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Sport for the masses – spectator sport

Not well enough rooted in society

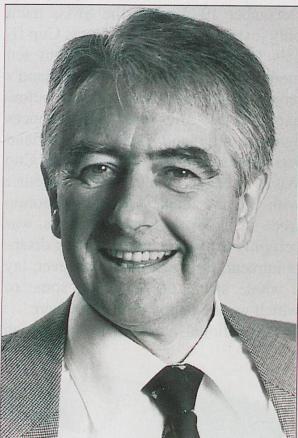
1993 was a good year for Swiss sport. Reason enough for Swiss Review to put some questions to René Burkhalter, central president of the Swiss National Sports Federation, about the general significance of sport, about sports clubs and about promoting both sport for the masses and spectator sport.

Swiss Review: For you, Mr. Burkhalter, sport, "the world's finest irrelevance", stands for performance, education and free-time occupation. Are these ideals all equal, or do you have priorities?

René Burkhalter: I don't see things quite as abstractly. For me all three are connected. The performance component is also part of free-time occupation, although in the last few years this idea has unfortunately lost ground. Covering 100 metres in so-and-so many seconds may have something alarming about it, but don't forget that even the most harmless ball game has a competitive aspect. Everybody is trying to get the ball from someone else. Performance of any kind requires effort and self-discipline, and that brings us straight to education. Going offside is an offence in football. But unhappily in our present society the line between offside and onside has become rather porous.

In your 1993 Pro-Sport-Club campaign, you advocate joining clubs, and you say "sport heals". Are clubs not popular enough, or is it a matter of just taking part in sport?

There are clubs in decline and clubs expanding. It was thought for a time that businesses like fitness centres would be



Biography

René Burkhalter, born in 1934, is married and has two grown-up sons. He is a free-lance architect in Ittigen, Canton Berne, so his job with the National Sports Association is part-time. He is still an active fencer and belonged to the national team for years. He was instrumental in making it world famous. Originally elected to the National Sports Association to represent the 'minor' sport of fencing, he became central president in January 1993.

over the world. But we have over 27,000 sports clubs – which is a pretty dense network. You have to imagine that a gymnastics club might set up a light athletics or a handball section. Ramifications of this kind would soon cover the whole sector. But I would like to come back to the place of sport in social life. People nowadays often complain about the loss of community spirit. But where does this really have its roots? All Swiss men go in the army, and that gives them things to talk about around the table. But women are coming up now, and sport could be a big potential joint-interest subject.

How do you see the link between sport for the masses and spectator sport? Would it not be a good thing to promote and support spectator sport more? Or is this being done by the private sector?

The Swiss want results. They want to see medals. But they don't want to pay for them. As citizens the Swiss don't think the government ought to spend too much money on spectator sport. I think this is right. We have to go to private industry to beg for the resources we need. And the result enables Swiss Aid to Sport to distribute four to five million Swiss francs a year amongst the spec-



Reason to celebrate: the Swiss women's volleyball team...



...and the same goes for the horse-jumpers. (Photos: RDZ)

tor sports. But of course we need more than that to bring our sportsmen and sportswomen up to the top professional level. An analysis has shown that in Switzerland today sport generates between 16 and 18 billion francs. Nowadays gym shoes are worn wherever people go, and not just for sport. Sport influences fashion, and it's mixed up in the hotel trade. So there is no harm in business making a substantial contribution, so that sport – which is used so much in advertising – continues to be promoted and encouraged to an ever greater extent.

Interview: Heidi Willumat

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