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Photo: Christoph Köstlin

Lea Sprunger and the 13-stride challenge

Swiss athlete Lea Sprunger was the first woman to run a 300m hurdles race with only 13 strides between the first two hurdles. She achieved this feat at the height of her career.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

On 11 June, at the Oslo Impossible Games, Lea Sprunger, born in Nyon 30 years ago and the first Swiss female to become a European athletics champion in the 400 metres hurdles discipline, accomplished a historical feat. She ran a 300 metres hurdles race with only 13 strides between the first two of the seven hurdles on the track, as opposed to the standard 14 or 15. This was a first in women's athletics, as only male athletes had managed it until then. One notable example being the American Edwin Moses who managed 13 strides between every hurdle in a 400 metres hurdles race.

"As there are no major championships right now, this exploit focused people's attention on something different," explains Laurent Meuwly, who has been training Sprunger

since 2007. As for the athlete herself, she says: "It's a stride which suits me. At the beginning of the race, I felt faster than in a 400 metres event and I passed in front of the others. But it's ultimately the time that counts." Reducing the number of strides takes a lot of energy. In Oslo, the sprinter achieved a time of 39.86 seconds, compared to 39.25 seconds recently in Zurich. "She paid for the initial effort at the end of the race," concludes Meuwly.

A double-edged figure

The question of the number of strides between hurdles is a sort of science, with the number 13 seemingly unachievable for a woman. "Lea is the only athlete to have been able to succeed in a race like this – with strides of up to 2.38



metres – because of her height (1.83m) and her strength,” explains her coach. As such, in the finals of the World Championship in Doha in 2019, where Sprunger beat the Swiss 400 metres hurdles record, only two athletes out of eight completed the course in 14 strides, with the others completing 15 strides between the ten hurdles.

A further difficulty with this technique is the change in the number of strides for passing over the hurdles, which are spaced 35 metres apart. In Oslo, the Swiss champion scrupulously followed a programme that had been prepared down to the very last metre: 21 strides at maximum speed for 45 metres, twice 13 strides between the first two hurdles, then twice 14 strides and then twice 15 strides. These adaptations cost the athlete a lot of energy. For all of these reasons, she will not necessarily be using the technique in future competitions, “but she will continue to work on it” states Meuwly.

The historic 13 strides were achieved at a time where Lea Sprunger was in peak form. Her sporting career will effectively come to an end at the close of the 2021 season. “For three years, her body and her mind have been aligned and top results have kept coming. It is the peak of a long journey, which she began at the age of ten,” explains her trainer. What is the next goal for this athlete from the canton of Vaud, brought up by two Swiss-German parents? “A medal at international level,” replies Sprunger, who is now preparing for the next World Athletics Indoor Championships, which will take place in Nanjing (China) in March.

One of Switzerland's most successful track-and-field athletes, Léa Sprunger – pictured here at the 2019 World Athletics Championships in Doha. Photo: Keystone

Switzerland in figures

Noisy neighbours, long hiking trails, dog waste bins

49

Switzerland is a nation of tenants – and noisy neighbours. Some 49 per cent of the country's apartment dwellers admit that they get irritated by the racket next door (Homegate survey, 2020). Use of the shared laundry room is the second most common, but more classically Swiss, source of conflict (18 per cent) – as immortalised in the novel “Der Waschküchenschlüssel” (The laundry room key); Hugo Loetscher, 1998, Diogenes Verlag.

65 000

Annoyed by the neighbours? Go hiking. More and more people have been discovering the delights of Switzerland's 65,000-kilometre hiking trail network this year. If the country's entire population were spread out evenly along all these trails in single file, everyone would remain socially distanced seven metres apart.

39 600 000

The Swiss tourist board Switzerland Tourism reported record figures for the month of July: 39.6 million overnight stays. Too good to be true? Unfortunately, yes: these are the figures for July 2019. Thanks to COVID-19, the current holiday season may break the wrong sort of records.

99

Another coronavirus statistic: 99 per cent of Swiss SMEs and start-ups have been negatively affected by the pandemic, according to the Berne University of Applied Sciences. Eleven per cent say that COVID-19 threatens their very existence.

40 000

Finally, some doggy-related business. Robidog – the Swiss-produced dog waste disposal system featuring an in-built waste bag dispenser – was patented in 1981. Around 40,000 of these contraptions can be found all around Switzerland. However, the dog waste bin has become a victim of its own success: its numbers are shrinking, because dog owners have become more conscientious in picking up and disposing of their pooch's mess.