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Valais: Afire for the Olymp

Switzerland is planning to start the next millennium with two major events: the National Exhibition Expo.01 and the Winter Olympics at Sion in 2006. The country intends to use these two occasions to re-establish its good name. Switzerland has already taken the decision to hold the exhibition. A positive answer from the Olympic Committee in June 1999 would be evidence that the world trusts Switzerland once again.

It would be wonderful if the Valais municipalities could sweep the board." Jean-Daniel Mudry, a chemical engineer and Divisional Commander, is planning Switzerland's run-up 7 years before the legendary 16 days.

Alice Baumann

He is staking everything on getting the 20th Olympic Games for Switzerland. "It would be a unique opportunity for our country to put on such a great event." Planning 68 competitive events in Valais would mean that the whole country would be obliged to open itself to the world, laughs the commander of the 9th Mountain Division, based in Bellinzona. "Creating communities across the language frontiers to prepare these events, we shall be contributing to Switzerland's sense of nationhood."

Serving our country

Divisional Commander Mudry is putting himself in the front line until June the 30th 1999, as director general of the candidature committee "Sion 2006 - Switzerland". 11 days before this mandate runs out, the keenly awaited decision will be taken: the International Olympic Committee (IOC), meeting in Seoul, will decide which of 6 applicants will get the games.

Although the objective is not yet reached, the planning of stadiums, ski-jump ramps and sleeping quarters, hospitals, schools and roads, pistes

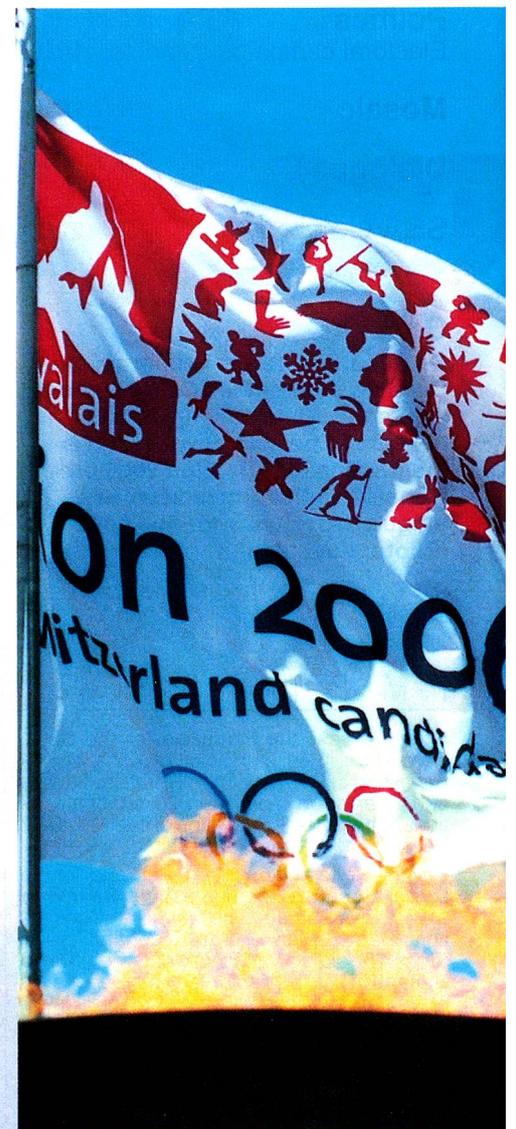
and snow cannons has long since started. Alpine skiing and ski jumping will be concentrated around Crans Montana and the ice sports in Sion. It is intended that Goms should be the Nordic skiing centre and St Moritz - which can be reached through the Gothard tunnel - is to host the bobsleigh and luge races. There are no plans for ostentatious buildings; only simple ones in the style of the "environmental games" at Lillehammer (see illustration).

A spark of hope for Valais

The Olympics are not only great for the physique: they can do wonders for your wallet. The games are intended to bring to this economically isolated valley the stimulus which it so needs; what is more, to the whole of the valley - surprisingly enough, for the moment there is no deep divide between the upper and lower valleys. The prospect of employment and contracts has welded all 163 valley municipalities into a single block. They are hoping that the file handed in on September 1st to the IOC - weighing all of 5 pounds - will have an impact that sends the other five competitors spinning out of the race. The party on June 19th 1999 on the Place de la Planta in Sion is already being planned.

