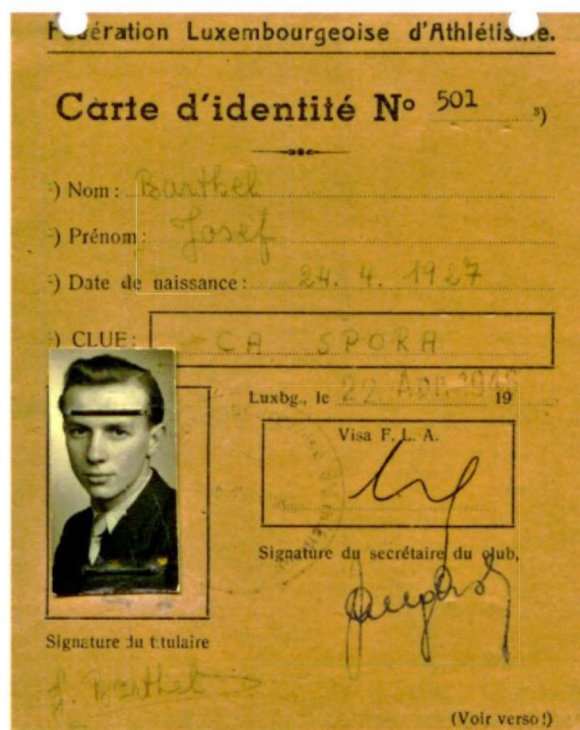


# When tears write history

Josy Barthel, Luxembourg's only Olympic champion, was born 90 years ago

By Pierre Gricius



In Luxembourg his name is known by every child. It was on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1927, 90 years ago, that Josy Barthel came into the world. He came from Mamer, born into modest circumstances but remained proud of his roots. On 26<sup>th</sup> July 1952, he won the men's 1500 m at the Helsinki Olympic Games and became world famous at once. Two pictures went round the world. One shows Barthel in the moment of triumph, with arms raised, the other, a few minutes later, as Olympic champion, on the podium, fighting back tears.

Barthel made a lasting impression on Luxembourg sport that went beyond his sporting achievements on the track. He was an initiator of groundbreaking reforms in the athletics federation. He served as its President from 1962 to 1973. Then he presided over the National Olympic Committee from 1973 to 1977. In September 1977, he was

called to join Gaston Thorn's government as a minister. Barthel died at the age of 65 on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1992. His passing came a little too early after a long illness.

## A perfectionist with a will to teach

Sixty-five years after his Olympic victory, and a quarter of a century on from his death, Josy Barthel still holds a unique place in the history of Luxembourg sport, itself not exactly short of dazzling performances. Barthel was a sporting hero such as the Grand Duchy had not seen. It had produced two great cyclists Nicolas Frantz, a Tour de France winner in 1927 and 1928 and Charly Gaul who did so in 1958. Like them, Barthel was a man of the people and a hard worker in sport. At the same time he had a light elegant writing style and reflected on his performances, but also his sufferings and doubts, in literary form. Barthel was most comfortable in French, kept a diary conscientiously and wrote genuinely demanding texts.

To a certain extent he was an intellectual of his sport. He was never tempted to move into what some regarded as higher spheres. He was too firmly anchored

At 17, Josy Barthel was called up to an anti-aircraft regiment during the war. But he deserted in September 1944, a month before the liberation of Luxembourg by the US Army. Over 10,000 Luxembourgers born between 1920 and 1927 were conscripted. 28 per cent lost their lives. As early as April 1945, Barthel received the licence of the Luxembourg athletics association (left), issued under his name "Josef".

