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Last winter Swiss skiers won more victories than ever before

by Beat Caspar,
chief sports correspondent
of the «Basler Zeitung»

Last winter «Made in Switzerland» was a highly esteemed mark of origin in sport, too. As a winter sports country, Switzerland was worthily represented by the queen of pirouettes, Denise Biellmann, who became European and world figure-skating champion, and by the Lausanne-Riviera team, which captured the world curling title. However, it was the Alpine skiers who won the most resounding victories. Swiss ski-ing aces came first in 21 out of 69 World Cup events. Marie-Theres Nadig (9 successes), Erika Hess (7), Doris de Agostini (2), Peter Müller (2) and Toni Bürgler (1) were standing on the highest step of the winners' podium last winter on the eve of the Alpine ski-ing world championships in Schladming. In the 10th year of her international career Marie-Theres Nadig became

the second Swiss woman to carry off the overall World Cup (the first was Lise-Marie Morerod, who has recently turned professional, in 1977). However, although she also won the World Cup downhill (for the second time – beating her colleague Doris de Agostini, who did better than ever before), this skier from Flums, who was 27 on 8th March, could not say at the end of April whether she would be taking part in competitions next season. One of the three most popular Swiss sportswomen – the others being Denise Biellmann and Christine Stückelberger, the Olympic dressage champion – confessed before leaving for a well-deserved holiday: «There are so many reasons for retiring, and so many reasons for going on. I really don't know yet what I shall decide.» In reaching her decision she will have to take account of Toni Arnsteiner, the owner of the Blizzard ski firm, who has been a major factor in her success, and of her

brothers, who look after her sports goods shop in the Flums mountains during her long absences for training and racing. At the end of the season she also declared, as she had done several times in previous years: «The hard training and the torture of competitions are getting more and more difficult to take.» Moreover, Marie-Theres Nadig has a special problem of motivation. As a double Olympic champion in 1972 and third in the 1980 Olympics, she has more or less achieved all she could have dreamed of in competitive sport. And who can guarantee that in the 1981–82 season she will be as successful as she was in the last two years, or win a world title? She has always said that a sports idol should retire while he or she is still winning.

Last winter's second best woman skier in Switzerland and the world is far from thoughts of retirement. Erika Hess, for four years regarded as an exceptional talent in the mould of a Lise-Marie Morerod, and winner of the Lake Placid Olympic slalom bronze medal, only discovered victory last winter. In 1981 she was unbeaten in all the slaloms she entered, whether only in the FIS or in the World Cup. «During the season I just didn't realize what a series of victories could mean», said this always good-humoured farmer's daughter from Central Switzerland after the finals in Laax (Grisons), «but now, having got things in perspective, I think it's wonderful to have established this record.» Although still young – she was 19 on 6th March – Erika Hess has no illusions about her future career. «Next winter everyone will be measuring me against my successes this season. I shall have to consolidate them. That will be very difficult because the others won't just be sitting back.» But the slalom

The Federal Councillor G.-A. Chevallaz is complimenting Erika Hess after her victory in Diablerets. In the middle A. Oggi, director of the Swiss-skiing-Federation. (ASL photo)





From left to right: Doris de Agostini, Erika Hess, Maria Walliser and Marie-Theres Nadig.
(Key photo)

star from Nidwald knows the recipe for continuing this unique series of successes. «Even more training», she declared before she left for two months in California, where she plans to relax on a ranch and improve her English. She needs both that language and French because, with the growing international popularity of competitive skiing, she is increasingly sought after as an interview victim.

If Marie-Theres Nadig and Erika Hess figured most frequently in the headlines, others also played a part in the Swiss team's outstanding triumph in the Nations Cup – their first victory in the 15 years of the World Cup's history. First and foremost there was Doris de Agostini who, after a long period in the wilderness, has just had her best season, thanks to a change of ski make and a clever ski technician who always «sets her up». She is already a favourite for the world title in the «Haus im Ennstal» downhill. This expert from Airolo has made particular progress in technique and now negotiates the bends considerably better than she did a year or two ago. A skier who must be mentioned in the same

breath as Miss de Agostini is Maria Walliser. She is a lovely girl from Mosnang, in the Toggenburg, and will not be 18 until 27th May. Competing in her first complete World Cup season, she burst on the scene like a bombshell. This slalom expert, who won her first points in the first race at Val d'Isère, had at the end scored in all sections and was the season's most successful newcomer. Sparkling with ambition and the pleasure of skiing, Maria Walliser, who is a passionate horse-lover and who, despite the stresses of the World Cup, has just completed her commercial apprenticeship with good marks, commented: «I have only just really understood how it works. That will give me the necessary drive to train this summer.»

Besides this renowned quartet from the women's team – so well trained and managed by René Vaudroz – Zoe Haas, Brigitte Nanzo and Brigitte Glur are among the best skiers in the world, and they have been joined by a new talent in the person of Brigitte Oertli, who came second in the European Cup. Only Fabienne Pralong, Christine Klossner and Gaby Infanger suf-

fered setbacks, as a result of which the last two have left the national team.

In contrast to the ladies, the men were not quite able to repeat their success of the previous season. After two consecutive victories Peter Müller lost the World Cup downhill to Harti Weirather. The main cause was his heavy fall just before the end of the Lauberhorn downhill, when he was in the lead. The race was then won by Toni Bürgler and Müller had to rest for a time with a dislocated shoulder. A positive aspect of this turbulent winter, however, is that the new downhill trainer, Karl Frehsner, built up a solid team which is well equipped to compete against the dominant Austrians and the Canadians. The slalom and giant slalom racers, on the other hand, did not come up to expectations. Only Jean-Luc Fournier and Joel Gaspoz managed to gain a few places, coming after Ingemar Stenmark (who was no longer so outstanding and who has problems of motivation arising from his move to Monte Carlo and his new romance), overall World Cup winner Phil Mahre, and Alexander Tschirrow, who turned up trumps towards the end of the season with four victories. «We just haven't got any winners», was the disappointed comment of the men's leader, Rolf Hefti. He and his trainers are fighting a difficult, almost hopeless battle. In the slalom events the competition is growing year by year because more and more countries are going in for expensive, specialized training and because most of the Swiss talent moves into the downhill camp at the first opportunity. There it is considerably easier – at least for the moment – to get to the top (and it is more lucrative). This has been proved by Franz Heinzer, a 19-year-old from Schwyz. After two victories in European Cup downhills he qualified for the World Cup and, beginning with Kitzbühel, won points in all the other downhills.