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Switzerland has its sights set on 13 medals

The 21st Winter Olympics will take place in Vancouver from 12 to 28 February 2010. How well is Switzerland expected to perform in Canada? Will we achieve the same medal haul as in Turin in 2006? Alain Wey takes a look at Switzerland's prospects

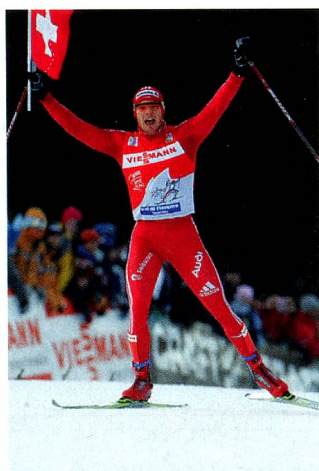


Carlo Janka

Is Switzerland set to bring home a record number of medals from the Vancouver Olympics? Will Canada bring us as much luck as it did in Calgary in 1988, when Switzerland returned with fifteen medals? Such an ambitious target is not merely a flight of fancy as the outlook has seldom been so good. The Swiss Ski Association has its sights set on thirteen medals (see interview with Urs Lehmann). These games will turn February into a winter sports extravaganza throughout Switzerland. We talk to the Swiss team's officials to get the inside track on our chances.

Predictions of the Swiss Olympic Organisation

The Swiss Olympic Organisation was aiming for eight medals at the Turin Olympics in 2006, but exceeded its goal by six (see honours list). This was a significantly better return than at previous Olympics in Salt Lake City (11), and particularly in Nagano (7). "Judging by the results in all disciplines last winter, we are on track to pick up the same number of medals as in Turin", predicts Gian Gilli, head of elite sport at the Swiss Olympic Organisation and Head Coach of the Swiss delegation in Vancouver. He explains: "Of course, it will also depend on the injury sit-



Dario Cologna

uation, but we have the potential to repeat our exploits of 2006. The athletes have to get through the winter without injury, because if we lose an athlete capable of winning two medals, we would have to lower our expectations." The Swiss master of ceremonies believes talk about the Olympics is superfluous. He says: "The athletes must peak at the right time. That is the problem with the Olympics; you only get one shot at it every four years. If the athletes get it right on the day, they will be amongst the medal winners." He believes Switzerland has good medal prospects in alpine skiing, bobsleigh, cross-country skiing – with Ammann, Küttel and Cologna – snowboarding and freestyle skiing. He adds: "There are lots of athletes with the potential to take a place on the podium. The final selection for the team will be announced on 2 February 2010."

Focus on snowboarding

The Swiss snowboarding team has a maximum of 18 places available for the flight to Vancouver, divided into three disciplines – the half-pipe (HP), snowboard cross (SBX) and parallel giant slalom (PGS). In the half-pipe, Zurich's Iouri Podladtchikov has been close to breaking American supremacy for the past two seasons. He achieved second place at the World Cup opener in New Zealand. The novice Christian Haller from Grisons, Swiss champion at Zermatt last September,

and his sister, Ursina Haller, are also in with a chance. However, it is in women's snowboard cross that the Swiss team has the best chance of winning medals with Tanja Frieden (Olympic champion in 2006), Sandra Frei (2nd at the 2007 World Championships), Mellie Francon (3rd at the 2009 World Championships) and Olivia Nobs (2nd at the 2009 World Championships). In PGS, competition within the men's team will be very intense with experienced competitors like Simon Schoch, Roland Haldi, Heinz Inniger, Marc Iselin and the return of two-time Olympic champion, Philipp Schoch.

Curling, bobsleigh and ice skating

The curling event will be fiercely contested.

"Both teams are aiming for a medal", says Jürg Leuenberger of Swiss Curling. The team led by Mirjam Ott from Davos (Grisons) has already won two silver medals, one at the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002 and one in Turin in 2006. Its honours list includes European Championship titles in 1996 and 2008 and 3rd place in the 2008



Lara Gut

World Championships. Jürg Leuenberger says: "The women have medal aspirations, but winning gold will be tough because of strong competition from the Canadians and the Chinese." In the men's event, the team captained by Ralph Stöckli of Club Basel Regio finished 5th at the Turin Olympics, 3rd at the 2003 World Championships and 4th in 2007 and 2009. Leuenberger explains: "The main contenders will be Canada, Norway, Scotland – the current world



Simon Ammann

champions representing Great Britain – and Germany.” There are also hopes of success in the bobsleigh with teams led by the pilots, Ivo Rüegg and Beat Hefti. The return of Stéphane Lambiel augurs well in the figure skating. It remains to be seen whether he can compete with a new generation of skaters. Whatever happens, the Games promise to be a magnificent spectacle and will hopefully bring us a good medal haul.

Urs Lehmann, President of the Swiss Ski Association: “Thirteen medals”

“SWISS REVIEW”: *What are your goals for the Vancouver Olympics?*

URS LEHMANN: We have eight disciplines at the Swiss Ski Association, and seven of them will be represented at the Games. Only telemark will not make the trip. Based on an analysis of results in previous years, we are aiming for thirteen medals.

In which disciplines has Switzerland got the best medal prospects?

