

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 82 (2016)
Heft: [5]

Artikel: Switzerland at the Olympics - then and now : clocks, bells and Olympic Games
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944308>

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Switzerland at the Olympics – then and now

Clocks, bells and Olympic Games



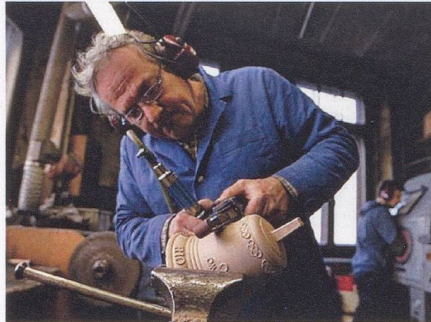
The difference between a Silver and Gold medal could be as little as a second – a vital second for the Olympian and his or her country's pride. That precision falls to Swiss watchmaking manufacturer, Omega, who has been the official time-keepers of the Olympic Games since 1932. Everyone recognises the Omega name, logo and its role in sports.

However, few people know the origin of the bells used since 1896 to signal the final lap in running and cycling races. For the 2016 Olympics Omega ordered 21 hand-forged bells from the Bondeau foundry, a small family business in La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Jura mountains, founded in the 1830s by Piedmontese immigrants. This family has been making Olympic bells since the Moscow games of 1980 and as with the cowbells they make, each bell has a unique mould and is made using technical skills which have hardly changed over the centuries. So next time you watch a race and hear the final lap signalled, remember the Swiss bell-makers of Jura.

Switzerland and the Olympics from 1896 to 2016

Switzerland has sent athletes to compete in every Summer Olympic Games since the inaugural 1896 Games. It has won a total of 185 medals from 28 Games, an average of just under 7 per Games. Add another 138 medals for Winter Olympics and Switzerland is in the top 10% of medal winning countries over 50 Games and ranked 17th in the world. Top sports have been Alpine skiing, gymnastics, bob sled, rowing and snowboarding.

The first Swiss athlete to compete was the Neuchâtel-born gymnast Louis Zutter who travelled privately to Athens in 1896 and came home with 2 silver medals and one gold. However, his achievement passed almost unnoticed. This was because “the Olympic spirit was still slow to develop in Switzerland,” historian Marco Marcacci explains,



“partly due to difficult international relations, the First World War, the cancellations of the Games in 1916 and partly to Swiss tradition” where physical activities were practised and competed through the national federations of shooting, skiing, horse-riding and gymnastics, rather than at the Olympic Games.

It wasn't until 1923 when the Swiss physical education association (Asef) and various national federations signed an agreement with the Swiss Olympic Committee that Switzerland began seriously competing and seeing results: 25 medals in Paris in 1924, 17 in Amsterdam in 1928 with the greatest successes in gymnastics, rowing and wrestling.

The 1936 Berlin Olympics saw another shift in thinking “where people became aware of the role of sport in building national cohesion, mobilising youth and making it part of military training,” according to Marcacci. In the post war years, the military character of physical education lessened and a more scientific approach was realised in the 1960s with the founding of the Institute of Sports Science. By the 1970s sport featured in the Federal Constitution and the “Youth and Sport” movement began. Since then there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of results and with good facilities and generous funding, Switzerland's athletes are managing to achieve creditable results.



2016 Olympics in Rio

This summer, Switzerland sent 105 athletes to Rio – 59 men and 46 women – its largest group in the past 20 years. They participated in 17 different sports. The youngest was 18 year old golfer Albane Valenzuela and the oldest was 53 year old equestrian Paul Estermann. A total of 21 Swiss athletes also took part in the Rio 2016 Paralympics with athletics and paracycling being Switzerland's particular strengths.

Guilia Steingruber was the flag-bearer at the Opening Ceremony and Nino Schurter at the Closing Ceremony.

A total of seven medals were won. Congratulations to the following participants:

Fabian Cancellara
Gold Medal in Cycling – Men's time trial

Mario Gyr, Simon Schuerch, Simon Niepmann and Lucas Tramer
Gold Medal in Rowing – Lightweight Men's Four

Nino Schurter
Gold Medal in Mountain Biking – Men's Cross Country

Timea Bacinsky and Martina Hingis
Silver Medal in Tennis – Women's Doubles

Nicola Spirig Hug
Silver Medal in Women's Triathlon

Heidi Diethelm
Bronze Medal in Shooting – Women's 25m Pistol

Guilia Steingruber
Bronze Medal in Gymnastics – Women's Vault

Sources: <http://www.swissinfo.ch> / <http://www.reuters.com> / <http://olympic-medal-count.pointafter.com/116/Switzerland>

Researched and compiled by
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