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Where are the Sons of Tell?

A Brief History of the Formative Years of Swiss Biathlon, 1957-1964

by Robert Sherwood



Aita Gasparin at the 2013 Swiss Biathlon Championships. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Despite the lack of international success in biathlon, the sport has a long history in the Swiss Confederation. Biathlon, which combines the long-distance endurance of Nordic skiing and the precision marksmanship of rifle shooting, would seem a perfect match for the Swiss.¹ In the 2010s, the Gasparin sisters (Elisa, Aita and Selina), along with Benjamin Weger, have helped Switzerland start to realize its potential as a player in the world of biathlon. But in the early years of the sport, the Swiss

were not at the top of the list for strong biathlon nations. The reasons for this lack of success are puzzling. In the 1950s and 1960s, the inter-

¹The term Nordic Skiing and cross-country skiing refer to the same event and will be used interchangeably in this article.

national biathlon competitions were dominated by those with military backgrounds. Switzerland had all the elements available for a nation who would succeed in biathlon. These included a mandatory military requirement for Swiss men, abundant snowfall, a tradition of Nordic skiing, and a culture of rifle shooting. With all elements of a strong biathlon nation present, the manner in which Switzerland did not become an important player in the world of biathlon raises further questions about its history in the country.

The first mention of biathlon in a Swiss newspaper appeared on November 26, 1957. This brief article, highlighting the inaugural World Championships of Biathlon scheduled for March 2, 1958, at Saalfelden, Austria, took the time to explain to the readers what the sport entailed. Biathlon combines two diametrically opposed disciplines: Nordic Skiing coupled with rifle marksmanship. Nordic Skiing requires a very high level of cardiovascular activity. Precision marksmanship at targets as far away as 250 meters requires intense concentration. The two disciplines, added together, create a sport that few can master. This combination heightens the excitement of the event due to the unpredictability of the shooting. Five months prior to the first World Biathlon Championships, ten nations had committed to attend. These included Italy, the USSR, the USA, and “the Scandinavian countries.”² No Swiss biathletes participated in this event and Swiss newspapers appeared to have reported on it for novelty reasons more than anything else.³ It would not be until 1960 that the Swiss entered the sport and hosted their own biathlon event.

Despite the lack of perceived interest in biathlon in the very early years, Switzerland did have a strong skiing and shooting tradition. A former Winter Olympic event, the “Military Patrol,” had existed for decades. It consisted of cross-country skiing and shooting with a team of four; an officer, a non-commissioned officer, and two enlisted

²“Les championnats du monde,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Nov. 26, 1957.

³“Championnat du monde de biathlon à Courmaueur,” *Le Monde des Sports*, Feb. 23, 1959.

soldiers. The Swiss won the gold medal in 1924 at the Chamonix Winter Olympic Games, the bronze in 1928 at St. Moritz, and the gold in 1948 at St. Moritz which was the first Olympic Games after the Second World War.⁴ In the post-World War II era, the Olympic Movement tried to move away from sports that appeared overtly militaristic. The Military Patrol, with its name, restriction on only military personnel participating, and usage of military firearms, no longer met with the same enthusiasm as in previous years.

The 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, California, would be the site of the first Olympic Biathlon. A year prior to the Olympic Games, the United States held a “test event” for multiple sports in the new Olympic venues. The concept of a test event is sometimes called a “soft opening.” It allows the organizers and race officials to see the course in race conditions and assists them in learning what needs to be worked on to ensure a smooth contest. It also allows the athletes a chance to compete at the venue prior to the actual event. Biathletes from a handful of nations participated in the test event to determine the viability of the proposed course. Multiple Swiss newspapers covered the events, despite the fact that the Swiss did not compete in the biathlon race.⁵

The 1960 Winter Olympics provided a unique opportunity for biathlon as sports that are often overlooked in the media receive additional attention in Olympic years. Biathlon, not bobsled as many nations desired, had been added to the 1960 Olympic Winter Games, thus many people around the world were introduced to the sport for the first time. Today biathlon is a massively popular spectator sport and is the most viewed winter sport on television in Europe. In 1960, it was a relatively new sport—difficult to understand and almost impossible to watch. Spectators were not allowed on the course; all they

⁴ Christian Manzoni, “Biathlon in Switzerland: Doldrums for Decades,” in *50 Years of Biathlon 1958 to 2008, A Success Story*, ed. Ivor Lehotan et. al. (Salzburg, Austria: Herausgeber), 211.

⁵ “Biathlon-Wettkampf in Squaw Valley,” *Freiburger Nachrichten* (Freiburg, Switzerland), Mar. 6, 1959.

could see was the start and the finish. Times have changed as now over 100,000 watch in person at some of the current biathlon competitions.

Biathlon in the 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Olympic Games consisted of one event, the 20-kilometer individual race. This race, now simply known as the *Individual*, consisted of 20 km of cross country skiing and four shooting stages of 250 meters, 200 meters, 150 meters, and 100 meters in that order. Shooting was done at paper targets and missed targets resulted in added penalty minutes. The rules during the formative years of the sport saw each miss add two additional minutes to the overall time. There were two other unique aspects of biathlon at these Olympic Games. One rule, created to test the true marksmanship of the biathletes, prohibited the athletes from both skiing and shooting on the actual course during training. These elements added another level of difficulty to the event. The shooting results were unknown by the competitors until the end of the race. Biathletes had no idea how their shooting results would affect their overall time until the paper targets were collected, analyzed, and penalty time awarded.⁶

The organizers of the first biathlon race in Switzerland anticipated a bump in interest due to the Olympic Games. On Friday, March 17, 1960, less than a month after the Winter Olympics, the inaugural biathlon in Switzerland occurred at Sorenberg, Canton Luzern contested over a 24 km course. The international standard distance of 20 km was largely ignored in the formative years of biathlon. Multiple reasons caused this variation, but the most prevalent ones were the available land to ski on, space for the four different shooting ranges, and the topography of the area. The 24 km race in Sorenberg had four shooting bouts, each bout consisting of five shots. Each missed shot added two minutes to the overall time of the race. The competition, hosted by the 17th Mountain Infantry Regiment, prevented non-military

⁶“Avant les Jeux de Squaw Valley,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Nov. 3, 1959. The inaugural rules also included a provision for four entrants per country with one alternative. This was not an issue as only nine nations sent biathletes with a total of 30 entrants. The most surprising was Hungary who sent one competitor.

personnel from participating. Corporal Alfred Sullinger won the race with a time of 2:23.23. Sullinger's time included 16 minutes of penalty time for eight missed shots.

The top five also included:

1. Cpl. Alfred Sullinger 2:23.23 (16')
2. Fus. Hans Reider, 2:22.08 (24')
3. Cpl. Fritz Holzer, 2:22.11 (22')
4. Sgt. William Walter Loetscher, 2:23.22 (28')
5. Can. Oskar Schlid 2:26.01 (28')⁷

Of the 30 entrants, 20 served in the Bernese Oberland regiments and they were joined by 10 other "interested parties" in the competition.⁸ Although rather minor in scope and ability, this event started the Swiss on a journey at times like Odysseus, seeming to close in on success, but never being able to achieve it.

The race in Sorenberg hosted representatives from multiple government agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, who observed the race with "great interest" to see how improvements could be made for future competitions. They also ascertained if biathlon might be a valid training tool to better prepare the Swiss soldiers in defending the Confederation from invasion. It is important to remember the international setting of this first biathlon hosted by the Swiss. This was the middle of the Cold War, and high tensions between nations existed. Switzerland, although neutral, had some geographic vulnerabilities. Could biathlon better prepare Switzerland to defend itself? Some thought yes, others simply saw it as a diversion.⁹ "It is not up to the interested associations to follow the further development of the

⁷"Biathlon Loetscher toujours là," *La Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland) Mar. 26, 1960. Also "Versuch mit dem Biathlon," *Oberländer Tagblatt* (Thun, Switzerland), Mar. 2, 1960.

⁸"Berner Oberländer Skipatrouillenlauf in Sörenberg," *Oberländer Tagblatt* (Thun, Switzerland), Mar. 22, 1960.

⁹"Biathlon Preimer in der Schweiz," *Oberländer Tagblatt* (Thun, Switzerland), Apr. 4, 1960.

biathlon attentively after the idea of the Scandinavian “ski shooting” has taken root in our country through the initiative of Col A. Kaech.”¹⁰ Kaech, the Regimental Commander of the 17th Oberland Regiment, organized the event and was the catalyst for the event itself.

Other lessons that were learned included how the layout of the track impacted the race, where the shooting ranges should ideally be located, and the proper number, location, and difficulty of the hills in the race. The organizers realized that a climb just prior to the shooting ranges made the difficult challenge of hitting a target almost impossible. The direction of the shooting range also needed to be considered to ensure the visibility of the targets based on the location of the sun. It became clear to those observing and participating in the race that shooting would also be a major part of the sport. The average competitor that day hit seven of 20 targets. The winner Sullinger only hit eight. The challenge of hitting targets, at various distances, on a range unfamiliar to the biathletes, increased the difficulty as well. An overly simplistic idea for improvement was expressed as “the shooting results can be greatly improved through intensive training.” This simple suggestion has been repeated by coaches since the start of the sport and continues today. In addition, another larger championship would be held at Andermatt the following year with a series of training races beforehand. The CISM, or International Military Sports Council, promised to look into adding the sport to its winter calendar. The race finished to great success and optimism reigned. “The biathlon . . . is likely to find numerous fans in Switzerland thanks to its interesting combination of skiing and shooting.”¹¹

The biathlon season, like most winter sports, started in late fall, usually December, and lasted until mid to late March. Despite the short season, the sport demanded year-round training in order for athletes to be competitive. As the 1960-1961 winter season started, a series of races were planned in Switzerland. On December 22, 1960, Hans

¹⁰“Biathlon Preimer in der Schweiz,” *Oberländer Tagblatt* (Thun, Switzerland), Apr. 4, 1960.



