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Autor: Lettau, Marc
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A star with feet firmly on the ground

Simone Niggli-Luder runs through unfamiliar forests with a map and compass, always finding the fastest route with tremendous precision. The elite athlete once again proved that she is the world's best orienteering runner at the World Orienteering Championships 2012 held in Lausanne in July.

By Marc Lettau

This is roughly how orienteering works. The runners make their way to the start. They set off one after the other. Once the starting signal is sounded, the runner grabs the map laid out ready and gets going. The map is of a forest with which they are not familiar and where they are not permitted to train beforehand. Relying entirely on their own abilities, the compass and the map, they try to find the control points shown on the map as quickly as possible. The route is not marked out. Sometimes the runners head straight through the forest and sometimes they detour and opt for longer but quicker paths using forest trails. One last control point and then the final spurt for the line. The competition is over, and Simone Niggli-Luder is presented with the gold medal once again.

The 34-year-old from Münsingen keeps winning with a level of consistency that leaves her opponents dumbfounded. She has amassed so many victories that even her own fans only count the world championship titles as they would lose track otherwise. After taking a break to give birth last year, she has picked up where she left off: Simone Niggli-Luder stood on the top of the podium three times at the World Championships in

Lausanne. She was victorious in the sprint and the long distance, and she dominated the relay race together with Judith Wyder and Ines Brodmann. That takes this exceptional athlete's tally of world championship wins to twenty.

Three times Sportswoman of the Year

Her home town of Münsingen has clearly become accustomed to the success of its high-profile resident and sent out invitations to a celebration in Niggli-Luder's honour before the World Championships had even taken place. The town council assured would-be guests that their sportswoman was "as brilliant as ever" after the birth of her twins. As a back-up, Münsingen would have been able to celebrate the three gold medals that Simone Niggli-Luder had won earlier in the year at the European Championships in Sweden, which was also an exceptional achievement.

Why the world's best female orienteering runner is so adored by the public was obvious right at the start of the reception in Münsingen. The guest of honour did not arrive in a limousine. There were no groomed horses or a carriage all decked out. Simone Niggli-Luder and her husband Matthias

turned up by bicycle with their three-year-old daughter Malin and the twins, Anja and Lars, in the bicycle trailer. The family arrived as though they were going into the village to do some shopping. This elite athlete, who has enjoyed constant success in the natural arena of the forest, goes about her daily business without any airs.

The public applaud her wholeheartedly because she seeks success but does not bask in it. Simone Niggli-Luder is regarded as conscientious, ambitious, unaffected, grounded and never aloof. "There is certainly no indication that she is putting this on", says Marcel Schiess, President of the Swiss Orienteering Federation: "This is just the way she is." She herself says likewise: "Thankfully, I never have to put on an act." You are inclined to believe her.

Simone Niggli-Luder was crowned Swiss Sportswoman of the Year in 2003, 2005 and 2007. She enjoys recognition because her popularity transcends sport. Her degree in biology shapes her current lifestyle. She does not just talk about the inherent and sensitive balance of nature, she is also committed to living in an eco-friendly way. The Niggli-Luders live with their three children in an energy-surplus house, a building constructed in accordance with strict environmental criteria that generates more energy than the family requires. She campaigns on behalf of aid projects in Africa and is also a credible ambassador here. She studied the tortoise beetle in depth as a budding biologist. These beetles love to eat thistles and may therefore one day be used as a natural means of controlling weeds. The fact that she was awarded the prestigious "Prix Nature" sustainability prize in spring as a "Beacon of Hope" comes as little surprise.

Balancing everything

Niggli-Luder's tremendous successes mean that people almost forget that orienteering is a peripheral sport in Switzerland. Just under 10,000 Swiss actively participate in orienteering. However, the figure is rising due to the "Niggli effect", as



Crossing the finishing line at the World Championships in Lausanne



With her husband and children at the reception in Münsingen after the World Championships

many junior orienteering trainers will confirm. The number of young people taking an interest in the sport is increasing, and the newcomers include a noticeably high proportion of girls. This can be explained by the fact that Niggli-Luder inspires so many because she appears to balance her various responsibilities as a sportswoman, role model, mother and conscientious biologist so effortlessly. She puts this into perspective: "Appearances can be deceptive. I have not always been self-confident and sometimes I am still not." Being an elite athlete and a mother alone presents an enormous challenge: "We are sometimes pushed to our limits with three small children. Regular sleep is vital to any top sportsperson." She nevertheless soon found the strength to resume training after the birth of the twins: "Training generates energy rather than drains it

away. It provides an escape from daily routines and an opportunity to switch off." The major challenge still lies in "separating my role as a sportswoman from that as a mother". She attempts to keep the roles apart as far as possible: "By really being there for my children when I am with them and really pursuing my sporting objectives when I pull on my training shoes."

