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Elite training facilities for sportspeople

There are five Swiss Olympic Sport Schools in Switzerland. These offer elite training facilities for young sportspeople with high potential eagerly working towards taking part in Olympic Games and swotting up on school subjects at the same time. A visit to the sport school in Engelberg reveals how the young people cope with a 60-hour week.

By Reto Wissmann

Booming drum & bass music blasts out of the loudspeakers. Boys in baggy gym shorts and cool caps are nonchalantly pedalling away on training equipment or balancing on the slackline. But the relaxed atmosphere is deceptive. Hard work is being put in here. The fast rhythms are part of the plan. All the youngsters have their own individual training programme beside them. Emerging young stars of the winter sport disciplines are trained at the sport school in Engelberg, at the foot of the Titlis, where the ski sea-

at the end of January whether he will be going to Sochi.

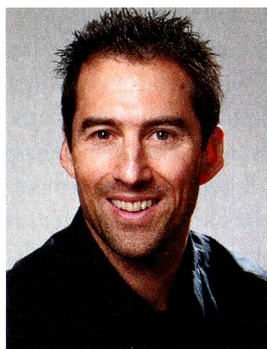
In any case, Jonas Bösiger will be doing lots of travelling before then. Training camps, competitions and sponsorship commitments will take the teenager all over the world. He has only spent 16 days at school since the summer holidays. Nevertheless, he is not neglecting his studies. "The school-leaving diploma is important," explains the young elite sportsman. After his exams, he will focus entirely on sport but if nothing

kil Läubli, director of the sport school. Such establishments would be state-funded as a matter of course in Austria. However, in Switzerland people balk at the idea of systematic training for children as young as six or seven.

But Eskil Läubli is not complaining. The school founded in 1994 is flourishing, constantly expanding and yet remains far from able to offer places to all applicants. And this is despite the fact that the parents of the young sports stars have to dig deep into their



The sport school in the former sawmill of Engelberg monastery



Head teacher Eskil Läubli



The coordination hall where jumps are practised

son runs from October to June. They are all talented young athletes who might even compete to win Olympic medals for Switzerland in Sochi.

The dream of Sochi

Jonas Bösiger will sit exams for his Swiss school-leaving diploma shortly but has his mind on other things at the moment. "I want to compete with the best in the world," says the 18-year-old snowboarder. He is one of the Engelberg protégés with hopes of taking part in the Winter Olympic Games in February. He became Swiss champion last year in Zermatt, finished third at the junior world championships in Turkey this year and won the World Rookie Fest Final Slope-style in Ischgl, Austria. There are still a few qualifying events to go before he finds out

comes of that he will need a plan B. The Engelberg sport school is providing him with support in that respect. It organises the snowboarder's hourly, weekly and yearly schedule so that sport and education can be combined.

Little financial support

Engelberg is one of five schools in Switzerland to have been awarded the label of "Swiss Olympic Sport School" (see box). It offers exceptionally gifted young sportspeople optimal training conditions while ensuring that they also achieve their educational objectives. These private institutions do not benefit from this financially. There is no money from Swiss Olympic. "Switzerland is very different in this respect from a winter sports-mad nation like Austria," reveals Es-

own pockets. A study place costs almost 14,000 Swiss francs per year. Further contributions are made by the pupils' home cantons via the funding scheme for highly talented individuals. The sizeable training costs, standing at 37,000 Swiss francs, are ultimately met by additional sponsors.

Exceptional facilities are provided in return: the so-called "powerhouse", the former sawmill of the Benedictine monastery in Engelberg, contains everything that alpine skiers, snowboarders, freeskiers and now also biathletes and cross-country skiers require for their training. In addition to a gymnasium, there are weights rooms, large trampolines and half-pipes for the "off-snow training" and, of course, a physiotherapy suite. 34 teachers and trainers focus on the 82 pupils virtually around the clock. In order to keep up, the

youngsters also receive individual tuition in addition to lessons in small classes. They can even do their school work in a training facility on the other side of the world thanks to an electronic learning platform.

Rigorous selection

The talented young sportspeople are under tremendous pressure in some respects. With lessons, training, exam preparation, equipment upkeep and self-marketing, many have to put in a 60-hour week – while going through puberty. Eskil Läubli nevertheless says that few problems arise. One reason for this is the “extremely rigorous selection procedure”. The school only accepts those who possess the personal, academic and sporting attributes to deal with such a workload.