We have our sights set on six medals in alpine skiing, four in men’s and two in women’s. We were the top nation in the 2009 World Championships for the first time in 20 years. In the women’s events, even though Lara Gut is unlikely to make it, skiers like Fabienne Suter, Dominique Gislin, Fränzy Aufdenblatten and Nadia Styger have the potential to win two medals. Right from the first race of the season, the men proved that they will be in the reckoning with Didier Cuche’s 1st place finish and Carlo Janka coming 3rd. Both are world champions. Didier Défago, winner of the downhill at Wengen and Kitzbühel last season, is also expected to do well.

What about snowboarding?

The team won four medals at the World Championships – Fraenzi Mägert-Kohli and Patrizia Kummer in alpine and Mellie Franco and Olivia Nobs in snowboard cross. But we are hoping for three medals this year – two from the women in snowboard cross and one in alpine, even though that will be a tall order with the Americans.

And what about the new freestyle discipline – ski cross?

Switzerland generally tends to do well when a new discipline is introduced. We believe we have a chance with Michael Schmid and Andreas Steffen. The women also won World Cup races last year. However, it is difficult to predict as it is not yet an established sport like snowboarding or alpine skiing. In freestyle skiing, there is, of course, the Olympic champion, Evelyne Leu, and a very talented young men’s team, four of whom finished in the top 10 of the overall World Cup rankings, including Andreas Isoz and Thomas Lambert. We also hope to win a medal in freestyle skiing.

And the ski jump?

Simon Ammann and Andreas Küttel both won medals at the 2009 World Championships (1st and 3rd). We believe Ammann, in particular, has a good chance of being amongst the medallists. He finished 2nd in the overall World Cup rankings in 2009 and is a consistent, high-level performer.

Cross-country skiing?

We have medal aspirations here for the first time in a long while. Dario Cologna, who finished first in the 2009 overall rankings, and the relay team are expected to do well. And not forgetting Curdin Perl and Toni Livers, who remain in Cologna’s shadow, but who have achieved the same results as him in training.

14 MEDALS AT THE WINTER OLYMPICS IN TURIN IN 2006:

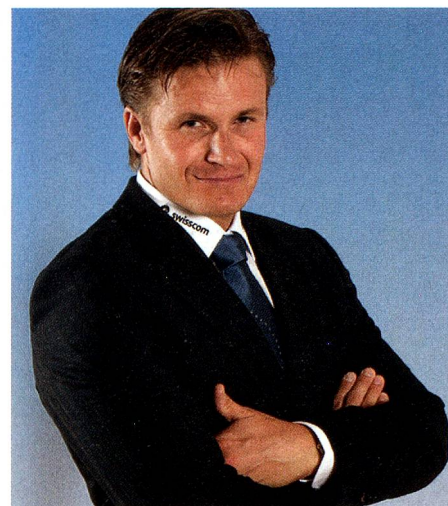
5 gold, 4 silver and 5 bronze medals in addition to 24 top 8 finishes.

- Evelyne Leu, freestyle skiing, gold.
- Tanja Frieden, snowboard cross, gold.
- Daniela Meuli, snowboard PGS, gold.
- Philippe Schoch, snowboard PGS, gold.
- Maya Pedersen-Bieri, skeleton, gold.
- Mirjam Ott and her team, curling, silver.
- Martina Schild, downhill skiing, silver.
- Stéphane Lambiel, individual ice skating, silver.
- Simon Schoch, snowboard PGS, silver.
- Martin Annen and his team, two-man and four-man bobsleigh, bronze.
- Ambrosi Hoffmann, super G, bronze.
- Bruno Kernen, downhill skiing, bronze.

- Gregor Stähli, skeleton, bronze.

SIX MEDALS AT THE 2009 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS IN VAL D’ISÈRE (FRANCE):

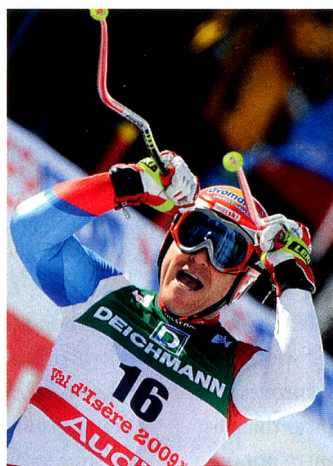
- Didier Cuche, gold in the super G, silver in the downhill.
- Carlo Janka, gold in the giant slalom, bronze in the downhill.
- Lara Gut, silver in the downhill and super combined.



Urs Lehmann

The host city: Vancouver, nestled between the USA and Alaska

“The best games ever!” – the Canadians are pulling out all the stops to deliver a magnificent and memorable event. The Olympic Village in Vancouver will host competitors and officials from the ice sports as well as snowboarding and freestyle skiing. The other disciplines will stay in Whistler Village in the Coast Mountains, some 120 kilometres from Vancouver. Describing the host city and its surroundings almost feels like writing travel diaries in the style of Jack London. Countless bays, headlands, fjords and islands are found along the Pacific Ocean coastline. Majestic, snow-covered peaks rise above the sea, and emerald lakes are nestled between the mountains. The trees, which are as wide as medieval towers, underline just how well-preserved the natural environment is. With a region of such outstanding beauty and Canadian hospitality, what more could you want from the Olympic Games?



Didier Cuche