

# National football team : "The Swiss team can go all the way"

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**Heady days for Swiss football.** The European Football Championship, Euro 2008, will soon be kicking off. Walter Lutz, editor-in-chief of the "Sport" newspaper for many years, knows Swiss football inside out. He takes a look back, for "Swiss Review", at the greatest achievements of the Swiss national football teams of the past.

The European Football Championship will take centre stage between 7 and 29 June in four Swiss cities (Basle, Berne, Geneva and Zurich) and four Austrian cities with 16 countries involved in 31 matches. The Swiss taxpayer will shoulder the burden for the most expensive sporting event ever held in Switzerland. Whereas the 1954 World Cup was self-financing thanks to support from the Sport-Toto organisation, CHF 182 million of public money will be used to stage this event. The federal government will provide half that amount, essentially the full cost of the security measures. Security is a crucial part of the tournament, but also an Achilles heel. It involves a national operation and means the government will have to take security measures that go far beyond the field of sport. Four hundred to a thousand police officers will mingle with the spectators for each match. Higher demands from UEFA and the plan to set up fan zones for visiting supporters in the cities, where they can watch matches on giant screens, have contributed to escalating costs. Expectations have changed dramatically since 1954. While the Brazilian and Swiss teams of the day stayed alongside one another in Spartan accommodation in the Magglingen sports college – the buildings they used still bear the names of the teams – with minimum comfort, almost like a scout camp, most of the delegations will be staying in five-star hotels this time around.

Switzerland and its football federation (SFV) have contributed enormously to football's global development. When the SFV was founded in 1895, it had to overcome deep-rooted opposition and prejudice from teachers, the Church, the authorities and parents. Switzerland was one of the seven founding members of FIFA, world football's governing body, in 1904. FIFA's headquarters have been in Zurich since 1932. Five Swiss people have run FIFA as General Secretary: Sepp Blatter from Valais has been the head of world football since 1998. Half a century later, UEFA was born

in Switzerland, which has been its home for 50 years.

The sun never goes down in FIFA's empire today. Football is the world's most popular sport and attracts the most media attention. Two hundred and eight countries with over 250 million active footballers belong to FIFA. Thirty-two billion TV viewers (17) seem to have been set in stone. They form the only set of laws in the world, which apply to all languages, races, cultures, rich and poor, young and old, and the illiterate and the educated, and they must be adhered to by people of all political systems and ideologies, with no ifs and buts.

Despite the fact that the game only became professional relatively late in Switzerland, Swiss footballers have enjoyed remarkable success on the pitch. Switzerland was one of the great footballing nations for 32 years (1934–1966), when no other country, except Brazil, could better the six times Switzerland qualified for the World Cup finals during this period.

The series of incredible performances by the Swiss amateur team began at the Olympic tournament in Paris in 1924. They returned home as European champions. This tournament, held six years before the first World Cup, is seen as the birth of international football. This is because in Uruguay a tournament featured a South American team for the first time. The Swiss team travelled to Paris by train with a return ticket valid for only 10 days. All the players had worked up until two days before the first match and were back in work two days after the final. Every member of the team had taken unpaid holiday. Success in the six matches caused unimaginable levels of excitement back home. It made football popular overnight in Switzerland. Newspapers dedicated extra pages to a sporting event for the first time and in the corridors of the Federal Parliament they were saying: "The



1924 Olympic Games in Paris. The Swiss national team lines up for the national anthem before the start of the match. The Swiss won the Silver medal, becoming European champions. From left to right: Kam Abegglen (GC), Fern Bissler (FC), Hans Meyer (FC), Oberhauser (Nord-Old Boys), Ehrenbolger (Nordstern Basel), Dietrich (FC)

only diplomats that Switzerland needs are eleven men and a ball." The President of Switzerland, Ernest Coudand, sent words of encouragement to the side before the final in the first telegram ever sent from Parliament to a Swiss sporting team. He said he was "conveying the feelings of the whole Swiss nation", and hoped "that their courage and stamina would continue to serve them so well".

