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Autor: Wey, Alain
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Men and women of iron

It's a non-stop event combining swimming, cycling and running. Swiss triathlon celebrated its second Olympic medal in 2012 with Nicola Spirig's victory in London. Switzerland's elite athletes take part in competitions all over the world and have enjoyed tremendous success. This feature by Alain Wey looks at this tri-discipline sport, its origins and its popularity in Switzerland.

By Alain Wey

The triathlon is in a league of its own - a crazy sport, some might say. It's a non-stop event combining swimming, cycling and running. Ever since it was invented, it has been regarded as an extreme sport ahead of its time. The maiden event was christened "ironman" because it takes a superhuman effort to cover over 200 kilometres on land and water. If the athletes were able to fly, "superman" might even be a fitting name. The triathlon has only been an Olympic event since 2000 and will celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2014. It has since conquered the entire world and takes place over various distances. Swiss triathletes are amongst the best in the world and Switzerland is one of the most successful nations at the Olympic Games with two gold and two bronze medals. Some of these victories have even had a touch of Hollywood about them with Zurich's Nicola Spirig winning in London in 2012 by just a few centimetres ahead of her Swedish opponent. We get the inside track on triathlon past and present in Switzerland and worldwide with Reto Hug, the Head of Swiss Triathlon and former European champion.

A recent sport in a young country

While the origins of the sport go back to France at the start of the 20th century, the first modern triathlon event only took place in 1974 in San Diego, California. The sport established its legendary status on the archipelago of Hawaii in 1978 with the launch of the ironman competition in which 15 athletes swam 3.9 km, cycled 180 km and ran a marathon. Dave Scott and Mark Allen from the US have each won six times in Hawaii. "They have left their mark on the sport and have taken it to a new level as has the Zimbabwean triathlete, Paula Newby-Fraser, who has won the event eight times. These are true legends of the sport," explains Reto Hug. The iconic ironman event crossed the At-



Nicola Spirig

lantic and captivated northern Europe, where the first competitions took place in 1981, before conquering France in 1982. The number of events has increased sharply ever since. There are also shorter courses, known as half and quarter ironman events. National federations were established in most European countries from 1984 with Switzerland's being founded in 1985. The level of popularity soon saw the creation of the International Triathlon Union (ITU) in Avignon, France, where the first World Championships were held in 1989 over the Olympic distance (1.5 km, 40 km, 10 km). Lausanne has since hosted the event twice, in 1998 and 2006. The long-distance World Ironman Championship is of course held annually in Hawaii in October.

Switzerland – breeding ground for triathletes

The triathlon began to establish itself in Switzerland in the early 1980s. The first competitions took place in Zurich, Morat, Soleure and Geneva. Carl Kupferschmid from Zurich performed exceptionally well. He won the Swiss triathlon in Zurich three times (1983-1985) and finished third in the ironman event in Hawaii in 1985 to become the first European to secure a place on the podium. The national federation exceeded the 2,000-member mark at the end of the

1980s and today has over 4,200 members belonging to 76 clubs. Switzerland's greatest triathlon event is undoubtedly the "Ironman Zurich Switzerland" which is part of the world ironman circuit. Reto Hug adds that the Zug, Lausanne and Geneva triathlons are also raced over the Olympic distance. "What's more, Geneva will host the European championships in 2015," Hug explains. Other competitions are concentrated around regions where lakes are found. One triathlon in canton Berne stands out on account of its steep terrain with a total ascent of 5,500 metres - the "Inferno". The race starts out in Thun before reaching Schilthorn at 2,970 metres, passing through Grindelwald.

Reaching for the stars

Several Swiss triathletes have won some of the world's most prestigious titles. In the long-distance competition, Natascha Badmann from Aargau has won the Hawaiian ironman event six times (1996-2005) and still continues to take part today at the age of 46. 34-year-old Caroline Steffen from Berne is following in her footsteps with a second-place finish in 2010 and 2012. In the men's event, Lucerne's Christoph Mauch made it onto the podium twice in Hawaii in 1998 and 1999 as did Zurich's Ronnie Schildknecht in 2008. Schildknecht is currently the leading Swiss athlete in the sport with six victories in Zurich (2007-2012). Over the Olympic distance, big names include Olympic medal winners Sven Riederer from Zurich (bronze in Athens in 2004), Zug's Brigitte McMahon and Neuchatel's Magali Di Marco-Messmer, who won gold and bronze respectively in Sydney in 2000 and, of course, Nicola Spirig (see interview). In this category, the World Championship Series is even more selective than alpine skiing and only includes eight races spread around the world. In 2013, these will take place in Auckland, San Diego, Yokohama, Kitz-

bühl, Hamburg, Stockholm, Madrid and London. "These are the most important races over the Olympic distance," explains Reto Hug. The number of competitors is limited to 75. They firstly have to get through the European Championships and then the World Championships to obtain enough points. Only three Swiss women (Nicola Spirig, Daniela Ryf and Melanie Hauss) and three or four Swiss

men (Sven Riederer, Ruedi Wild and the brothers Andrea and Florin Salvisberg) will be able to take part.

