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Heinz Frei



Parasports receive less media attention than so called able-bodied sports. And Heinz Frei is less well-known than, say, tennis player Belinda Bencic, gold medal winner in the Tokyo Olympic Games. And yet, Frei's story is incredible! On 1 September, at the Paralympic Games, the 63-year-old athlete from Berne won the silver medal in road handcycling. He cycled 78 km in the driving rain using just the strength of his arms. This was the 16th time he has participated in the Paralympic Games, in which he has won a haul of 16 gold medals in athletics, handcycling and cross-country skiing. Superhuman!

This exceptional sporting tale began with an accident. The year was 1978 and the young Heinz was running in the mountains. He fell and broke his spine at his ribcage. The result was paraplegia. "Am I going to manage? Is life in a wheelchair worth living?" Heinz Frei asked himself. Then, two years later, he returned to sports with a modified wheelchair. The idea of limitations has underpinned his journey. "It is important to have realistic objectives that lead step by step to success, and that allow you to achieve what is possible, rather than aiming for a utopia which will always remain a fantasy. This means accepting deep down that there are limits," he explains on the website of a Swiss stairlift manufacturer.

In Tokyo, on the Fuji International Speedway, Heinz Frei took risks and succeeded in winning the silver medal, which he describes as his gold medal. "Today, the real winner is my body," he states. After his accident, the sportsman had to refamiliarise himself with this new body, "until it became [his] friend". Mission accomplished.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Women's session calls for more equality

It was women only in the Federal Palace during the last weekend in October, when the second women's session (the first was in 1991) was held to establish the political position of women in Switzerland. The main demands were greater equality and equal pay, the eradication of old-age poverty among women, the creation of a federal office for equality and family, and the establishment of a research programme for gender medicine. The women's session produced a total of 23 petitions, which now go to the National Council and Council of States for approval. (MUL)

Switzerland approves second cohesion contribution

At the end of September, the Swiss Parliament approved a second cohesion contribution, totalling 1.3 billion Swiss francs. The funds are to support development in new and economically disadvantaged EU member states. The contribution is in return for the benefits Switzerland gains by having access to these markets. Given the current tension between Berne and Brussels, parliament initially wanted to make the funds contingent on certain conditions, but ultimately decided against it. (MUL)

Australia opens embassy in Switzerland

After a gap of 30 years, Australia is once again opening an embassy in Switzerland. This is somewhat unusual, as many countries have closed or merged embassies in recent years. Australia emphasises that the new embassy will strengthen the political, economic, strategic, cultural and scientific ties that bind the two countries together. (MUL)

Criticism of the use of force in asylum centres

An investigation has concluded that security staff have used "disproportionate force" on a number of occasions in federal asylum centres. However, according to former Supreme Court judge Niklaus Oberholzer, who led the investigation, the documented instances of disproportionate and unlawful conduct do not constitute a systematic failure to respect the rights of asylum seekers in federal centres. (MUL)

New minimum tax rate "feasible" for Switzerland

Switzerland is not happy about the large industrialised nations' plan to apply a global minimum corporate tax rate of 15 percent. The reform would affect 18 Swiss cantons in particular, where corporate income tax is below 15 percent. Nevertheless, following some initial scepticism, Finance Minister Ueli Maurer does not envisage "any major problems". The new tax regime is considered "feasible" for Switzerland, although some companies will inevitably have to pay more tax in future. (MUL)