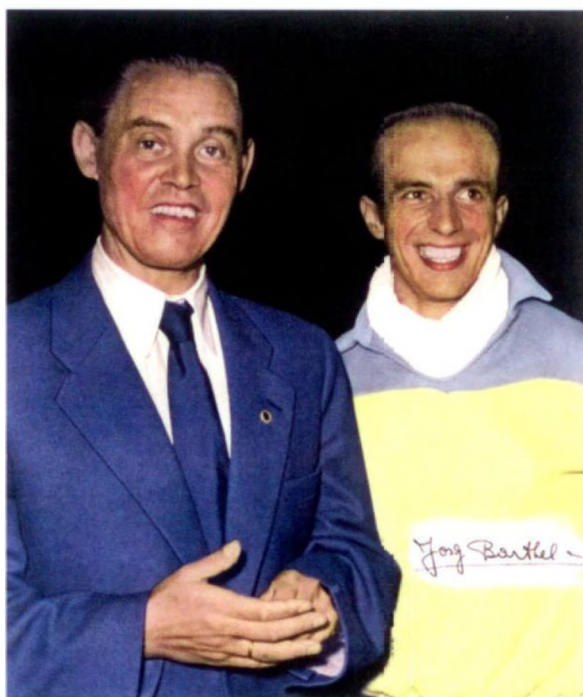
Adjacent: Barthel first made his mark as a 16 year old in a 1500 m race in Diekirch during the summer of 1943.

Photos: Pierre Gricius Archive



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Josy Barthel with Woldemar Gerschler, who organised his training programme from 1951. This included interval training. Gerschler, had previously trained the German world record holder Rudolf Harbig who had been killed during the war. He visited Luxembourg rarely. When Barthel surprisingly became Olympic champion, Gerschler was criticised in Germany, because his own protégés Werner Lueg and Günter Dohrow had been beaten by a foreigner.



Photos: Pierre Gricius Archive, Volker Kluge Archive

in Luxembourg sport to wish involvement elsewhere. Nothing caused him greater irritation than the attitude of armchair administrators. At that time they persisted with old fashioned practices at the expense of the vitality of an open lively sporting life. After his competitive career, Barthel was not shy of taking on responsibility and getting much needed reforms under way.

Throughout his life, Barthel was a perfectionist with a tendency to be a teacher. There was no question for him of neglecting his studies to have more time for sport – at least not at the price of stress and innumerable short nights.

His big chance of Olympic victory did not come until 1952, but Barthel had first caught the eye with impressive performances as early as 1947. But at that time, his studies took priority. Here too, he was also driven to be among the best.

A family man through and through, Barthel had a special affinity with his friends at the CA Spora sports club and the Lasel student sport federation. They formed the guard of honour when a few months after his triumph in Helsinki, the Olympic champion married his fiancée Fernande Senninger. His motivation to pass on his knowledge to those followed in his footsteps was less not so much a matter of obligation but an expression of a natural desire to teach.

### Barthel and Letsch, the story of a friendship

The friendship of Léon Letsch and Josy Barthel developed in childhood and continued until Barthel's death in 1992. Their family homes were scarcely a hundred metres apart; their common interest was sport. Barthel lived with his parents and his sister Cécile, two years his

junior. The house called "A Chruetzesch" was in the Rue Josy Barthel, which today is no longer as modest as 90 years ago, when the lane stood in the shadow of the "A Schungeschten" estate building. This has long since disappeared. Now the site is occupied by the Place du Marché. Just opposite are the church and the school. A little farther on is the house where Letsch was born. His parents ran, an "Epicerie" (grocery shop) and a café.

"As far as I can remember, we were always together", says Letsch. The two attended a kindergarten and later the primary school, at which incidentally the boys and girls went into a single class. From the second year of school they were separated.

Their time as schoolfriends in Mamer continued into the seventh class of the upper primary school. Thereafter they both attended the Athenäum in the capital, Josy in Septième B, Léon in Septième D – but both classes had the same timetable. Letsch describes his friend as "a very good and very ambitious pupil". Josy was equally interested in all subjects.

### Exclamation marks in Diekirch and in Berlin

Although he was barely 16, Barthel first made his mark as a runner in the summer of 1943. At that time Luxembourg was occupied by Nazi Germany. It was ordered that sport in the Grand Duchy be "Germanised". Barthel was a member of the SV Moselland 07 club.

On the cinder track in Diekirch the "coming man" gave the established stars cause to be afraid. In the 1500 m Luxembourg's 3000 m record holder Josy Deloge, and Charles Heirendt who held the 5000 m and 10,000 m were considered favourites. Yet in the duel of these "cracks" Barthel showed himself as a laughing third man. When Heirendt quickened the pace, it was Deloge who fell away not Barthel. Even then Barthel had an irresistible sprint and broke the tape in first place.