Switzerland enjoyed new highs 14 years later in 1938. On 21 May, Switzerland became one of the first European teams to beat England with a 2-1 victory in Zurich. And on 9 June, Switzerland achieved its most spectacular success to date at the World Cup finals in Paris. A few weeks after Austria became part of Hitler's empire, the Swiss beat the great German team of the day 4-2 in a replay after a 1-1 draw. Never before and never again would a football match find such resonance in Switzerland on account of the tense political situation back then. Extra sports pages, match reports on the front pages, even of the NZZ, victory parades, messages of congratulations from the Federal Council and Parliament – the win still goes down as the most significant in Swiss footballing history. Before the second match, the "Völkischer Beobachter" newspaper, Hitler's mouthpiece, mockingly warned the Swiss: "Sixty million Germans will be playing against Switzerland in Paris!" After the match, the "Sport" in Zurich sarcastically replied: "We were playing against 60 million Germans, but we only needed eleven players."

On three more occasions Swiss national teams have pulled off famous victories at World Cup tournaments. The Swiss knocked the Italians out of the tournament in 1954 in Switzerland in two momentous matches.

Then in 1994 in the USA and in 2006 in Germany the Swiss progressed at least past the group stages.

What made the 1924, 1938, 1954, 1994 and 2006 teams so strong? All these teams benefited from diversity in language, race and culture and from different approaches to the game. The teams were made up of players from different parts of Switzerland drawing on a combination of Swiss characteristics. They blended German-Swiss endeavour with Latin temperament. Half the players in these teams came from German-speaking Switzerland and the other half from the French-speaking part. And in the 1954 team, arguably the strongest of all, there were nine French speakers. A similar approach has been adopted in recent years, with the inclusion of second and third generation foreigners in the national team.

The European Championship will raise excitement levels to fever pitch. An army of more than 30,000 Swiss fans invaded Germany two years ago to support their team at the World Cup finals. Football fever meant that many teams could not cope with the surge of young players signing up. There are more than 242,793 active footballers in Switzerland today and around 60% of them play in youth teams. And there are 80 Swiss professionals playing abroad. Many of these are squad players, though, rather than first-team regulars. This factor and the large number of injured players have to be taken into account when weighing up the team's prospects at this latest tournament under the management of Köbi Kuhn. Though some dreamers are talking up their team's chances, Switzerland are highly unlikely to become European champions.

## "The Swiss team can go all the way"

Will Köbi Kuhn's team shine at Euro 2008? The success of a football team depends on more than the ability of its players. The former Swiss international Umberto Barberis looks at the Swiss team's chances. Interview by Alain Wey.

SWISS REVIEW: *What do you make of Köbi Kuhn's tactics?*

UMBERTO BARBERIS: He has got it spot on. It's a shame that he's retiring after this tournament. He'll of course be dreaming of going out on a high. I believe he will do everything possible to ensure the team performs at its best. In tournaments such as these the early results are often decisive: they can give the team the required momentum and get the fans behind them. Rationality has very little to do with it. As regards the build-up, you have to take into account that we qualified automatically as one of the host nations. As a result, there are lots of factors that Köbi Kuhn cannot influence. Over the past year his team has played lots of friendly matches that he has no doubt taken very seriously: Given that the matches had nothing to do with qualification, however, the players themselves will have been focused in part on their club football.

*I often get the impression that when the Swiss team went ahead, they became over-confident and stopped giving their all. Their game dropped off, exposing weaknesses that the opposition frequently exploited with great success. Is that because these were friendly matches, or does it go deeper than that?*

I don't see it that way. The team looks good in defence when everyone plays defensively, but we don't possess the qualities of the Italians, as the art of defending requires a great deal of precision. Defending without making errors requires a great deal of class. The Swiss team attacks, puts the opposition under pressure, and as soon as they have scored a goal, sometimes even against weaker teams, they try to hold onto their lead. This is still a rather Swiss approach, but they do it much better than they did before. You've always got to put yourself in the opposition's shoes. If you go 1-0 down against Switzerland, you change your tactics. If the team has played well in the first half, the tempo can drop off in the second half, but that does not necessarily have anything to do with over-confidence.

