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Raptures in red and white

A When the Swiss national football squad returned home after losing their World Cup game against Ukraine, the players were welcomed at Zurich airport as if they had won the competition. Even the missed penalties couldn't dampen the fervour that awaited the team on their arrival back in Switzerland. During the competition tens of thousands of red-and-white-clad Swiss fans travelled to Germany, determined to turn their side's encounters into home games. Thousands watched the games on huge screens in cities up and down the country, revelling in their team's performance at the group stage of the competition. Swiss flags and red t-shirts bearing the Swiss cross were everywhere. The country was in party mood, the likes of which it had seldom seen. And even the side's unfortunate elimination in the second round didn't dampen spirits for too long. After all, the FIFA World Cup in Germany was just the beginning: "That was the World Cup. Now for the European Championships. Roll on 2008", wrote main sponsor Credit Suisse in full-page ads, voicing the sentiments of Swiss football fans. In two years' time, the Swiss national squad could be playing for the European title in front of its home crowd. Then the party will begin anew.

Rarely has Switzerland witnessed the type of enthusiasm for sportsmen shown to the current national football squad and their coach, Jakob "Köbi" Kuhn. And never before has Switzerland had a national squad that prompted so much support while embodying a modern, open-minded country. Players like Senderos, Dzemaili, Djourou, Barnetta and Cabanas are the multilingual sons and grandsons of immigrant families. Their roots lie abroad, they play in Europe's top leagues, and they are optimistic, ambitious and proud to be Swiss. They may be reserved when facing the media, but they clearly affirm their commitment to their country's greatest possible success. They are self-confident and sure of their Swiss identity: an attitude by no means taken for granted.

As recently as the 1990s, Switzerland drew attention to itself with the slogan "La Suisse n'existe pas" (Switzerland doesn't exist). The '68 generation, left-wingers and the media in particular had major issues about being Swiss, and any form of patriotism was equated with right-wing extremism. Flags were the scorned synonym for the army and the right-wing bourgeoisie. The end of the Cold War brought more relaxed attitudes.



Heinz Eckert

Indeed, "Swissness" has even made a distinct comeback since the Expo.02. Accessories bearing the Swiss cross are now extremely trendy and big money-spinners.

The young people of today have a relaxed relationship with their home country and are proud of their red passport. They are not alone: A representative survey found that 78 percent of respondents were proud to be Swiss – up from 74 percent in 2004. In the past, national identity was never even questioned.

Sociologist Kurt Imhof sees this as a positive development. "Democracy needs a belief in communality, and it's good that identifying with one's home country is no longer the sole preserve of the Swiss People's Party," he says.

"It's cool being Swiss," a 28-year-old designer confessed in an interview.

Such sentiments are new to Switzerland. "Chauvinism is a matter of dosage," said literary critic Peter von Matt in an interview on the issue. "Controlled delivery is good for you. It increases your joie-de-vivre and makes you adventurous. Ill-tempered self-flagellation is unproductive in the long run."

HEINZ ECKERT, CHEFREDAKTOR

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