This was the first 1500 m race for the boy who would later be Olympic champion. His winning was 4:29.6 min, not particularly dramatic. It was not the last that would be heard of Barthel that season. On 19<sup>th</sup> September 1943 he raced for SV Moselland in a match against Strasbourg in Esch. He beat the Strasbourg runner Bässler in 4:16.4 min. Two races and two victories at only 16 years, both at what would become his specialist distance. It was a more than respectable start.

### A commitment with consequences

In 1950, the former German Reich trainer Woldemar Gerschler was engaged as Barthel's coach. This was the result of an agreement made in Lausanne between Lucien Hayardt (First Vice-President of the Luxembourg athletics association, FLA) and the President of the (West) German association (DLV), Dr. Max Danz. It was



agreed that Gerschler was to take in hand the Olympic preparation of the Luxembourg athletes.

In return they would support the reintegration of the Germans. At that time the DLV only had observer status at European Athletics congresses. The two former middle distance runners discussed the possibility of engaging a German coach for Luxembourg. Danz brought up some names including that of Gerschler, who after the war had gone from Dresden in the Soviet zone of occupation to Freiburg i. B., in the French zone.

As far as Hayardt was concerned Gerschler was the only candidate, He had trained Germany's world record holder Rudolf Harbig, who had been killed in war. But Danz reacted defensively: "You are taking my best horse. As a man of honour however I accept your proposal if you can achieve a match." What Danz had was an international match between West Germany – whether with an A-, B- or C- team – and Luxembourg.

To get agreement was anything but easy. The Lausanne congress was chaired by none other than the French representative Paul Méricamp. When the meeting discussed "international matches" Luxembourg was the first association to be asked for proposals, whereupon Hayardt listed: "Alsace-Lorraine, Netherlands B, Belgium B and ... Germany B!" There was a cry of indignation from Méricamp. There was a lively discussion and finally the decision: "Do what you want!"

With that the proposal was accepted. Other countries followed. On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1951 in Trier, the German B-team and Luxembourg met in the first post war international athletics match. The Germans won by 112 points to 44.

### The official and the unofficial winning time

At the 1952 Olympics there was an innovation in the men's 1500 m. For the the first time there were to be three qualifying rounds. Heats, semi-finals and final. These three races were held on 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> July. 52 runners took part. For the leading contenders, it was a matter of keeping something in reserve in the two preliminary rounds in order to go to the start in the final still relatively fresh.

Josy Barthel did not show this tactical caution. Each time he ran played safe and won, using his sprinting strength. In the first of the six heats he was a convincing winner in 3:51.6 ahead of German Günther Dohrow (3:51.8) and Sweden's Ingvar Ericsson (3:52.0). The first four in each heat qualified for the semi-final. Besides the nominated runners in Barthel's heat was also the Australian Donald Macmillan (3:52.0).

Barthel won the first of the semi-finals in 3:50.4 ahead of the Swedes Olof Åberg and Ingvar Ericsson, American Bob McMillen and Roger Bannister of Great Britain. All given the same time of 3:50.6 min. As the sixth finisher the German Rolf Lamers (3:50.8) also qualified for the final. Dohrow, who had been considered co-favourite, was tenth and eliminated.

The final went the way Barthel had hoped and expected. As forecast, Lamers went into the lead from the gun, followed by Werner Lueg who had set a world

Helsinki 1952: after the last bend in the 1500 m final the German world record holder Werner Lueg led by five to six metres. Barthel made his decisive move 50 metres from the line. He said later that he had practised this sprint at home in the woods of Mamer around 3000 times. Barthel crossed the finish line with a smile on his face.



After his victory Josy Barthel wept like a child. Lueg, who won the bronze medal, registered disappointment. Barthel later told his friends about a dream in which he won the race but then woke up with a start, because he believed that the band could not play the Luxembourg anthem. But when the dream became reality, the band did manage to play.

Josy Barthel at the Grand Prix which bore his name. He was especially concerned with young people. He was also ready to take on responsibility. From 1973 to 1977 he was President of the Luxembourg NOC. Previously he led the athletics federation for over ten years.



