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bübel, Hamburg, Stockholm, Madrid and London. "These are the most important races over the Olympic distance," explains Reto Hug. The number of competitors is limited to 75. They firstly have to get through the European Championships and then the World Championships to obtain enough points. Only three Swiss women (Nicola Spirig, Daniela Ryf and Melanie Haus) and three or four Swiss

men (Sven Riederer, Ruedi Wild and the brothers Andrea and Florin Salvisberg) will be able to take part.

An increasingly professional sport

The effort and discipline required of the athletes is hard to conceive for most people. "Triathletes generally train three times a day," reveals Reto Hug. "That equates to around 25 hours a week but can rise to 40 hours during

intense weeks," he adds. The fact that the triathlon is such a recently established sport explains why it has not yet reached the level of professionalism found in other sports. "In the past, the athletes often trained with the specific sports clubs for each discipline of the triathlon – swimming, cycling and running. But this made overall coordination of training difficult. Today, former athletes often go on to become trainers and the elite compet-

itors are developing thanks to better coaching," Hug says. The Head of Swiss Triathlon believes that the challenge has only just begun. He remarks: "We still have highly individual solutions but we intend to change that. The system is evolving."

Even greater distances?

If competitors take over eight hours to complete an ironman event, you may won-

der whether even longer triathlons exist? "There is no limit in terms of going further. There are double, triple and even quintuple ironman events. Doctor Beat Knechtle from canton St Gallen has won several of these competitions. But my personal vision for the sport is not about running for over 20 hours," Hug observes. Whatever its format, the triathlon still has plenty of surprises in store for us. "It is an incredible ex-

perience. I still find the combination of these three sporting disciplines fascinating. After all, that's why I participated in the sport for over 20 years," he explains.

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www.swisstriathlon.ch
www.ironman.ch (Ironman Switzerland)



Triathletes in action: swimming, cycling, running

"A dream comes true"

2012 proved to be a remarkable year for Olympic triathlon champion Nicola Spirig. The Olympic long-distance specialist notched up a number of successes in terms of both sporting achievement and in her private life. The 31-year-old from Zurich won the World Championship Series in Madrid and Kitzbühel, the Ironman 70.3 in Rapperswil and Antwerp and became European champion in Eilat, Israel. She also married her long-term partner, the triathlete Reto Hug, and is expecting a baby in May. To top everything off, the triple European champion was crowned Swiss Sportsperson of the Year, ahead of Roger Federer.

«SUISSE REVIEW»: What does it take to become a triathlon champion?

NICOLA SPIRIG: Lots of pieces make up the jigsaw. You need a certain degree of ability. You have to put in lots of hard work and training both physically and mentally, while a good team and support are also vital. My team consists of myself, my family, my husband, my trainer and his international coaching staff as well as my sponsors. You also need a little bit of good fortune during competitions to avoid illness and injury. Lots of small details have to come together to ultimately be the best.

What attributes are needed to become an elite sportsperson?

The triathlon requires endurance, versatility and good technique in each discipline. You have to find the right balance between the various sports. It helps if you are tall and muscular for the swimming whereas a slimmer build is better suited to the running. Psychologically, you have to be ambitious and possess the desire to see things through to the end, to work hard to achieve your objectives and to carry on despite setbacks, such as injuries and doubts.

Have you ever been injured?

I suffered a fatigue fracture of the tibia in 2011, a year before the Olympic Games, and was unable to run for four months. I consequently adopted a slightly different approach to training in 2012. I worked on the other disciplines during my recovery period, learned to have patience and continued to believe I could achieve my goal despite the injury.

You wouldn't be the sportswoman you are today without your parents. They have always been very supportive. What sort of sporting background do you come from?

Family plays a major role for all young sportspeople. My grandfather and my parents were PE teachers. They passed enjoyment

of sport onto me and I was given the opportunity to try out lots of types of sport. My father was my coach for fifteen years. Choosing to pursue a career in sport was nevertheless my own decision.

Who do you admire?

I've never had one idol in particular but lots of athletes have impressed me with one or more qualities and they have been my inspiration in creating my own sporting personality.

Olympic gold and victory on the line by just a few centimetres ahead of your Swedish competitor – what does that mean to you?

It's a dream come true. That was a massive achievement. The medal has had a tremendous impact on my life and lots of people in Switzerland now recognise me because of that race. It is also special because only three Swiss women have ever won gold in the history of the Olympic Games in all disciplines.

What is your next challenge?

The European Athletics Championships in Zurich in 2014. That will just be running but I can't tell you which distance that will be at this stage. It may be 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres or even a marathon. I will definitely continue to take part in triathlon competitions at the same time.

Can you really make a living from triathlon?

There are very few athletes able to make a living from triathlon in Switzerland. I won't make a fortune from it – I earn a living thanks to my personal sponsors – and after my sporting career, I'll focus on another profession as I'm a qualified lawyer. Finding sponsors is therefore a key part of my job.

What is your philosophy?

I find it very exciting to set myself a target and to see how far I can get, to put my abilities to the test and to find out where my limits lie. I like to set myself extremely ambitious objectives, such as the Olympic Games, and I draw inspiration from pursuing these goals.

Now that you have started a family, you are entering a new chapter in your life as a sportswoman and will have to draw on your resourcefulness. When do you expect to resume competition?

I'm keeping my options open and will wait to see how our new life as a family settles down. Our child and the family come first. Many athletes have proven that family life can be reconciled with elite sport. I'm not going to set a date for my return now. I firstly intend to regain my fitness and train hard before returning to competition. I'm going to give it a go and if it doesn't work out, there will always be other avenues open.

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