Andermatt, Switzerland, in winter looking west towards Hospental and Realp. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Schweizer of Bowil, Aaragau, won a 15 km race hosted at Rigi. His winning time of 1:27.17 (6') and hit rate of 17 of his 20 shots showed marked improvement from the event the previous year. Unlike today's flat, standardized shooting ranges, early biathlon courses had ranges located on all sorts of terrain.¹² Corporal Ernest Frei was the fastest skier, finishing the 15 km race in 1:09.29, but he missed 11 shots of the 20, was penalized 22', and finished in 5th place. The best shot for the day was Max Stehli, who finished in 3rd place with 18 of 20 shots hit, with a total time of 1:30.50. The event, limited to members of the military, drew a "record crowds of 259" who witnessed the biathlon

¹²"Militärischer Rigi-Lauf," *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Dec. 19, 1960. Second place went to Füs. Robert Ifanger (Escholzmatt) 1:28.00 (10') shot 15 out of 20. Third place went to Gren. Hansruedi Elsässer (Gontenschwil) 1:30.36 (14') shot 13 of 20. Fourth place went to Füs. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 1:30.50 (4') shot 18 of 20. Fifth place went to Fw. Robert Haller (Dietikon) 1:31.14 (20') shot 10 of 20. Sixth place went to Cpl. Ernst Frei (Escholzmatt) 1:31.29 (4') shot 18 of 20.

competition as best they could.¹³ Even in these early races, marksmanship held the key to success. The two-minute penalty could, and did, radically change those in the lead, and greatly affected who won the race. Teams from Sweden and Finland had planned to attend the race, but there is no record that they participated.¹⁴

The next biathlon race in Switzerland occurred as part of CISM Winter Championships hosted in Andermatt which included alpine, Nordic and ski jumping events, in addition to the biathlon on February 18, 1961.¹⁵ The planned course had 20 km of skiing with 400 total meters of downhill and 500 meters of uphill during the race. At five km and seven km, there would be shots of 150 m distance. Around the 12 km mark the shooting would be 100 m, followed by the 50 m shots at the 15 km distance. The first two shooting bouts were in the prone position, followed by one kneeling, and the final one in the standing position.¹⁶ The distances for the shooting were considerably shorter than those of the 1960 Olympics, or the 1961 World Biathlon Championships. Those started at 250 m, and went to 200 m, 150 m and the final shot at 100m. The first three were in any method a biathlete wanted, most shot from the prone as it was more stable, while the last shooting had to be from the standing position. An open call went through the Swiss Military ranks for participants. "The officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers who desire to participate in this biathlon trial are asked to announce as early as possible to the alpine sport officer of their army unit."¹⁷ It does not appear that there were any qualifications other than a desire to participate and membership in the military.

¹³ "Premier Epreuve Suisse de Biathlon ay Righi," *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Dec. 22, 1960.

¹⁴ "Rien de spécial dans le domaine de la compétition," *Le Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland), Nov. 28, 1961.

¹⁵ "Haute-Nendaz organise les championnats d'hiver de la Br. mont. 10," *Le Confédéré* (Martigny, Switzerland), Nov. 7, 1960.

¹⁶ "Militär-Skiwettkämpfe in Anderinatt," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 17, 1961.

¹⁷ "Championnats d'hiver de l'Armée et concours internationaux militaires," *Le Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland), Jan. 18, 1961.

Due to factors beyond the control of the organizers, the race, which doubled as the first Swiss National Biathlon Championship, had some slight modifications to the initial course. The shooting ranges were altered slightly to the following distances in the race: 4.6 km, 10.5 km, 17 km, and 19 km. The last two were a major advantage to those who shot well. The longer the race, the more fatigue set in, thus making the marksmanship even more difficult. The racers who could center themselves and shoot well would have a major advantage over those who focused more on the skiing. Placing the final two shooting ranges in the last three km of the race elevated the shooting to an unprecedented role in the race. In addition, Andermatt is over 1400 m (4700 ft) in elevation. At that elevation, breathing would have been more difficult in daily life, and much more when competing in the biathlon. The actual location of the race was in Userental, a commune adjacent to Andermatt. Armin Mueller of nearby Hospental had the fastest ski time, but with penalties had a final time of 1:43.20.¹⁸ Josef Brunner of Einsiedeln skied fast enough and shot well enough to win the first Swiss Biathlon National Championships.¹⁹

The 1961 World Championships held later in February 1961 in Umea, Sweden, were the 4th of its kind, and the first that the Swiss attended.²⁰ Compared to the Olympic Games, an increased number of nations sent athletes to the World Championship. The increased exposure that the Olympics provided the sport helped to raise participation. The second reason for increased participation was simple, budgets. A trip from Europe to Sweden cost much less than to California. The *Schweizerische Interessengemeinschaft für militärischen Mehrkampf*, or SIMM, a group that had influence over Swiss Military athletics, but not part of the official military structure, sent Max Stehli, Ernst Frei

¹⁸“Biathlon,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Feb. 21, 1961.

¹⁹“Winter-Armeemeisterschaften in Andermatt,” *Walliser Bote* (Sion, Switzerland), Feb. 22, 1961. According to contemporary newspapers, Brunner’s winning time was 1:44.28, a time that would appear to be slower than Mueller’s 1:43.20, but each newspaper account listed him as the winner. So one of the times is incorrect.

²⁰“Février,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Jan. 2, 1961.

and Ludwig Hobi to the 1961 World Championships. Selection for the event came from previous success in related events. Their rationale for each biathlete was as follows: Stehli of Adliswil won the “military obstacle course” race, Hobi of Walenstadt won what the newspaper called *Waffenläufe*, or gun races, in the previous two years. Frei’s selection focused on his participation in and positive result at the biathlon race at Rigi on December 22, 1960, and he also won a 24 km race in Engelberg earlier that helped convince the group to select him.²¹

The three arrived in the coastal city of Umea, Sweden, situated just over halfway up the west coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, full of excitement, nervousness, and a sense of unknown. The Swiss had not been tested on an international scale yet and previous to the 1961 World Championships there really was not a way to see how good, or bad, the Swiss biathletes were. Their debut had the potential for the three, and Switzerland in general, to take stock of the progress of the team since its inception. The winner of the race and World Champion, Kalevi Huuskonen of Finland finished with a time of 1:32.11 with two penalty minutes. He only missed one shot out of 20, which came on the third shooting range.

In the top ten finishers of the race, three biathletes missed more than five shots, but they were able to ski fast enough to make up for their misses. The Swiss found out quickly that being from a land of snow did not automatically make them world class biathletes. Ludwig Hobi finished 34th with a time of 2:02.40, Max Stehli finished 39th with a time of 2:09.40, and Ernst Frei finished 41st with a time of 2:14.31. It is not possible to know if Frei finished in last place, the only indication of the amount of biathletes in the race was that there were more than 40 competitors in the race. Full results are not available as the official results currently available online only list the top 30 athletes.²³ The in-

²¹“Schweizer Delegation für Biathlon-WM,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 13, 1961. Some of the results of races, let alone information about early races, have proved very difficult to obtain. Nothing else about the 24 km race that Frei won, to put him on the team, has been found.

²²“Finnischer Doppelerfolg in Biathlon,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 27, 1961.

²³“Umea: Men 20km Individual,” International Biathlon Union, accessed Sept. 17, 2020. www.biathlonresults.com

augural foray into the World Championship competition by the Swiss did not dazzle anyone in Switzerland nor abroad. When the best, Hobi, finished over 30 min behind the winner, it was obvious that a large gap existed between the Swiss and other nations.

The remainder of the 1960-1961 season is unknown as results for the events have not been found. So many of the early competitions were not recorded in newspapers. Without a published schedule, it is not possible to verify whether there might have been more races.

The biathlon opening race for the 1961-1962 season was held in Rigi. It provided an opportunity to gauge athlete's progression. The biathlon race that weekend was part of a larger Nordic and alpine competition for the military. One caveat existed, that the race would be held "if the snow conditions permit."²⁴ The caveat had to be used and the race was postponed until January 7, 1962 due to poor snow conditions.²⁵

Unlike the December attempt, lack of snow did not cause any issues on January 7, 1962. Snow fell before, during, and after the race. For the organizers of the race, the challenge of the day was fog; it blanked the firing range to such a degree that it forced a relocation of the shooting ranges. According to reports, there were around 80 entries into the race. Josef Marti won the 15 km race, which saw a first in Switzerland, a Swiss biathlete hitting 20 out of 20 targets or "shooting clean." Marti's perfect shooting made up for his slower skiing and moved him to the top of the race standings. Robert Haller of Dietikon skied the fastest, but lost 24 min due to 12 missed shots which dropped him to 13th place.

