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Autor: Wey, Alain
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A new age for surfers

Over the last 10 years, the sport of kitesurfing has become a permanent feature on Swiss lakes, but it remains restricted to very limited areas. The Federal Assembly has now decided to lift its ban at national level. We get the lowdown from kitesurfing teacher Marc Maurer and talk to Fribourg native Manuela Jungo who finished 5th in the World Cup in 2012.

By Alain Wey

Carried by the wind, they glide and skip over our lakes and over distant seas. For more than a decade, kitesurfers have been winning over fans in Switzerland with their unique blend of surfing and power kite. The enthusiasm for this sport is so great that it has become political, with tough restrictions in place on some Swiss lakes. In other areas the sport is banned completely due to the danger it represents to other lake users. The ban is opposed by a committee of enthusiasts who took their case all the way to Berne. They argue that the discipline has developed enormously over the last 10 years, with rigorous safety regulations in place and training offered by specialist schools. Last December, the Federal Assembly lifted its ban on kitesurfing on Swiss lakes. Now the cantons have to define zones. Mario Kaufmann, vice-president of the Swiss Kitesurfing Association (Kitegenossen or Kitesurfklub Schweiz), estimates that it will take until 2014 for the cantons to endorse the national decision and to choose the parts of the lakes where kitesurfing will be allowed. For now, kiteboarders have a few areas in Switzerland where they are allowed to practise their sport, but they frequently cross the borders to neighbouring countries in order to give free rein to their passion without getting caught up in the "traffic jams" that are all too often seen in Switzerland.

Lac Silvaplana is the Mecca

"Kitesurfing is not a crime": the famous cry of skateboarders in the 1980s has now been light heartedly reappropriated by kiteboarders. The sport was invented in France in 1996 and quickly went on to conquer Europe and Switzerland. Inflatable tubes have improved the stability of the kites and made it possible to start out directly in the water. The board itself can look like the traditional iconic surfboard, but also like a wakeboard. Marc "Fish" Maurer, 48, fell under the kite-surfing spell in 1998 in Tarifa, Spain and in Venezuela. He runs the Kiteswiss School in

Zurich. "The really great thing about this sport is that you can also do it in the snow in winter with a snowboard or skis (snowkiting)," says Maurer. Or on the land with a skateboard fitted with extra-big wheels. What's more, you don't need a lot of equipment, like you do for windsurfing, says Maurer. A native of Zurich, he runs intensive week-long kitesurfing courses for his students in Egypt, Morocco and Brazil, where the limitations imposed by the natural features of Swiss lakes (trees, cliffs and winds that can change direction very quickly) are no longer an issue. "Understanding the winds, knowing the safety rules and being able to assess the weather conditions are essential when you're learning," says Maurer. In Switzerland, the most highly prized spots are on lakes Constance, Neuchâtel, Biel and Silvaplana (Grisons). "On Lake Geneva, it gets difficult because there can be as many as 20 different wind directions," he says. The Kitegenossen Association also offers a map of spots and places where kitesurfing is permitted.

Lake Silvaplana remains the Mecca for kitesurfing in Switzerland, with the Kitesailing School and the Swiss Kitesailing Association. The Swiss "King of the Lake" championships have taken place in October in Portolban on the southern shores of Lake Neuchâtel since 2003, and the organisers have been working closely with the experts in Silvaplana since 2008. Kitesurfing offers several competitive categories, the main ones being freestyle (with jumps) and speed racing. The International Sailing Federation had announced that kitesurfing would replace windsurfing at the 2016 Olympic Games, but this announcement was subsequently withdrawn. However, the question is likely to arise again in 2020. With more than 3,000 kitesurfers, Switzerland could certainly hope to win a few medals!

www.kitegenossen.ch



Manuela Jungo in action

"You can achieve anything if you really want it!"

Interview with Manuela Jungo

Manuela Jungo, 29, has been competing in the kitesurfing world cup (www.prokite-tour.com) since 2012, where she finished in fifth place in the freestyle discipline. A native of Düdingen, in the canton of Fribourg, Manuela Jungo is the only Swiss woman in the world-class category and is able to make a living from her sport through sponsorship deals. "My career path is different from that of many other elite athletes," she says. "I first studied economics at university and then worked as a manager for a watch-making company in Biel. Then I took a big break from work so that I could go kitesurfing every day, and I'm still on that break!"

How did you get started?

I discovered kitesurfing in 2006 when I went to learn English in Hawaii as part of my studies. That was where I saw a kite-surfer for the first time. I was completely enthralled. Then, during my long summer vacation I went to the Dominican Republic,

where I worked as a marketing assistant in the mornings and learned to kitesurf in the afternoons.

Where do you go kitesurfing in Switzerland?

On Lake Biel. From La Neuveville and Ipsach. When I worked in Biel, I was sometimes able to take a couple of hours' lunch break to go and kitesurf. Then, in 2010, I resigned from my job so that I could go and kitesurf at a suitable location every day. I trained hard and I made quite a bit of progress. Then I found sponsors who provided the financial backing for my passion. I had my first go at the World Cup in 2012, an event where I could measure myself against the best in the field. I am the first Swiss woman to take part in the whole World Tour.

How did 2012 go for you?

I made a start with the competition in Dakhla in Morocco, going in fifth place. I even won my head-to-head against the then world champion. At the Mondial du Vent in France, I was awarded best newcomer. And in Haikou, in China, I reached fourth place. The standard of the four best world-class competitors is very high but they have all been competing in the World Tour for more than four years. For me, it is an amazing success to be one of the top five in the world. Last March, I finished fifth again in Dakhla. My goal for 2013 is to defend my place as fifth in the world.

So from March to December, you are travelling all over the world. Where are the next competition destinations after Morocco and France?

Italy and Germany, Spain, Egypt, China, New Caledonia and Australia.

How are competitions organised?

They take place through knock-out rounds. Two kite-surfers go head-to-head for seven minutes. You can do 12

tricks, from 23 different categories. Out of these categories, you choose five that will earn you points. The competition is also strategic as you choose what risks to take depending on the strength of your opponent. There are also all the meteorological and technical aspects to take into account. For example, I have to decide which kite I will use: there are different sizes depending on the strength of the wind (11 m2, 9 m2, etc.)

When you practise an extreme sport, there are bound to be falls...

Yes, it's inevitable. When I'm trying out a new trick, I might fall anything up to 500 times before I succeed. Sometimes when I'm training, I end up falling all the time. I always want to get better, but you can only do that if you fall so you can then learn from your mistakes. Sometimes it is difficult, especially as I don't have a coach. But the pleasure I get from this sport always gives me fresh motivation. It's the joy of being in the water, the sense of freedom and the ambition constantly to learn and improve!

What is the atmosphere like in the kitesurfing world?

During competitions we are like a family because there are not that many of us in this sport. There are around 15 women and 30 men. We are all friends. Lots come from Europe, and there are others from New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, etc. It is very interesting comparing our different experiences and cultures.

What is your philosophy?

You can achieve anything if you really want it. When I gave up work so I could practise kitesurfing intensively, lots of people had doubts about my decision. You always have to try new things and not rest on your laurels. That's how you keep moving upwards. You have to live your dreams – not just talk about them but make them happen!

ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"