

## 7700 km in one year

Laura Sagadin is a 17-year-old girl attending high school II. gimnazija Maribor. "I am a swimmer and triathlon athlete," says Laura over Zoom. As she is giving answers she is driving to Kranj, where she has a swimming competition. Laura lives in Slovenia. That is a small country with a significant phenomenon. Among only 2 million people there is an enormous number of very successful athletes. Let me mention a few of them. On Tour de France Tadej Pogačar won 2 times and Kristjan Čeh just became the youngest ever discus world champion. But many more amazing Slovene sportspeople are incredible in their disciplines. At the last Olympic games in Beijing, the Slovenian representative team achieved 7 medals. One of the most known basketball players worldwide is young Slovene Luka Dončić. Even climbing Slovenes have great representatives, including Janja Garnbret, who became the first-ever female Olympic gold medalist in sport climbing, and is widely regarded as one of the greatest competitive climbers of all time. All of these 4 champions are only 23 years old. And we can not forget about the amazing skier Ilka Štuhec, who became world champion downhill in 2017 and defended this title 2 years later. What does it take to get to the world's elite and when does it start?

Laura is dreaming about a bright future in professional sports. She began training swimming when she was in second grade after her doctor advised her to do so because she had a twisted spine. She still has it, but it is better now. Later, she fell in love with this sport and it became her passion. "I always enjoyed being in the water. But sometimes I ask myself "How can I love such a difficult sport?" And I don't have an answer, I just love to be in the water". She says swimming is her passion because she loves it so much that she is ready to suffer during the training, "which are brutal", as she says.

But in the last few years, she also started to participate in triathlon competitions. The covid crises were in that sense good for Laura because she had more time and one of the trainers convinced her to try running and cycling as well. Young sportswoman swims approximately 2600 km, runs 1196 km, and cycles 3900 km in a year. If we add up these numbers we get 7696 km, that number is the same as the distance from Tanzania to Ireland. But that is not all. She also goes to school and studies a lot. Maybe that sounds impossible but Laura says that time management enables her to do all of that. I was able to experience her great planning skills. She was answering questions for this article in the cafe near the swimming pool because she had training afterward. Her mum called her during our conversation and she gave her the bag with swimming equipment. Everything Laura does is in some way productive and she spends her time very well.

Her lifestyle may sound like a rarity among teenagers, but II. gimnazija is a school that gives those young athletes chasing their dreams their class with certain adjustments. The students who show great results in sports are enrolled in school after an interview. "I went to the interview with my parents. There was one teacher and the coordinator of the department.

They looked at my grades and my sports results. Then they asked me many questions about my ambitions, plans for the future, about how seriously I want to train ... It was obvious they want to accept only serious athletes, the ones who are very determined to train and compete for all 4 years of schooling." says Laura. Good grades are important for enrolling because there is a big inquiry.

Because of competitions and as an after-effect absence from class they have the opportunity to expand their school year. That gives them more time to get grades. Laura missed the first week of school, because of the Balkan championship. "I catch up with copying my schoolmate's notes and I do not have problems, only maths is sometimes a challenge because the explanation is more important." Because she missed school a lot this year, she decided to expand her school year. The sports class students have 6 hours of PE a week, these classes are in the morning, and students who have morning training can skip them. The school schedule is also adjusted. There are not many free hours so the school starts at about seven in the morning and finishes at half past one every day so the athletes can go to training afterward. In the normal class, the lessons can end even at three o'clock. All gradings are announced in advance so athletes can prepare and make their plans.

Students can also change their oral and writing exam dates if they do not suit their schedules. One of the most interesting adjustments is writing a test during holidays, so you can get grades even on Christmas if your teacher agrees. One of the most important features of this class is that you can miss the class if you have training at that time. All these adjustments and rules are great because they enable you to manage school work and your sport more easily. They are 4 classes like that and each of them has about 20 students.

