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CROSSBOWMEN

The impressive Latin word "arcuballista" means catapult and although over the centuries this became the popular German "armbrust" or crossbow its principles of stock, bow, bowstring and trigger remain the same today.

No Swiss would like to deny his national hero the right to the weapon, even though William Tell was certainly not the first to use it. In fact the crossbow originated in China. Long before there was a Switzerland it was in use in the far and near east from whence the knights of the Crusades brought it to Europe.

Swiss warriors quickly saw the value of the range and accuracy of the crossbow and in 1235 the weapon appeared on a coat of arms and seal for the first time — on those of the Lucerne alderman, Johann von Hochdorf.

Until the invention of gunpowder the crossbow reigned supreme as a long-range weapon. It was improved. The yew-wood bow was superseded by horn and then by iron, and the bowstring was strengthened.

But as a weapon of war its importance had slipped to second place by the 15th century, elbowed aside by tempered armour and the small firearm. Soon it became obsolete.

Today the crossbow is a sporting weapon, an expensive, pampered, precision instrument for target shooting — though its ammunition is cheap. Instead of boxes of non re-usable cartridges all it needs is one, or perhaps two "quarrels" or bolts — short arrow shafts — which can be used again and again.

A powerful hand-operated lever draws the steel bowstring back, setting it at high tension. A bolt is carefully placed in a groove against the bowstring. A steady hand and eye aims the 20 lb weapon at an 18 cm diameter target 30 metres away. A finger takes up the trigger pressure. Shoot! — The one ounce wooden bolt flies into the target. When the electric pulley returns the target to the bowman he can see how much of Tell's skill remains in him and if he has hit the bull's eye — the 14 mm centre circle.

So that the 2,600 members of the 123 branches of the National Crossbow Association can meet regularly a number of inter-regional and inter-cantonal competitions are arranged and every five years, there's a Swiss crossbowmen's championship meeting.

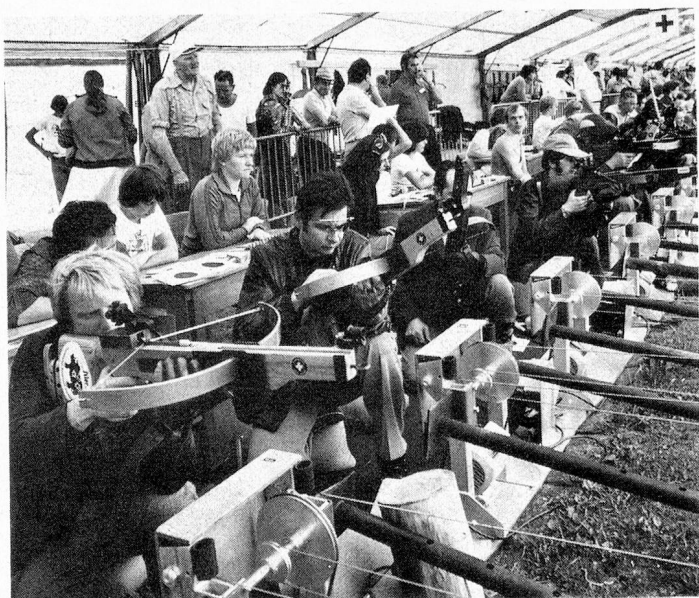
Crossbow archery is a sport without star players. There is no money to be won. The bowman competes for the honour of winning. Marksmen and onlookers alike are calm — the quiet congratulatory murmur at a bull's eye is praise enough.

Story and pictures by courtesy of SNTÖ.



The bolt is placed carefully in position in the groove. A careless move and the bowman can say "I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth, I know not where."

OF SWITZERLAND



Line up for a championship



Sidescreens of plastic or fabric are used to reduce wind effects.



Pouring lead for the targets

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