

Saarland: The 'new' Olympic nation which appeared only once

By Hans Giessen

Entry to the Olympic Village in Käpylä – at least for the Saarland men. The five female team members were directed far away to a school run by nuns in Tuka. Everything was to be conducted with “decency”. On the shield is still the French inscription ‘Sarre’.

Photo: Saarländisches Landesarchiv



On the 19th July 1952, Urpo Ryönänkoski was amongst the 70,000 crowd and watched the opening ceremony of the Helsinki Olympic Games with great excitement. The day was not exactly summery. It was cool and rain left the arena full of puddles. The day of all weather tracks had not yet arrived. Even so, the mood among the spectators was good, even uplifting. Ryönänkoski was excited not only because the Games were about to begin, but also because they represented the start of a personal adventure.

His regular job was as a lieutenant in the Finnish army, but he spoke excellent German. For the duration of the Games, he was seconded as a radio producer and ‘fixer’. In 1952 broadcast journalism was still a complicated business. Radio not television was the dominant medium but live transmissions to distant countries remained technically difficult if not impossible.

There were also language problems. English was not the obvious *lingua franca* it has become today. It was important to the Finns that they were perceived as capable hosts as the potential of Helsinki as a host city of major events including political events would later be founded on the success of the 1952 Games. The organisers in Finland carefully considered how things could best be arranged.

“The Department for the Olympics of Finnish radio” decided to engage “language assistants”. A personal assistant would be on hand to assist a foreign commentator for the duration of the Games’, remembers Ryönänkoski. His duties included organising transport between various venues, interpretation and translation, the gathering of information and establishing contacts. He would then also take the recordings to the public Finnish broadcasting service (YLE), from where they would be relayed to the reporter’s home station. In short the role was one of facilitator so that reports of a high standard could be presented.

In early July 1952, the list of foreign commentators and their assistants was published. Ryönänkoski discovered that he had been assigned to the only radio reporter from a completely new Olympic nation: Saarland.



Hans Giessen | He studied at the FU Berlin, the Université de Metz, France and the Universität des Saarlandes. After achieving his doctorate, he followed a career in the media working in Saarbrücken, Luxembourg and as an editor and reporter with ZDF. He was then awarded a research bursary and has been a Professor in Saarbrücken since 2009. He also works with the University of Helsinki. In 2014, he contributed an article on Michel Bréal to the *JOH* (Vol. 23, No. 2).

Saarland as an Olympic nation? Today it is one of the smallest federal states in Germany.² How could a such a territory, with a population of less than a million, become an independent Olympic nation? Then as now, it was necessary for a National Olympic Committee (NOC) to be internationally recognised.³ This was a time when "Cold War" tension was at its height. The Federal Republic of (West) Germany had risen from the Western Allied zones of occupation. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) had been formed in the East from the Soviet zone.

So as not to exclude East German athletes, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Executive Committee had brokered an agreement with both German NOCs. This laid down that athletes from the GDR would be permitted take part in the West German qualification events and if they qualified they would become part of the German team. In the end negotiations foundered. This was a time of great political tension and the GDR demanded equal treatment. As a result only West German athletes appeared at the Games in 1952. An "all-German" rule was not put in place until the 1956 Melbourne Games. This remained in force until 1964. It was only in 1968 that a GDR team took part as a separate entity.

Which begs the question, if such matter were so complicated, how was it that little Saarland was permitted to send its own team to Helsinki in 1952? It was for the same reason for the little state today exists as an independent federal unit.⁴

Historically Saarland has been a rich strip of land. Rich because of coal mining, the basis of industrial prosperity. Since the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15, part of the area occupied by today's federal state had been Prussian, another section was Bavarian and there was a portion which belonged to the free state of Oldenburg.

After Germany's defeat in the First World War, France received "Reparations". As part of the deal, a rich "Saar Region" was created. This included the Prussian, Bavarian and Oldenburg territories here mining was dominated. Politically the territory came under League of Nations administration.

The population was mainly German however, and in a plebiscite held in 1935, around 90 per cent voted for a return to Germany, even though Hitler had already risen to power. After the Second World War the whole process was repeated, with slightly adjusted borders. Once again the Saar territory was economically joined to France.