This sports department is 32 years old. They are many successful athletes who attended the program, together with about 250 students. One of them was also before mentioned Ilka Štuhec. She was able to attend school and go to competitions in other countries around the world during the school year, and that is the main goal of the program. It supports teenagers, so they can attend as much sports practice and competitions as they can, but finish school also. Great successes in sport also achieved by skier Boštjan Kline; with 3 medals in the world cup, Katja Koren; her greatest successes are winning the Alpine ski world cup super G and the slalom bronze medal at the winter Olympic games in Lillehammer, Norway, tennis player Polona Hercog; Her career-high WTA rankings are 35 in singles and 56 in doubles, she has won five titles on the WTA Tour, three in singles and two in doubles, runner Sonja Roman who attended Olympics in Peking. But those are only the most successful ones, the list of great athletes who went to II. gimnazija is much longer. School offers a special team of teachers who support students and give them advice and motivation when needed. In celebration of 30 years of the sports department, the school published a special publication ("30 let športnega oddelka II. gimnaziji Maribor") with all the past achievements and advancements of the athletes who attended the class.

Our triathlon athlete says she has a lot of motivation because she is very competitive and she simply loves sport. Her models are mostly swimmers, one of them is American swimmer

Michael Phelps. That sounds fair because her favourite discipline is still swimming. Besides sport she is also interested in science, in marine biology and chemistry, to be exact. In the future, she would like to join the national team, but she also wants to attend college, maybe even in another country. "When I began swimming I looked up to the older swimmers in my club. Some of them went to study in the USA and that inspired me. I like that there you can study and train hard, in Slovenia that is not possible, because you are obligated to come to some lectures and you need to skip training. No matter what, I would like to study abroad, where I feel freer. I love to explore unknown places and cities. It is fun because it is a challenge."

Getting a degree is very important for Laura because a triathlon athlete is not paid as well as a football player. In Slovenia, you can get a salary if you get employed in the police or military as an athlete, but the income also comes from prizes and mainly from sponsors. Swimming and triathlon are not so popular, because of that there are fewer sponsors and the income is smaller. Maybe you picture Laura as a hardworking bee who has no time for fun or friends. But that is not true at all. She still loves to go watch Marvel movies at the cinema or attend a party and she travels a lot with her family. Last summer they went to Iceland. Laura's family is very important to her. They not only drive her around the city to get her to training, but they also make sure she feels supported and loved.

Laura had a lot of fun in Israel, where she participated in International children's games. The competition lasted 3 days, the festival 5. "The opening ceremony was great, I loved the ambient. There were many people from different parts of the world. I also performed very well. The company was great. I hung out with athletes from Slovenia, we swam together in the pool and we had a lot of fun in our free time." She also told me about their challenge with temperature. "I was ready for hot Israel, but the pool was freezing. I only had one zip-up. I have an adorable photo of our team sleeping in hoodies in the hall, during our break." Laura also loves competitions where she can compete in a team. One of her best results is second place in the national competition in the relay. Right now, Laura is among the top 3 triathlon athletes in the country and in some disciplines in swimming. Her goals are to qualify for the Slovenia representative team and do sports as a job. But she doesn't like to make big plans because "You never know where life is going to take you". Right now Laura is healing her leg. She hit her leg in the swimming pool, so the priority is to get well and begin to train.

Laura Sagadin is a young lady determined to achieve her goals, but also knows how to enjoy life the most. "The conditions for training are great. In Maribor there is an amazing pool, you have an athletic stadium nearby, you can run pretty much everywhere, because roads are not too busy, outside the city you have a great cycling track ..." As Laura says Slovenia gives athletes great terms and environment to start because it has beautiful nature, many sports clubs, and good economic conditions. Athletes are always on tv, in newspapers, Luka Dončić is even on our Poli sausage package. They are very well promoted which leads to more engagement in sports among the kids who look up to their role models and want to become just like them. And I can not wait to see Laura on my tv screen doing her best as she always does.