Photo: le Cinquenaire du C.O.L.

record in Berlin barely a month before (He posted 3:43.0 on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1952 in the Berlin Olympic Stadium). He came through the first 400 metres in a fast 57 seconds, so that his tactics were clear. Lamers was to set the pace for Lueg so as to shake off the competition early.

In fact, the race became markedly slower, for the weaker Lamers could not perform to the same level as Dohrow might have done. At 800 m, reached in 2:01.4 min, Lueg took over again and speeded up, but Barthel had already moved into position behind him. The German was the first into the finishing straight with a lead of two metres, but he felt his advantage over his fast-finishing opponents melting away, which is why he looked several times uncertainly to the right, where a runner sprinted past him. It was Josy Barthel.

Again Lueg glanced to the side and this time, he caught sight of the American McMillen. Now it was the bronze at best for Lueg. Those who had worshipped him until then, now became his sharpest critics. "Disappointment for Germany" – that that was the least of it. The Germans were not to win a single gold medal at those Games.

Barthel and McMillen were given an Olympic record 3:45.2 min in the official results. In fact the Luxembourg was a tenth of a second in front of the American. This apparent contradiction is explained the fact that according to the existing rules at the time the results from the 1500 m upwards were rounded up to full fifths of a second. In accordance with an IAAF from 1926. Until then all times reached on the track were timed in tenths of a second.

The reason for this step, incomprehensible today: people were of the view that from a certain span of time, thought to be around three minutes, the stopwatches used then would not give exact measurements. How absurd this argument was is seen clearly from the picture of the run-in in Helsinki. It can be clearly recognised that Barthel lay well in front of McMillen. Yet both were given the same time of 3:45.2 min. In Olympic record progression lists, Barthel's name is alongside that of McMillen.

Even then technical development was well in advance of the rules. Automatic timekeeping which was much more precise had been developed pre-war but the IAAF

refused to accept it. In 1952 in Helsinki the results were given in hundredths of a second. These unofficial times offer a much truer picture of the run-in and the intervals: Barthel ran 3:45.28 min, McMillen 3:45.39. The difference between the hand-timed 3:45.1 and the automatically timed 3:45.28 is explained by the reaction time of the timekeepers at the gun.

### An Olympic victory for the front page

Barthel's Olympic victory was front page news for the *Luxemburger Wort* on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1952. At the time this in itself was highly unusual. That this was achieved was due to former international sprinter and long jumper François Mersch. (His national record of 7.44 m stood for 47 years from 1938)

Mersch was a sort of jack of all trades in all branches of Luxembourg sport. Although not employed by the newspaper, he wrote a long euphoric report off his own bat and presented it to the editors. As it turned out, the 1500 m final was on a Saturday and the paper did not appear on Sundays. For the Monday edition only a relatively small report from Helsinki was expected from sports editor Emile Goebel, who in addition to his journalist duties was also President of the Sporting Press Union and Luxembourg press attaché. In other words, he was very busy.

It all happened in the press room, where typesetters altered the already finished first page and sent it to the management and chief editorial team and inserted the photo of the finish in Helsinki. They did so with "be it on your head, Herr Mersch!" On a weekday that would certainly not have been possible. The picture moved to make room was of Eva Perón, the wife of the Argentinian President, whose was relegated down the page.

### "Luxembourg Express" creates a furore on the US east coast

The next challenge was approaching. Barthel had been offered a scholarship by the famous Harvard Graduate School of Art and Sciences. This had a double attraction, for he had the opportunity to specialise the subject of sanitary engineering, today one would speak of environmental protection, and in addition the chance to race at indoor meetings on the east coast of the United States. On the 19<sup>th</sup> September 1953 Josy and Fernande Barthel boarded the "Maasdam" of the Holland-America Line in New York.

The Olympic champion's tour was a great success. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1954 Barthel ran the mile at the Boston Amateur Athletic Games in 4:07.7 min. The American media immediately suggested that he would be capable of achieving the "Dream Mile", in other words break the four minute barrier.

