

A Saarland Olympic team – did that really exist?

By Andreas Höfer

The Summer of '52. Even today, all of 63 years later, Hilde Peters likes to remember her participation in the Olympic Games in Helsinki as an unforgettable highlight of her sporting career. Under her maiden name Hilde Antes, she competed in the heat of the 80 m hurdles alongside, amongst others against the defending 1948 champion, the Dutchwoman Fanny Blankers-Koen who had won three other golds at those Games. Peters posted a time of 12 seconds which was a national record, and helped set another with 49.0 with compatriots in a heat of the 4 x 100 m relay.

Antes represented Saarland, which in the confusion of the post-war period had arisen as a French military governed region. It possessed an autonomous status which made possible the building up of a sports organisation. Thus a regional sports federation, sports unions and a National Olympic Committee were founded. In May 1950 these were provisionally recognised by the IOC – just as the NOC of the Federal Republic of Germany was to be. Later the GDR was added as a third German NOC.

And so Saarland had stepped onto the great stage of world sport. 36 competitors, both men and women wore the colours of their 'country', among them Antes, who put on the blue and red vest with a silver cross in the centre, and took part in the 1952 Olympics.

None of them stepped spectacularly into the spotlight. The best result seems to have been achieved by canoeist Therese Zenz aus Merzig, only 19, who finished ninth on the unfamiliar waters of the

Baltic. Two years later she became a world champion, the only one for Saarland.

In 1954 Saarland also drew made a name for themselves in football. Unable to send a team to Helsinki because of the cost, Saarland now took part in the qualifying for the World Cup in Switzerland. They were coached by a young Helmut Schön who had played for Dresdner SC with whom he had twice won the German championship. He was capped 16 times.



They managed an away win against Norway and a draw at home. They only lost 0-3 and 1-3 to the German side who were later to win the World Cup. However that was not enough to get to the final round.

In October 1955 the great majority of Saarlanders voted against the "Saarstatut" and thus against the idea of an autonomous "European territory". And so the way was free for them to join the Federal Republic of Germany. They did so from 1st January 1957, at which point sporting independence was also lost.

Irrespective of that the Saarlanders would have been able to take part with their own team in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, but they chose not to. Instead they joined in a united German team which included the athletes of the GDR. Had they not done this, Therese Zenz would again have won silver for the Saarland. She followed up with by two further silver medals in Rome in 1960.

So that the memory of the only Olympic participation by Saarland would not be forgotten, Hilde Peters decided to hand over her personal memorabilia to the German Sports & Olympic Museum in Cologne. The director willingly accepted with his own hands a rucksack made by the "Lafuma" company, manufactured in France and decorated with a Helsinki badge, as well as the spikes she had worn at the time. These of course did not compare with today's high-tech equipment. Yet they were acquired with honest money and as Hilde Peters made clear, worn with great pride.



The emblem of the Olympic team corresponded to the coat of arms used by the Saar state from 1948 to 1956. The colours of the tricolor reflected the influence of the French occupying power.

Left: Therese Zenz, finished ninth in single kayak at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics and in 1954 became the only Saarland world champion. In 1956 and 1960 she won three silver medals in the German team. She was also a trained mosaic artist.

Photos: Landesarchiv Saarbrücken, Bildersammlung: Volker Kluge Archive

The Olympic safety lamp

On their first visit to Helsinki in November 1951 the Saarland delegation presented a safety lamp from 1910 to Erik von Frenckell, President of the Organising Committee. Such a lamp was traditionally used by the Saarland miners. He was very pleased with the gift, as until then he had found no solution as to how the Olympic flame could safely be transported by air from Athens to Munich and later via Denmark and Sweden to Finland. Four years later the Saarlanders sent another safety lamp to the Australians. It was a sturdier and more efficient model than in 1952, as the flight to Melbourne lasted 56 hours.

Photo: Official Report Helsinki 1952

