

## **Towards a sustainable Nordic World Ski Championship: Cross Country Stadium Ried: Sport in tune with nature and tourism**

**For his bachelor's thesis, top athlete Johannes Rydzek analysed the stadium's renovation**

Nordic combined skier and Oberstdorf native Johannes Rydzek conducted a retrospective analysis of the Cross Country Stadium Ried renovation for his bachelor's thesis. The focus was on the sensible economic and ecological use of the facility.

Much of the Nordic World Ski Championships 2021 in Oberstdorf will take place at the Cross Country Stadium Ried. This sports venue was renovated in the run-up to the event. Meetings of a task force in which Nordic combined skier Johannes Rydzek took part preceded the actual construction planning phase. The main focus of discussion for participants of the task force was on a sustainability concept for the sports facility.

Johannes Rydzek was also very interested in this topic throughout the construction phase - not just on account of being a professional athlete, but also because he was studying industrial engineering in Kempten at the time. He informed his professor of his interest. The two of them then came up with the idea that Rydzek could explore the planning of the renovation from an environmental as well as a social point of view in his bachelor's thesis. The topic of the thesis was then set: "Recommendations for action regarding the sustainability of a major sporting event using the example of the new cross-country skiing centre for the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships in Oberstdorf". The paper is not yet public.

### **Creating new habitats: ecological compensation areas**

Environmental aspects, such as the creation of new habitats for reptiles and insects as a compensatory measure, are at the centre of the thesis. Rydzek continues: "I also worked out how much potential the sports facility has in terms of sustainability: year-round services for athletes and visitors could be implemented in a cross-country skiing stadium like the Ried. In comparison, a ski jumping stadium would have less potential here, because there is 'only' jumping." Rydzek also looks at the issue of public transport: "You would have to invest in the Ried to start operations in the summer. According to my recommendations, for example, the current public transport stop at the Renksteg should be moved closer to the cross-country stadium. It would also be helpful to improve the signage to make it clear that the Ried has something to offer," says Rydzek.

An additional building that could be used as a mountain sports centre is also part of the 29-year-old professional athlete's theoretical design: "Here, tourists or school classes on a field trip could find out about environmentally friendly sports in the Alps or how to interact with nature in general. I already noticed this summer during training that there were definitely more day-trippers in the Ried. This centre, which could also house a café or a museum, could potentially better direct the flow of visitors," says the 29-year-old.

### **The sustainable use of sports facilities by recreational athletes**

"Hiring out cross-country skis in winter would also make sense. In summer, roller skis could be available for hire. As many recreational athletes as possible should use the roller track as well as the cross-country skiing trails. The more people who use the athletic facilities, the more sustainable the sports facility itself will be. So-called 'Finnish tracks', which are strewn with wood chips, provide superb cushioning for walking and could be made into nature trails that are easy on the joints for the whole family. In addition, these wood chip paths are also a preparation for trail running," says Rydzek.

**What are the arguments against implementing these points?**

"My bachelor's thesis is really only theory and it also doesn't make any claims as to its feasibility. On top of that, I didn't finish the thesis until May 2020 - well after the planning phase ended in 2019 with the start of construction work on the cross-country stadium. But regardless of that, if everything were to be carried out as presented in my bachelor's thesis, for starters the responsibilities in the operating concept would overlap. So there needs to be a consensus that includes any controversial points, such as financial and legal issues. I admit that this is a challenge at first, but at the end of the day it would be good if there was a solution for everyone - especially from an economic point of view," says the Nordic combined skier from Oberstdorf.

When the stadium was renovated two years ago, the people in charge also paid a lot of attention to the environmental aspects. While one pond has a purely technical snow-making function, the other pond is untreated and sparsely laid out. This provides a habitat for reptiles and amphibians. Some of the animal species around the Ried are protected. The people responsible for the construction work took these species into consideration. Take the dormouse, for example: this small rodent loves mixed forests. For this reason, care was taken to ensure that as few of the valuable old trees as possible were cleared during the construction of the new snow-making pond. Nesting boxes have also been sited at the edge of the forest since construction work began. These were hung up to offer an alternative to the animals from the cleared part of the forest - and have proved highly successful: the dormice took to the nest boxes very well.