The youngsters are highly motivated: “they all ultimately want to be the best in the world,” explains Eskil Läubli. Some of them

have already achieved that goal. The alpine skiers Dominique Gislin, Silvan Zurbriggen, Wendy Holdener and Fränzi Aufdenblatten, the freeskier Jonas Hunziker and the ski-crosser Sanna Lüdi are just some of the alumni of this sport school in central Switzerland. The elite freeskiers Kai Mahler and Fabian Boesch are still at Engelberg.

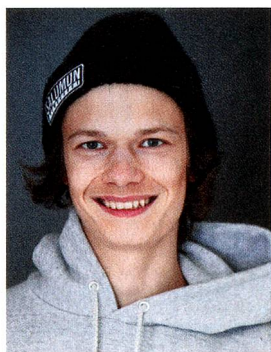
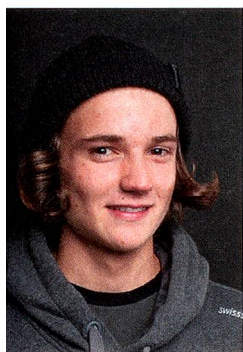
Preparation for life

Is such extreme focus on top-level sporting performance actually good for young people aged 13 to 19? Or in attending a sport school like the one in Engelberg, are they growing up in a world that bears little relation to normal life? Eskil Läubli, who was once a skier and trainer himself, does not see any issues. Elite sport is a good teacher. The young athletes have quickly learned that nobody will wait for them there and that they will be told immediately if their perfor-

mance level slips, he says. Some pupils might find this very traumatic. The school nevertheless helps them to deal with such situations. “Even though the pupils here live under exceptional circumstances, they are definitely well prepared for life after school,” remarks Eskil Läubli.

Four years ago, the school set itself the target of ensuring that at least one pupil qualified for the Winter Olympic Games. “If you can dream it – do it!” is the slogan on the gymnasium wall. Perhaps Jonas Bösiger or another talented young athlete will succeed. However, it might be that Engelberg is not represented in Sochi. The sport school will then set itself a new goal for the next Winter Games and again work hard to achieve it in a relaxed atmosphere.

RETO WISSMANN is a freelance journalist living in Biel



Three pupils with genuine hopes of qualification for Sochi: Fabian Boesch in freeskiering, and Jonas Bösiger and Verena Rohrer in snowboard freestyle



The two freeskiers Kai Mahler and Jonas Hunziker studying together

EXCLUSIVE LABEL

In addition to the one in Engelberg, four other establishments have Swiss Olympic Sport School status. The title is bestowed by the umbrella organisation of Switzerland's sporting associations upon schools that combine sport and academic education in an ideal fashion, employ their own trainers and have boarding facilities.

■ The High-Alpine Institute Ftan in the Engadine offers such conditions to almost 60 talented youngsters, mainly in snow sport disciplines. The young athletes attend the school from year 7 until they sit exams for a school-leaving diploma in technical, vocational or academic subjects. Dario Cologna, who went to the institute and was crowned Olympic champion in 2010, is a source of great pride.

■ At the Swiss Sport-Gymnasium Davos, over 120 young elite sportspeople attend classes while at the same time striving for sporting success. Here, too, the emphasis is on snow sports. The

“wall of fame” includes names like Markus Keller and Iouri Podladtchikov (snowboarding), Marc Berthod and Tamara Wolf (alpine skiing) and Toni Livers (cross-country).

■ The Kollegium Brig, a bilingual sport school, accepts gifted artists as well as young elite sporting talent. The sport intake is also dominated by winter disciplines. Around 130 youngsters are currently enrolled. The biathlete Benjamin Wenger, the snowboarder Patricia Kummer and the ski racer Elia Zurbriggen are just some of the school's alumni.

■ The Nationale Elitesportschule Thurgau in Kreuzlingen has a unique role to play among the Swiss Olympic Sport Schools in that it focuses on summer sports, such as athletics, tennis and swimming. But ice hockey players also find ideal training conditions here. The establishment educates its pupils to the point where they complete obligatory secondary schooling and then arranges an apprenticeship for them or tuition at a school that teaches at the next level.