*Are Switzerland difficult to play against?*

Yes, very difficult. Especially for countries like Italy and France, who do not like playing against Switzerland. Switzerland are not such a tough proposition for the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Germans, as they know we have little chance against them if they play to their systems. By contrast, we have caused Italy and France serious problems in recent years. They switch from their usual formation when they play Switzerland. When making comparisons, you can't just look at things from a Swiss perspective. You have to look at the opposition, their style, how they approach matches and how the tournament is progressing.

*What are the strengths of the Swiss team?*

It has a lot of spirit. Köbi Kuhn has been working on developing team spirit for several years, and the supporters have responded well to that. Perhaps it was a little less evident in the most recent friendly matches, but the Swiss do genuinely have team spirit. The sponsors and the fans wouldn't give their support unless they believed in the team. There is a good atmosphere in the camp. With the European Championships just around the corner, however, the Swiss media is being hyper-critical of the team. If you want to be one of the top eight footballing nations in Europe, then of course you have to perform at the very highest level. Switzerland still has a lot to prove, but it has already achieved great things. It's only to be expected that from time to time it will quite simply be out-classed by other countries such as Germany. There are no miracles, you simply have to play exceptionally well.

*What about Switzerland's other strengths?*

I believe Switzerland's greatest strength is as a unit. We have a few outstanding individuals, but not many. There is Alex Frei, but we've seen little of him this year. He is a player who can turn matches. And there's Ludovic Magnin, who when he puts his mind to it can completely change a match, as he can



do a lot of damage to the opposition down the flanks. Then there's the younger generation. Our strengths are how we perform as a unit, our youth, our hunger and our individual talent.

*And our weaknesses?*

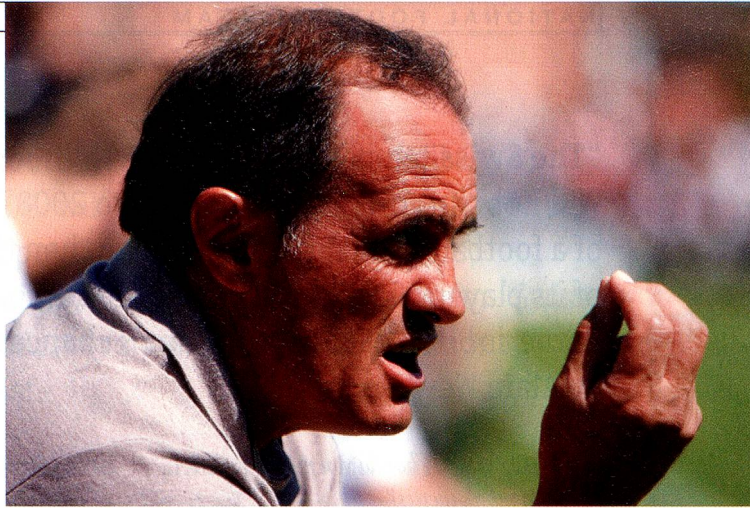
We don't have enough belief in our chances. Any team, perhaps with the exception of a few great European footballing nations like Italy and Germany, can have an off day. These two teams have such a good track record and are so good in both attack and defence that it will be difficult to get the better of them this summer. They can soak up waves of pressure, something which the Swiss team has not yet mastered. We also lack creativity and depth in attack.

*What is our biggest weakness?*

Our media let us down. They heap unbelievable praise on the sporting stars of other countries, even when our home-grown talents are doing just as well or even better. Sportsmen and women are sensitive and turn their backs on the Swiss press after severe criticism. They are happier to talk to the foreign sporting media, who don't give them any special treatment, but do show them much more respect. In Switzerland, however, we seem to enjoy knocking people.

