

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 44 (2017)
Heft: 2

Artikel: A new star in Swiss wrestling
Autor: Willimann, Dominic
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906898>

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The great battle:
Orlik (left) takes on
Matthias Glarner in
the final of the Swiss
federal wrestling
and alpine festival.
Photos: Keystone

A new star in Swiss wrestling

Armon Orlik from Grisons is only 21 but is already one of Switzerland's top wrestlers. Who is this top performer from Maienfeld who was crowned "Wrestler of the Year 2016"?

DOMINIC WILLIMANN

You could hear a pin drop in the Es-tavayer arena. Some 52,000 spectators are here to watch the final bout. The most coveted title in this Swiss national sport is at stake. On one side stands Matthias Glarner from Berne and on the other Armon Orlik from Grisons. When Glarner looks for and gets the call, Orlik is lying flat on his back. Glarner celebrates. The restrained celebrations of the 2016 Swiss wrestling king are matched by the muted reaction on the terraces. Rarely has a wrestling king received less applause in recent times, which has nothing to do with the elite sportsman from Meiringen but is instead explained by his opponent.

Armon Orlik wrestled his way into the hearts of the spectators over these two days at the end of August. In the very first round he saw off Kilian Wenger, the 2010 Swiss wrestling king. He later triumphed over two other "confederates", in other words wrestlers who are at the top of the rankings for this championship event held every three years. It was not just the underdog's victories that explained the jubilant mood in the ring. It was mainly the way in which he won his bouts. When Orlik shook hands to beckon his opponent to fight, it generally only took a few seconds before the 21-year-old was wiping sawdust off his adversary's back. "I deliberately adopt an offensive fighting style," he explains. According to

Orlik, who has made rapid progress in his fledgling career, it makes sense to stick to your own routine.

Thanks to judo

The civil engineering student from Maienfeld did not begin regularly visiting the wrestling room until the age of 14. The youngest of four boys in the Orlik family, he had previously been attracted to judo like his brothers. He learned the ropes of judo in the dojo and also realised that he could go a long way if he put in the effort. "I had to repeat a technique a hundred times before mastering it," he explains. Through judo he not only developed his training work ethic but also bulked up physically. This model athlete, who is 1 metre 90 cm tall and weighs 105 kilograms, developed his agility and strength while participating in this combat sport for eight years. "The fact that I now have the powerful physique needed to take part in elite sport can largely be attributed to my background in judo," says Orlik.

His decision to finally turn away from judo seven years ago was due to his only injury to date. An elbow problem forced Orlik to reconsider his plans. Instead of pitting himself against his brothers Lucas and Flavio, the latter recently just missing out on qualification for the Olympic Games in Rio, on the judo mat, he began going to the wrestling club cellar with his brother Curdin who is two years older. He quickly established himself as one of the best performers here, too. His determination and ambition helped the alpine wrestler from the Unterlandquart wrestling club to compete at the top level in traditional Swiss wrestling trousers. As did his faith in God, he says. However, the decisive factor is something else. "I would never be where I am today without my family," remarks Orlik. "They provide me with the stability I need." His tremendous progress in such a short space of time is down to his parents. He is very grateful to his father Paul, a cantonal policeman, judo coach and former champion wrestler, and his mother Helena, the village's sacristan, for his childhood.

Armon Orlik grew up in the oldest house in Landquart. They used wood for heating and there was no television for a long time. The Orlik brothers therefore spent much of their free time outdoors.

His brother Curdin played a major part in his rise in the sawdust arena. Armon spent hours on end with him in the wrestling cellar, honed his technique with him and travelled with him to his first Swiss championship in 2013 in Burgdorf. "He drummed it into me that success would not just happen," recalls Orlik. That spurred Armon on because he wanted to be as good as Curdin. The youngest in the family of six, he drew

motivation from his elder brothers from a young age, which helped him to develop his competitive edge in sport. As the physical gap increasingly closed, little Armon suddenly became the big one. He began to enjoy success and in August 2015 the harmony in the Orlik team was put to the test for the only time to date. At the Sertig-Schwinget tournament in Davos, the final bout pitted Orlik against Orlik. Armon came out on top.

Eight oak leaf laurels

This was the start of a journey that reached its peak so far last summer in Estavayer. Armon Orlik outshone the competition last season. He was awarded the livestock prize at six wreath ceremonies and won eight oak leaf laurels in total in 2016. He occupied first place in the annual rankings of the federal wrestling association, was voted "Wrestler of the Year" by experts and was declared "Newcomer of the Year" at the national Sports Awards evening on Swiss television after a public vote.

The reserved, hard-working wrestler from Grisons has since enjoyed popstar status all over the country. It is not Swiss wrestling king Matthias Glarner but instead Orlik who garners the titles away from the sawdust. He is well liked by everyone. However, he is not getting carried away and remains as down-to-earth as ever. Dealing with the attention he has received is not easy. "But I have gained a lot of strength and self-belief over the last year," he reveals, including outside of the sport, for instance through his studies in Rapperswil, where he lives during the week.

With the positive experiences of last year behind him, Orlik has now embarked on the 2017 season. The wrestling year began for the man



The sportsman from Grisons is not just "Wrestler of the Year". He was also voted "Newcomer of the Year" in 2016 by the Swiss television audience at the national Sports Awards.

from Grisons as the last one ended at the Niklaus-Schwinget competition in Dietikon – with a victory. At the Berchtold-Schwinget event in Zurich on 2 January, he was carried on the crowd's shoulders through the sports hall. He is therefore right on track. Orlik is hoping to find his best form by the end of August at the latest for the Unspunnenfest festival in Interlaken. He will continue to train hard until this event which is the highlight of the season.

His role models are doing the same thing. These include Martin Grab. The 37-year-old from Schwyz is not only one of the most experienced wrestlers, he is also one of the most spectacular performers owing to his offensive approach. Orlik is emulating his style. Orlik is also impressed by the strength of people like Jörg Abderhalden and Matthias Glarner. Swiss wrestling king Glarner is likewise impressed by Orlik: "Armon has outstanding physical attributes and is very accomplished technically for his age. He also wrestles with a very carefree attitude." If the native of Grisons stays fit and continues to work hard, he will be amongst the favourites again in Zug, says Glarner. Zug is in two years' time. The whole of the nation will be watching events in central Switzerland where the next king of Swiss wrestling will be crowned. It is very possible that Armon Orlik will again have a chance of emerging victorious. Should he win, he would no longer just be the king of the public's hearts. He would also be Grisons' first ever Swiss wrestling king.