

Opening speech by Ingmar De Vos, FEI President

23 November 2020

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

Welcome to the FEI Online General Assembly 2020!

As you can see, I am here in Switzerland at the FEI Headquarters with our Secretary General Sabrina Ibáñez at my side and with our dedicated GA team, with all the recommended Covid-19 measures in place and socially distanced of course.

In the building, we also have most of the Directors and Heads of Departments, so that they are also available to answer any questions that may arise.

We are a long way from South Africa, our original host for the FEI General Assembly 2020. But we are here together, and we have a viable solution. So, before I go any further, I want to thank the South African Equestrian Federation for their flexibility in these difficult times, and for their willingness to postpone their invitation to welcome us next year for the FEI General Assembly 2021. I believe I speak for everyone when I say we are really looking forward to it, especially as we will also be celebrating 100 years of the FEI in 2021!

Now back to 2020, and this extraordinary online edition. As always, and in a spirit of good governance, this GA is being livestreamed for all stakeholders and members of the public. For our regular participants such as member National Federations, FEI Board Members and Technical Chairs, we have arranged special access rights so that they may interact as they usually would.

This is not the ideal scenario and it certainly does not replace an in-person GA. But it does the job and importantly it allows our members to exercise their statutory right and have their say on the future of the sport.

This year has been incredibly difficult for everyone, both personally and professionally, disrupting every part of our day-to-day lives. We are still in the midst of a global pandemic and the sport we are all so dedicated to, continues to suffer, as do the many industries connected to the equestrian world. But this is also why we are here – to rebuild. And I firmly believe in our systems, our processes, and importantly in the global equestrian community.

Dialogue, communication and transparency are key, and this year there is no doubt we have had to compromise when it comes to our usual platforms such as the Sports Forum, our annual in-person Committee and Board Meetings and now the General Assembly.

However, we have found solutions to the restrictions we have faced when it comes to the decision-making process. And I am confident we have the very best conditions for today's important meeting. Remote may be the new norm, but we tried to recreate the General Assembly week as best we could virtually. This is why we also offered the possibility to have virtual Regional Group Meetings and why we maintained Rules Sessions. It was really good to have seen so many of you during the Group meetings and to have a real interaction. It was also reassuring to see our family in such an upbeat and constructive mood.

I am grateful and would like to thank all our National Federations for their time and their dedication throughout this GA process. Your commitment ensures we can take the important decisions we need to make as a community.

We have kept the agenda for this virtual GA as simple and efficient as possible – although there are still 39 points to get through! And, we also made a conscious choice to focus on the decisions we have to take from a statutory perspective. As you have seen in the agenda, and in order to be efficient, we will - for specific reports and points - simply refer to the annexes that were provided to National Federations on 26 October and that are publicly available on the FEI General Assembly 2020 hub. And when it comes to questions and voting, we have grouped these in sections, so that we maintain momentum and therefore present a set of topics and at the end of each section, we open the floor to questions and then voting.

Although today's General Assembly is virtual, there are still some important decisions to be made

Some are based around rules revisions and changes. This includes a big review of our Anti-Doping regulations for both human and equine athletes. Despite the covid-19 restrictions, we have had a thorough consultation process dating back to the online Sports Forum earlier this year and more recently with the Sessions on Saturday.

Today, there will also be some important elections for FEI Board positions. And further to the statutory changes we approved last year, the Chairs of the Vaulting, Para Equestrian and Medical Committees will be elected for the first time by the GA and will become full Board Members.

Regretfully, we also have to ask you today, in accordance with the FEI Statutes, to ratify the UAE NF suspension. This is not a decision the FEI Board took lightly, and we do not expect our members to take it lightly either. It is unfortunate that we have had to resort to the suspension of a National Federation, but the FEI Board was resolute and unanimous in its assessment of the case. As a community, we cannot and we should not allow individual NFs to apply the rules only as and when it suits them. Especially when it comes to integrity and horse welfare. In the meantime, the Court of Arbitration for Sport has confirmed a suspension of three months for all disciplines and considerable fines, and we will ask you today to ratify the suspension based upon the decision of CAS. As a chain, we can only be as strong as the weakest link and with your support, I do hope this suspension will drive change within the Federation and give rise to a new era for Endurance in the UAE equestrian community.

