

The German "Zehnkampf-TEAM" – approach to an "International Decathlon Team"?

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by Christian Schenk

“ In 1989 a group of German decathletes founded what they called a 'Zehnkampf-TEAM', with a view to bringing about much needed improvements in the situation of decathlon. The aims were unity and co-operation among all those involved or interested in the decathlon, such as athletes, coaches, doctors and scientists, an exchange of knowledge, better financial support and a strong system of doping control. This paper describes the background to the founding of 'Zehnkampf-TEAM', its problems and its successes and the way in which it proposed to combat actively the doping problem, to popularise the decathlon, with the aid of professional management, and to support young decathletes. A sincere attempt to internationalize of the TEAM spirit was also undertaken but, so far, has met with little success. ”

Christian Schenk was Olympic Decathlon Champion in 1988, 3rd at the World Championships in 1991 and 4th in 1993. His personal best performance is 8488 points, scored in 1988.

(Translated from the original German by Mirja Hommel)

Pre-note: The paper was originally prepared for Christian Schenk's presentation at the EACA-Conference in Valladolid, which he could not attend due to business commitments. This version is edited and completed (inserts in *italics*) by Claus Marek (German National Coach combined events) and Helmar Hommel (NSA EEB). The supplementary inserts were made to give more detailed information on the historical background and goals of the German "Zehnkampf-TEAM" and also to furnish details about a first approach to an international decathlon team and the experiences entailed, which Christian Schenk himself could not deal with in his planned lecture.

For more than thirteen years I have been proudly associated with the "royal event". Proudly, because it is a real challenge to train for ten different athletic events. Its history, commencing in 1912 in Stockholm with Jim Thorpe, is fascinating and shows that the decathlete is now taking a special place, not only in athletics but also in society, because of the interest the decathlon now attracts and because it is an individual sport with a strong team spirit.

I have met very few athletes during my active career, who have not accepted these truisms, as there is no other way to understand the lap of honour being run together by all decathlon athletes in international meetings, no matter whether they are placed first or last. This differentiates us from other athletes, makes us unique and was symbolised in September 1990, during the European Championships in Split. This was only a month before the historic re-unification of the two German nations, and I was the only representative of the eastern part. It was then, as part of the group of founding athletes, that I experienced the birth of the German "Zehnkampf-TEAM" with joy, enthusiasm and idealism.

Up to that time, there were huge differences between the eastern and western part of Germany: In the German Democratic Republic almost 600 full-time coaches were

working at all different performance levels and meeting regularly to share their experiences, evaluations and training plans. Thus the individual preparation of each athlete was carried out as a kind of team-work. Part of the team's success was due also to its political and ideological isolation, allowing it to concentrate its strength against the class-enemy.

On the other hand, only about 50 full-time coaches were working in the Federal Republic of Germany, sixteen of them responsible for different functions within the DLV (German Athletics Federation), the others being employed by the regional federations and a few big athletic clubs. At the beginning of 1982/83, everyone in the decathlon went his own way; jealousy, envy and egoism allowed no constructive co-operation. After competitions Hingsen, Wentz, Kratschmer and their coaches tried to avoid each other; next ranked athletes, Schulze, Rizzi, Schmidt etc. could not stand each other.

In 1988, two new federal coaches, former decathletes Marek and Leykes, appeared. These two managed to develop a new spirit amongst the young and upcoming generation and introduced the first unannounced doping-tests in training. Since then, regular get-togethers of the coaches have been taking place, binding oral agreements have been made in regard to qualification systems and more precise planning has been carried out. In a brochure, published by Marek in October 1989, these topics were summarised and the term "Zehnkampf-TEAM" appeared for the first time. The foundation of the Zehnkampf-TEAM was a logical result of two years' work in awakening team-spirit.

The union of Germany's top decathletes, the unification of coaches, doctors, biomechanists, physiotherapists and all concerned persons and supporters of this event into a club independent of the federation was revolutionary. The club developed, under the management of the 1987 World Championships Silver Medallist, Siegfried Wentz, into an integrated organisation.

Naturally plans were carefully made for success, both in the sporting and political spheres. Clearly defined goals, convincing arguments as well as the necessary idealism and a little luck, all contributed to the establishment of the Zehnkampf-TEAM in Germany and to its presentation as an innovation in German sport. Its name – „Zehnkampf-TEAM“ – became a synonym for success and professionalism. The team also helped to initiate a more intense fight to combat the doping problem in German and international athletics.