Barthel's result was at that time the third best in the all time indoor lists. Until then only the Americans Gilbert Dodds (1948/4:05.3 min) and Chuck Fenske (1940/4:07.4 min) had run faster. Barthel was to improve his time by two tenths of a second a week later at Madison Square Garden. On 20<sup>th</sup> February he brought his indoor tour to an end with a victory at the open American Championships also in New York.

### The critic takes responsibility

In Luxembourg there was a lot of discussion about the 1956 Melbourne Games and not all of it was about sporting matters. Before the team boarded the plane to Australia on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1956, Barthel and the 400 and 800 m runner Gérard Rasquin both gave interviews to *Revue* magazine. Neither man held back "My mother did more for my colleagues as the whole federation, starting with the president", said Barthel. Rasquin pointed out that "On my own initiative and at my own cost I went with Barthel to Freiburg."

In retrospect these interviews appear to be the tipping point of dissatisfaction with the arrogant behaviour of federation chiefs. The most important consequence came six years later Barthel and Rasquin took over the fate of the Luxembourg athletics association with others who were also dissatisfied. They ended the old routine, modernised structures and introduced reforms which restored respect for the FLA.

Four years after Helsinki things had become clear. Barthel's victory presented a golden opportunity to take Luxembourg athletics forward. To a great extent this had been missed. There was only one visible legacy for the principle Olympic sport: since 1954 the CA Spora had organised the "Grand Prix Josy Barthel" for the primary schools in the capital.

Barthel and Rasquin, regarded until then as "eternal" critics, had interesting initiatives ready for their first months in office were already waiting in the first months of their new mandate with interesting initiatives. The "Route du Vin" over the half-marathon route along the Mosel was called into life – a project at the heart of which above all was peace. The rules were reformed from the bottom up, and within the main committee, people worked as a team, but each had individual responsibility for a specific area. This model justified itself in the course of the decades. After his ten and a half years as athletics president, Barthel led the Luxembourg Olympic Committee from 1973 to 1977.

From 1962 a fresh wind blew through the hidebound and obsolete structures of athletics in Luxembourg. It was anything but a gentle breeze. Over the next ten years and with only seven honorary members, who met every week, a huge amount of work was done. Performance classes with set criteria were created, on



Josy Barthel had taken part in the European Championships as early as 1946 and made his Olympic debut in 1948. He studied chemistry in Strasbourg from 1947 to 1951 and later went to Harvard. He made a name for himself as an environmentalist. He became government commissioner for water protection, which brought him the nickname "Water-Josy". From 1977 to 1984, he was minister for amongst other things, environment, traffic, energy, tourism and communication.

Photo: Walter Rieger

the basis of which the athletes were supported and sent to courses not only in Luxembourg, but also abroad. One such was on the French Atlantic coast in Lacanau. Connections were established with regional associations in neighbouring countries.

Common courses were organised and mutually agreed on at meetings. Courses for coaches and officials sprang into life. Women's athletics was not forgotten either. This was systematically built up again. Although in 1948 there had been a legendary Luxembourg female trio "Tilly, Trinya Milly" (Tilly Decker, Trinya Bourkæl and Milly Ludwig) athletics for women had faded from the scene.

All these developments for the benefit of athletics would not have been possible without the natural authority and charisma of Josy Barthel. He and Rasquin managed to build up solid and reliable structures within the FLA, which still functioned when their successors took over responsibility. Today that is called sustainability. ■

### Michel Theato and Jean Jacoby

Often Josy Barthel is described as the only Luxembourg Olympic champion. That is not technically correct. It would be better to say that he is the only official Olympic winner in sport.

In 1900, twelve years before the foundation of the Luxembourg NOC, Michel Theato won the Olympic marathon in Paris for his French club Saint-Mandé. The medal was (and remains) ascribed by the IOC to France. This was in breach of the rules in force at that time, which stated that the athletes started for their own country. Theato had been born in the City of Luxembourg in 1878 and remained a Luxembourger all his life.

The artist Jean Jacoby won the gold medal for painting in 1924, with the work "Etude de Sport (Corner, Départ, Rugby)". In 1928 he was awarded gold again, this time in the "drawings" category for his work "Rugby". From 1912 to 1948 the art competitions were part of the official programme of the Olympic Games. They had equal status with the sports competitions though most contemporary record books do not include them. (PG,