The results were as follows:

1. Wm. Josef Marti (Kloten) 1:25.34 (0')
2. Sgt. Josef Christen (Grafenort) 1:26.45 (8')
3. Fus. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 1:28.02 (8')
4. Gfr. Martin Christen (Grafenort) 1:32.18 (12')
5. Cpl. Ernst Frei (Escholzmatt) 1:32.25 (16')

²⁴ "Sport AM Wochenende," *Friburger Nachrichten* (Freiburg, Switzerland), Dec. 16, 1961.

²⁵ "Wehrsport," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Dec. 19, 1961.

6. Pol. Werner Graf (Zürich) 1:32.56 (10')
7. Fus. Hans Zimmermann (Schwendi/GL) 1:33.12 (14')
8. Gren. Hansruedi Elsässer (Gontenschwil) 1:34.08 (12')
9. Sap. Paul Wüthrich (Luzern) 1:36.46 (6')
10. Gren. Peter Luchsinger (Schwanden) 1:37.12 (4')²⁶

Overall, the shooting in the race greatly improved from past attempts. The shooting element is highly unpredictable in biathlon. A gust of wind at the wrong moment, a pulse rate too high, or simply a change in lighting due to a cloud moving over the sun are all small things that can cause poor results while shooting. The successful shooting results in this specific event could be attributed to good shooting conditions, an overall improvement in competitors' shooting, or simply pure luck. But within the top ten, there were only two who hit less than 15 shots. This improved shooting caused pre-race favorite and defending champion Hans Schweizer to be unable to defend his title. In his first ten shots, Schweizer hit nine of them, and seemed in line to repeat as winner due to his good shooting and strong ski speed. However, at the third shooting range, he missed each of his five shots. Those misses, which equaled 10 minutes of penalties, were too much for him to overcome.²⁷

Stehli and Frei, two of the three who competed in the World Championships, shot and skied well. Their relative high placing in this event showed the low level of competition in the Swiss event as compared to the World Championship. There appear to be no further biathlons that the Swiss participated in during the 1961-1962 season. Records indicate that no Swiss biathletes were sent to the 1962 World Championships in Hameenlinna, Finland.

In preparation for the important 1962-1963 season, a pre-Olympic year, the Swiss Interest Group for Military All-Around Combat of SIMM laid out the upcoming biathlon schedule for the season.

²⁶ "Treffermaximum beim Rigi-Biathlon," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 8, 1962.

²⁷ "Wehrsport auf Rigi-Klösterli," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zuri Neue Zürcher Nachrichten (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 13, 1962.

The group determined that four biathletes would participate in the pre-Olympic World Championship at Seefeld, Austria, a test event for the 1964 Winter Olympics.

The committee released the planned domestic and international racing calendar as follows:

- Jan. 6 at Rigi-Lauf
- Jan. 20 at Schwarzsee—the Swiss Regional Championships
- February 1-3 at Schwellbrunn—the Swiss Biathlon Championships
- March 3 at Seefeld, Austria—World Championships
- March 16-17 at Arosa, Italy—CISM events²⁸

The first race of the season was held at Rigi on January 6, 1963, where weather created challenges for the biathletes.²⁹ There were 60 biathletes who entered the race, which was contested over 19 km, 300 m. Like all events to date, there were four shooting bouts. As normal, weather played a deciding factor in this outdoor sporting competition—the *foehn* winds caused havoc on the race tracks as well as the shooting ranges. Hans Ammann, the fastest on his skis with 1:33.32 was one of the worst shots. He hit only 4 of his 20 shots and ended up in 9th place for the day. Fritz Zimmermann from Glarus won the event. Ammann is a classic example that the winner needs to be both a good skier and a good shot.³⁰

On January 20, 1963, Schwellbrunn, canton Appenzell Ausserrhoden, hosted the first true National Championship, unlike the quasi-event in 1961.³¹ This race, located on the calendar just prior to the team selection for the World Championships in Seefeld, Austria, held great importance in the selection for the World Championship team.³²

²⁸ “Wehrsport-Terminkalender und Beschlüsse der SIMM,” *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Nov. 28, 1962.

²⁹ “Sports militaires,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Nov. 27, 1962.

³⁰ “Le biathlon de Rigi,” *Journal de Genève* (Geneva, Switzerland), Jan. 7, 1963.

³¹ “Les sports DIVERS,” *La Liberté* (Fribourg, Switzerland), Jan. 19, 1963.

³² “Ausschreibung der Biathlon-Meisterschaft,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 5, 1963.



An aerial view of Schwellbrunn. Note the rolling hills, ideal for a biathlon race. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Despite plentiful and fast snow, the weather did not cooperate at all. The first shooting range had its results nullified as the conditions changed so drastically during the race to make the results unusable. The fourth shooting stop was simply cancelled due to heavy fog and the inability to see the targets. The race, originally a 20 km with four shooting stops, turned into a 20 km with two shooting stops. The reduced number of potential penalty minutes increased the importance of ski speed and decreased the importance of shooting. Similar to the first race of the season at Rigi, out of the 50 entries, the fastest time belonged to Hans Ammann of Alt-St. Johann. However, he did not finish near the top due to his poor shooting as he missed every shot! Peter Gerig of Göschen won the race with a 1:38.54, but only hit five targets.

The results were:

1. Peter Gerig (Göschen) 1:38.54 (10')
2. Hansrüdi Mettler (Schwellbrunn) 1:41.17 (10')
3. Marcel Vogel (Weinfeldern) 1:47.01 (8')

4. Hans Ammann (Alt-St. Johann) 1:47.02 (20')
5. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 1:50.35 (10')
6. Othmar Suter (Basel) 1:52.21 (14')
7. Josef Schnider (Sihlbrugg) 1:52.59 (16')
8. Andreas Vetsöh (Giufplan) 1:53.35 (16')
9. Jakob Etzensperger (Unter Schlaft) 1:54.14 (16')
10. Fritz Zimmerman (Glarus) 1:54.19 (18')³³

The shooting results emphasize how difficult the conditions were for shooting that day.

The Biathlon World Championships on March 3, 1963, held in Seefeld, Austria, were notable in a few ways. With the Winter Olympics the following year, these World Championships acted as a preview of sorts. There were 13 teams in attendance.³⁴ This was the only time when the host for the Biathlon World Championships also hosted the Winter Olympic Games the following year. In recent years it is traditional that the Olympic venue will host an event on the IBU World Cup circuit a year prior to the games to allow athletes and organizers to test the venue.³⁵

As anticipated, the Swiss team did poorly in the competition. The 20 km race, won by Vladimir Melanie of the USSR with a time of 1:32.06 (4'), was a full 30 minutes faster than the best placed Swiss biathlete.

The Swiss finished as follows:

42. Peter Gehrig 2:07.57 (20')
43. Max Stehli 2:09.10 (16')
46. Fritz Zimmerman 2:12.46 (24')
47. Willy Bar 2:15.18 (16').

³³ "Späher Peter Gerig erster Bathlon-Meister," *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 21, 1963.

³⁴ "La saison en Autriche," *Journal et feuille d'avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Jan. 12, 1963. The teams at the World Championships were East Germany, West Germany, Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Mongolia, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and the USSR.

³⁵ <https://biathlonresults.com/> This is the official website of the International Biathlon Union [hereafter IBU]. Past results are found on this website for multiple levels, IBU World Cup, IBU Cup, and Youth/Junior Events as well as some other events sanctioned by the IBU. A look into the specific seasons prior to Olympic Games will show a test event, but not the World Championships at the same venue as the Winter Olympic Games.

Out of the athletes who completed the race, the Swiss biathletes all finished in the final six. The only two biathletes not Swiss in the final six were Edgar Schubert of West Germany, and John Moore of the United Kingdom. Schubert had 36 minutes of penalties and Moore 32 minutes of penalties, and they still managed to beat Zimmerman and Bar!³⁶ One account of the Swiss competitors simply stated, “The Swiss were grossly inferior in this field, both technically and in terms of shooting.”³⁷ No rationale for the team selection has come to light. Zimmerman, who had won the Rigi race in early January, fared poorly at the National Championships, so a marginal result at the World Championships had been expected. Gehrig had won the National Championships, and more had been expected of him.

The national rankings, based on the combined times of their four racers, shows an even larger gap between the Swiss and the other nations in the competition. The USSR biathletes were each in the top seven and won with a composite time of 4:45.56. Finland was relatively close behind with 4:46.02. The Swiss were in 12th place with a time of 6:29.53!³⁸ The second foray of the Swiss into the larger international biathlon scene was met with another whimper. It was obvious from the race that the Swiss had a long way to go to be competitive on the international scene.

After the World Championships, a rather lengthy editorial about biathlon found its way into *Die Tat*, a daily newspaper from Zurich, in late February 1963. The author, Harry F. Gehm, is unknown except for this editorial. In it, he espoused the idea that biathlon did not belong in the Olympics due to the requirement for a large bore rifle, as these were only found in the military. He stated:

³⁶ <https://biathlonresults.com/> Schubert missed 18 of his shots and Moore missed 16 of his shots.

³⁷ “Vladimir Melanin wieder Biathlon-Weltmeister,” *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 4, 1963.

³⁸ “Championnat du Monde—Biathlon,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Feb. 4, 1963.

