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Curling – a game of chess on ice

Since its introduction at the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, curling has emerged from the shadows and has benefited from renewed public interest every four years. Amongst the leading nations in the sport, Switzerland has never returned from the games empty-handed.

By Alain Wey



Mirjam Ott releasing a stone with Carmen Küng and Janine Greiner at the Olympic Games in Vancouver in 2010

An ice rink, a target (house), granite stones weighing almost 20 kilos and brooms – curling is a winter sport like no other, which requires both physical strength and strategic ability. With around 7,000 registered players and 154 clubs, Switzerland is one of the most decorated nations at the World Championships along with Canada, Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Just a few days before the opening of the Sochi Olympic Games, the medal hopes rest with the teams of Mirjam Ott, who has twice won silver, and the young Sven Michel, who became European champion last December. “With some 10,000 players in Switzerland, there is huge interest in curling,” remarks Patrik Lörtscher from canton Vaud, who was Olympic champion in Nagano in 1998 and is Vice-President of Swiss Curling. “It is becoming increasingly popular amongst young people. In the 1970s, there were four or five juniors in Lausanne whereas today there are around fifty. Since curling became an Olympic sport, there has always been an increase in the number of participants after the games. This then drops off a little

before building up again for the following Olympics.”

Invented on the frozen lochs of Scotland

While more recent than skiing, curling is one of the oldest winter sports. Historians trace its origins to the 16th century in Scotland, although the Netherlands also stakes its own claim. It was nevertheless in the United Kingdom that the oldest curling stone – the famous “Stirling Stone”, dated 1511 – was found. This is where the game took off and the first clubs emerged. “It was introduced to Switzerland at the beginning of the 19th century by the English who took holidays in mountain resorts like St. Moritz, Château-d’Œx and Gstaad,” explains Patrik Lörtscher. The first official competition took place in St. Moritz in 1880.

The first clubs were subsequently founded in Grisons and then in the Bernese Oberland and the alpine regions of cantons Vaud and Valais. The Swiss curling association (Swiss Curling) was established in 1942. Switzerland has since hosted interna-

tional tournaments on many occasions including the World Championships in 1974, 1979, 1988, 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2012. The Swiss medal tally at the World Championships is testament to the talent and consistency of our national teams. The women and men have won gold 6 times, silver 7 times and bronze 11 times. Since the introduction of curling to the Olympic Games at Nagano in 1998, Switzerland has also secured gold (1), silver (2) and bronze (2) medals. The first Olympic champion, the skip Patrik Lörtscher, recalls that Switzerland arrived in Japan as outsiders. “They saw us as one of the two teams that had no medal hopes. Everything went well for us. We won our first match against Germany, the European champions, with the last stone and that gave us a winning mentality. It was incredible, in fact quite miraculous as it was completely unexpected!”

Champions of Europe 2013

Last December, the Adelboden team (canton Berne) led by 25-year-old skip Sven Michel won gold at the European Championships in Norway. However, after finish-

ing in 6th place in the World Championships in Victoria (Canada) in March 2013, they are not travelling to Sochi as favourites. Patrik Lörtscher explains: "There are six or seven teams at the same level of performance as Sven Michel's team. The best nations of all include Sweden, the reigning world champions, Canada, the country of curling, and then Norway, despite losing to

Switzerland in the final of the European Championships. Then there are Scotland, Switzerland and Denmark. To secure a medal, Switzerland must finish in the top four and then win the semi-final or the bronze medal play-off." The Vice-President of Swiss Curling never tires of extolling the merits of his sport. "I've always been fascinated by the tactical aspect of

the game. This sport does not just require physical prowess (5 km covered per match, half of which in sweeping) but also tactical nous. You have to produce strategies. Curling is like a game of chess on ice."

www.curling.ch

ALAIN WEY is a journalist on the "Swiss Review"

"We want to win a medal"

The figurehead of Swiss women's curling, the 41-year-old skip Mirjam Ott is travelling to Sochi to attempt to win a 3rd Olympic medal after picking up silver in Salt Lake City in 2002 and Turin in 2006. With her teammates Carmen Schäfer, Carmen Küng, Janine Greiner and Alina Pätz, she received a bronze medal at the last European Championships and was crowned world champion in 2012. The captain of the CC Davos team has an incredible track record. She also won a bronze medal at the World Championships (2008) and two gold (1996, 2008), three silver (2004, 2005, 2009) and four bronze (2001, 2006, 2010, 2013) medals at the European Championships.