People associated with the project like Jean-Daniel Mudry have their eye on socio-cultural effects as well as the

economic and political impact. "People taking part in sport generally have no trouble fitting into a community." Sport brings benefits to every town and village. "40% of school children in Sion come from abroad; sport helps them to integrate."



c flame

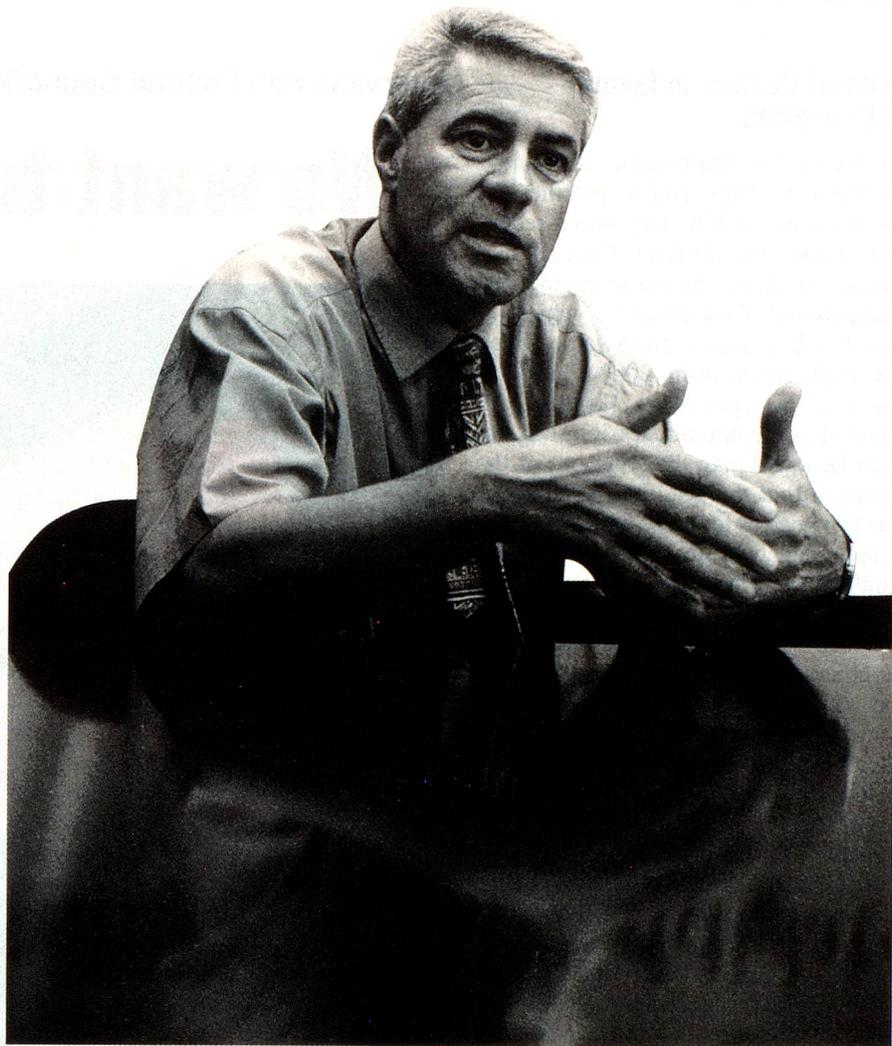
Waking up Switzerland and the world

That is an insider speaking. But why should Switzerland put on the Winter Games? Polled by opinion researchers, 43% of 500 people living in French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland said that they welcomed the positive publicity for Switzerland; 38% hope to see tourism given a puff; 25% look to the promotion of trade and industry; 22% hope that Sion 2006 will make Switzerland more open to the world; 10% that sport will spread; 8% that unemployment will drop; and 8% look forward to the expansion of sporting infrastructure.

Protecting Valais' landscape

What about the building, what about protecting the environment? "We shan't be leaving ruins behind us, but values which will be of benefit to society in the long term. Our aim is to achieve lasting development for Valais," insists Mudry, who lives in Ticino. The intention is to show Valais' beautiful landscape, not to ruin it. Existing installations are to be expanded on a temporary basis. As far as possible transport will be by rail and bus.

