structures as increasingly man-made and therefore arbitrarily assigned at birth. This does not negate their power, however. Despite seeing the havoc competing for one's country brings – always resulting in unhappiness and emptiness because the public's eye quickly moves on to the next high literally the moment the winner steps off that podium – I still caught myself tearing up when Aino tore it up on the slopes... all the whole purposely looking for a "POL" in the winner's tables, despite knowing the country of my ancestors was certainly not going to be represented. Patriotism carves a deep hold indeed.



Toivo, our protagonist, with the most conniving film still of Coach Ilmo I could find.

And the national coach in this film, Ilmo, definitely realized the power of using such rhetoric. Whenever he uses the words, “Are you a patriotic man?” – no less than thrice in the film – you can be sure subterfuge is coming next. I am not sure if Ilmo is selfish, an idiot perpetually caught in a perfect storm, or outright evil, though I’m leaning towards slipping him into the first box. Regardless, the movie is worth watching just to see how eagerly people serve themselves up for exploitation whenever event a hint of patriotism is mentioned – I mean, even Toivo’s wife comes to terms with his affair because he is ultimately serving their country.

Final thoughts: Toivo is much stronger than many of us, originally refusing to cooperate despite very real threats of violence but only coming on board when serving the country was perceived as a greater good than his own moral code. The scenes with the Russian drug traffickers made me genuinely uncomfortable, that [Ben Johnson](#) made a cameo was neat (especially given the topic), and a scene involving a heart attack reminded me of a golden rule: if ever a friend looks sick and retreats to a quiet place in the middle of a social gathering, follow them! This advice can be the difference

between life and death. And some trivia: turns out [Toivo & Aino jokes](#) are quite popular in the Nordic country. Additionally, the Finnish word for Finland, *Suomi*, likely means [ground](#) (as opposed to the “[Fin-](#)” derivatives used by most other languages).

Rating time: ★★ $\frac{3}{4}$. Characters are not special but this makes them totally believable, with the lead split between a great match of a simple hero and a misguided heroine. The plot kept me genuinely interested from start to finish and the complexity was just right. Half a star for all three. Originality: $\frac{3}{4}$ for the believable, non-Hollywood elements that pulled empathy for our imperfect heroes right out of me. Recommendability: half a star. It's good for people who like Scandinavia (especially Finland, obviously), sport, ethics, or skiing, and would definitely make for a good high school class leading to interesting discussions on doping afterwards, and even a neat flick for a comedy drama with friends who like foreign films.