This time the French were determined to avoid the mistakes of the past and made concessions. They granted people a far-reaching autonomy with their own regional government. Sport seemed an especially suitable vehicle to foster identity, and the Olympic Games was the most prestigious event. It was little

wonder then that the Saarlanders made a big effort to become full members of the Olympic Movement as quickly as possible.

The strength of political interest in the matter was indicated by the nomination of Erwin Müller as NOC President. He was Minister of Justice and Culture and as such was a member of the regional government and sometime Deputy Prime Minister.⁵

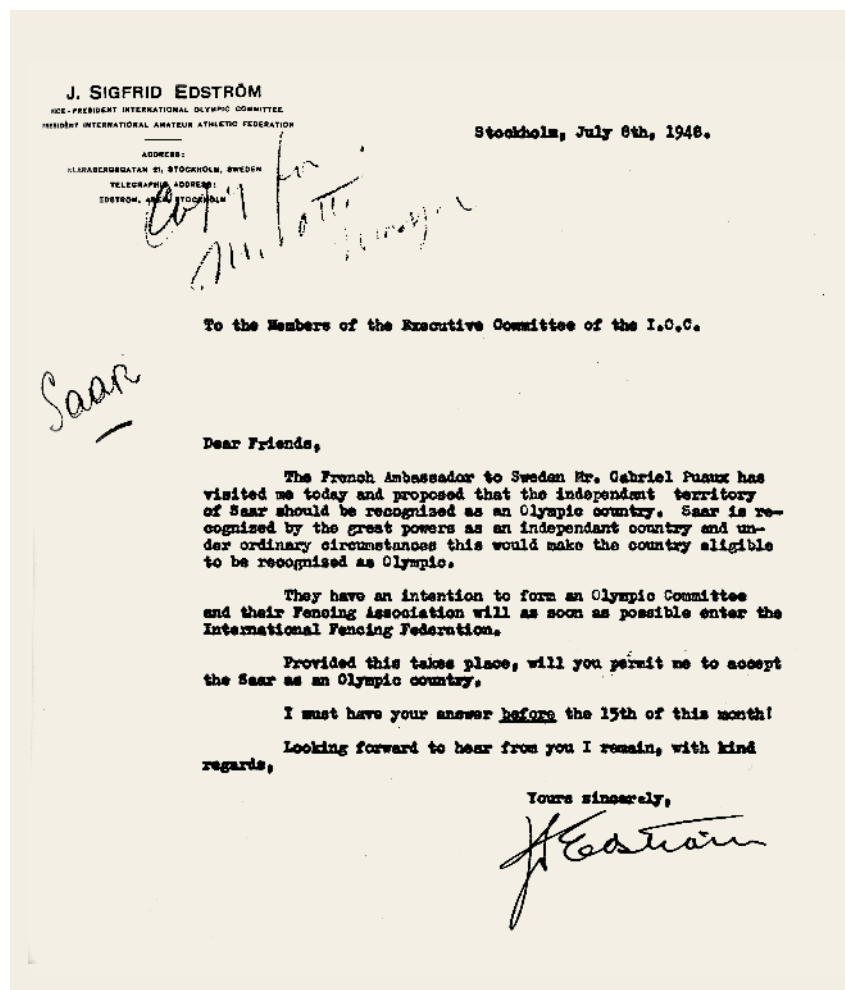
The IOC accepted the application on 15th May 1950 at their Session in Copenhagen. According to Wolfgang Harres⁶ this was achieved through various procedural "tricks". The vote on the Saarland NOC had been set for ten minutes before the lunch break, a time members were less willing to become embroiled in complex arguments. Although the IOC were set to discuss new Olympic Committees and the German question, there was no explicit mention of the Saarland on the original agenda.

Since Coubertin's time, the IOC had favoured their own 'sporting geography' (As a result of this Bohemia, which belonged to Austria, and the Grand Duchy of Finland, at that time still a part of the Russian empire, was permitted take part in the Olympic Games from 1906 to 1912). Whatever: now the Saar NOC was accepted. The West German NOC's claim to represent all German territories



The legendary Saarland miner's lamp. Below: IOC President Edström informed the Executive Committee in 1948 before the London Games of a visit from the French Ambassador in Sweden. As no sports associations had yet been constituted, Saarland had to be patient until 1952.