Back to the real world: how good are the chances that Switzerland will get the games? Apart from Sion the spotlight is on Helsinki (Finland), Klagenfurt (Austria), Turin (Italy), Poprad-Tatry (Slovakia) and Zakopane (Poland). Ives Terrani, sports editor of the French-speaking paper "Le Temps" believes that only Switzerland and Italy have a chance. Switzerland's trump-card: it is multilingual. Its handicap: unlike Turin it has no financially powerful sponsor like the Agnelli group (Fiat) which owns the Sestriere ski resort. No games for Switzerland perhaps?



Divisional Commander Jean-Daniel Mudry got Valais into shape for the Sion 2006 candidature. (Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)

Once again, after 58 years

If Switzerland's candidature for the games to be held from February 11th to 26th 2006 fails once again, the window of opportunity will close for many years. Since the last debacle – Salt Lake City was chosen for 2002 – Switzerland has been planning more compact games, with an Olympic village and shorter distances to the competition venues. Mudry says "from the Tourbillon hill above Sion you can see 60% of the projected competition sites".

The first Swiss Winter Olympics took place in 1928, the last in 1948 in St Moritz. Since then the reputation of the

sport has suffered: drug abuse and sponsorship excesses have soiled its image. And Switzerland's dented reputation? Does that too cast a shadow on the Sion 2006 project? "I myself have doubts about Switzerland's record and role in the Second World War," the Divisional Commander says. "But Switzerland cannot possibly have been as bad as its present reputation suggests."

He is convinced too that Switzerland's image as grasping comes not only from the banks but also from the tradition of mercenary troops. "In the old days it was said: 'pas d'argent, pas de Suisse' ('No money, no Swiss'). No-one has forgotten that countries like France paid through the nose to have Swiss soldiers serving them."



Federal Council in favour of Sion 2006

To lessen the impression of money-grubbing, perhaps, and to put the 118 members of the IOC jury into a receptive mood, the Federal Council and Council of States intend to exempt the International Committee – which is based in Lausanne – from value added tax with effect from 2001. “A coincidence,” as president Flavio Cotti stressed at the autumn session. But not even he could take the sting out of the reproach that the IOC had applied for this privilege as long ago as 1994, to see it approved only in the run-up to the candidature. The National Council had not taken a view when we went to press.

What is certain is that the federal government attaches great importance to the Olympic candidature: President Cotti spent a Saturday looking at the sites from a helicopter. And as long ago as March 4th 1998, Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi – once director of the ski association – appealed to the National Council and Council of States: “If we do not organise the games, the valleys will empty and their people fill the towns”. As Ogi has said – notably at the Swiss Abroad Congress in Lugano – the Expo, Olympics and a positive approach to the past mean a new start and self-confidence for Switzerland.

Persuading sports lovers world wide

Switzerland wants to win. Nobody knows quite what criteria decide who gets a positive answer. Apart from objective criteria, we can take it that June 1999 will show whether the country has enough friends world-wide. Necessarily, if we lose the country will have to show its sporting side. As Jean-Daniel Mudry often says: “Anyone who goes in for sport plays fair, and knows how to lose occasionally.” ■

The Sion 2006 candidature dossier is to be found on <http://www.sion2006.ch>.

Interview with Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi on Sion 2006

“We want to reinforce our



Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi thinks that sport is Switzerland's way out of self-inflicted isolation. (Photo: Keystone)

Federal Councillor, why does the country need a major event like the 2006 Winter Olympics?

Our candidature, and still more the possible attribution of the 2006 Olympics to this country, would give us a platform to put Switzerland across abroad as a place open to the world and worth visiting. It would shake the country up a little, and we should go into the next millennium with self-confidence and a swing. Our application gives us Swiss a chance to work toward a goal that is of national importance because it extends beyond sport. When the IOC assessment commission visited Sion recently, our country's stability and security were emphasised as well as the support of the municipal, cantonal and federal authorities and Swiss Olympic Association (SOV). The admirable concept, with Sion as the centre, the experience of the people of Valais with international competitions, and the existing hotel, public transport and hospital infrastructure found favour with our foreign guests.

Switzerland has taken something of a beating recently: do you feel that our candidature is already giving Switzerland the feeling of a new start?

Our candidature is an opportunity to reinforce the feeling of togetherness in our country with its four languages, four cultures and twenty-six cantons. There are not all that many possi-