

Good morning friends, colleagues and guests,

It's my pleasure to welcome you to the 8th edition of the FEI Sports Forum.

Since 2012, we have come together to review, to discuss and to debate the future of equestrian sport. And I believe everyone will agree that this annual get-together has become essential for the governance of our sport and organisation, providing us with a framework to consult with our NFs and stakeholders in order to set in motion relevant policies, processes and decisions for endorsement by the FEI General Assembly.

As you have seen in the programme, we have again a busy two days, with diverse topics and an impressive list of experts, guest speakers and panellists to help guide our discussions. But the Sports Forum is all about dialogue, so your input is absolutely vital and I want to take this opportunity already to thank everyone here for making the effort to come to Lausanne, and invite you to actively participate in the discussions.

So let's now take a closer look at this year's agenda, which opens with a discussion on gender equality, but I will come back to this later on...

The first "Hot" Topic we will be tackling (and when I say "Hot" I mean it literally) is the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

I don't have to explain to you how important successful Olympic and Paralympic Games are for our sport. With less than 15 months to go before the start of these Games it's important to provide you with a review of the preparations and an update regarding climate mitigation planning & optimising human and equine performance. As you know, alongside the operational and climatic conditions planning which will be discussed, we are also preparing comprehensive test events in both Hagen and onsite in Tokyo in order to test all the systems in place in view of the new formats which will be introduced at the 2020 Games.

This afternoon is dedicated to the review of the Legal system and the Future of Reining.

Having a clear and understandable Legal system is essential to preserving a level playing field, so we look forward to seeing some proposals for simplifying procedures.

Further to the termination of the agreement with NHRA and AQHA, the FEI Board has to make an important recommendation to the General Assembly in November about the future of Reining within the FEI. This is a very complex matter for which we need your input based upon a clear understanding of the situation from a statutory, horse welfare and clean sport perspective.

We need of course also to look at the evolution of this discipline inside and outside the FEI and, most importantly, listen to our Reining community.

This is a delicate and important issue and we want to provide a platform to look at it from all angles so that, together, we can take the best course of action for the FEI Family. But let's not forget, we are in the phase of consultation and no decision has been taken yet.

On Day 2, we will focus all our attention on Endurance.

Since 2011 when I was appointed Secretary General of the FEI, Endurance has always been on my desk – and we have continuously and without hesitation invested resources and time in order to seek and implement solutions. I am not going to give an overview of all the actions the FEI has undertaken in the interim, because our Secretary General will do this when she opens this session tomorrow, but I can guarantee you the list is very extensive.

But, regardless of all the actions undertaken, all the decisions and all the resources made available, we still have the same issues!

Horse welfare and the integrity of the sport remain huge concerns in Endurance.

There are still too many horse injuries and fatalities annually – and I can only talk about those that we know of.

We continue to receive more complaints and enquiries about Endurance than all the other disciplines combined and, to be honest and I apologise if I'm too frank here, we collectively hold our breath when the season starts up again in the Middle East.

After Tryon, the FEI Board unanimously agreed that this has to stop. We need to bring horsemanship back to the heart of Endurance – it is our responsibility and this is the last chance!

But let me be very clear on this: Endurance is and will continue to be an FEI discipline. Not only because we are the sole governing body, and as such we need to take our responsibilities, but also because it has great potential and a big future in the FEI, but not as it currently exists. This is a ride – not a race. Horsemanship and the unique bond between horse and rider is key. If you don't respect these values then go somewhere else. In our sport athletes and their entourage also have to take responsibility. This will take courage and leadership.

For these reasons, and many more, I am sure you can appreciate why we decided to dedicate an entire day to the one topic. We need to take this time to discuss, to debate and to find a common goal so that we can support and promote the very best of Endurance.

I believe the Temporary Endurance Committee is doing a great job and we have really encouraged them to think out of the box and not to be afraid to propose the changes that they feel are necessary. We needed them to be courageous, just as we too need to be courageous to make the right decisions in November. We know the diagnosis and we know the cure is tough, drastic and without compromise. Failure is not an option.

And now, before we go any further, I would like to thank IMD for hosting our important discussions; I would like to thank the many sponsors; I would like to thank all the panellists for making themselves available and for sharing their expertise and knowledge and, last but not least, I would like to thank the wonderful team at FEI HQ for their support and determination in making the Sports Forum an effective and invaluable tool in the decision making process.

The first topic of the day will be Gender Equality, and as you all know, this is an important theme also in the Olympic movement as it is in society and business generally. We are particularly well versed in certain areas of gender equality, particularly from a sporting perspective, but we also have our weaknesses on the governance side and I hope that through the session today we will uncover the stumbling blocks and explore solutions for our sport and our organisation.

So, before we start, here is a quick reminder as to why we are here at the Sports Forum:

- we cannot compromise on quality;
- we cannot compromise on equality; and,
- we certainly cannot compromise on horse welfare.

Our sport is based on these founding principles and I look forward to fruitful debate in all the sessions so that we can continue to serve our community and the sport we are all so passionate about.

Before we delve into the first session, I'd like to invite Professor Ginka Toegel, an IMD teacher, facilitator and researcher in the areas of leadership and human behaviour, to set our minds alight and get us thinking how we can progress.

Ingmar De Vos
FEI President