Photos: Finnish Sports Museum, IOCIOSCArchives



Olympic stamps as a source of finance. An extra stamp of 30+5 francs was devised by Hubert Blum. Around 225,000 were sold. Far right: "Being there" is everything. Saarland appeared for the first and only time as an independent Olympic country at Helsinki. The flag bearer was long jumper Toni Breder.

Photos: Saarländisches Landesarchiv, Volker Kluge Archive



was rejected. The inclusion of the Saarland team was conditional on the affiliation of a number of national governing bodies including athletics to their respective International Federations.

On 19th July 1952 the Helsinki Games opened and a Saar team of 37 athletes marched into the Olympic Stadium of Töölö as one of the 69 'nations'. It included five women, four relay runners and a canoeist. A further 24 other representatives followed, among them eight coaches and a sports doctor, plus the 'officials' from the Saarland NOC, among them Erwin Müller.

Three journalists were also accredited. Two newspaper reporters and the radio correspondent Charly Scholz, to whom Ryönänkoski was assigned. "This was a lucky task", said the 'language assistant'. For athletes from the Saar took part not only in athletics but also in eight other sports. "The job of looking after Scholz, who commentated on all sports, proved to be varied and mobile, but also demanding." It was fortunate that the two men got on so well.

The Saarlanders won no medals but for them, the high point was the march in during the opening ceremony. This had the effect of establishing the identity of the Saar as a separate territory. In addition the marching order according to the language of the hosts had dealt them a prominent position following Sweden (in Finnish: Ruotsi), and almost too good to be true, directly in front of Germany (Saksa in Finnish)! So the whole world gazed at tiny Saarland.

However the Saarlanders had been early in twisting the screw. For when the new member country was introduced at the IOC, the French 'Sarre' was to be used the region is after all named after the frontier river. In

German this is written as 'Saar', but in French as 'Sarre' (its name is supposed to derive from a pre-Celtic word, probably Sara/Sarava = to flow, to stream)⁸.

'Sarre' would have been appropriate because French has been the predominant official language of the IOC since Coubertin, but also because France had been the driving force behind this autonomous small country. The photographs were sent back to their homeland in the early stages depicted the team displaying a shield with the inscription 'Sarre'. But suddenly the German designation 'Saar' was deemed acceptable, to hit back at their mighty neighbour. And thus the Saarlanders marched in directly in front of the Germans, and not just behind them.

It was a thrilling moment for Saarland, but Charly Scholz remained cool. "The slim, sharp-eyed commentator spoke perfect High German, with a pleasant, sonorous voice, which did not let him down even at the critical moment, although the noise increased", recalled Ryönänkoski. Scholz's contributions needed scarcely any editing before at all they were then sent to Saarbrücken in the evening⁹.

Germany had reacted sniffily to the decision to grant the Saarland recognition. The 'Olympic passports' given out by the IOC were supposed to guarantee a visa-free journey to Finland. They were valid from 1st March to 31st August 1952 and were legally recognised. But the Federal Republic did not recognise the documents of the Saarlanders, as their claim to be a team for the whole of Germany did not accept the existence of a separate Saar team. The Saarlanders were therefore forbidden to travel by the shortest route which would have been via Germany to Finland. Instead the delegation had make a

special trip in chartered buses to Paris. From there they flew in two SAS aircraft via Copenhagen and Stockholm, respectively, to Helsinki.

The difficulties extended to the team uniforms. On 14th November 1951 the Saarland NOC decided on an Olympic uniform consisting of a blue jacket, grey trousers, grey leather shoes and a grey hat. Later it was learned that the Germans would be intending to march in a similar colour combination. On 24th January 1952, the decision was changed and new clothing ordered. To distinguish themselves from the Germans, the Saarlanders uniform was altered to beige hats, brown blazers with cream shirts and sandy coloured ties, grey trousers and brown shoes.