Regarding the Reining discipline, we will not take any decision today. As you know, even after tireless efforts, we were unable to come to an agreement with NRHA to split the market and to allow the FEI to respect its statutes and to be the sole governing body for a viable part of the Reining discipline. We will continue to work with the FEI Reining Committee and the relevant National Federations to see how we can preserve the legacy of FEI Reining for the future. And we will report on this in the months to come.

Before we delve into the proceedings and the voting, I do want to take a moment to address Covid-19, the repercussions on our sport, and the power of a unified front.

At the start of 2020, before the pandemic, we expected to have around 4,800 Events on the international calendar, which is in line with our 2019 figures.

In reality, and as a result of Covid-19, nearly 60% of those Events have since then been cancelled or postponed, and we will more likely be closer to the region of 2,000 International Events in 2020. This is the reality of the numbers.

For some communities, such as Vaulting, Reining, Driving and Para Driving, over 90% or all of their international activity came to a halt after the onset of the pandemic. While for Jumping, Dressage, Eventing and Endurance, the figures are still very alarming, with around 65% of all their Events cancelled.

The scale and the loss of Events is a huge concern because it affects a large cross section of our community and their livelihoods. For Organisers, Athletes and their entourage, Owners, Officials, Sponsors and the entire equestrian and connected industry, these cancellations are detrimental.

I fully appreciate all the sacrifices and the hardships many have had to endure and I am devastated for all the individuals and businesses that have suffered as a result of the pandemic.

The postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games sent shockwaves throughout the global sporting community. And although it was the right decision, it had many direct and indirect consequences. The complications for our calendar have been far reaching and the source of much debate, and then there are the logistical difficulties for athletes, teams and National Federations in terms of preparations and gaining eligibility, as well as venue management and cost saving measures for the OC.

This has been a tough balancing act, and of course there will be an impact and there will be measures in place of which we do not yet know the details. But I remain very confident that these Games will go ahead, that our sport will have a wonderful platform. These will definitely be the Games of hope.

From the very beginning, our main priority at the FEI has been to mitigate the effects and find solutions to protect our community and our sport so that we can not only pick up where we left off, but also learn for the future.

This has been and continues to be our focus.
It has also been and continues to be an incredible team effort.

When news first hit of an impending pandemic in February, the wheels were set in motion.

We immediately created calendar task forces with broad representation from all the stakeholder groups and technical committees to advise the Board on specific measures that needed to be taken within each discipline. The Medical Committee, and in particular Dr Mark Hart, also played a vital role and were enlisted to not only monitor the sanitary situation extremely closely, but also to advise and help us formulate the Return to Play policy, effective risk assessments and guidelines based on the recommendations from the World Health Organisation.

We were quick to react and time has shown this was very wise. We have since passed over 150 event and sport related Covid-19 resolutions - which I appreciate are not always to the liking of all. But they have been the fruit of collaboration and consensus and they reflect the needs of the community and our values. In this exercise we always have to find a balance between needs for flexibility while still preserving the integrity of our sport and providing a level playing field.

For our National Federations, we applied some financial measures to alleviate the strain from the Covid-19 repercussions, by waiving calendar fees altogether, applying a 50% reduction in annual fees and more recently in September, with the announcement of the FEI Covid-19 Relief Fund. Today already 30 applications have been received and 230,000 CHF has been transferred to National Federations and there is more to come.

At the same time, we are also confronted with a 2/3 decrease in revenues for the FEI and a forecast loss of 8.2million Swiss francs for 2020 as a result of Covid-19.

