

The passion of a female referee

Nicole Petignat is the only female Swiss referee to officiate at the top level. She tells swissinfo how she will be keeping a close eye on all the action at Euro 2008.



The 41-year-old and her twin sister Dominique both fell in love with football at a young age and decided to become referees in order to be able to watch games from the pitch rather than from the stands.

Dominique no longer referees, but Nicole went from strength to strength and has reached the pinnacle of her profession, blowing the whistle in the top Swiss league in addition to many international competitions for women.

swissinfo: After all these years as a referee, what keeps you going?

Nicole Petignat: To be honest I never thought I'd get so far as a referee and that doing this would bring me so much pleasure. And if I ever do have some doubts, I just can't bring myself to give it up.

What I love in particular is what the fans and the people watching at home can't experience: the energy and emotion, which is similar to that of a music concert. The footballers all play a roll in a drama that unfolds minute by minute. No one has a better view than the referee, who also hears what the players say to their teammates – and also to their opponents!

I talk to the players – I warn them, but also I sometimes tell them that one of my decisions was wrong and that I've acknowledged that.

It's interesting that in every team there are the same characters: a leader, an agitator and a moaner. I also sometimes ask myself why a coach doesn't make this or that change.

swissinfo: Are you always in the same state of mind on the pitch?

N.P.: No. I like it when the game is fluid. If it's really jerky and impossible to tell where the ball's going to go, everything becomes more complicated. In those cases you have to be really focused – one lapse and the match can turn upside down.

But I like match days because I wake up with butterflies in my stomach and the stress levels gradually increase – but it's a good stress!

swissinfo: What impact does being a woman have?

N.P.: Right from the start I made it a point of honour to be considered a referee and not a woman referee. On the pitch I've always kept a distance from the players – I want there to be a difference between Ms Petignat on the pitch and Nicole off it. It's completely out of the question that I use my femininity to back up a decision, a smile for example. I couldn't let people think I was sending out a double message.

swissinfo: When you look at the wider picture, how do you see football?

N.P.: Football is, and should remain, a game. But that's impossible because of financial interests which give the results of matches a disproportionate importance. As a referee, you have to ignore that aspect so it doesn't affect your judgement.

swissinfo: And women's football?

N.P.: I think women's football has come a long way and it will continue to get even better. You only have to compare the World Cup final in 1999 and that in 2007.

Technically the women are remarkable, but they lack power and speed. The tackles are increasingly rough, as seen in the number of cards issued. The standard in Switzerland is improving but there is still a desperate lack of awareness.

swissinfo: What is your fondest refereeing memory so far?

N.P.: Every match is a new experience. But it's true that refereeing a final of a women's World Cup or a men's Uefa Cup match are very special moments, also because of the level of media coverage.

Thanks to refereeing I've been able to discover many countries and cultures and meet many people. A World Cup, Euro tournament or Olympic Games goes beyond the mere competition.

swissinfo: What will you be doing during Euro 2008?

N.P.: I deeply love football and I will be at the heart of this event. Uefa has asked me to assist the television directors at Bern and Geneva stadiums with slow-motion replays. I will also act as a guide for some people who have been invited by my sponsor.

For the rest of the time I will be supporting the Swiss team! I think they could go very far if they prove to be strong mentally. In fact everything could depend on their opening match – a good result against the Czech Republic and anything could happen.

swissinfo-interview: Mathias Froidevaux

Nicole Petignat

Nicole Petignat was born in October 1966 in La Chaux-de-Fonds, canton Neuchâtel.

In August 2003 she became the first female referee of a men's football game organised by Uefa: Swedish team AIK Fotboll versus Fylkir from Iceland in the preliminary round of the Uefa Cup.

Petignat grew up in canton Jura. She took her first refereeing classes in 1983, working her way up to the Swiss Super League.

In July 1999 in Los Angeles she refereed the final of the Fifa Women's World Cup between the United States and China. In September 2000 she refereed in the women's football tournament at the Olympic Games in Sydney.

Petignat lives in canton Zurich, where she is a medical masseuse.

Questions to the text 'The passion of a female referee'

- 1. Why did she become a referee?**
- 2. What keeps her going? Name 4 reasons.**
- 3. What does she like about match days?**
- 4. What difference does it make to be a female referee?**
- 5. How does she see today's football?**
- 6. What is the main difference between men's and women's football?**
- 7. What two refereeing memories are special to her?**
- 8. What will she be doing during the Euro 2008?**
- 9. What is her real job?**