

Session 2 – Youth

Youth was the focal point of the first day of the FEI Sports Forum, with a dynamic panel of eight successful young athletes from around the world representing all disciplines debating a wide range of topics during three separate sessions. Led by moderator Catie Staszak (USA), the panel shared their thoughts on **accessibility to high level sport**, **long-term career pathways** and **sport promotion and media**.

The summary below highlights the main points raised during the discussions.

I – Accessibility to high-level sport

Education:

- One of the big challenges for young athletes competing internationally was finding balance between sport and education: athletes were often asked to choose one over the other. Whereas at high school, courses could be spread out and subjects could be dropped, such arrangements were more problematic at university.
- Those, deciding to proceed with higher education, usually received limited support from their universities and were not always allowed time off for competition.
- Athletes in the non-Olympic disciplines had additional difficulties as their sports were not as recognised as their Olympic counterparts.
- Positive examples allowing for a seamless combination of sport and education, such as online education offered by the Palm Beach International Academy, were shared. This approach was flexible and adaptable to different priorities throughout the competition season.
- In Switzerland, a special talent card was made available by Swiss Olympic (SUI NOC) allowing athletes to receive special support from their universities.
- All athletes expressed their belief in the importance of securing education along with a sporting career. All were aware of the ways education would be able to contribute to their sporting career in the future.

Access to horses:

- Some athletes were born into equestrian families and had had access to horses from a young age through their parents. The industry connections also opened up more opportunities for them.
- Others, while having their parents' backing for the time being, were aware of the need to be independent and therefore be able to secure the support of owners and sponsors.
- Regional differences, such as e.g. the lack of access to horses in Asia, were also highlighted.
- All the athletes regardless of their background expressed an interest in business training to attract the interest investors and sponsors.

Funding:

- The amount of prize money available at youth competitions was low and could not be relied upon.
- The athletes were already considering ways to balance keeping good horses to progress in the sport and selling them to fund their career.
- The athletes reiterated the need for support in finding sponsors. Questions regarding ways to come in contact and communicate with potential sponsors were raised. The possibility of transfer of knowledge between generations of athletes was discussed.

- Holding an event, such as an exhibition or convention, where athletes could meet with owners/sponsors directly was mentioned.

Promotion and exposure

- The crucial importance of exposure was highlighted.
- Suggestions were made regarding an end-of-year award based on the Young Athlete World Ranking List to increase awareness and promotion. In general, accomplishments and achievements had to be recognised more prominently.
- Athletes were interested in traditional and social media training programmes and communications guidelines.

II – Long-term career pathways

Relevance of age categories

The U25 category was a great stepping stone for young athletes allowing them to get more confidence and experience. With time, it was expected to become even more successful.

Moving from J/YR categories up to senior level could come as a shock to many young athletes due to the large disparity in the skill levels. A smoother transition was necessary as the abrupt change could prove off-putting for some and may cause many to drop out.

Transition to senior level:

- This was a tough phase which required drastic decisions.
- Establishing support mentor schemes between young and elite athletes and access to internships for additional training were discussed.
- Athletes found it difficult to secure invitations to top level competitions given the fact that established senior athletes dominated the sport for many years. Objective evaluation of U25 athletes and selection requirements of U25 athletes as reserves on Nations Cup teams were mentioned.
- GER NF explained their scheme of national series for the Olympic disciplines with a final held at Aachen. This provided good experience for the athletes along with opportunities to be seen as talent scouts were sent to these competitions.
- A developed young talent scout scheme was also presented by NED NF.
- Support for combining top level competition and family life was necessary. Sharing first-hand experience of other athletes that this was possible would be important. Freezing ranking points for female athletes whilst on maternity leave across all disciplines, and not only in Jumping as was currently the case, was mentioned specifically.

Other ideas:

- A youth platform (e.g. forum, conference, committee) for young athletes to share information and ideas to allow for a more consistent approach to progress in the sport.
- Balanced discipline approach – more specific to individual needs but also allowing to learn from other disciplines as many perspectives could be found. This would also allow for greater cross-discipline promotion and development.
- Youth Nations Cup across all disciplines.
- Improved presentation of the sport to make it easier to understand by including more statistics and unusual features (e.g. broadcast radio messages drivers exchange with their crews during the marathon phase of Driving competitions)

III – Sport promotion and media

Social Media: “It’s not just about selfies”

1. What is social media and what’s the point of it
 - Platforms for interaction
 - Possibility to share and upload content
2. How to make money out of it?
 - Brand identity
 - Following base
 - Collaborations
 - Pay-per-view
3. Why is it important for equestrianism?
 - Knowledge
 - Community
 - Branding
 - Sustainability

The line between private and public on social media and the pertaining ground rules were discussed.

The next step: “It’s time to harvest”

- Social Media --> Influence --> Financial platform --> Sustainability

Examples of technology servicing the different disciplines:

Dressage: make the discipline more exciting to younger outside audiences without taking away the essence of the sport;

Endurance: use of radio and innovative possibilities to broadcast rides, which last minimum seven hours;

Eventing: Use of GoPro during cross country to broadcast the race from a different angle.

Each discipline should be targeted in its own special way to better understand the challenges faced by the athletes and horses. The fact that people were mainly interested in the interaction between man and animal as opposed to the final result was an important conclusion.

In connection with presentation, the topic of the equestrian dress code was also briefly touched upon. It was considered to be elegant and to express power, tradition, and prestige. It did not appear to be outdated. It suitably represented the unique values of the sport and changing it would damage the essence of equestrianism.

Ultimately, the horse was the unique element of the sport, which need to be highlighted and made more personal in order to maintain and grow public interest in the sport.