In 1990 I moved from Rostock to Mainz, where the TEAM-office was then located. There, close to the centre of development, I was filled with enthusiasm and elation at taking my place, living the TEAM's ideals, alongside Frank Müller, Thorsten Dauth, Paul Meier and many more German decathletes, to represent the TEAM-character during competitions and meetings. In 1994 Jürgen Hingsen took over the position of Chairman from Siegfried Wentz for the following two years. Siegfried remains in the TEAM, being a doctor working especially with youngsters, right at grass roots level.

On the basis of the experiences of athletes and coaches, three major tasks were set, which incidentally appeared to be matters of sports politics in Germany:

- 1) To combat actively the doping problem.
- 2) To popularise the decathlon with the aid of professional management.
- 3) To support young decathletes.

These goals, not easy to realise, meant a lot of hard and difficult work, especially as the credibility of athletics had been poisoned by the facts revealed by the publication of "Doping Dokumente" (1990) by Brigitte Berendonk. Because of accusations made both in the eastern and western parts of Germany, doping became a social matter.

The Zehnkampf-TEAM faced the problem with such intensity and success, that its regulations and its practical advice were accepted and adopted by the DLV. For example, sponsors had to be sought to cover the enormous cost of drug testing (20,000 DM for 20 athletes per year). In addition to the existing control mechanisms of German and international sports, a steroid profile (as suggested by Prof. Donike/Köln) was introduced for the top 22 German decathletes. It shows the curve of the quotient of testosterone/epitestosterone for a period of eight months. This profile, in addition to unannounced monthly tests, provides protection for the athletes and the security of being able to prove the legitimacy of their performances whenever necessary, through the agency of a doping control system unique at that time. International success at the Olympic Games, World and European Championships (Meier: 3rd 1993; Schenk: 3rd 1991, 4th 1993) may be taken as good examples.

Clearly set goals and clearly stated rules provide a solid basis for success. On this basis of openness, the team was able to establish itself in Germany, even though it was faced by resistance from the DLV during its development.

The independence of the German decathlon lead to social acknowledgement. The Zehnkampf-TEAM became a synonym for success and fair-play and its fight against the doping problem in sport led to its being honoured with the Fair-Play Trophy in 1992.

As novelties are always of interest to the mass-media, the Zehnkampf-TEAM received more than a million mentions in the press and television coverage increased tenfold during its first year of existence, thus winning the interest of sponsors.

The team's work resulted in training camps for all athletes, a developing team spirit and an increasing number of performances around 7000 points. One is proud to be a member of this club. Youngsters look up to the Zehnkampf-TEAM and try even harder to improve and to reach performances of 7000 points, so that they too may become members.

This excellent progress was followed by the development of a concept for forming a TEAM international. This was announced during a press conference held during the World Championships in Stuttgart. A palm on a deserted island was chosen as the official symbol. By November 1993, after information about the scheme had been sent to many federations, Switzerland, Canada, Japan and France stated their willingness to join the team and to accept the regulations of the Zehnkampf-TEAM, to have two additional unannounced drug tests carried out by the IAAF and for the athletes to notify the IAAF when leaving the country for more than a week.

What is the reality at this moment? By May 1994 the listed nations should have fulfilled the regulations and, therefore, their athletes should have presented the slogan "clean power '94" on their vests. However, up to May not one of them had initiated doping-controls during training. After an internal discussion in Götzis and a subsequent press-conference, we had hoped to clear the way regarding "clean power '95" for the following year. On contacting the coaches involved during December 94 and January 95, we found that, once again, the required doping controls had not taken place and therefore the German athletes were once more the only ones allowed to wear the "clean power '95" slogan in Götzis. A mild protest made to these athletes and their coaches elicited the following action. Criteria were agreed with Switzerland, France, Canada and Japan:

Each athlete, complying with the requirements, is given the reward-logo "clean power"

from the "Zehnkampf-TEAM e.V." (e.V. means incorporated – the editor). The reward-logo being valid for one year is therefore marked with the according year. The bestowal always takes place in April/May of each corresponding year only according to the above conditions, the decision of the judges is final and binding.

1) *Each athlete has to give an affirmation that she/he does not take any doping substances, does not act against the valid anti-doping regulations of the IAAF and is willing to step in publicly against all doping abuses at any time.*

Also she/he affirms to donate \$ 3,000 to the international anti-doping programme of the IAAF in case of any violation of the valid regulations, the money being used exclusively for further international doping controls.