It was an emotional scene when those 37 Saarlanders marched into the Olympic Stadium ahead of 214 Germans. An image to spark feelings of pride. Perhaps it awakened feelings of identity among many Saarlanders. At least that was the impression held by Ryönänkoski. "There was hardly any other team at the Helsinki Games, which would have experienced the Olympic Games and their atmosphere at the opening and closing ceremonies more deeply and intimately than the Saarland team."¹⁰

And they managed one further public relations coup. The Olympic flame was flown from Athens to the

north in a Saarland miner's lamp typical of those used underground in the pits. The idea probably came from Ludwig Seitz, the chief sports official for company sport in the state Saar mines in Sulzbach – he was then also nominated as Olympic inspector. Thus this new nation was also mentioned prominently in coverage of the Olympic Torch Relay. Saarland could hardly have been introduced to the world's public in a more public or sympathetic way and at minimal cost.

Originally it was intended that a Saarland football team was supposed to travel to Helsinki. From April 1952 the Saxon-born Helmut Schön was put in charge of training the squad. (He later guided West Germany to victory in the 1972 European Championship and 1974 World Cup.)

But here the Saarland NOC hesitated, probably because of political advice. A potential meeting between Saarland and the German team might well cause divisions amongst a football-mad population. This would undo the efforts made in political circles to foster a 'feeling of Saarland identity'.

Although the Saarlanders had been drawn against Austria in the elimination round, their football team was then withdrawn. Officially the reason given was financial, but was probably a pretext. After all the government had guaranteed the participation of all



The most emotional moment. The entry of the Saarlanders to strengthen national identity.

Photo: Saarländisches Landesarchiv

competitors to the IOC and the Saarland parliament had also agreed the money.

On 23rd October 1955 there was yet another referendum and around two thirds of the population voted to return to the German fold. (There was a 96.6 per cent turnout of voters). In spite of their traumatic experiences in the Nazi era, the feelings of belonging to the German culture outweighed the newly emerging sense of Saar identity.

Now it was a question of taking back the special route without 'breaking too much china'. At first the NOC tried to make it possible for its athletes to compete in the next Games in Melbourne. Although the independent Saarland still existed in the summer of 1956, after the referendum result it was almost impossible for their own team to travel. At the IOC Session in Cortina d'Ampezzo the Saar NOC asked to be allowed to take part as part of the 'united' German team.

Initially the IOC Members refused, in view of the expense already incurred to get a Saar team to Helsinki. Once the Saarland sports federations had joined the Deutscher Sportbund (DSB) on 20th September 1956 despite the misgivings of the NOC, the IOC declared itself in agreement with this premature integration. Shortly after that the Saarland NOC dissolved itself.

On 1st January 1957 there followed political integration as the tenth German federal state, and on 6th July 1959 economic attachment followed as the German mark was adopted. The independent 'Radio Saarbrücken' now became a regional German station, which continued to employ existing members of staff including Charly Scholz.

Even though the new nation was no more, Ryönänkoski had his memories of a unique historical event, in which he had taken part and taken a 'special' path, that had its crowing moment in the triumphal march on 19th July 1952. ■

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- 1 Bernardi/Fischer/Meyer 2004: 173
- 2 The incredulity which attends the story of the Saar team is demonstrated in Höfer's 2016 contribution: "A Saarland Olympic team – did it really exist?"
- 3 Although this is not explicitly stated in the Olympic Charter, it is generally accepted that the IOC only recognises one NOC per country.
- 4 Linsmayer 2007
- 5 On the history of the NOC and the events in the run-up to the Games, cf. Bernardi/Fischer/Meyer 2004 und Harres 1997
- 6 Harres 1997
- 7 Bernardi/Fischer/Meyer 2004: 174
- 8 Kirsch 2016
- 9 Bernardi/Fischer/Meyer 2004: 174
- 10 Bernardi/Fischer/Meyer 2004: 175

At the 1956 Games in Melbourne the Saarlanders had already been absorbed into the unified German team. However two of their own stamps appeared, showing an antique head of a youth, exhibited in the Louvre, the "Tete de jeune homme de Bénévant". The designer was the well known French engraver Raoul Serres.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

