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Ice-hockey's Switzerland's winter spectators sport

Ice-hockey sport in Switzerland was in need of an example, of a stimulus. The reputation of the Clubs of Davos and Arosa as top teams has long since been lost. The loss of the players who at the time helped the Swiss national team to acquire the finest reputation of all times, finished not only the two clubs but put an end also to successful groups from traditional winter-sports resorts. Ice-hockey left the base of its beginnings and became the privilege of those who constructed artificial ice-rinks at great expense. They were able to increase training manifold and were no longer dependent on weather conditions. Seeing that the attraction of the cities is bigger than of the countryside, young people do not hesitate to emigrate, especially since earning possibilities play a not inconsiderable part.

The success of the Hockey-Club of La Chaux-de-Fonds has given ice-hockey its original direction again and at the same time applied the brake on too much generosity or rather channelled it cleverly. The club of the watch-making metropolis had all the means at its disposal to realise its ambitions. But they had to act with discernment and selective instinct. The fact that the La Chaux-de-Fonds Club won the Swiss championship six times and anticipates a successful defence of the title for this year, is explained through a combination of the following elements:

The town itself at an altitude of 1,000 m is the highest in

Switzerland. Thus it is basically predestined to indulge in all kinds of winter-sports. The late skiing champion Georges Schneider was convincing proof of this.

In our case it was a communal undertaking which allowed the realisation of a plan to build a covered ice-rink. It seemed essential in this town of cold weather and precision that Ice-Hockey had to become king.

If this town enjoys such a privileged position today, it is thanks to one particular man, Gaston Pelletier. This sportsman, now well in his forties, had wakeful eyes and wielded a diabolical hockey-stick. He is a Canadian who had previously founded the Ice-Hockey Club of Villars, was the *deus ex machina* of "Operation La Chaux-de-Fonds". He knows incredibly well how to assert himself on the ice. It may be a little sad from the point of view of analysing Swiss ice-hockey that the success and superiority of the La Chaux-de-Fonds Club is largely due to the ability and devotion of this Canadian mentor.

The people of La Chaux-de-Fonds are often accused that they built up their team of European standing with money — their peak position for so long has naturally caused some jealousy. It is undeniable, of course, that finance played a part, but it must not be forgotten that

clever policies and foresight were used at the same time. This golden period of success was the result of having been able to build up a whole school of successive players and the chance of training also during the summer. The whole equipment is put at the disposal of young players. This generosity guarantees a succession of performers.

Thus the centre of interest has shifted. The heart of ice-hockey now beats in La Chaux-de-Fonds. The Berne Club, too, regularly supported by over 15,000 spectators, is experiencing an inspiring adventure. In it there is a similarity with the amazing Ice-Hockey Club of La Chaux-de-Fonds, whose reputation is secure for all times.

In March, the Swiss team will once again defend its position in Group B at the world championships in Grenoble. Three years ago we were involved with the Russians and the Czechs. At that time, Pelletier was coaching the Swiss team, and Charles Frutschi (La Chaux-de-Fonds) was president of the technical commission. One did not listen to their exhortations, and the result was accordingly bad. Their frankness shocked many people's feelings at the time. But since then, the La Chaux-de-Fonds Club's reputation has strengthened, and it has become a kind of island of peace in a grey sea.

Bertrand Zimmermann



Square jaws and leathernecks, these seem to be the dominant features of this tough lot from La Chaux de Fonds, who were six times national ice-hockey champions.