

Axel Ekros: From Elite Rowing to Finding Opportunities in Nordic Equities

The next generation of portfolio managers often begins its journey away from the spotlight, developing investment skills as analysts before taking on portfolio responsibility. Axel Ekros, an analyst at stock-picking boutique Protean Funds Scandinavia, is following this path, drawing on experience in elite rowing, entrepreneurship, corporate finance, and credit analysis. Yet the spark that drew him to stock picking was a book.

Ekros's first exposure to investing came at home. "It was my parents who first introduced me to the pink sheets and hammered in the discipline of monthly savings in equity funds, even though I had no idea why it was so important at the time," recalls Ekros. The defining moment came during a training camp with the Swedish national rowing team in the Czech Republic, where he picked up Joel Greenblatt's *You Can Be a Stock Market Genius*. "Reading about ignored or misunderstood corporate situations completely captivated me."

After his rowing career ended, Ekros entered finance through an internship in corporate finance. "I quickly realized that while the corporate finance side was a lot of fun and highly educational, my true passion and interest was for the public equity markets." He subsequently joined Staffan Östlin to assist in managing Adrigo Small & Midcap L/S, while also working as a high-yield analyst within the East Capital group, supporting a crossover credit strategy. These roles gave him experience assessing companies from both an equity investor's and a creditor's perspective.

Developing a Portfolio Manager's Mindset

At Protean, Ekros works as an analyst supporting the portfolio managers of Protean Small Cap, Protean Aktiesparfond Norden, and Protean Select L/S. His responsibilities extend beyond analyzing individual companies, however, as he contributes investment views and participates in discussions about portfolio decisions. "While my title is still analyst, I actively provide my views on how I think we should act in the market," he notes.

One of the most significant changes in his thinking has been a stronger focus on risk management and the consequences of being wrong. "The biggest change in my thinking is avoiding positions or situations where a loss could materially impact the portfolio," he explains. "I have become far more diversified in the number of positions, and I am highly mindful of considering both possible and probable outcomes. Furthermore, a key learning is that the entry price an investor pays for a position is extremely important for future returns."

Learning to Look Beyond the Numbers

Ekros attributes much of his development as an investor to the variety of experiences he gained before joining Protean. Running his own e-commerce business, completing internships in private equity and corporate finance, and working as a credit analyst exposed him to different aspects of business models, capital allocation, and financial risk. "What has been most important in developing me as an investor is undoubtedly my diverse background and how it has taught me to analyze companies from entirely different perspectives," he argues.

Credit analysis, in particular, reinforced the importance of downside protection. "My time as a credit analyst taught me to evaluate the downside and identify sector-specific risks, since the upside in the credit market are in most cases, that you get your money back plus interest."

These experiences also shaped his research process. "A more universal lesson I have drawn from all these different experiences is that every sector has its own specific key risks and KPIs that need to be checked before you begin to judge the potential upside or downside of a stock in an individual company."

Discipline, Patience, and Market History

Ekros's years in elite rowing taught him to remain disciplined under pressure and tolerate discomfort when results do not immediately follow expectations. "Competing on the Swedish national rowing team instilled discipline and a high threshold for discomfort," he says. "This resilience is important as an investor. You have to follow a situation, adapt to new information, and rely on your prior work and fundamental analysis without getting stressed when a position or the broader market goes against you."

He also believes investors must look beyond the market conditions that have shaped their careers. "Many who entered the financial industry since the 2010s have never had to navigate an environment with persistently high interest rates or a long recession," considers Ekros. "With the exception of the pandemic, most people have only experienced a long stretch of low rates and good economic growth."

"I believe you cannot allow yourself to be blinded by the tailwinds of the past decade. It is crucial to understand how markets function when capital actually costs money and growth is not guaranteed."

The Challenge of Finding the Signal

At Protean, Ekros follows more than 70 companies, requiring him to distinguish relevant information from market noise. "From the outside, the role might look like a purely quantitative exercise of reading balance sheets and building models to form a view. I believe the numbers are generally the easy part," he says. "Meeting the company, learning more, weighing perceived potential versus valuation and possible outcomes, and ultimately deciding whether we should buy, sell, or do nothing, that is the hard part."

The challenge is particularly pronounced among small-cap companies and spin-offs with limited or no sell-side coverage. Without external estimates to provide a reference point, investors must rely more heavily on their own research and judgment. "There are often no external estimates to lean on outside of your own," Ekros says. "Even when a company is developing exactly according to plan, the share price might still move lower. This can be mentally draining, and it requires endurance to maintain conviction and look 'wrong' for months while waiting for the thesis to play out against a falling stock price."

What Separates Great Investors?

Working closely with Protean co-founders and portfolio managers Pontus Dackmo and Carl Gustafsson, and portfolio manager Richard Bråse has reinforced Ekros's belief that investment success depends as much on temperament as technical ability. "Most people are smart enough to build a sophisticated financial model or spot a cheap valuation, but few possess the temperament required to act on them effectively," he considers.

Finding an apparently undervalued company is not enough. Investors must understand why the market assigns it a discount and whether the reasons are temporary, behavioral, or rooted in structural weaknesses. "It's relatively easy to find cheap assets, but what differentiates a 'great investor', I believe, is looking beyond the obvious surface metrics to understand the behavioral or structural reasons why those assets are mispriced in the first place."

Looking at Stockholm's investment community, Ekros sees a strong pipeline of young talent and opportunities for smaller, specialized managers. As fund companies consolidate and expand, he believes their organizational complexity can create room for more agile competitors. "As they scale up, they inevitably become slower moving and more bureaucratic, which opens up attractive opportunities for agile, niche players to establish themselves," he says.

He believes the growth of passive investing could create further opportunities for active managers conducting detailed fundamental research. "Paradoxically, I believe this dynamic actually creates even better conditions and opportunities for active, fundamental-driven funds to thrive and generate alpha."