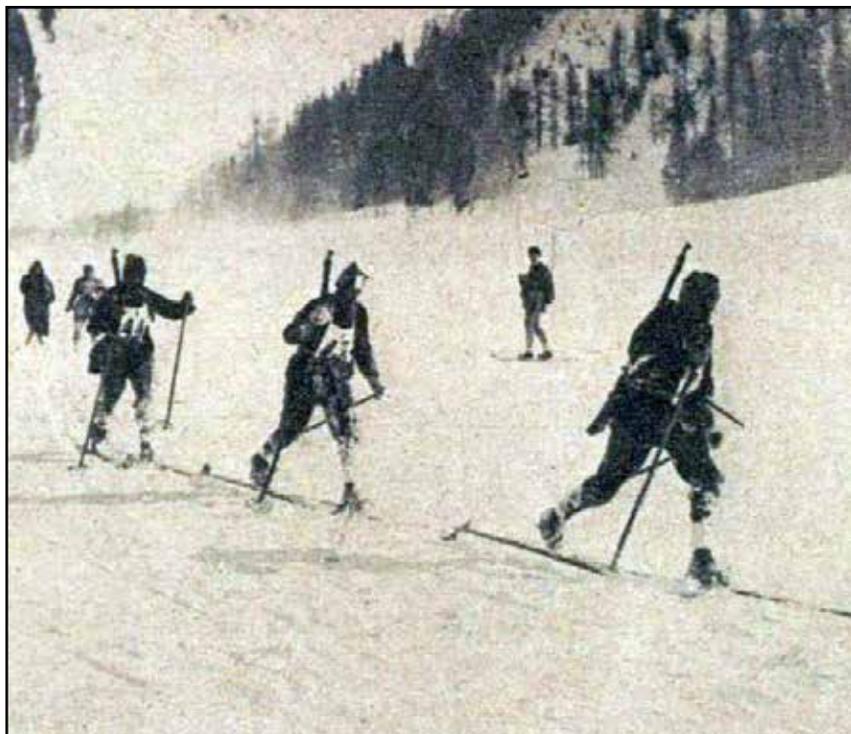
This competition has no Olympic legitimacy because the purely military half of the test, the shooting, is rated far too high in relation to the sporty skiing. Fighting continues under unequal conditions. Since every runner has to bring his rifle with him, a Swiss might have to lug around a huge “cannon” that dangles around his back and legs with every step.³⁹

Although the hyperbole is evident, his point is well made. Gehm advocated that “a uniform rifle and a uniform support frame had to be prescribed.” With frustration in his tone, he stated that “the old military patrol run, which was finally banned from the Olympic winter sports program, is now celebrating a happy birth.” The Swiss had been good at the Military Patrol and were obviously not doing well at biathlon. He continued that according to those who supported biathlon, the sport “symbolizes the performance of the Nordic hunter, who follows the game on skis and shoots it down.” Not true, said our dear Harry Gehm, “They must be strange hunters, though, with the army rifles shooting at bears and moose from a distance of 250 meters.”⁴⁰

The argument for a more standardized rifle, one that made sense then and now, led to a change. In the 1978-1979 season, the .22 long rifle replaced the large bore rifle which was previously standard for the biathlon. This change and the accompanying reduction to a 50 m shooting range greatly increased the accessibility and popularity of the sport. Gehm longed for the day when the Military Patrol resulted in Swiss glory. This is a recurring theme in the few editorials that exist about the sport. There is an underlying tone in these editorials that as a sport with military influence, failure on the ski tracks and in the shooting range could lead to decreased prestige in the world. This could in turn lead to an increased chance of invasion due to perceived military weakness.

³⁹ Gehm, Harry F., “Biathlon gehört nicht in das Olympia-Programm,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 21, 1963.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



The Gold Medal winning 1924 Swiss Military Patrol team. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

With the failure of the 1963 World Championships in their rear-view mirror, the Swiss turned towards the 1964 Winter Olympics as the next major target in their anticipated ascendancy into international biathlon respectability. The optimism of the SIMM was amazing. Each time that the Swiss had been involved in international competition, the results had been very poor. Despite this, the Olympic Games were the next target, and all efforts were made for a successful showing. The first national summer biathlon training camp set in July 1963, saw the initial step in this concerted effort. These training camps are commonplace in today's hypercompetitive international biathlon environment, but this camp was a first for Switzerland. Led by Captain Weber of Bern, 25 aspiring soldiers were selected to train and prepare for the Olympic Games. The first training session focused on shooting. Ski

technique as well as other elements of the biathlon were prioritized in later training sessions. The culmination of these sessions was a “biathlon on foot” held at Weinfelden, canton Thurgau in August 1963. Bremgarten, canton Aargau, Macolin, canton Bern near Biel/Bienne, and canton Glarus hosted subsequent training events. An ambitious series of biathlon competitions in the winter would determine who would represent the Swiss. Andermatt, Tamis (canton Graubünden outside of Chur), Zugerberg (canton Zug), Schwanden (canton Glarus), Rigi, and Gonten (canton Appenzell Innerrhoden) were scheduled to host the series of races.

One of the interesting aspects of the team was the Swiss-German vs Swiss-Romand split. One newspaper article made a point to have as its headline “Only five Romands” were among the 25 competing for training slots. Further discussions about the locations for the planned races brought up questions of favoritism to the Swiss-German side of the Confederation.⁴¹ It appeared that the long standing tensions between Swiss linguistic regions emerged in this realm as well. The perceived slights between French and German speaking Swiss citizens are a long-standing part of the Swiss Confederation. Another development in the selection process was to actively use Swiss Nordic team members in biathlon. The aforementioned physical tests in Macolin, held in September, contained 11 biathletes who were also listed on the Swiss Nordic “B” team.⁴²

Credit must be given to the SIMM for their efforts to lay the groundwork for a successful season, team and program. The growth in the frequency, intensity and focus of summer training, as well as the increased number of competitions that determined the Olympic team are in line with current practices. The major issue with the team was twofold. The first was simple, the Swiss were simply not fast enough, and did not shoot well enough. The second was a little more complex.

⁴¹“Sports Militaires—5 Romands seulement,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), July 18, 1963.

⁴²“Les Sports,” *La Liberté* (Fribourg, Switzerland), Sept. 4, 1963.

Biathlon is a sport that takes a long time to master. Most biathletes reach their peak in their late 20s and early 30s. The need for prolonged success started with a decade-long training program, where the focus on core conditioning in the summer time resulted in a strong training base for the winter season.

The Weinfelden Summer Biathlon held on August 27, 1963, a 14 km run and shooting race, played a considerable role in the start of the Olympic season. The rules were the same, four rounds of shooting, plus running instead of skiing between. Each shot missed led to a two-minute penalty, exactly the same as in winter biathlon.

The results were as follows:

1. Albert Läubli (Märstetten) 1:40.10
2. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 1:44.38
3. Marcel Vogel (Weinfelden) 1:47.22
4. Waller Neff (Appenzell) 1:50.13
5. Erich Schönbächler (Einsiedeln) 1:56.50
6. Josef Marti (Kloten) 1:58.11⁴³

This event is one of the first recorded events of an intentional summer biathlon in the world. A previous Swiss event became a run and shoot biathlon due to the weather, but this event was different as it was intentional. In the United States, a series in the 1980s and 1990s expanded to around 50 events in the summer. The International Biathlon Union eventually created a Summer Biathlon Championship, but with rollerskis, not running. Although good for cardiovascular health and training for shooting, the running and skiing do not always lead to the same winner. This is keenly evidenced with first-place winner Albert Läubli, as this is the only evidence of his participation in any biathlon event. He assuredly did participate in other events, but no record of his further results have been uncovered to date.

In early December 1963, the Swiss Olympic Committee announced that they would send 70 total athletes to the Innsbruck games

⁴³ "Weinfelder Sommer-Biathlon," *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Aug. 27, 1963.

the following year. Among the 70, they committed to sending five biathletes. This decision, combined with the intensive training and competition schedule about to start, showed the real desire for the Swiss biathletes to perform well and elevate the national prestige that comes with success at the Olympic Games.⁴⁴

The first of the selection races, scheduled for December 9, 1963, at Andermatt, started with great enthusiasm and hope for a strong showing for a Swiss team at the Olympics. The course, located near the Oberalp Pass, was 14 km in length with 300 meters of “denivelation.” According to accounts of the race, the skiing was adequate, but the shooting “left much to be desired.”

The top eight places were as follows:

1. Fus. Willy Junod (Dombresson) 1:24.37 (14')
2. Sgt. Erich Schönbächler (Einsiedeln) 1:27.40 (6')
3. Cpl. Marcel Vogel (Weinfeldeln) 1:32.56 (18')
4. Sgt. Norbert Schmid (Disentis) 1:33' (16')
5. Sgt. Peter Gehrig (Goeschenen) 1:33.32 (19')
6. Cpl. Josef Haas (Marbach) 1:33.44 (20')⁴⁵
7. Gren. Fritz Zimmermann (Schwendi) 1:36.48 (16')
8. Lt. Gregor Furrer (Riederalp) 1:36.57 (24')⁴⁶

The lack of skilled shooting is evident when looking at the penalty times. Willy Junod skied the course in 1:10.37, but due to seven misses out of 20 he almost lost the race to Eric Schönbächler who skied much slower at 1:21.40. He only had three misses for a total time of 1:37.40.