If mothers are very successful in sport they find themselves at odds with their traditional role. They have to justify their sporting ambition. Simone Niggli-Luder: "I know how it feels to have to justify yourself. I am also familiar with the insecurity this causes." She occasionally feels a need to be "seen as the mother of three young children" more often than she is at present "and not just reduced to a top athlete". After all, she is not the only mother who goes to work. She also

aims to stay honest, with regard to her family commitments as well: "I would not be satisfied if I were to restrict myself completely to my role as a mother. Of course I think about what being a good mother means. The notion that mothers ought to be on hand constantly is extremely prevalent in our society although many women will know from experience that they are far more relaxed and well-balanced when they have the opportunity to do things they want to do from time to time. This also benefits the child."

Tenacious, fast and bright

The public and media applaud her success without worrying about conflicting roles. Inspired by the performances of the "golden girl", the Zurich-based "Tages-Anzeiger" even proclaimed that Switzerland has found a new national sport as orienteering represents the very essence of the Swiss. Whereas Swiss wrestling is a pre-modern show of strength, orienteering runners possess all the attributes that the ideal Swiss person should have: "They are tenacious and move quickly but smartly. They combine tremendous fitness with intelligence, which is manifested in their use of a high-quality Swiss product – maps." This takes a certain kind of person who "makes his or her way forward through the undergrowth of the modern world in a disciplined, ambitious and admirable way".

The overstatement is not unfounded. Niggli-Luder has enjoyed a glittering career, but the sport itself is sometimes seen as rather lacklustre and lacking in glamour. Other sportspeople poke fun at orienteering runners, portraying them as rather austere, intellectual forest runners tending towards asceticism and as somewhat eccentric athletes in a rather isolated sociotope.

Experiencing all states of mind

This question needs to be put to her. Simone Niggli-Luder, are you the figurehead of an intellectual sport that is devoid of emotion and rather boring? Niggli-Luder responds: "You couldn't be more wrong. You won't achieve anything in orienteering without emotion." All of the senses are needed in the forest: "I experience all possible states of mind during a run – it is like an emotional rollercoaster. If you make mistakes, you have to make up lost ground. At the same time, you have to maintain high levels of concentration, shut out any disruptive influences

and control your own thought processes.” She touches on the very essence of the sport here, which is what inspires her: “What is unique about orienteering is that both physical and mental challenges have to be overcome – running at high speed while at the same time finding your way through unfamiliar territory. The fact that decisions constantly have to be made while running is what makes it so special. It is never dull.”

