

THE DECATHLON ASSOCIATION

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KONRAD LERCH RETIRES

Ends 35 year reign as Götzis Meet Director

Konrad Lerch, 70, the remarkable meet director of the annual Götzis meeting, has retired. He made the announcement personally at the technical meeting before the 35th Hypo-Bank Combined Events Meeting on Friday, May 28, 2010. And, although we knew this day would eventually come, no one was quite ready for it and, I must say, it was a surprise. You must understand his influence on our sport.

As a CE meet director Konrad had no peers. Only imitators. In 1975 (at age 35) Konrad, then the national CE coach of Austria, fashioned a small annual meeting in a remote hamlet of Götzis (where Mösle Stadium had been built in 1972) in western Austria (a few miles from his home in Bregenz) into the planet's most popular and most successful CE annual gathering. To fans, athletes, coaches and officials, the term "Götzis," and "Konrad Lerch" were synonymous.

He was a perfectionist and his meets were a model of efficiency. Konrad Lerch set the standard for integrity and good organization. If an event was to go off at 2:00



Konrad Lerch ran Götzis Meet for 35 years

pm, it went off at 2:00 pm. If a press conference was to be held at 10:30 am, it started 10:30. The press organization, the transportation, the facilities, the officiating, even the food, were first rate. He did not suffer fools nor mediocre efforts. Athletes who gave half-hearted attempts were not offered a return invitation.

His meet was inspired by a 1973 8000



The start of the 2009 Hypo-Bank Meeting decathlon 100m.

point performance by Sepp Zeilbauer, then an Austrian record. With his numerous international contacts Konrad organized a decathlon/pentathlon meeting at Mosle Stadium in Götzis in 1975 that was well received by the local community. Athletes and coaches who came to Götzis in those early years were overwhelmed by the quality of the competition, the efficient organization and the spectator acceptance. It soon became the top invitational meet. Word spread. In 1980 Daley Thompson set a world decathlon record (7000 fans watched) and American Jane Frederick was a frequent and popular winner. Crowds grew. 10,000 saw Siggie Wentz win in 1987. 10,000 for tiny Mosle Stadium. It was remarkable.

I saw my first meeting in Götzis in 1988 and was awed. This was Deca Mecca. Few Americans came to Götzis after the Jane Frederick era, but that was a scheduling problem. The proximity of the USA national championships (usually two weeks hence) precluded the top Americans from competing. But when dates were altered a bit and Harry Marra brought Sheldon Blockburger in 1994, Americans got a taste of efficiency sorely missing on the other side of the Atlantic. They wanted to come.

Götzis opened its arms to the world and stars came from every corner...., not only the conventional Europeans and North Americans, but from Syria, Sierra Leone, China, New Zealand (Simon Poelman once left the meet in a hot-air balloon after the 1500m), Iceland, Cuba, South Africa and more. Athletes from 58 nations have appeared in the Austrian Alps meet. It was hard keeping them straight. And one had to memorize national flags, colors, uniforms and flags. One uniform that did not need an explanation was that of *Superman*, the garb worn by Australian Simon Shirley in 1995.

In 1998, at the urging of Konrad Lerch, the IAAF approved a CE Challenge and Götzis became its very first meet and showplace. Konrad had recognized that the sport had turned overtly professional and he was at the forefront in providing financial opportunities for the athletes. He *convinced* the IAAF to create a Grand Prix for combined events

And, the late 1990s was the era of the Erki Nool Fan Club, a raucous groups of (as many as 200) based-in Estonian fans supporting their favorite son. Oh, could they be loud. Usually inebriated by 9 am, with accordions and horns, they kept the meet



Over 35 years between one quarter and one half a million spectators came to watch the CEs in Götzis.

hopping for hours. Nool's retirement has made the Götzis meeting a bit more sedate, but just a bit. The fans still come. Last

weekend about 6000 came (over 2 days) and sat in the drizzle to watch Bryan Clay win.

In 1999 the meet celebrated its 25th anniversary and many of the old champs: Guido Kratschmer, Daley Thompson, Jane Frederick, Siggi Wentz returned to see old friends and to honor Konrad. They were replaced by new stars: Tomas Dvorak, Roman Sebrle, Carolina Klüft, Bryan Clay.

In 2001 the new world record set in Götzis by Roman Sebrle (9026) was as much a tribute to Konrad's organization skills as to Roman's athletic skills. He orchestrated it masterfully making certain that Roman had every opportunity to break the record. By 2002 the top Americans had made Götzis part of their schedule. Tom Pappas placed 2nd three times in memorable wars with Sebrle. Bryan Clay won in 2006 and 2010 and Trey Hardee was 2nd in 2009.

foremost, Konrad was both a fan and a friend. He knew every athlete in our sport, every coach and was at the forefront of every challenge and every change our sport encountered.

As he leaves there is only a single decathlon meet which can claim that it's meet record begins with the number "9." And there is only one Konrad Lerch. He was someone you could count on, the commensurate professional. Well done, Konrad. We'll miss him intensely.



Konrad Lerch (left) will be replaced by long-time assistant Walter Weber (right).

Konrad was born in Bregenz on August 23, 1939. He was an engineer by profession and is recently (at age 70) married. (My hero!). In 1962 he was the Austrian 110m hurdle champ (15.1) and had a PR of 14.8 (1963, Leoben). On one occasion he competed in a decathlon. By the mid-1970s he was the national CE coach for Austria. Whether he had a desire to organize or was inspired by Zeilbauer's early success (perhaps both), he became a meet director and soon the planet's most successful one. He was a master at obtaining sponsorships for his meet. Success beget success. By 2010 the meet program was 74 pages. 74! Konrad will be replaced by long-time assistant Walter Weber.

Konrad Lerch was the face of our sport for a third of a century. First and