The subsequent weeks saw scheduled races around the country. A few alterations needed to be made to the schedule as the December 15 race at Reichenau-Tamins was rescheduled until January 12,

⁴⁴“Le COS a siege a Berne; 70 Sportifs Suisse presents a Innsbruck,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Dec. 3, 1963.

⁴⁵“Premiere epreuve de selection,” *Journal de Genève* (Genevam Switzerland), Dec. 10, 1963.

⁴⁶“Biathlon in Andermatt,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Dec. 9, 1963.

1964, due to lack of snow.⁴⁷ The third event on the schedule, the race at Zugerberg, changed format from skiing to running due to lack of snow. This change favored the strong runner over the strong skier. As a result of the change, Willy Junod, who seemed to be the strongest biathlete in the nation, did not even compete. The Olympic selection committee eventually decided not to use the results of the Zugerberg race for Olympic team selection. The race at Zugerberg, a 14 km race, had about 24 competitors in it. The first range was only 1.5 km into the race. Both Bär and Rüesch missed four targets and effectively eliminated themselves from race competition. Thick fog on the 2nd range at 8 km cancelled the shooting. Gehrig hit four times and Stehli hit three times on the 3rd range. Marti hit five of five on the third to move into the lead. On the last shooting of 100 m, all hit four of five, but Gehrig ran the best over the last section to take the win. Marti placed 2nd, and Stehli finished in 3rd.

The top five placings were as follows:

1. Peter Gehrig (Göschenen) 1:13.53 (8')
2. Josef Marti (Kloten) 1:14.38 (4')
3. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 1:15.01 (8')
4. Ernst Hartmann (Ebnat-Kappel) 1:28:40 (14')
5. Manfred Rüesch (Rheineck) 1:29.04 (16')⁴⁸

The scheduled race at Schwanden took on even greater importance as the Zugerberg race results were ignored for Olympic qualification.⁴⁹

The lack of snow continued to plague the great organization efforts. The race, originally scheduled for Schwanden, was relocated due to “lack of acceptable ski conditions” to Urnerboden. This race permit-

⁴⁷“Sports Militaires,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Dec. 14, 1963.

⁴⁸“Biathlon auf dem Zugerberg ohne Ski,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Dec. 23, 1963.

⁴⁹“Sport Am Wochenende,” *Friburger Nachrichten* (Friburg, Switzerland), Dec. 28, 1963.

ted one final attempt prior to the Swiss National Biathlon Championships scheduled for Rigi-Kaltbaa on January 5, to improve athletes' positions for selection on the Olympic Team.⁵⁰ The race was held over 20 km with 500 m of denivelation, with 45 contestants. Cpl. Marcel Vogel of Rheinfelden won the race.⁵¹

Vogel was the clear victor in the race, his time of 1:57.10 (6') was eight minutes clear of Sgt-Maj. Fredy Vogel of Kriens. The fastest skier was Fus. Franz Oetiker who finished the race in 1:44.48 but had 22 minutes of penalties. Sgt. Josef Marty of Klotten had the best shot of the competition with only three missed shots.

The top ten places were as follows:

1. Cpl. Marcel Vogel (Rheinfelden) 1:57.10 (6')
2. Sgt-Maj. Fredy Vogel (Kriens) 2:05.10 (16')
3. Sgt. Erich Schönbächler (Einsiedeln) 2:05.56 (12')
4. Sgt. Peter Gerig (Goeschenen) 2:06.04 (20')
5. Lt. Gregor Furrer (Riederalp) 2:06.14 (18')
6. Fus. Jean-Michel Aeby (La Chaux-de-Fonds) 2:06.48 (18')
- 6 (*tie*). Fus. Franz Oetiker (Einsiedeln) 2:06.48 (22')
8. Lt. Ruedi Etter (Schwanden) 2:10.57 (14')
9. App. Willy Junod (Dombresson) 2:10.58 (24')
10. Fus. Max Stehli (Adliswil) 2:11.03 (10')⁵²

The course had to be altered some, and instead of skiing over 20 km of fresh, new trails, the course at Urnerboden used the same 10 km loop twice, which meant as well that the ranges were used twice at 3 km, 5 km, 13 km, and 15 km. The course started out reasonably flat, then turned east as it left the Klausenstrasse and climbed towards the valley wall near the cantonal border. The last portion of the course was uphill and in a westward direction to return to the start. Vogel's win, added to his 3rd place finish in Andermatt, put him in a strong position

⁵⁰ "Biathlon auf Urnerboden," *Friburger Nachrichten* (Friburg, Switzerland), Dec. 30, 1963.

⁵¹ "Sports blanc," *La Liberté*, Dec. 30, 1963.

⁵² "Les specialistes du biathlon a l'entrainement," *Journal de Genève* (Geneva, Switzerland), Dec. 30, 1963.

to make the Olympic Team. Schönbächler fell during the race and had to spend some time repairing his rifle. This may have resulted in the six misses, but he did well enough to finish in 3rd place. With one race left, the team looked to be shaping up as Vogel, Schönbächler, Aeby, Junod and Gerig.⁵³

The final race moved from Rigi to Hospenthal only 24 hours prior to the start time due to an inadequate amount of snow. The organization lacked a few elements, but most were grateful for the “great lengths” taken by the race organizers to save the championship/qualifier.⁵⁴ Another reason for the move was the calendar. Those selected for the Olympic team needed to be registered by January 6, 1964. A postponement of the race in Rigi would not be possible. This race doubled as the 2nd National Championship, as well as the last Olympic qualifying race. The course, laid out only a few days prior to the event due to the race relocation, started near the northern part of the valley. It followed the Furkareuss towards the village of Realp. The first of the shooting ranges was situated near Realp. Another range was near Zumbach. Reports had the snow powdery and consistent through the entire race.

Of the 52 entries in the race, some major storylines emerged around Vogel, Schönbächler, Junod, Gerig and Furrer as the leaders in qualifying. Not all of them could qualify and the question of who would succeed added an additional edge to the event. The second major story line was the question of whether Peter Gerig would defend his 1963 National Title at Schwellbrunn. When the results were tabulated, Norbert Schmed was the best shot and won the day. Furrer was the big loser on the day with 17 misses; he finished in 13th place and missed a spot on the Olympic team.⁵⁵

The race started at a frozen -14 degrees Celsius and was contested over 23 km with 550 m of denivelation. Mot. Georges Dubois of

⁵³ “Biathlon auf dem Urnerboden,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Dec. 30, 1963.

⁵⁴ “Biathlon-Schweizer-Meisterschaften in Hospenthal,” *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 7, 1964.

⁵⁵ “Die Biathlonmeisterschaft in Hospenthal,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 6, 1964.

La Chaux de Fonds had the fastest time on the course, but did not shoot well, and missed 11 shots for 22 minutes of penalty time. Sgt. Peter Gehrig, the defending champion, also shot poorly and had 10 missed shots with 20 minutes of penalty time to finish 13 minutes behind the winner in 5th place. Sgt. Norbert Schmed of Disentis, canton Graubünden, won the race to become the Swiss National Champion. His performance on skis was adequate, but Schmed missed only one shot and won by almost four minutes over App. Willy Junod who missed eight shots, but skied much faster.

The top 13 places were as follows:

1. Sgt. Norbert Schmed (Disentis) 1:52.48 (2')
2. App. Willy Junod (Dombresson) 1:56.14 (16')
3. Mot. Georges Dubois (La Chaux de Fonds) 1:59.03 (22')
4. Lt. Rudolf Etter (Schwanen) 2:01.35 (10')
5. Sgt. Peter Gehrig (Goschenen) 2:05.40 (20')
6. Cpl. Marcel Vogel (Weinfeldten) 2:08.36 (16')
7. Fus. Max Stehli (Addiswil) 2:09.53 (6')
8. Cpl. Josef Haas (Marbach) 2:10.22 (24')
9. App. Michel Aeby (La Chaux de Fonds) 2:10.22 (24')
10. Sgt. Erich Schönbächler (Einsiedeln) 2:12.24 (24')
11. Gren. Peter Lochsinger (Schwanden) 2:15.46 (14')
12. Gren. Fitz Zimmerman (Schwendi) 2:16.43 (24')
13. Lt. Gregor Furrer (Rideralp) 2:17.42 (34')⁵⁶

The Swiss Olympic team announced the members of the Winter Olympic squad a week after the National Championships. The selected members of the team were: Sgt. Norbert Schmed (Disentis), Fus. Willy Junod (Dombresson), Sgt. Peter Gehrig (Goschenen), Cpl. Marcel Vogel (Weinfeldten), Sgt. Eric Schönbächler (Einsiedeln) and the Head of the delegation would be Captain A. Webber (Zurich).⁵⁷ These

⁵⁶“Norbert Schmed enleve le titre de Champion Suisse de Biathlon,” *Gazette de Lausanne*, Jan. 6, 1964.

⁵⁷“La représentation suisse a Innsbruck,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais*, Jan. 14, 1964.

five Swiss, with Schönbächler as the alternate, joined 13 other nations for the Olympic race.⁵⁸

Training and racing for those who were not selected did not stop. A 17 km race held in Gonten, Appenzell, permitted those not in the Olympics to continue training. About 80 entries for the race started in bright sunshine in the shadow of two mountains—the Kronberg and the Hundwiler Höhi. The course ran along the railway line in an eastwardly direction towards the hamlet of Gantenbad. In the initial part of the race, the course was generally flat, but the latter portions had steep climbs and descents. The course passed Jangen Bahn and Jakobsbad before returning to Gonten. The course was well frozen and consistent throughout the valley.

