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Switzerland: a true nation of sailors

Thanks to their victories in ocean racing and the America's Cup, the Swiss have established themselves at the top of international sailing. Love of the sea is alive and well in Switzerland. The combination of lakes with technology and money is working wonders.



STÉPHANE HERZOG

Pierre Fehlmann, Stève Ravussin, Bernard Stamm, Dominique Wavre and Ernesto Bertarelli. Do these names mean anything to you? They are almost certain to. They are all Swiss sailors who have achieved success at the highest level – in ocean racing in the case of the first four and tactical sailing in the case of the last, Alinghi having won the oldest sporting trophy, the prestigious America's Cup, on two occasions. Further back in history, there was the Swiss-American skipper and countess Hélène Pourtalès, who won two gold medals at the Paris Olympics in 1900. Then there was Louis Noverraz, the great sailor from French-speaking Switzerland (see opposite) who flew the Swiss flag in international competition for several decades. "We are a mountain nation with famous sailors," sums up This Oberhänkli, curator of an exhibition on Swiss sailing at the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne, which runs until mid October 2014. The SUI-100, the boat which won the America's Cup in 2007, is on public

display. But the museum also has in its possession the model of the *Mérit*, the vessel of the father of Swiss ocean sailing, the above-mentioned Pierre Fehlmann.

With its ten entries in around-the-world competitions, eight of which were completed, Dominique Wavre believes "outstanding sporting results have been achieved for such a small nation, especially in ocean sailing where lots of French-speaking Swiss have excelled over the past 20 to 30 years, influenced by the exploits of the French sailor Eric Tabarly". This phenomenon, in which Dominique Wavre has played a part as the person who set up the sailing training centre in Geneva, has in turn "inspired young people and had a snowball effect". This suggests that we have by no means heard the last of Swiss sailing.

Battling the elements

Long-distance regattas, such as the Vendée Globe and the Solitaire du Figaro, have tremendous public appeal.

The start of a sailing regatta on Lake Geneva – the UN building is in the background

"It's a natural endurance sport where you're battling against the elements and the weather," says the Geneva-based sailor. "When it's winter in Switzerland, there we are sailing in South Africa or Australia! It also presents an opportunity to talk about the environment. It is successful because the Swiss love outdoor activities, like hiking and skiing, but also competition."

The Swiss are not satisfied with just following the Vendée Globe online. "They love cruising in the Mediterranean and there's not a bay where Cruising Club Suisse vessels are not harboured," points out Dominique Wavre who has always been able to rely upon the support of his compatriots and consulates when faced with glitches and damage. In his view, the most striking example is the Bol d'Or event (on Lake Geneva) in which between 500 and 700 boats take part each year. "If you count the five-strong crews as well as the families following the race from a distance, 50% of the population of French-speaking Switzerland takes

an interest in this regatta,” he estimates.

Lake Geneva is the focal point

Head of a communications agency specialising in sailing and the author of several books on sailing*, Bernard Schopfer sums up the success of Swiss sailing and its appeal in a few words – the lake, technology and money. “The Swiss have contributed to the rise of this sport internationally thanks to Swiss money and boats constructed in Switzerland with Swiss technology,” he underlines. At the centre of this equation is Lake Geneva. “People have sailed on the lake since the 14th century, if not before, and the first regattas date back to the 19th century when transport vessels competed with one another,” explains this maritime expert.

“Lake Geneva is the national centre for competition in Switzerland. It is a wonderful location and a bit like a small sea,” he adds. “Technology-based shipyards have been set up on its shores, firstly constructing wooden vessels in the last century – with manufacturers such as Luthi and Amiguet – and carbon ones today made, for example, by Decision S.A which has built boats for the America’s Cup and the Volvo Ocean Race. These sailing vessels are highly regarded all over the world.”

Bernard Schopfer observes that there is a sense of continuation between the sea and the mountains amongst the Swiss, as well as a great love of nature. “Many Swiss people, for example, attend the procession of traditional tall ships in Brest. They have a maritime culture like the Bretons,” he laughs. And while owning a boat is expensive – which is why sailing is a sport of the rich – it is always easy to sail. “Many owners of beautiful boats are constantly looking for crew members, including to go to sea. There is a long tradition of social di-

versity on board boats. Since 1900, owners have recruited deckhands from the Eaux-Vives and Pâquis districts, places where people would be very unlikely to pass through the doors of the sailing club, but once on board everyone was treated equally,” recounts the author of “Légendes du Léman” published in 2012.

Eighty days without proper sleep

The future of Swiss sailing appears promising, even if its greatest achievements at the Olympics and on the ocean were some time ago. Bernard Schopfer points to the exploits of two sailors, Justine and Elodie-Jane Mettraux, who will take part in the next Volvo Ocean Race in November 2014 as part of the SCA team. “They are part of the Alinghi generation which has led the way in the sport,” remarks the former journalist who was head of communications for this red-and-white syndicate.

But how do you go from the lake to the sea and from the safety of the shores to the fearsome immensity of the oceans? “It is a shock to the system but it’s all relative,” explains Dominique Wavre. “You go from one environment where you are safer because of the proximity of the ports to one where endurance is of paramount importance. For example, in an event like the Figaro single-handed race, you spend almost 80 days without proper sleep. But if you have a competitive spirit, you will want to take on international opposition and that obviously takes place at sea.”

* “La légende du Léman Bol d’Or Mirabaud”, Bernard Schopfer, Slatkine, 2012.

STÉPHANE HERZOG IS AN EDITOR WITH THE “SWISS REVIEW”



The Swiss skipper Dominique Wavre in action on the Vendée Globe

Some milestones in Swiss sailing:

- 2013: Justine Mettraux finishes second in the Mini Transat with the best female performance in the event's history;
- 2013: Dominique Wavre completes his third “Vendée Globe” with a seventh place finish. He has taken part in ten around-the-world sailing races, which is a record.
- 2003: the Swiss Alinghi syndicate wins the America’s Cup in Auckland;
- 2002–2003: Bernard Stamm wins the “Around Alone” race. He beats the record for a solo Atlantic crossing during the first stage;
- 1998: Stève Ravussin wins the “Route du Rhum” race in the small trimarans class;
- 1994: Laurent Bourgnon wins the “Route du Rhum” solo event;
- 1988: Laurent Bourgnon is victorious in the Figaro solo event having entered the competition for the first time;
- 1985–86: Pierre Fehlmann is the winner of the Whitbread Round the World Race (now the Volvo Ocean Race) with UBS-Switzerland;
- 1968: Louis Noverraz wins a silver medal with his fellow crew members Bernhard Dunand and Marcel Stern at the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico (in the 5.5-metre international class);
- 1900: Hélène, Hermann and Bernard de Pourtalès win gold medals at the Paris Olympic Games in the Lerina sailing boat (1–2-ton class).