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Tents dot the Ebersecken sports field in the heart of the Lucerne countryside (image on left). Rope pulling is finally back!

Photos: Danielle Liniger



Sticky stuff – athletes rub their hands with resin in order to get a better grip on the rope (image on right).



Gritty determination, quirky hats – the men's team competing at home in the 580-kg category (above).



"Cool team sport" – young rope-pulling stars before and after a pull (images on left and right).



The strong women and men of Ebersecken

In a small Lucerne village, the fringe sport of tug of war is the biggest thing around. The Ebersecken rope pulling club has been the most successful Swiss tug of war association in the last ten years. We stopped by to witness this test of strength that requires team spirit and connects a farming village with the world.

SUSANNE WENGER

On an early July Saturday in Ebersecken, the summer sun shines down on the gently rolling landscape of the Lucerne countryside. Cowbells tinkle, butterflies flutter by. On the sports field near the school, however, there is intense activity in the heat, and the competition sounds loud and fierce. More than 20 Swiss rope pulling teams have come to compete in a championship tournament this weekend in several weight and age categories. The Ebersecken rope pulling club, which organised the event and is fielding five teams, has seized the opportunity and turned the tournament into a three-day village festival.

There's finally a tug-of-war festival in Ebersecken again, after the two long pandemic years. "We're so happy," says Peter Joller, co-president of the club. The 32-year-old weaves his way around the field in a blue team uniform. Despite the difficult situation, the club members did not waste any time lazing around, he is quick to point out. Mixed teams are competing in the under-19 age group, while in the elite categories of 580 and 640 kilograms, the men are on their own this time. Anyone who has never been to a rope-pulling tournament quickly realises that the seemingly archaic competitions are strictly regulated, with set techniques and sequences, weight controls and footwear inspections.

Muscles and mental strength

Pick up the rope! Take the strain! Ready! Pull! These are the commands the referee gives to start a pull. With their left feet rammed into the grass in sync and the 33-metre-long rope gripped tightly between tacky hands, the athletes assume the most horizontal position possible, and the battle for a place in the final begins with great vigour and shouting. The aim



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records.
This edition:
Visiting the power-house of the strongest rope pullers.

is always to pull the opposing team far enough onto your own side. Anyone who clamps the rope under their arm is warned, and locking or sitting down is also prohibited.

"Hold, hold, hold, downwards, downwards, downwards!" The coaches stand right beside their teams and bark out instructions non-stop. Because of the intense physical exertion involved, mental fitness is also important, explains the club's own field announcer Adrian Koller over the powerful loudspeaker system. One of the youth teams from Ebersecken immediately demonstrates the truth of that statement. Even after two warnings and with defeat looming, the local team doesn't crack and is able to win the preliminary round draw after all. Cheers are heard on and off the field. The marquee fills up, food is served, and the drinks flow.

A fun hobby turns serious

Ebersecken is a rural village, with around 400 people still living here. Two years ago, the village was amalgamated with the larger neighbouring municipality of Altishofen, as Ebersecken was no longer able to operate as a commune on its own. In return, Altishofen won a world championship title for free, as they say in the village, only half-jokingly, when talking about

Carmen Rölli and Peter Joller are the volunteer presidents of the Ebersecken rope pulling club. Both also compete in teams.



the victorious rope pullers. The residents of Ebersecken had to give up their old coat of arms featuring a boar, but the bristly animal continues to snort fiercely on the logo of the rope pulling club. And even now, as a district of Altishofen, Ebersecken remains a tug-of-war stronghold.