The results were as follows:

1. Wm. Josef Marti (Kloten) 1:50.14 (16')
2. Max Stehli (Aldiswil) 1:51.41 (12')
3. Mandred Rüschi (Rheineck) 1:53.21 (22')
4. Albert Nett (Appenzell) 1:56.44 (28')
5. Hans Alder (Gais) 1:57.36 (30')
6. Ernst Hartmann (Ebnet) 2:00.37 (18')
7. Hansruedi Hug (Schwellbrunn) 2:07.24 (38')
8. Max Kam (Gais) 2:07.56 (30')⁵⁹

The six months of intense training, followed by the two-month long qualification process, ended with the selection of five biathletes who were to represent Switzerland. There was a final tune-up race held in Brassus prior to the start of the Olympic games. In preparation, Switzerland had two different competitions, a three-person relay where teams from multiple nations participated as well as a USSR versus Switzerland 20 km race. In the relay, the top two teams were USSR I and USSR II, the best Swiss team finished in 8th place—over

⁵⁸ "La Suisse à toutes," *Le Nouvelliste*, Dec. 6, 1963. The 13 other nations were the USSR, Norway, Romania, Poland, Finland, Sweden, the United States, Japan, Unified Team of Germany, Austria, France, Great Britain, and Mongolia.

⁵⁹ "Biathlon in Gonten," *Die Tat* (Zurich), Jan. 24, 1964.

five minutes behind the Soviet teams. This result did show improvement from the previous year's World Championships, but there were different specifications. This race had only three competitors, not four, and the race covered a shorter distance which reduced the time between the teams. There was less chance to fall behind on the skiing, and fewer opportunities for penalty minutes on the range as only three shot instead of four. A three-person team also did not require the same depth as a four-man team.

The Relay results were as follows:

1. USSR I (Guizatolin, Koltchine, Vaganov) 1:30.50
2. USSR II (Tarakanov, Utrobine, Worontikchine) 1:30.52
3. West Germany (Weiss, Buhl, Demel) 1:33.44
4. France (Arbez, Pires, Mathieu) 1:34.20
5. Italy (Piler, Bacher, Grenuim)
6. Czechoslovakia (Hruby, Cillik, Fusek) 1:36.45
7. USSR III (Lubimov, Gubine, Anikine) 1:34.45
8. Switzerland I (Amann, Hirschier, Kaelin) 1:35.31
9. US 1:37.39
10. Japan 1:37.53
11. France III 1:37.55
12. Switzerland III (Bebi, Haas, Oberer) 1:38.09
13. Switzerland II (Baume, Rey, Dubois) 1:38.28
14. France II
15. Germany II 1:39.44
16. US II 1:40.24
- DNS Italy II

Although the Swiss legs for the relay were improved from previous events, there were still some troubling signs. The fastest leg was by A. Kaelin and he had not been selected to attend the Olympics in Innsbruck. Despite him being the fastest Swiss leg, he was only the 11th fastest for the day.⁶⁰ The following day, a Swiss-USSR 22 km race fur-

⁶⁰“Tres Bon Resultat D’Herbert Schmid,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Jan. 20, 1964. Times for the individual legs of the relay by Swiss biathletes were as follows: A Kaelin 31’37”, Amann and K Hirschier 31’57”, Oberer 32’26”, Haas 32’42”, and Dubois 33’18”.



Sixten Jernberg, a Swedish Nordic Skier at the 1964 Innsbruck, Austria, Olympic Games. The Nordic Ski events used many of the same trails as the biathlon event. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

ther showed the gap between the world power and the infantile Swiss team. Valentin Pschenitchine won the race with a time of 1:16.31 (2'). In fact, the first four spots were Soviet biathletes. Willy Junod, with a time of 1:31.05 (10'), finished in 5th place, almost eight minutes behind the slowest Soviet Biathlete. Despite being almost 15 minutes behind the winner, he was the fastest individual Swiss.⁶¹ The race at Brassus had shown the Swiss that although improvements had been achieved,

⁶¹ Results are as follows for the Individual race:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Valentin Pschenitchine (USSR) 1:16.31 (2') | 2. Nikolai Pusanov (USSR) 1:18.04 (6') |
| 3. Alexandre Privalov (USSR) 1:19.08 (2') | 4. Vladimir Melanchine (USSR) 1:23.33 (10') |
| 5. Willy Junod (CH) 1:31.05 (10') | 6. Erich Schönbächler (CH) 1:33.31 (12') |
| 6. (tie) Marcel Vogel (CH) 1:35.31 (12') | 7. Peter Gerig (CH) 1:36.17 (12') |
| 8. Norbert Schmed (CH) 1:39.40 (16') | 9. Rudolf Etter (CH) 1:44.56 (20') |

they were still behind the major competitors in biathlon. With a little trepidation, the team departed across the Alps to Innsbruck.⁶²

One Olympic preview in the newspaper gave this stark impression of the Swiss biathletes' chances. "We have no chance of a good placing in the biathlon. The Swiss are unlikely to get beyond the last places. After all, what our brave fighters should learn with this competition, is to understand what they have learned for themselves and do better the next time."⁶³ The usage of the phrase "brave fighters" in this article contains a certain amount of disdain and an air of hopelessness present.

As the athletes attended the Olympic opening ceremonies, they were understandably excited. The 20 km biathlon competition held in Seefeld was scheduled from 8:30 am—11:00 am on February 4. The rules stated that each of the 51 biathletes would depart at 30-second intervals. Most races up to this point had two minutes between starters. The course had four shooting ranges in nearby villages along the course: at six km (Wildmoosalm)—the 250 m range, at 10.4 km (Hasenwinkel), the 200 m range, at 11.8 km (Lottensee), the 150 m range, and then at 17.1 km (Seewald), the 100 m range. One of the unique elements of biathlon at this time was that there was no standard length between shooting bouts. The three initial bouts were in the prone, or laying down position, the final was done while standing.⁶⁴ The course high point was 1356 meters with a total climb of 729 meters.⁶⁵

All of the training, organization and support by the Swiss government and Swiss military came to a head, and the results were not impressive. For the Swiss, the highest placed was Marcel Vogel in 45th place. He was followed by Eric Schönbächler (46th), Willy Junod (47th), and Peter Gehrig (48th) respectively. It needs to be clarified that

⁶²"Tres Bon Resultat D'Herbert Schmid," *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Jan. 20, 1964.

⁶³"Skandinavien im nordischen Bereich," *Thuner Tagblatt* (Thun, Switzerland), Jan. 25, 1964.

⁶⁴"Le Dioramme," *Le Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland), Jan. 22, 1964.

⁶⁵"Bergisel-Schanze und Seefeld," *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Jan. 14, 1964.

in modern competition, a top 50 result would be respectable. But in 1964, there were only 51 registered for the race. Of those 51 entered, one did not start the race, and another did not finish. Forty-nine athletes finished the race and the Swiss took four of the last five places. One Swiss newspaper described it this way: “They were, in all simplicity, a catastrophe in the shooting.” The best Swiss biathlete, Marcel Vogel, hit only eight out of 20 targets. In other words, 24 penalty minutes were added to the best Swiss biathletes race time, and he finished a full 33 minutes behind the winner!⁶⁶

The *Journal et Feuille d’avis du Valais* had this to say about the biathletes, as well as some of the other lesser known sports including bobsled and speed skating:

The Swiss representatives are really amateurs this way and their preparation is imbued with a kind of amateurism, with an undeniable idealist side but with disastrous effective results. It is thus that in biathlon, para-military specialty with its shooting test, the Swiss were even beaten by the Mongols in the fight to avoid the last places.⁶⁷

To be fair, the Swiss did defeat one Mongolian, Narangtunglag Danzan, who finished in 49th place, but they were defeated by three others who finished in 38th, 42nd, and 44th.⁶⁸ However one looks at it, the cost of training did not match up with the results in the race.