At what age did you take up curling?

At the age of ten in Berne. It is something of a family tradition as my father also played curling. My teammates also started playing curling through family connections.

What appealed to you about the sport?

Playing in a small team to achieve a common goal together. Curling is an extremely dynamic and varied sport. Accuracy, coordination, athletic ability, strategy, mental strength and communication within the team are all key elements.

What role does the skip play in the team's performance?

It's a similar role to the captain of a football team. They take responsibility for the team, decide on the strategy to adopt before the match, lead the discussions during the match and often play the last two stones of the end.

How long has this team been together?

Since 2009–2010. Carmen Schäfer and Janine Greiner joined the team in 2007.

You are the most talented female player in the history of Swiss curling...

I've been on the circuit for a long time. I took part in my first international tournament in 1996 and immediately became European champion. Eighteen years later and I've now played over 220 international matches!

What is a year like for a world-class curling player like you?

The tournament season begins in September. We go to Canada two to three times for two to three weeks and take part in lots of competitions in Switzerland and Europe. On average, we are on the road every two weeks from Thursday to Monday. We spend over 100 days a year abroad in Olympic, European Championship and World Championship seasons.

Why were you unable to take part in the World Championships in Riga (Latvia) in March 2013?

The winners of the Swiss championship take part in that tournament. We were just edged out in the final by Silvana Tirinzoni's Aarau team and were consequently unable to defend our world title in 2013. Last season was a difficult one. I injured my

knee in January and was uncertain whether I'd be able to take part in the Swiss championship in February.

However, since March, you have won the Grande Prairie tournament in Canada...

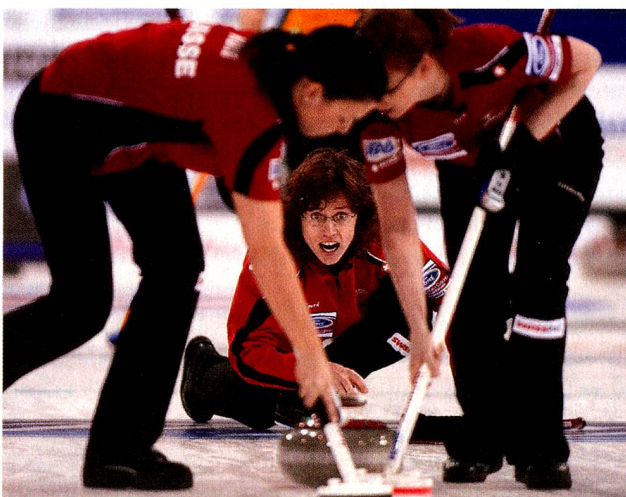
Yes, we took part in that instead of the world championships and accumulated the points required to qualify for the Olympic Games.

What are your objectives in Sochi?

We want to win a medal. We just came up short in the play-offs (4th place) in Vancouver in 2010. We know that we are an experienced team and have demonstrated our abilities on the international stage many times.

Which nations do you fear?

We are facing extremely stiff competition from Canada, the United Kingdom (Scotland), Sweden, Russia, China, and of course South Korea too. It is hard to predict which nations will reach the semi-finals. There are ten countries in contention, each of which will take part in nine matches in the round-robin stage from which the four best teams will qualify.



Switzerland's Carmen Küng, Mirjam Ott and Janine Greiner (left to right) at the World Championships in Canada in 2012