



# OLYMPIC STARS FORUM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF TOKYO 2021

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HT GOT IN TOUCH WITH THE TOP RIDERS IN THE SPORT, WHO HAD THE CHANCE TO COMPETE IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES, SOME OF THEM EVEN MORE THAN ONCE. WE HAD MANY QUESTIONS TO ASK TO EACH RIDER REGARDING HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN THE TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES 2020, BEING HELD IN 2021.

WE WERE INTERESTED TO KNOW THEIR VIEW OF THE ORGANIZATION OF THE GAMES BEING HELD DURING THE PANDEMIC, ALSO HOW THEY WERE ABLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR LEVEL OF SKILL, EQUITATION, AND HOW THEY WERE KEEPING THEIR HORSES FIT IN SUCH CRUCIAL TIME, HOW THEY FOUND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS SUCH AS THE FOOTING, FENCES, ARENA AND MUCH MORE.

WE ALSO HAD QUESTIONS REGARDING THE INTRODUCTION OF THE FIRST DAY OF SHOWJUMPING WITH THE NEW FORMAT BY THE FEI AND HOW THIS FORMAT AFFECTED SO MANY RIDERS AND HORSES.



#### **CIAN O'CONNOR**

Competed at three Olympic Games, two World Championships and six European Championships.

#### **KRISTAPS NERETNIEKS**

Represented Latvia at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo 2021

#### **MOUDA ZEYADA**

Made his debut appearance at the Olympics representing Egypt at the 2020 Summer Olympics.

#### **MOHAMED TALAAT**

Represented Egypt in the 2020 Summer Olympics.

#### **NICOLAS DELMOTTE**

Represented France at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo 2021, competing in individual jumping.

#### **PEDER FREDRICSON**

Won one Olympic gold medal in team jumping at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, and three Olympic silver medals in 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio and in 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo



## HOW DID YOU FIND THE PROGRESSION OF DIFFICULTY IN THE DESIGN OF THE COURSES OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES, ESPECIALLY THAT THERE WERE A LOT OF CLEAR ROUNDS ON THE FIRST DAY?

### CIAN O'CONNOR

I think it's important to admit firstly as a competitor that it was great the Olympic Games took place, despite Covid. I think most would acknowledge that the format was challenging in many respects.

With 30 Clears the first day, including time faults, that meant that several good partnerships who had one down missed out and as the course wasn't overly complex, some who were not capable of jumping bigger got through. It's not easy to know what the solutions are, but for our sport of Showjumping, I like to think of the Olympic Games as the ultimate test. In the Olympic Individual Final there were six clears and a full speed jump off.

That, in my own view, is not what an Olympic Final should be. Otherwise it's just another Grand Prix. Despite the format, the best horse won the Gold.

### KRISTAPS

That was my first Olympic experience, but one I can say for sure that all these beautiful and special fences together with course difficulty were made just perfect. I could not imagine that it could be made better; for the sport, for riders and for horses. For sure it was a top of equestrian sport. I think first day qualification was difficult enough and everybody who jumped it clear, deserved to go to the final.

### MOUDA

Well unlike any other show, the Olympics is the grand stage of them all. No rounds are built for warming up. It starts big enough and technical enough.

Santi the course designer did a fabulous job almost having 30 clears and 30 were to qualify to the individual final. Of course at the level of the Olympics you expect riders to jump clear, we are speaking about the best riders in every country working all the years for this moment. Still you didn't get a lot of them to jump in the individual final and yet had team medals. It was fabulous sport with top horses, athletes and course designer.

### TALAAT

I think that Santiago did a great job as usual. It's normal to have many clear rounds on the first day as it is the easiest course set by the course designer to give horses a fair start for the extremely demanding courses coming ahead.

If you look at Rio and London Olympics, you will see that always the first day almost half the starters are clear and the other half with have one down, of course maybe one or two with a bad results but the normal was clear or one down. The weaker links were then eliminated and the courses were on an absolute Olympic level.