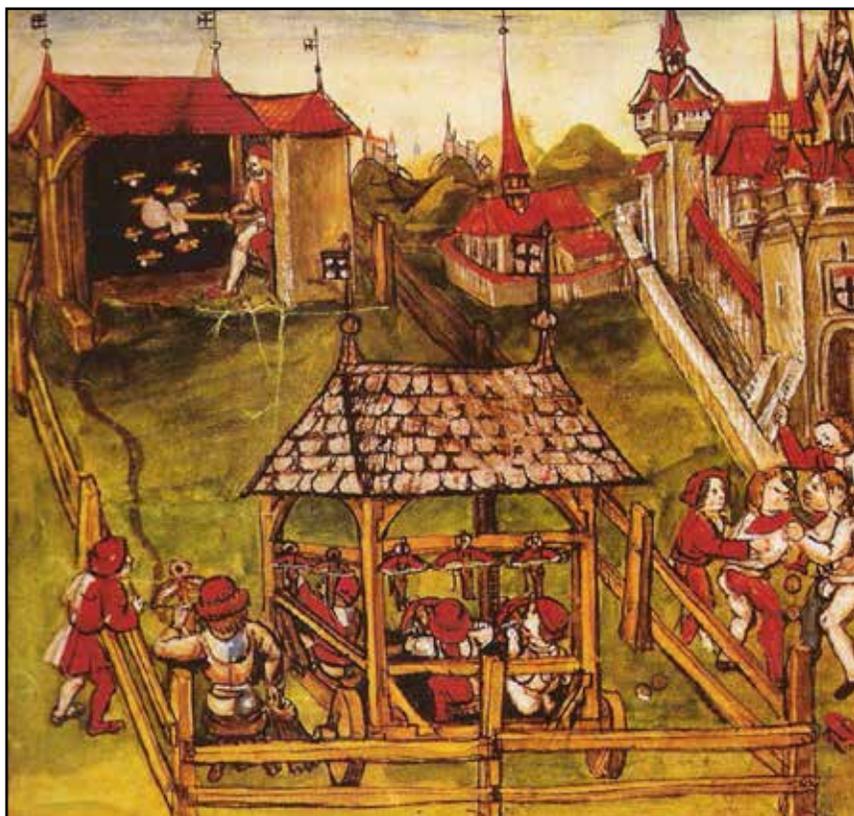
Another opinion piece, this one from *La Confédéré*, a French language newspaper from Fribourg, rife with much Helvetica-centrism, lambasted the results:

In this biathlon, which is above all a military test, our country suffered a real affront: on class competitors, the first

⁶⁶ “Désastre complet chez les participants suisses,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais* (Sion, Switzerland), Feb. 5, 1964.

⁶⁷ “Petites Nouvelles du camp Olympique Suisse,” *Journal et feuille d’avis du Valais*, Feb. 5, 1964.

⁶⁸ “Innsbruck 1964 Biathlon 20 km men,” International Olympic Committee, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.olympic.org/innsbruck-1964/biathlon/20km-men>.



Traditional Swiss shooting competition. Note the cross-bows. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Swiss is 46th, the second 47th and the third 48th. Only one country has been beaten by our men, that is Mongolia!

However, during this test, our competitors broke a record. That of the shooting penalties.

From sports defeat, this failure becomes a real disaster. Really, we are far, far from the great victories won by our patrols only a few years ago.⁶⁹

The writer was referencing the Military Patrol event. The only time this event was an official medal sport, 1924, the Swiss were vic-

⁶⁹ “Un veritable desastre Suisse,” *La Confédéré* (Fribourg, Switzerland), Feb. 5, 1964.

torious, with a team that included Lieutenant Denis Vaucher, brothers Anton Julen and Alfons Julen, as well as Alfred Aufdenblatten.⁷⁰ So in recent memory, the author of the article was hearkening back to a time when the Swiss were successful. From first to almost last is quite a shock to the system of a proud ski loving, military focused nation.

The negative press did not end soon after the race, the *Journal de Genève* simply asked “Ou sont les fils du Tell?” or in English “Where are the Sons of [William] Tell?”⁷¹ The Zurich daily paper *Die Tat* played up the Tell reference as well in their criticism. “The same can be said of our Swiss in biathlon, with whom William Tell in particular could not be satisfied because of the poor shooting results.”⁷² The *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten*, a Zurich daily paper, also utilized William Tell imagery in their comments, with another subtle dig at the results. “Word got around that the Swiss delegate in the international professional association for military sports had submitted the application to complete the biathlon with a crossbow in the future.”⁷³

The *Gazette de Lausanne* added to the criticism: “As for the Swiss, they did not honor their reputation as shooters. They did so badly that we find them at the bottom of the ranking, or they just managed to beat a North Korean . . .”⁷⁴ Although the writer mistook the Mongolians for North Koreans, the idea is pretty clear. Another criticism of the team:

One exception, however: the participants in the biathlon event. Switzerland was represented at this time by four famous strangers who only preceded the final classification by

⁷⁰ “Switzerland Land Military Patrol Gold,” International Olympic Committee, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.olympic.org/news/switzerland-land-military-patrol-gold>.

⁷¹ “Vladimir Melanine remporte le biathlon,” *Journal de Genève* (Geneva, Switzerland), Feb. 5, 1964.

⁷² “Schwendens Skikönig Sixten Jernberg gewann den 50-km -Lauf,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 5, 1964.

⁷³ “In Innsbruck erlauscht, notiert und kommentiert,” *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 8, 1964.

⁷⁴ “Les heros du biathlon,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Feb. 5, 1964.

one other competitor: a Mongol! The event included a long-distance ski and carabiner shots. Terrible shooting! After that we just have to challenge Zanzibar!⁷⁵

The normally reserved Swiss media, most who could not have identified any of the participants, did not stop their derision of the four Swiss competitors. Almost one week after the race, at a time when most Swiss coverage of biathlon was a few short paragraphs at best, or ignored at worst, there were still articles lamenting the performance. Once again, we see national pride at stake here:

Where we must speak of disaster, on the other hand, it is in biathlon. The shooting of William Tell's sons was dismal. We will not be told in this regard that the opportunities to train in shooting do not exist in Switzerland! Here, we can say that participating, for us Swiss, is not enough. We have a reputation to defend, a rank to maintain. If our biathletes were very slow in the race but had made excellent shots, we would have nothing to say. But the results as they stand are heartbreaking and call for serious explanation.⁷⁶

A final article in *La Nouvelliste* appeared a week and a half after the race, but the tone was similar.

But if there are any who deserve, more than the others, to receive a memorable caning, it is indeed the federation leaders who selected our biathletes for the Games. We have the right, in this case, to report a real scandal, because the elected officials in question are not only covered with ridicule, but they have caused enormous damage to the Swiss Society of Carabineers and to our shooters, which are do not carry any of the blame. So much so that for many people, the descendants of William Tell are not the Hollensteins, the Müllers, the Vogts or the Spillmanns who covered them-

⁷⁵ Et si l'on parlait sport!" *La Patrie valaisanne* (Sion, Switzerland), Feb. 7, 1964.

⁷⁶"La Suisse Bredouille!" *La Confédéré* (Fribourg, Switzerland), Feb. 10, 1964.

selves in glory last summer in Stockholm, but rather these lamentable “clocks” subsidized by the Swiss Olympic Committee.⁷⁷

All of these criticisms hearkened back to the failure of the Swiss in a shooting event, and the way that this damaged Swiss internal and external pride. There is even an insinuation in one of the articles that due to their poor showing, they might be seen as vulnerable for invasion. This failure needs to be remembered within the Cold War context, and the precarious middle ground that Switzerland occupied. The training plans for the various teams were examined. The Swiss plan matched up reasonably well in many areas to that of the more successful nations. The one where they lacked most was in shooting. In the entire year of training from the summer camps and summer biathlon to the Olympics, the Swiss competitors did not even fire 1000 rounds.

The Soviets, who placed all four of their biathletes in the top 10—1st, 2nd, 7th and 10th—each shot over 30,000 rounds in that same time.⁷⁸ In a sport that penalizes the competitor with two minutes for each missed shot, and each miss greatly affects the placing at the end of the race, the Swiss were at a great disadvantage.

The question then turned to why the results ended up this way, and what to do with funding. The disparity in training was simply a question of finances. More is not always better, but the disparity in shots fired in training was so egregious, it is impossible to overlook this portion of the training. Why the Swiss shot so few rounds in training is unknown, it could have been the cost, or other factors. But whatever the reason, it placed the Swiss biathletes at a major disadvantage.

The public outcry towards the poor performance in biathlon reached the Federal Council. The question of where the funds had come from to train the biathletes and where it would come from in the

⁷⁷“Jouons le Jeu! Reglements de Comptes!” *Le Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland), Feb. 15, 1964.

⁷⁸“Die Sport Laterne,” *Die Tat* (Zurich, Switzerland), Feb. 21, 1964.

future was raised. According to the Federal Council, “the biathlon is not a military discipline; it does not interest more than 100 people total in Switzerland.”⁷⁹ The Federal Council added that due to these small numbers, “It is therefore understandable that the Swiss representatives, despite their appreciable personal commitment in terms of time and resources, did so badly in Innsbruck that the question can be raised as to whether their participation made sense.”

Despite the obvious tie to the military, heightened by the mandated use of the large bore rifles, a practiced used until 1978, one of the newspaper articles specifically mentions how the sport was not a “military sport.” Although biathlon was by definition not associated with the military, the majority of Swiss newspapers placed biathlon news and its results in the “Military Sport” section of the newspaper.

One of the Federal Counselors on the chamber floor in Bern, a Dr. Erich Weisskopf, announced that the results of the biathlon shooting had caused “a certain emotion.” The commentator continued with a sarcastic remark “a ‘certain emotion’, without a doubt!”⁸⁰

Weisskopf engaged the Federal Council in a debate over funding for biathlon. He asked “whether the necessary financial aid should not be made more widely available” for the Swiss biathletes? He also wanted “the selection [of the team] and preparation to be carried out carefully, purposefully and comprehensively by Swiss delegations in military competitions with foreign participation?”⁸¹ The Federal Council replied that “biathlon is not a military sport. It is a cross-country ski race, combined with a shooting competition. This competition takes place—not in uniform but in sports attire and the shots are not fired with a weapon of war.”

In essence, since the biathletes, all who were in the Swiss military, were not in uniform, and not firing a “weapon of war,” there was

⁷⁹ “Après Innsbruck Responses du Conseil Federal,” *Gazette de Lausanne* (Lausanne, Switzerland), Feb. 14/15, 1964.