We have worked hard over the past 10 months to keep this loss at a minimum and alongside implementing many resolutions for the sport, we also implemented a number of measures within the FEI, including:

- a full review of all programmes and projects, removing or postponing all non-essential expenditures in 2020
- the placement of over 70% of the FEI Staff on partial unemployment – for an average of 30% of total working hours - thanks to a scheme offered by the Swiss government
- And a unanimous and voluntary cut in salaries from all the FEI Directors.

These measures have helped to significantly limit the losses in 2020. As for 2021, you will have seen in the budget, we have projected a loss of 40% in our revenues while continuing our efforts to reduce costs and end up with an estimated deficit of 1.3 million Swiss francs.

Fortunately, we have always been conservative in our prognoses by underestimating revenues and overestimating costs. This has led to some very positive figures in recent years. As a result of this but also thanks to a robust risk management plan we started to implement a couple of years ago, we have identified and built up a strategic reserve.

This reserve effectively allows us to absorb these losses and safeguard the organisation for the future. The FEI therefore remains in a healthy position financially, unlike many other IFs in these difficult times that have had to resort to loans from banks and even the IOC.

I also want to point out that we have maintained investments in areas that we believe are essential. The services to National Federations and our stakeholders remain at the same level. We continue to invest in our digital platforms and presence, as this is essential to maintain our fan base and to remain relevant as a sport in this very competitive world. We continued to invest in FEI Solidarity by maintaining projects that had to be postponed in 2020, by allocating new projects for 2021 and even increased our support with the creation of the FEI Covid-19 Relief Fund.

We were and still will be faced with challenges we never imagined... And in a year where compromise, change and uncertainty have been the norm, I believe, as a community, we have responded with great resilience and diligence.

A major crisis requires a major response, which in itself requires good governance, and a true passion to overcome any obstacles in the way. This is the strength of our community and the building blocks to our future.

I have been profoundly impressed by the resilience of the equestrian community when faced with adversity. And I am indebted to everyone that has contributed to finding or providing solutions this year.

Without the expertise and hard work of our experienced Committee and Task Force members, or the dedication of the FEI Board who have devoted countless hours to meetings and deliberations, the resourcefulness of our National Federations to assist their local communities and the understanding FEI Staff at Headquarters, we would not be in the position we are today.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like thank our sponsors and in particular our Top Partner Longines for their loyalty during these difficult times.

We have had an excellent relationship with Longines since we began our partnership in 2012, and I would like to take this opportunity to welcome new CEO Matthias Breschan, and wish the legendary Walter von Känel who has been in the industry for over fifty years, a wonderful retirement. Thanks to a shared vision on the unique qualities of equestrian sport, and working closely with Longines Marketing Vice President Matthieu Baumgartner, special advisor Urs Schiendorfer and Yanick Rosier, I am confident we will continue to produce unforgettable Events and engage our global fan base with top sport, great stories and inspiring horsemanship.

Thank you ... to everyone. This year has been a tremendous team effort. We were more than ever forced to think out of the box.

We still have a lot to do when it comes to Covid-19. There is still a lot of uncertainty, but I believe we have a good system in place, we have the right people and we are working around the clock to provide the very best conditions for our sport and our industry. The pandemic is not over yet and even when vaccinations and medication will be available, the effects of Covid-19 on our community and industry will resonate for quite a while. We will have to monitor this and continue our efforts to provide the best solutions possible. But there is light at the end of the tunnel and I am very confident that by working together and with the lessons learned we will be stronger afterwards. As many of you know I always say "optimism is a moral duty".

And now, to a more sobering and humbling tradition – the minute of silence.

This year has also seen the passing of some cherished and important members of our community. Please join me in remembering them by rising for a moment of silence.

[Moment of silence](#) (pdf format)

Thank you and I will now pass the floor to our Secretary General, Sabrina Ibáñez to take us through the Agenda and Procedures.