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Athletes who boost Switzerland's image

2003 was a very special year for Swiss sport, especially thanks to Alinghi and Roger Federer. Both attracted worldwide attention and established themselves as worthy ambassadors for our country.

CHARLY VEUTHEY*

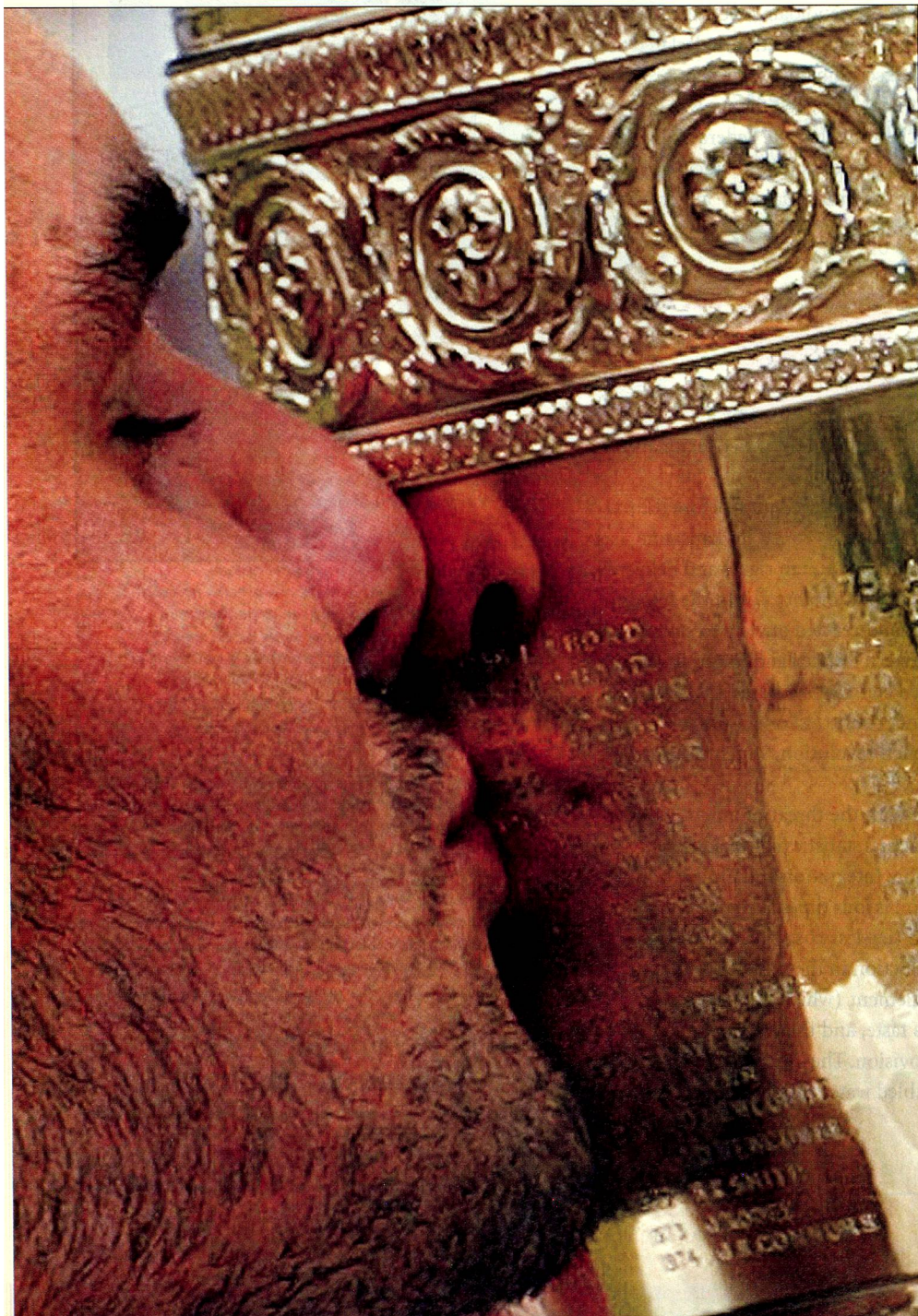
ON 7 JULY 2003, the day after 22-year-old Roger Federer from Basle won Wimbledon, Federal President Pascal Couchepin was quoted thus in the western Swiss daily "Le Matin": "I have sent Roger Federer a congratulatory telegram. Coming on the heels of Alinghi's triumph, this is another sign of the purple patch which Swiss sport is undergoing."

These two successes are of enormous significance for Swiss sport. The victory of the Alinghi syndicate and its main backer, Ernesto Bertarelli, CEO of pharmaceuticals company Serono, brings the legendary Americas Cup back to the European continent after 152 years, thanks to land-locked Switzerland. This cannot be an easy pill for Europe's great seafaring nations to swallow. And Roger Federer has become the first Swiss man to win a grand slam tennis tournament (Martina Hingis was the first Swiss woman to achieve this feat). The successes of Bertarelli and his Alinghi team and of Roger Federer have made them idols in the eyes of many Swiss and turned them into internationally acclaimed representatives of Switzerland.