⁸⁰ “Un Certain Emoi...,” *Le Confédéré* (Fribourg, Switzerland), Mar. 4, 1964.

⁸¹ “Biathlon heißt nicht Armeewettkampg,” *Walliser Bote* (Naters), Mar. 18, 1964.

not federal funding available for them. The Council continued that “the preparation of the Swiss biathlon competitors and their delegation to Innsbruck were the sole responsibility of the Association which deals with this sport and of the Swiss Olympic Committee.”⁸² To be fair, the Swiss Confederation had not previously assisted in subsidizing any of the athletes at the Innsbruck games, biathlon or otherwise. In summation from the Federal Council:

Biathlon is a very popular sport in the Nordic countries and in Russia. It has less than a hundred followers with us and has only been practiced regularly for a short time. It is therefore only surprising that the Swiss representatives, despite the personal sacrifices of time and money that should be recognized, have obtained results such that one wonders if their competition was justified. Without ignoring the value of this sport, we believe that giving it special support would lead to a dispersion of our efforts in the field of non-service activity. It is more appropriate for us to support above all the military ski patrols. This sport is based on an ancient tradition. It has already given us international success. Practical with us by several thousand soldiers, its form of team competition gives it particular value.”⁸³

Although this response seems definite, there are many very important aspects of Swiss society and government that can be inferred from it. First of all, the implication that if the biathletes had been in Swiss uniform, and shooting a military rifle, money for training would have been available. It must be remembered that each of the biathletes were actually in the Swiss military, as it was then mandatory for all Swiss male citizens with few exceptions. Those exceptions were mostly due to health issues, and a biathlete is not someone who would have been exempt from the demands of military service.

⁸² “Après Innsbruck: le biathlon n’est pas un discipline Suisse,” *Le Nouvelliste* (Sion, Switzerland), Mar. 14, 1964.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

The second major point to gain from this is the conservative way the Swiss government was looking at the sport of biathlon. Their desire to put the funding behind Military Patrol, a sport that had not been in the Olympic program for decades and was not showing any hope of returning, seems to be curious. After the initial Olympic Biathlon in 1960, biathlon was almost eliminated as a sport that was “too military.” If biathlon was considered too military, how would military patrol have made it back into the Olympic Games or even on a larger scale? It is possible that Military Patrol could have been important in the 1940s, but as warfare became more mechanized in the 1960s, this type of fighting seemed to have passed into the dust heap. For the Swiss though, this was a major plan of defense. Small units would keep resisting against a foreign power as long as possible.

One additional point made by a columnist is simple. “The military patrol is valuable as a team competition.” If we look at the purpose of sport, to the Swiss in the mid-1960s, the win at all cost mentality did not exist on a large scale. The writer continued with a very high-minded opinion of sport in general. He stated, “the Swiss view of the true nature of sport as a competition that should not become a nationalized question of prestige. In general, it cannot be overlooked that the Olympic Games,” despite the intentions of their founders, “has turned into a propaganda event of the powers.” The author continued, “in such a race, Switzerland can certainly not win any laurels, and it would be absurd if we gradually wanted to move on to state funding for sport in this ‘sense, beyond military training’.” He finished, “Switzerland’s reputation in the world certainly does not depend on the medals that its competitors won at the Olympic Games, but on their internal political and social order and their international treaty loyalty and reliability.”⁸⁴

If we look at the lasting effects of this debacle, they are quite long reaching. After the poor showing in 1964, the Swiss did not com-

⁸⁴“Sport und Staat,” *Thuner Tagblatt* (Thun), Mar. 21, 1964.

pete in 1968 games in Grenoble⁸⁵ or the 1972 games in Sapporo.⁸⁶ It was not until 1976, over a decade later, that the Swiss entered at least one biathlete in the Olympic competition.⁸⁷

The final statement on this matter, at least for the time being, was given in the summer of 1964. Speaking of the roles that various government organizations played in sport, a small newspaper from the region around Biel/Bienne published the following article. It contained a wonderful snapshot into many of the contrasting views that existed in the 1960s about the role of sports, the role of the military, and the Cold War.

It stated “the Confederation relieves itself of sporting responsibilities in the cantons. She only kept one or two because, in the end, she sees sport as nothing more than a method of military preparation.”⁸⁸ Military strength, preparedness, and the ability to defend the Swiss Confederation from foreigners was foremost in the thoughts of government officials. The geopolitical turmoil of the late 1960s included: the growing threat of increased activity in Vietnam, the armistice in Korea, the formal creation of the two Germanys, and the solidifying ideological conflict between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations. With all of these issues, it is understandable for a country to prioritize some activities over others. Why spend money on something that would really not protect the nation?

The article continued:

It’s the Federal Military Department that has the upper hand over the entire Swiss sports machine. This explains why this sport is conditioned, directed, guided in a direction sometimes very different from its natural aspirations. Be-

⁸⁵ “Grenoble 1968 Biathlon 20 km men,” International Olympic Committee, accessed July 23, 2020, <https://www.olympic.org/grenoble-1968/biathlon/20km-men>.

⁸⁶ “Sapporo 1972 Biathlon 20 km men,” International Olympic Committee, accessed July 23, 2020, <https://www.olympic.org/sapporo-1972/biathlon/20km-men>

⁸⁷ “Innsbruck 1976 Biathlon 20 km men,” International Olympic Committee, accessed July 23, 2020, <https://www.olympic.org/innsbruck-1976/biathlon/20km-men>

⁸⁸ “Macolin,” *Construire*, May 6, 1964.

cause, as long as sport is considered only in terms of a military interest, it cannot flourish freely in its most just ways. Everything being subordinated (despite appearances that we are trying to save) to a military organization, the hierarchy of sports leaders is, often also, modeled on that of the army. As a result, certain sports, more historically or more technically dear to army chiefs, obtain favors over others which the latter cannot seek or obtain in the same way.⁸⁹

Once again, the military component of sports is emphasized. Yet, within this section of the article, there is a subtle comment of an idea that persists to this day. The activity, book, movie, sport, political party or religion that is favored by the leadership, will see more relevancy within the organization.

Here we start to understand the Swiss organizational structure of sports.

It is also significant that the apex body of Swiss sport, the ANEP, is a heterogeneous assemblage of genuinely sporting federations and others which are only made up of soldiers. Sometimes this is good, but it is rare: the army is therefore moved by the pitiful results obtained by Swiss biathlons at the Innsbruck Olympics. Had these biathlons been nothing more than simple skiers, the thing would not have had a profound consequence. But the biathlon also requires these skiers to shoot rifles, and the shots of these men not having honored our traditions, the army frowned.⁹⁰

The old adage, “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck” applies here. Because of the long tradition of shooting in the nation, biathlon looked like a sport that the Swiss military should care about. The failure of the 1964 Swiss biathlon team caused the Swiss Army to notice and forced them to act.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

The federal military machine has taken a closer look at the case of our competitive athletes. It had most likely never happened to him. And in doing so, it heard grievances other than those simply from companies interested in the biathlon business. Suddenly, we seem to have noticed something that has been shouting in the country for a long time: the Swiss representative sports suite is going under the radar because sports leaders are above all dedicated to attracting the greatest number of followers at the expense of the best quality.

What is better for the nation, a large crowd of decent shooters, or a few select biathletes? The answer seemed obvious, in this case, and as observed by these leaders, quantity supplanted quality.

But all good writers also propose a solution to problems they identify. The solution is described poetically as the article continues:

One of the solutions found to improve the situation has a name that is already known: Macolin. On these rustic heights rises the darling child of Mother Helvétia Sporting: the Federal School of Gymnastics and Sport. Note that in any country other than Switzerland it simply looks like: the Macolin Sports School. But the fact of giving, in this title, a particular place to gymnastics which is, after all, only one sport among the others, clearly marks the intention that the character of military preparation be specified in Swiss sporting activity. Macolin is both a school and a symbol, therefore. For many German-speaking Swiss, it is the high place of a patriotism redistributed in the form of sport: some go up there as towards a purification, as to wash symbolically of the spiritual defilements contracted in the cities and in the plain where circulate the currents of foreign inspiration.⁹¹

Sports have moved beyond simple importance in health, but the health of the nation is key in this entire endeavor.

⁹¹ Ibid.

All foreign visitors envy us for this marvelous place where sport and the spirit of sport can be fulfilled and flourish in the most harmonious, most effective way. Macolin is a pledge of the future: the evolution of times and of minds will eventually make it the temple of this sport of which we dream, a sport which should bring young men together in peace.”⁹²

The creation of Macolin permitted Switzerland to have a road-map moving forward. The errors of the 1964 Olympic Biathlon team, which seemed to shake the nation to its core were gone.

Who would have thought that an obscure sport, participated by so few people, in an Olympic Games largely forgotten, would cause such great consternation among the Swiss leadership? It did, and over the next decade the Swiss chose to slowly develop biathlon within the context of Confederation first, international competition much further behind. The interaction between sport, politics, international affairs and society is important to understand. In the first decade of Swiss biathlon, multiple lessons were learned; some were quickly implemented and others would take years for the desired change to occur. Despite the failures, the first decade laid the groundwork for future decades of Swiss biathlon.

~ *Robert Sherwood*
Georgia Military College

⁹²“Macolin,” *Construire*, May 6, 1964.