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Autor: Wey, Alain / Lehmann, Urs / Rufener, Martin
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Swiss Ski – ready for the challenges of the future

Swiss skiing has made great progress, not just in terms of results but also in the training of emerging talents. Urs Lehmann, President of Swiss Ski, and Martin Rufener, coach of the men's alpine skiing team, give us the inside track on developments. We also talk to Lara Gut, the star of women's skiing. By Alain Wey, on the slopes.

"In sport, if you slow down, you lose", is the emphatic message from Urs Lehmann, President of Swiss Ski. With Carlo Janka winning the World Cup and Didier Cuche the reigning world downhill champion, Swiss alpine skiing is enjoying tremendous success. This season, the team will have to defend its titles at the World Ski Championships in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, from 7 to 20 February 2011. We take a look behind the scenes at Swiss Ski and the men's alpine ski team.

Radical change for the future

Behind the gleaming surface of success lies a well-oiled machine which is constantly developing: Swiss Ski and its entire team of competitors. The association has undergone fundamental change in terms of its hierarchy, professionalism and the schools of sport it has created. At the head of the organisation is a board of seven experienced members, including former athletes (Urs Lehmann, Pirmin Zurbriggen) and coaches (Urs Winkler). This set-up fosters communication between competitors, management and the various regions. Pirmin Zurbriggen, for example, is also head of Ski Valais and set up the national performance centre in Brig. "He is very close to the grass roots and brings passion and experience to the Swiss Ski board", explains Urs Lehmann.

Creation of national performance centres

In the 1990s, Switzerland could not match the quality of training available to Austrian skiers. "Since then we have made great progress", emphasises Urs Lehmann. "We have made enormous efforts in terms of both sport and education to ensure we do not lose talented youngsters aged between 15 and 17 or 18". Three national performance centres were established in Brig, Engelberg and Da-

vos in 2007 and 2008. In addition, there are around a dozen regional performance centres whose aim is to provide both professional training opportunities and an optimal educational environment. Coach Martin Rufener believes the organisation is on the right track. "We need to further enhance cooperation with the ski resorts to obtain training slopes. We are still not where we would like to be. The recent good results will certainly help our cause politically. We need to take advantage of this to become even better!" In partnership with sports shops, each year the association also offers apprenticeship places to athletes. "It's a future-oriented model", explains Urs Lehmann. In addition, cooperation with government needs to be stepped up to create state-funded positions for elite athletes. At present, such positions only exist in Switzerland for cross-country skiing with the border guards, whereas Austria provides 300 such places, particularly in the army, and Germany around 900.

A stronger men's team

Since the arrival of 51-year-old Martin Rufener from Berne as head of the men's alpine skiing team in 2004, competitors have quite literally soared to success. "The team has been strengthened and developed, and contains many potential winners", is Rufener's assessment. A professional approach has been adopted and the strategy has been adapted to incorporate emerging young talents. The team contains four training groups made up of experienced athletes and young skiers. According to Rufener, "the training and individual work between each athlete and coach have improved significantly. One group, for example, contains Ambrosi Hoffmann (aged 33), Tobias Grünenfelder (aged 32) and young skiers like Christian Spescha (aged 21) from Grisons and Marc Gisin (aged

22) from Obwalden". A wealth of emerging talent provides plenty of hope for the future. As Rufener explains, "last season in the European Cup, Spescha was top of the overall rankings and Ami Oreiller (aged 23) from Valais won the downhill title. Another emerging talented youngster is Justin Murisier (aged 18) from Valais in the slalom. The coach is hoping that the men's team will pick up four medals in the World Ski Championships and that Carlo Janka and Didier Cuche will defend their titles in the World Cup. "These are ambitious targets", admits Rufener, "but if the team maintains its form and avoids injuries, they are achievable".

Swiss Ski's five goals

"Speed can always be improved through innovation and development", explains Lehmann. "I always compare skiing to Formula 1. If Ferrari failed to carry out any development work for a month, it would finish ten seconds behind and would not win another race. It's similar in skiing." What are Swiss Ski's ambitions for the next few years? "Firstly, to maintain our performance in top-level sport and even make further progress. Secondly, to put the necessary structures in place in professional sport for emerging talent. Thirdly, as a leisure activity – ski club, etc. – the sport should be made more attractive and be geared even more towards the grass roots. Fourthly, to secure more funding to provide infrastructure. Fifthly, for two years now we have been endeavouring to profile ourselves as a competent partner in the area of sport policy." The association also aims to nurture great hopes for the ski seasons ahead.

www.swiss-ski.ch
www.laragut.ch
www.carlo-janka.ch
www.gap2011.com (site of the 2011 World Championships in Garmisch-Partenkirchen)

Lara Gut: "To give my all in every race"

Double silver medal winner at the 2008 World Ski Championships in Val-d'Isère, Lara Gut from Ticino was born on 27 April 1991. She started skiing at the age of one and a half, began racing aged 8 and finished top of the overall European Cup rankings aged 16. She trains with her personal team, Team Gut. Initially, between 2007 and 2010, she was coached by Mauro Pini, who became head of the women's team this year, and then by her father Pauli. After dislocating her right hip during a fall on the Saas-Fee glacier on 29 September 2009 and subsequently undergoing an operation, the ski star from Comano was laid up for an entire season. She is set to return for the giant slalom in Sölden, Austria, on 23 October.

How are you feeling?

I'm very well, thank you. On the piste, I feel just as good as before. I've never had such a

long lay-off, but it's given me the opportunity to learn a lot and to look at life differently. I've benefited in various ways as a result of my injury. I've developed a different relationship with my body, a new kind of awareness.

What did you do during your break?

I studied for my school-leaving diploma and created my own "LG" brand with my team. It's not just my injury which has helped me to mature, but also working on my brand and seeing the sport in a different light.

What motivates and inspires you?

Being able to continue skiing with the world's elite and constantly improving myself. I challenge myself to find perfection every day and continually enhance my performance. You compete against other girls in races, but when I'm training I concentrate on my own small steps of progress and not those of others.

How would you describe yourself?

When I was young, I used to be called "Sunshine". People generally say that I'm quite a happy person. I'm very chatty, stubborn and quite petite (1m 60).

What are your goals?

To give my all in every race. The aim is to race in the five disciplines, including the slalom.

You'll be defending your silver medals at the World Ski Championships in Garmisch-Partenkirchen...

The first step is to qualify. Let's not take anything for granted! I have to start racing again and then we'll see.

How do you feel about being the leader of the Swiss women's team and the outsider returning to the fold?

I haven't really given it much thought. I don't like taking up the role of team leader because I don't feel like one.

Which skiers inspired you?

When I was younger, I had the opportunity to train with the Spaniard Maria José Rienda Contreras (a giant slalom specialist) from whom I learned a great deal. And two years ago at the World Cup, Renate Götschl (Austria) also gave me some very good advice. They are my role models. I am inspired by people from whom I can learn something when I watch their technique.

What is it like being a Swiss athlete who travels abroad...

When I say I'm Swiss, people always ask me why I speak Italian and not Swiss German. I think I'll always be asked that. I'm also very proud of holding dual nationality (Swiss and Italian). It allows me to see the two countries differently. I practise my sport to make everyone happy and I'm delighted if the Italians and French appreciate my results too.

INTERVIEW BY ALAIN WEY

