

Dear Friends,
Dear Delegates,
Dear guest speakers and panellists,

It's a pleasure to welcome you and all the online viewers to the 7th edition of the FEI Sports Forum.

Every year we use the Sports Forum platform to zoom in on specific topics so that we can make decisions as a community that will help drive our sport to new heights. And we are here once again to do just that.

Since being created seven years ago, the FEI Sports Forum has proven to be an important phase in the decision making process of our organisation as it offers a unique opportunity not only for our member National Federations but also for our stakeholders such as athletes, organisers, officials and owners to participate in debates on topics that are important for the future and development of our sport.

We can be very proud of what we have achieved in recent years. We have worked hard to create a clear and transparent decision making process. Our sport is growing – and not only in numbers but also in terms of the diversity. We have 113% more events today than we did in 2007, which is more than double. And although this growth has stabilised, if you look since the first Sports Forum in 2012, there has been a 35% increase in the number of events, which in real figures is an additional 1,110 events.

Over the past ten years, we have also seen a 65% increase in athletes and many new nations competing on the international circuit. And as a result of all this, we have increased our visibility in the media, we have enhanced the profile of our sport globally and we have, ultimately, increased the value of our industry.

This is very healthy and promising. But of course, with growth and ambition and the ever-increasing competitive environment we are living in, comes an even greater responsibility to be proactive and hands on.

One of the big themes for this edition is youth. The next generation of athletes are the future of our sport and our continued growth and success depends on our ability to provide effective and modern structures which will support them in order to reach the top level. How can we improve the career pathway for a young athlete trying to get to the top – and even before that, how can we ensure we have the most efficient structures in place to identify and nurture talent. How can our formats and our rules provide smooth transitions from one category to the next? For this, we need to acknowledge the challenges, see the bumps along the way and we need to share best practice.

We have brought together a really dynamic panel of young athletes eager to share their experiences and to help us find solutions – they are 100% committed, extremely professional in their outlook and they are highly experienced despite their age. This is our opportunity to find out from them how and what we need to improve so that we can assist their journey and the journey of our future athletes to the top level.

Youth and universality are important points on Olympic Agenda 2020 – and it is by focussing at the very base of our pyramid that we can make a difference. Yes, we are a diverse community, we have different sports and different nations so there is no “one size fits all” but there are stepping stones which must pave the way. Keeping our sport democratic and accessible to all, and especially for the youth, is key for the further development of equestrian sport.

Of course, the success of our athletes also depends on the processes in place to protect them and also the structures in order to safeguard the integrity of the sport.

I am grateful to the IOC for taking the time to share their Toolkit to address Harassment and Abuse later today, it is a really valuable resource which not only the FEI but also all National Federations need to take on board. We have seen the ravages that can occur when the safety nets are not in place, and it is our collective responsibility as the guardians of our sport and our athletes to ensure we provide safe conditions. The same also applies to concussion and return to play policy as well as education around medication and recreational drugs and risk management. Our athletes are our biggest asset – and their welfare depends on the systems and the culture we implement.

We also need to ensure we provide the best possible conditions and have a thorough understanding of our horses and the conditions in which they compete. I am delighted that Dr David Marlin and Dr Misha Misheff will be here alongside Veterinary Chair John McEwen and Medical Chair Peter Whitehead to share with us the findings and the recommendations for human and equine athletes in “hot” and “hot and humid” climates. Knowledge and education go hand in hand with welfare – and I am grateful for the wealth of knowledge they bring to our sport on this specific topic and I invite our National Federations to carefully study these recommendations in view of the participation of their athletes in important Championships and Games later this year.

Integrity of the sport has been at the heart of many discussions in recent years, we have set up working groups, we have had think tanks and tomorrow we will hear back from the Officials and Dressage Judges Working Groups. They are vital to our sport and act as a frontline liaising directly with our athletes and the field of play. Their work – and the way they work - is really important in order to preserve the level playing field. Neutrality and clear processes and guidelines which protect them and the sport from any kind of abuse – whether it is deliberate or not – are the key to ensuring that integrity we seek. It’s time to be tough and to take the right decisions for the future in order to provide the support they need and deserve so that they can operate fairly and equally.

This is a really big year for our sport – we have the FEI World Equestrian Games in September in Tryon and I am delighted to have members of that Organising Team – Michael Stone, Eric Straus and Caitlin Lane - present at the Sports Forum to meet with you. They have a dedicated office here at IMD where you can discuss and ask all the questions you have as we count down to the 8th edition of our flagship event. We also have the Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires to look forward to in October – with 30 riders from 30 nations qualified through Championships and the extensive FEI World Jumping Challenge which now takes place in nearly 50 countries around the world.

These riders will be making their debut on the Olympic stage and what a fantastic opportunity for a young athlete – to compete at a global multi-sport event focussed on developing the athletes of the future. We will be starting this morning with a presentation from Antoine Goetschy from the IOC – and I am really grateful for his presence and the continued support of the dynamic Youth Olympic Games team.

This is an election year – but that does not change how and what we do. It's business as usual and independently from its leadership the FEI has to remain a service organisation focussed on delivering the services, tools and structures required to develop our sport, to increase our activities, to harmonise our process, and to protect and celebrate the values which make us unique.

I am really looking forward to all the discussions that will take place during this FEI Sports Forum. They guide us to develop the right strategies and to take the best decisions. We also want these discussions to happen in the best possible environment – and as you can see this year we have payed special attention to the setting and style!

I would like to thank everyone here for taking part – and once again - express my sincere gratitude to all the panellists, the guest speakers and the FEI HQ team led by Sabrina Ibanez for coordinating the important discussions that will be had over the next two days.

And last but not least, it's absolutely fantastic to be back here at IMD – we seem to have found a winning formula, and as in previous years, we have the pleasure of meeting one of their professors – Ina Toegel – who will be welcoming us and setting us off on our journey. She is an IMD professor of leadership and organisational change, which, given the role and purpose of the FEI Sports Forum seems awfully appropriate.

Thank you for your time.

Professor Toegel the floor is yours.