*Do you think the Swiss team would get through in a penalty shoot-out?*

I wasn't a bad player, but I hated taking penalties. I'd always put them away in training, but I didn't volunteer to take them. Although the penalty spot is so close to the goal, it always felt to me like I was 200km away, because so much was going through my mind. You can't accuse Köbi Kuhn or his staff of not preparing for penalties. But when qualification depends on it, you have to understand that a new chapter opens with each penalty. That is the only moment in which a player can start to think negatively and say to himself: "I'll be torn to shreds if I miss this." It is a huge responsibility to bear. Maradona and Platini missed penalties. All great footballers have failed on at least one occa-



**UMBERTO BARBERIS (55)**

■ Umberto Barberis, the former manager of Lausanne Sport, made 54 appearances for Switzerland between 1976 and 1985. The playmaker, an Italian born in Sion who became a naturalised Swiss citizen, won the Swiss title with FC Servette in 1979 and 1985, and the Swiss Cup in 1978, 1979 and 1985. He won the French title with Monaco in 1982, and was voted the best foreign player in France in 1981 and 1982.

sion to put a penalty away in an important match.

*What can we expect of the Swiss team?*

To go all the way, of course! First of all, just like all the teams, we have to qualify from the group. The first objective is to get through the early stages. Switzerland can do that. We'll already be familiar with all of our opponents, as teams have been put together to monitor them. They will watch the matches of the other teams and analyse their game plans. There are seldom surprise results in the finals, making allowances for current form. You also have to ask whether it is an advantage to be a host nation. I can't really answer that one. A lot will depend on how the media approaches the event. Will they provide the team with a solid foundation that allows them to build momentum, or will they create a fear-laden atmosphere of mistrust? Factors like these are crucial. I'm not saying that Switzerland has a better chance than other sides, but our chances are just as good. The tournament favourites, like Germany and Italy, will be under much more intense pressure.

*And your predictions?*

Like lots of people, I speak from the heart. In view of my Italian roots I always have to go for Italy, because they are always able to compete with other football nations. Then Switzerland, as I've genuinely got a lot of confidence in them, and finally France.

*Are Switzerland's games in Group A all equally difficult?*

Switzerland are fortunate not to be facing Portugal in the first match, as we have a very poor record against them. Portugal show great ambition, play a high-tempo game and are not afraid of Switzerland. Switzerland have difficulty playing against technically gifted and quick teams. Turkey are also good technically, but are also very temperamental. Switzerland can beat them if they have an off day. The Czech Republic, by contrast, are not better than us technically, but the system they play is more sophisticated. We are capable

of getting a result against both of the last two teams. In my view, however, the game against Portugal will be crucial. It would be better if Portugal were to win their opening matches to put the other teams under pressure. The fixtures favour Switzerland. To have faced Portugal first would have been the worst possible scenario. I believe Portugal will definitely qualify from the group.

*Who will be the key men for Switzerland?*

For me there are two. Firstly Tranquillo Barnetta, who is a very complete player. He perhaps lacks the charisma to really put his stamp on a game, but Euro 2008 could be his tournament. And of course Alex Frei, who scores a lot of goals, but to do that he also has to get good service. I'm not sure about Blaise N'Kufo. He has enjoyed a lot of success in Holland, and I'd be delighted if he could replicate that with Switzerland. We have to have the same atmosphere in the Swiss camp that he is used to in Holland. Maybe we need to make him feel more welcome. And finally my favourite player, Zuberbühler, who I think is fantastic. He deals with criticism extraordinarily well, an indication that he is one of the greats, both as a player and as a man. Our quarter-final appearance in the World Cup Finals was down to him. He is also a great motivator.

*Will the Swiss fans get behind the team?*

They certainly did at the World Cup Finals in Germany. They were unbelievable, and only the South Koreans generated more atmosphere in the stadiums. It gave the team a tremendous lift.