2) *Each athlete has to inform her/his own federation, the IAAF and the German Zehnkampf-TEAM about her/his place of residence and training, training times and whereabouts during the calendar year.*

3) *Each athlete has to prove at least 6 unannounced, that means with a notice of less than 24 hours in advance, doping controls during training. 2 of those have to take place between October and December of the year previous to and 2 between February and April of the year the logo is valid for.*

4) *Each athlete has to carry an official document (e.g. a pass of dope-testing), showing the mentioned controls, their time of notification and the corresponding controller.*

The more the desire to create an international team developed, the more difficult it became to co-ordinate and accomplish the additional loadwork.

Nevertheless, I am glad that an internationalisation of the German Zehnkampf-TEAM has been discussed during this congress. The experience of our TEAM will help to develop a concept. The combined-events needs a better lobby within the EAA and IAAF. Only internationalisation can achieve this. The aim of such a team should be to raise our voice and, among other things, to obtain two separate days for multi-events in international championships and to obtain more suitable timetables for the athletes who, at present, are always "squashed" in between the individual events. The enthusiasm developed for the decathlon was shown in Stuttgart.

There will be problems in realising an international team, although it will surely eventually improve the international exchange of

coaches and athletes, encourage the organisation of training camps for athletes of all nations and facilitate the exchange of scientific knowledge in the combined events.

In Germany we have found that, with an increasing number of TEAM-members, the concomitant problems of co-ordination also increased. The organising expenses were greater than the income and therefore the benefit to the athletes was not much more than that of a better image. But at a time when the economic union of Europe is taking place, a union of the top athletes would be of real interest. I am sure there are large companies willing and able to support this idea. Then the combined events will be unique and their image positive.

Claus Marek voiced the opinion of the best coaches and athletes in the TEAM in the following words:

"In the past, athletes and coaches of the Zehnkampf-TEAM have tried almost every possible type of competition: triathlon, pentathlon as well as heptathlon during the indoor-season, three competitions with a break of three or six weeks, competitions in single events or as triathlons at meetings. Two facts crystallized:

- 1) Athletes, following the international regulations, should not be over stressed – especially when having to advance their education during the recreation periods.*
- 2) If the athlete competes in only two or three events, or even in a triathlon, during a meeting, it will do no good for the decathlon itself, because his performances will get lost within the 'circus' of the other 18-22 events taking place.*

Today, the Zehnkampf-TEAM gives a definite sporting lead for the following:

- 1) There should be a combined events Grand Prix.*
- 2) As one of the 'combined event nations', we should have our own important meeting here in Germany, open to a limited number of international athletes and scheduled prior to the yearly major event (European or World Championships, Olympic Games).*
- 3) The European Cup should take place no more than once every two years and it should be scheduled after the top event.*
- 4) In the European Championships, World Championships and Olympic Games, the combined events (both decathlon and heptathlon) should be held on two separate days, without any other individual event taking place.*

These are the guidelines that should be followed and be widely reported. The possibility of an international decathlon team would result in a new concept for the media. The combined events could be made more attractive with the help of modern electronic equipment. For example, use could be made of artificial throwing sectors or crossbar heights, the fading in of the intermediate results in between each attempt, as well as possible changes to the rules, as, for example, the introduction of handicap starts for the 1500m (as already done in Nordic combination skiing).

This concept has to include the drama accompanying the unity of this event and the spectator has to feel part of it right from the beginning. There is no doubt that the press and broadcasting media would consequently be prompted to promote interest in the event weeks and even months before a competition is due to take place.

My opinion is that the main problem in the international concept of the German Zehnkampf-TEAM lies in the basic demand for two unannounced drug tests of the top athletes during the training periods. For German athletes this has already become a normal procedure. The following remark is not meant to be an imputation: but how is the doping problem handled in other countries? The effort to face it has often been expressed but, unfortunately, there are still huge differences to be found among the federations. For as long as there are different approaches to testing in IAAF member countries, an international team cannot exist. On the other hand, if the athletes agree on establishing a uniform approach, they could once again give a signal to the whole world of athletics.

I am a strong supporter of this idea and, together with the German Zehnkampf-TEAM, I will try to establish the necessary foundation. For further contacts, the latest office address of the German Zehnkampf-TEAM is: Alfred Maasz, Höchbergstraße 56, 97082 Würzburg, Germany; phone: +49-931-450720, fax: +49-931-4507299.