The Alpine salamander also lives in the mixed forest around the Ried. There is even a comparatively high population of the species here. The Alpine salamander is generally classified as "strictly protected" in Germany. It copes poorly with sudden changes in its habitat, so those responsible had to make the mixed forest particularly attractive for this sensitive species during the construction work: Stone slabs, old rootstocks and rotten wood were spread around. These serve as shelter for the alpine salamander. "It is important that people also show consideration for this sensitive species during their everyday activities," says Rydzek.

**Butterflies and moths take up residence in the Ried**

The car park was only partially paved following the construction work. The other parking areas are gravelled: This allows natural mixed grasses to grow. Butterflies and moths feel at home there. "The Ried was renovated once before, in 2005. The diversity of butterfly species even increased as a result. But that happened rather by chance: so-called 'neglected grassland' grew to the south of the old snow-making pond after the renovation and there were areas of gravel. These areas became valuable habitats for butterflies and moths. Unfortunately, they briefly fell victim to the construction of a new pond. A partially gravelled car park was created as an ecological compensation area for the many species of butterflies and moths. In addition, a species-rich meadow with native wildflowers and grasses was created very close to the new snow-making pond," says the 29-year-old.

"Wherever there is construction, it always has an impact on the flora and fauna. The task force in the run-up to the project discussed how this impact could have as few far-reaching consequences for nature as possible. Alongside the other participants in this group, I pointed out that as few of the old trees as possible should be cleared during the construction work. Experts also made this recommendation and the people in charge followed it. We also discussed creating other habitats for the animal species in the form of ecological compensation areas. This too was implemented in the end: "There are areas like this in Schöllang, for example," says Rydzek.

"Something really cool has been created outside the Ried. There is a lot of space here and everything has blended in well with nature. The green roof on the new building alone makes a difference," says the 29-year-old. "It's also great for athletes. But this could also be improved a little: there is one section of the cross-country trail where the route is not well signposted. You basically find yourself on a large, rolled expanse and many people get confused and end up zig-zagging all over the place. A cold training room could also be built here. Unfortunately, such rooms with equipment are in short supply in Oberstdorf," he says.

### **The Ried: a unique selling point in all of Germany**

"But I really don't want to complain. The Ried represents a unique selling point in all of Germany. There is perhaps something comparable in Italy. We have the chance to really set ourselves apart from places like Ruhpolding, for example, by offering a coherent, sustainable concept. The sports facilities there are really only for athletes. We already have a lot of demand in the cross-country stadium for reasonable use by professionals, recreational athletes and visitors. We just have to meet that demand. The biggest challenge will be the harmonious coexistence of all those involved. My dream would also be to install a Nordic centre out there, piece by piece," says the Nordic combined skier.

Hans-Martin Renn, an architect from Fischen in Allgäu who had initially planned the concept with the walk-over building in the Ried, also states: "Oberstdorf really sets itself apart with what it got in terms of sports facilities for the 2005 and 2021 World Championships. In my opinion, however, this development will only be noticed later. Karl Geiger, Vinzenz Geiger and Johannes Rydzek, for example, all had dreams of jumping or racing in such competitions at the 2005 World Ski Championships. Who knows what young talent will be motivated by the World Ski Championships this year to achieve top sporting performances. In this way, Oberstdorf will prove that it is a functioning hub."

Nordic combined skier Johannes Rydzek took a deep look at the issue of sustainability at the Ried in his bachelor's thesis. His work may still be under lock and key, but as a public figure he can share his views with the outside world: "I hope for a dynamic process that will surely come about through communication. Maybe my view will find favour, and others will certainly have other ideas. I am convinced of that."

Johannes Rydzek is less sure, however, about where his professional life will take him after his sporting career: "I don't know yet. But I can very well imagine linking the engineering side with business studies to sport, as in my bachelor's thesis." Finally, he says with a laugh: "Maybe I'll also incorporate my new hobby, photography. Who knows?"

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