A Switzerland that wins

The Swiss nation, and above all those in French-speaking Switzerland, celebrated Alinghi's victory in grand style. Even politics got in on the act. At the hero's welcome at Geneva airport, Pascal Couchepin, on behalf of the "Swiss nation", congratulated the team on a victory that "showed the world a Switzerland that challenged, surprised and won". A few days later, during the parliamentary session, Couchepin proclaimed: "First there was the France of Zidane fame, now there is the Switzerland of Alinghi fame." The fact that the Federal President felt compelled to compare Switzerland's reaction to the French euphoria over their vic-

Roger Federer's historic win on 6 July in Wimbledon.



Keystone Press

tory in the 1998 Soccer World Cup, is indicative of the importance he attaches to Alinghi's achievement. The opportunity to boost Switzerland's image was too good to miss.

Moreover, it worked. The international press followed suit, and the French press agency Agence France Presse caught the mood projected by the Swiss press: "An opening of Switzerland to the big wide world and an opportunity to belie the cliché of a country huddled behind its mountains." The French political magazine "L'Express" reported Alinghi's victory in great detail and even included a secondary article entitled "A Switzerland that wins".


Roger Federer's Wimbledon triumph also made international headlines. During the tournament, the London "Times" devoted several articles to the young tennis ace. One article illustrated the impact that a major sporting victory had on little Switzerland's image in the following words: "Forget alphorns and all the other clichés. Throw out all the cuckoo clocks. Yodel the good news from peak to peak. Break out the Toblerone. Roger Federer's victory in Wimbledon has boosted Switzerland's reputation as a nation of sporting heroes, and as a country where giants descend from their mountain fortress to sail the world's oceans, navigate round the world in a balloon, and smash their way confidently to the Mount Olympus of tennis. When God created Europe and made the Swiss the keepers of the continent's money coffers, few believed He would also bless the gnomes of Zurich with supple limbs and swift feet." The article went on to say that Federer's game was a model of Swiss precision and synchronization. But the author was unable to explain where we could find room for our tennis courts "among all those mountains, motorways and watch factories". Cuckoo clocks, alphorns, chocolate, watches, mountains and banks – the entire spectrum of clichés is quoted in the article. Remarkably, however, "sporting heroes" like Federer and the Alinghi syndicate referred to in the "Times" article belie these clichés and are bringing about a change in Switzerland's image.

Spotlight on Switzerland

Which sporting events are capable of projecting Switzerland's image to the world at large? Americas Cup, Wimbledon – what else? The World Alpine Ski Championships

held in St. Moritz at the beginning of this year are a good example of the type of major events that draw attention to our country. Added to this, Switzerland's co-hosting with Austria of football's 2008 European Cup offers us a huge opportunity to boost our profile on the international stage. It is also a chance to refute the sort of cliché-ridden assumptions contained in the "Times" article and convince the world that Switzerland boasts urban centres as well as mountains. And last but not least, 2008 consoles Switzerland for its most recent unsuccessful candidatures for the Olympics: failures which are often perceived as defeats for Switzerland as a whole ("A Switzerland that loses").

Which of Switzerland's current crop of athletes can act as ambassador for our country? There are a number of possibilities: André Bucher; our beach volleyball players (teams Laciga-Laciga, Heuscher-Kobel and Heyer-Egger led Switzerland to the Number Two world ranking); young motor-cycling talent Thomas Lüthi; and Simone Luder, four-time gold medal winner at this year's World Orienteering Championships. Last season FC Basle performed brilliantly in the Champions League, and the successes of the Swiss national football team brought them up from 60th to 40th position in the world rankings.

But such victories are by no means a passport to lasting international fame. FC Basle failed to qualify for this year's Champions League, and Switzerland's resounding defeat in the friendly against France in August clearly showed the national team how far they had to go to attain world-class status. The modern world of sport must pander to global media, and it takes a major victory in a mass spectator sport to really grab the headlines. With its high-profile European appearances, FC Basle has also helped to promote tourism. People in Europe are much more familiar with the city of Basle than before FC Basle's foray into the Champions League. 

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Translated from German.

Stars in Switzerland's galaxy

AFC Basle: Following their brilliant performance in the 2002–2003 Champions League, this Basle soccer team now has to concentrate on defending its reputation in the less prestigious UEFA Cup. FC Basle has brought a breath of fresh air to Swiss football.

Hakan Yakin: The creative genius of Swiss soccer, Yakin was responsible for more than half the goals scored last season by FC Basle and the Swiss national team. Whether or not he is destined for the great career experts are predicting, remains to be seen. Currently Patrick Müller (Lyon), Johann Vogel (PSV Eindhoven), Stéphane Henchoz (Liverpool) and fifteen other Swiss footballers play for clubs elsewhere in Europe.

Laciga-Laciga, Heuscher-Kobel and Heyer-Egger: Two of these three beach volleyball teams will be at the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 – with a real chance for a medal.

Nicole Brändli: While Swiss male cyclists may now be facing a drought after the successful era of Zülle, Rominger, Richard and Dufaux, Nicole Brändli is top of the women's league. Only 24 years old, she has already won two silver medals at the 2002 World Championships, came first in this year's Giro d'Italia, and second in the Tour de France.

Thomas Lüthi: This season the 17-year-old motor cycling ace has provided the first convincing proof of his extraordinary skills. A huge up-and-coming talent.

André Bucher: 800-meter world champion in 2001 and winner of lots of international races. Currently the only world-class Swiss track and field athlete.

Simone Luder: Winner of four gold medals at the World Orienteering Championships which this year were held in Switzerland. One of the dominant figures in women's orienteering.

All candidates for the title of Swiss Sports Personality of the Year are listed under: <http://www.sports-awards.ch>

Translated from German.