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Autor: Wey, Alain
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Swiss national team on the way to the Olympic Games

The Swiss national ice hockey team will fly out to the Winter Olympic Games, which will take place in Sochi between 7 and 23 February, having finished runners-up at the World Championships. We look back at the Ice Hockey World Championships last May with team coach Sean Simpson.

By Alain Wey



The Swiss national team in action at the World Championships in Sweden: Nino Niederreiter (above) and Reto Suri, two of the goal scorers in the semi-final against the USA

Goaltender Reto Berra and Roman Josi in the match against Belarus (above); Rafael Diaz, Nino Niederreiter and Denis Hollenstein celebrate after the semi-final against the USA

"Do you believe in miracles? Sometimes..." This joke appeared on the website of the Ice Hockey World Championships in Sweden and Finland last May in relation to the silver medal won by the Swiss national team. It was undoubtedly an incredible achievement. You have to go back decades to find similar success. The national team won a silver medal in 1935 and bronze in 1953. Their performance saw Sean Simpson's team climb three places in the world rankings of ice hockey nations to seventh spot. The Swiss national team's Canadian coach believes the final defeat by Sweden (5:1) could also have ended differently. Prior to the World Championships in Scandinavia, most experts predicted that Switzerland would not even reach the quarter-finals. However, Simpson

is keeping his feet on the ground and has realistic expectations for the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in February and the World Championships in the Belarusian city of Minsk in May 2014. His goal is to reach the quarter-finals.

The right chemistry

The Swiss team played with a complete lack of confidence at the 2011 and 2012 World Championships. They did not even make the quarter-finals. At the start of the 2013 World Championships the team was expected to show greater self-belief but many questions remained unanswered. Simpson selected seven new players for the team who had never taken part in a World Championships before. He relied on a combination of

youth and experience. However, the team had to cope without key players like Julien Sprunger and Goran Bezina. The Swiss looked extremely weak compared with the titans in Group A, which included Sweden (4), the Czech Republic (3) and Canada (5). But, to everyone's surprise, Simpson's men first overcame Sweden, then Canada and finally the Czech Republic. They held their lead against four other opponents and finished the stage top of the group. It was a dizzying series of results.

The Swiss faced the Czechs again in the quarter-finals and unexpectedly reached the semi-finals, where they played the USA. The Americans had trounced Russia, the reigning world champions, by 8 goals to 3. The Swiss therefore feared the worst.

But the incredible run was not over yet. Goaltender Reto Berra, who plays for the Calgary Flames in the National Hockey League (NHL), defended superbly well on the ice and did not concede a goal. The Swiss ran out 3:0 winners with goals from Nino Niederreiter and two of the new faces, Julian Walker and Reto Suri. The Swiss secured their first silver medal in 78 years and met the Swedes, who they had previously beaten 3:2, again in the final. This time, however, Simpson's men had no chance against Sweden, losing 5:1. This meant Switzerland finished World Championship runners-up, an incredible achievement that nobody had expected and which underlined how well Sean Simpson has performed over the past three years.

The players received a hero's welcome on their return to Zurich on 20 May. The Canadian coach nevertheless immediately warned against too high hopes during the 2013-2014 season. Anticipating such success

"We won silver rather than lost gold"

The 53-year-old Canadian Sean Simpson has been coach of the Swiss national team since 2010. After beginning his coaching career in 1997, he won the Swiss title with EV Zug at the first attempt. In 2008, he took over as coach of the ZSC Lions, who became Swiss champions under him. Following the Lions' victories over Metallurg Magnitogorsk in the Champions Hockey League in Europe and over the Chicago Blackhawks in the Victoria Cup, he gained a reputation as a world-class coach.

How has the team developed since you took over as coach?

We have worked extremely hard. The appointment of a new coach in 2010 meant a new era for the team. It took a while for everything to click. My predecessor, Ralph Krueger, had coached the team for 13 years (1998-2010). I had my own connections and my own ideas ... Winning people over was not always easy. Our silver medal is not just down to the work we put in last season but to what we have done over the past three years.

You were also coach of the Swiss Under-20s team in the 2012-2013 season. Did this prove beneficial to you as coach of the senior team?

It was extremely advantageous. I had also been an advisor to the U20s for a few years prior to that. I know the young players very well. We play with the same system. The approach with the national teams is now very similar irrespective of whether it is the senior team, the U20s or younger age groups. We

ENCOUNTERS ON THE ICE

■ Tournaments in 2013. Switzerland will meet the United States, Slovakia and Germany at the Deutschland Cup in Munich in November 2013. Belarus, Slovakia and Norway will take part in the Arosa Challenge – the national team's home tournament – in December 2013.

■ 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Switzerland will face Sweden (1), the Czech Republic (4) and Latvia (11) in Group C between 12 and 23 February 2014. The three group winners (A, B, C) and the best second-placed team will qualify automatically for the quarter-finals. The eight remaining teams will play off in an elimination round for a quarter-final place.

■ World Championships in Minsk, Belarus. Switzerland will play against Finland, Russia, the United States, Germany, Latvia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in Group B between 9 and 25 May 2014. The top four teams in each group (A and B) will qualify for the quarter-finals.

every year would be unrealistic. The silver medal should not place a burden of expectation on the players who needed to stay realistic, he said.

Switzerland can certainly look forward to the Olympic Games in Russia. However, a degree of trepidation is also in order as Switzerland will once again encounter the world champions, Sweden. Dreams are part of sport,

as illustrated by the film "Miracle" about the US ice hockey team's sensational victory at the 1980 Winter Olympic Games. But dreams can only be achieved on the back of hard work.

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ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"

are all in the same boat. The emphasis was previously placed primarily on the senior team, while less importance was attached to emerging talent. Today, the national teams at all age levels are regarded as important in Swiss ice hockey.

What are the Swiss team's major strengths?

A silver medal at the World Championships is no mean feat. The team has to be very solid in all positions on the ice. The goaltender and the defence must be outstanding. That's the key thing. We have a very good system and displayed the courage to impose our will. The chemistry in the camp is our major asset. And we scored lots of goals, something we have failed to do in the past.

Let's take a look at the future. What position in the world rankings do you hope to achieve with this team in two years' time?

The question as to whether we can repeat our medal success is irrelevant at the moment. Our goal for 2014 is to reach the quarter-finals. We cannot expect to win silver or even gold medals every year. We are not the best ice hockey nation in the world, and if that were our goal then this silver medal would represent failure.

When you reflect on your achievement at the World Championships, how did it make you feel?

It was a sensational experience for the national team – the players and the management. We proved that a very good standard of ice hockey is played in Switzerland with good players and good coaches. For me, the question is now how we deal with that. We cannot allow success to go to our heads. We have to keep our feet on the ground.