The Ebersecken elite pullers have won at least one Swiss championship title every year since 2010, and their top national team members have brought home gold medals from three world championships. Their success stems from tremendous determination, intensive training and team spirit, all of which are very evident on the ground. Founded in 1980

Switzerland and its many clubs

The Ebersecken rope pulling club is one of an estimated 100,000 associations in Switzerland, a country that certainly loves its clubs. According to the 2020 Volunteer Monitor, three quarters of the population aged 15 and over are members of at least one club or non-profit organisation, and over 60% are actively involved. The largest group is sports clubs, followed by leisure and culture. Associations have historically been very important in Switzerland, and despite increasing mobility and a trend toward individualisation, experts have not detected a decline in club memberships. The small scale and local flavour are attractive, especially in a globalised world. Associations that embrace innovation have the best prospects. This could involve making use of the internet, for example, or enabling project related involvement. (SWE)

for amateur tournaments, the club began to set its sights higher and higher. A few members decided to focus on making a big name for the club in sporting circles, comments copresident Joller: "And that's what we can build on today." Training takes place at least twice a week during the off-season and almost every day during the regular season. The rope-pulling club has its own training facilities and a weight room.

Social media presence

What's so appealing about rope pulling that carpenters, structural draughtswomen, civil engineers, and truck drivers are willing to invest a great deal of time and resources in it as a hobby? "Team spirit", answers Carmen Rölli, "Achieving something together." The 26-year-old is co-president of Ebersecken rope pulling club and a rope puller herself. "Good



Ebersecken lies between the towns of Langenthal (BE), Sursee (LU) and Zofingen (AG).

friends you can rely on," says Erich Joller, the 34-year-old who coaches the elite teams. "The fact that everyone looks out for everyone else, from the strongest to the weakest," adds Sarah Lüönd, a volunteer and spectator at the tournament. Svenja Krauer and Julia Marti, two 13-year-old junior rope pullers, also think it's a "cool team sport", but that it needs more women. "Write that down," they exclaim breathlessly between two pulls.

The Ebersecken rope pulling club intentionally invests in youth development. "We offer young people something positive," declares co-president

Peter Joller. The club's catchment area extends into the surrounding municipalities, and he confirms there are currently more than enough interested youth. This is probably also thanks to the club's up-to-date communication efforts. It has a social media presence as well as innovative analogue ideas. The calendar printed for its 35th anniversary, in which the men's teams appeared bare-chested, sold out in no time. The club has 110 members, more than half of whom never touch a rope but instead are involved in volunteer work for the association.

2023 World Championships coming to Switzerland

The rope-pulling club has created an identity for Ebersecken, otherwise just one more small village in the middle of Switzerland. It's important for community life and something to rally around. "The club is making the name of Ebersecken known around the world," confirms co-president Carmen Rölli. It has already competed in tournaments in South Africa, the USA, Sweden and Spain. And next summer, athletes from 30 nations will descend upon Ebersecken, which has been chosen by the Tug of War International Federation to host the 2023 World Championships. It will be the biggest event in the club's history. The president of the organising committee is Lucerne Centre Party National Councillor Ida Glanzmann-Hunkeler. She grew up in Ebersecken and comments, "It's an honour for me." Rope pulling has "always been one of our regional sports", says the politician, and the community is proud of the club's achievements.

Due to space constraints, the actual World Championships venue will be Campus Sursee in the nearby small town of Sursee. According to Glanzmann-Hunkeler, one goal is to increase awareness of the sport of rope pulling in Switzerland. While "Schwingen", or Swiss wrestling, has become popular and hip in urban circles as well, rope pulling has a low profile. In Ebersecken, however, the sports field erupts in pandemonium



Ready for victory – the Ebersecken youth team psyches itself up for the pull.
Photos: Danielle Liniger



The shoes are custom made, with a metal plate permitted on the heel.



The overall team weight must be correct, with everyone weighing in before the competition.

on this Saturday in July. Amid deafening cheers, the youth team wins its final and claims the championship title once again. The older teams have been falling slightly short of the high expectations this season, but, "We'll be back," co-president Peter Joller states reassuringly. He appears relaxed and is beaming. A song by the dialect band Züri West is now playing in the marquee. "Someday happiness will find you," goes the refrain. In Ebersecken, happiness has found the team hanging for dear life to the end of a rope.

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