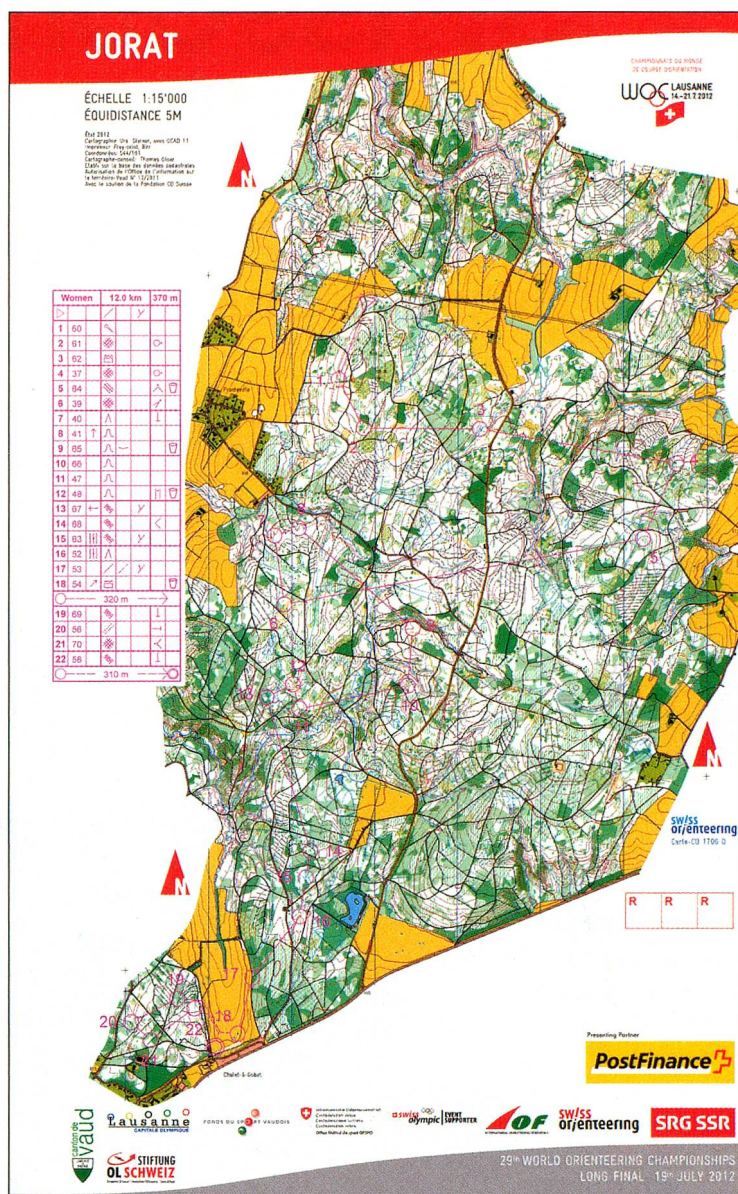
Even she has not succeeded in completely changing the sport’s image. She concedes that the scene sometimes makes it difficult for newcomers to settle in. The University of Lucerne in fact analysed the “orienteering sociotope” this year and revealed that the image of a rather elitist society in the forest is not all that wide of the mark. 64 % of orienteering runners hold a university degree or another higher education qualification, 50 % are homeowners and an above-average 30 % use public transport. According to the study, the main motivating factors for participation are enjoyment of the wonders of nature, contact with other runners and the fact that you are alone and self-reliant in the forest during the race.

Applause for fifth place

Getting back to the sport and our outstanding athlete, those of us who are not so talented, have no sense of direction and are GPS-dependent would like to know whether the world champion has a secret recipe for success. Does she find her way through the unknown thanks to incredible intuition? Niggli-Luder remarks: “There are times when you know instinctively where the controls are but experience and practice are the key factors. I personally prefer to rely completely on the orienteering map.” Feelings come into play in competition in the last few metres before the control. She starts to tingle with nerves. “I need the exact map. Intuition is not really my thing”, she says. In everyday life, her powers of perception are limited to knowing where north and south are but “nothing more”.

The majority of people who are not extraordinarily talented take comfort in the

A map from the World Championships in Lausanne



fact, just as she herself does, that Simone Niggli-Luder often wins but not always. She only won three of a possible four gold medals at the World Championships in 2012. She performed poorly in one discipline, the technically challenging middle distance race. She fought her way back into the race after falling behind into a position from which she could not catch up and finished in fifth place. But she received no less applause than usual. It seems as though the odd lapse is required to sustain the constant success of sheer per-

fection. She was even thanked for the slip-up at the reception in Münsingen as it provided a valuable lesson. It showed that even she cannot take winning gold medals for granted. The manner in which she fought her way back into the race was admirable. It also underlined that she is not so far removed from those of us who regularly slip up, as making mistakes is human.

Niggli-Luder was herself surprised by the reaction. She received great encouragement and recognition in the midst of defeat: “Defeat highlights that victories have to be earned. It makes the actual achievement more visible.” It is difficult to find fault with Simone Niggli-Luder – even in defeat she does everything absolutely perfectly.

SCANDINAVIAN ROOTS

Orienteering was translated into a running sport at the start of the 20th century in Scandinavia. It remains more popular there than anywhere

else, though top runners from Switzerland have been among the best at world championships for years. Over the last ten years, some 250,000 school pupils have been

taught how to find their way around using a map and a compass as part of the orienteering project “Scool”.