An increasingly professional sport

The effort and discipline required of the athletes is hard to conceive for most people. "Triathletes generally train three times a day," reveals Reto Hug. "That equates to around 25 hours a week but can rise to 40 hours during

intensive weeks," he adds. The fact that the triathlon is such a recently established sport explains why it has not yet reached the level of professionalism found in other sports. "In the past, the athletes often trained with the specific sports clubs for each discipline of the triathlon – swimming, cycling and running. But this made overall coordination of training difficult. Today, former athletes often go on to become trainers and the elite competi-

tors are developing thanks to better coaching," Hug says. The Head of Swiss Triathlon believes that the challenge has only just begun. He remarks: "We still have highly individual solutions but we intend to change that. The system is evolving."

Even greater distances?

If competitors take over eight hours to complete an ironman event, you may won-

der whether even longer triathlons exist? "There is no limit in terms of going further. There are double, triple and even quintuple ironman events. Doctor Beat Knechtle from canton St Gallen has won several of these competitions. But my personal vision for the sport is not about running for over 20 hours," Hug observes. Whatever its format, the triathlon still has plenty of surprises in store for us. "It is an incredible ex-

perience. I still find the combination of these three sporting disciplines fascinating. After all, that's why I participated in the sport for over 20 years," he explains.

ALAIN WEY is an editor at «Swiss Review».

www.swisstriathlon.ch
www.ironman.ch (Ironman Switzerland)



"A dream comes true"

2012 proved to be a remarkable year for Olympic triathlon champion Nicola Spirig. The Olympic long-distance specialist notched up a number of successes in terms of both sporting achievement and in her private life. The 31-year-old from Zurich won the World Championship Series in Madrid and Kitzbühel, the Ironman 70.3 in Rapperswil and Antwerp and became European champion in Eilat, Israel. She also married her long-term partner, the triathlete Reto Hug, and is expecting a baby in May. To top everything off, the triple European champion was crowned Swiss Sportsperson of the Year, ahead of Roger Federer.

«Suisse Review»: What does it take to become a triathlon champion?

NICOLA SPIRIG: Lots of pieces make up the jigsaw. You need a certain degree of ability. You have to put in lots of hard work and training both physically and mentally, while a good team and support are also vital. My team consists of myself, my family, my husband, my trainer and his international coaching staff as well as my sponsors. You also need a little bit of good fortune during competitions to avoid illness and injury. Lots of small details have to come together to ultimately be the best.

What attributes are needed to become an elite sportsperson?

The triathlon requires endurance, versatility and good technique in each discipline. You have to find the right balance between the various sports. It helps if you are tall and muscular for the swimming whereas a slighter build is better suited to the running. Psychologically, you have to be ambitious and possess the desire to see things through to the end, to work hard to achieve your objectives and to carry on despite setbacks, such as injuries and doubts.

Have you ever been injured?

I suffered a fatigue fracture of the tibia in 2011, a year before the Olympic Games, and was unable to run for four months. I consequently adopted a slightly different approach to training in 2012. I worked on the other disciplines during my recovery period, learned to have patience and continued to believe I could achieve my goal despite the injury.

You wouldn't be the sportswoman you are today without your parents. They have always been very supportive. What sort of sporting background do you come from?

Family plays a major role for all young sportspeople. My grandfather and my parents were PE teachers. They passed enjoyment

of sport onto me and I was given the opportunity to try out lots of types of sport. My father was my coach for fifteen years. Choosing to pursue a career in sport was nevertheless my own decision.

Who do you admire?

I've never had one idol in particular but lots of athletes have impressed me with one or more qualities and they have been my inspiration in creating my own sporting personality.

Olympic gold and victory on the line by just a few centimetres ahead of your Swedish competitor – what does that mean to you?

It's a dream come true. That was a massive achievement. The medal has had a tremendous impact on my life and lots of people in Switzerland now recognise me because of that race. It is also special because only three Swiss women have ever won gold in the history of the Olympic Games in all disciplines.

What is your next challenge?

The European Athletics Championships in Zurich in 2014. That will just be running but I can't tell you which distance that will be at this stage. It may be 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres or even a marathon. I will definitely continue to take part in triathlon competitions at the same time.

Can you really make a living from triathlon?

There are very few athletes able to make a living from triathlon in Switzerland. I won't make a fortune from it – I earn a living thanks to my personal sponsors – and after my sporting career, I'll focus on another profession as I'm a qualified lawyer. Finding sponsors is therefore a key part of my job.

What is your philosophy?

I find it very exciting to set myself a target and to see how far I can get, to put my abilities to the test and to find out where my limits lie. I like to set myself extremely ambitious objectives, such as the Olympic Games, and I draw inspiration from pursuing these goals.

Now that you have started a family, you are entering a new chapter in your life as a sportswoman and will have to draw on your resourcefulness. When do you expect to resume competition?

I'm keeping my options open and will wait to see how our new life as a family settles down. Our child and the family come first. Many athletes have proven that family life can be reconciled with elite sport. I'm not going to set a date for my return now. I firstly intend to regain my fitness and train hard before returning to competition. I'm going to give it a go and if it doesn't work out, there will always be other avenues open.

www.nicolaspirig.ch