### NICOLAS

The courses were very well built, and I really would like to congratulate the course designer as it was pleasant to ride and very fair for the horses. Riders were unanimously happy with the way the courses were built.

Regarding the clear rounds on the first day, I don't think there is anything particular to say: the formula being changed, the nations with a little bit less experience could have done one fault but it was definitely a fair course for everybody.

### PEDER

The course builder Santiago Varela did a fantastic job at the Olympics. There were perfectly balanced courses. I am very impressed. Santiago Varela is one of my favorite course builders.





## AT THIS TOP LEVEL OF THE SPORT, HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THE QUALIFIED PAIRS?

### CIAN O'CONNOR

The course designer had a difficult job as there were mixed standards of horse and rider in the competition. The proof for me that the format was a disaster is to go back and watch the first round of the Nations Cup. You had top combinations literally schooling and not trying for the time allowed as all they had to do was survive to get through to the second round, which made really poor viewing.

### KRISTAPS

I don't think that all qualified riders belonged to the Olympic level, we saw several disappointing starts there. But this is the responsibility of FEI and the qualification system. They want to see more countries in the Olympics, but not all these representatives are ready for that. I also did MER competitions to qualify with my horse and it was too easy. I think MER standards should be much higher.

### MOUDA

I believe who ever made his/her way there, definitely is up to the level. Yet anything can happen as we saw some jumped amazing clears at the individual qualifier for example Scott Brash and Cian O'Connor but didn't ride through the rest due to their choice to prioritize their horses' health yet we also witnessed others struggling from fence. Anything can happen in this sport but I believe mostly everyone was up to the level.

### TALAAT

I believe there are stronger teams out there like Italy that didn't get a chance to compete because of the strange quota; less experienced countries like China were there with all respect to both countries.

### NICOLAS

Every rider has their own chance when he has qualified to take part in the Olympic Games, there's nothing more to say.

### PEDER

I think the qualifying rules should be reviewed. The level of difficulty should be raised so that it becomes more difficult to qualify.





## HOW DID YOU FIND THE ORGANIZATION AND THE VENUE?

### CIAN O'CONNOR

The venue was super and it was really well organized. The horses jumped well off the footing and, as I said, despite the restrictions it was great to be able to compete there.

### MOUDA

Well I believe if it wasn't for the Covid, Japan would've definitely been able to pull out a lot more.

I didn't find a problem with the footing my horse loved it and felt so comfortable. To be honest the whole facility was at the top level.

### KRISTAPS

The organization and footing was at the highest level, thanks to that we could show our best possible performance.

### TALAAT

The organization was up to perfection and it is what we always expect from our friends in Japan.

The footing was up to Olympic standards.

### NICOLAS

The organization there was incredible: the facilities were amazing as well as Japanese people who were very welcoming. The horses had very good living conditions. It was a super experience!

The footings were perfect, just as we can imagine them at the Olympic Games. Jumps were splendid; it was very nice to ride there.

### PEDER

The competition was very well conducted. They did a very good job, especially given the restrictions that existed due to the pandemic. I am grateful they even managed to arrange the Olympics in the middle of a pandemic. The footing was fantastic.



## THE NEW FORMULA BY THE FEI STATES THAT THE TEAM COMPRISES ONLY 3 RIDERS, DID YOU FIND IT FAIR?

### CIAN O'CONNOR

On a personal level I was so proud of all my background team at Karlswood, particularly Johanna (Berg) and Ross (Mulholland) who were with me and Sue Magnier's brilliant Irish horse Kilkenny. He jumped amazing to finish equal 7th individually and I'm really excited about the coming season with him.

### KRISTAPS

In my opinion the new Olympic format with only three riders per team is a big mistake. I saw all these terrible starts in team qualification, where riders were forced to push their horses to continue the course instead of withdraw and save their horses. It is too much risk of the welfare of our best friends - horses. It's not fair!

Quality of our sport is much more important than quantity of nations competing. I hope one day it will be fair for the horses and riders also.

### MOUDA

That's a definite downgrade, so many sports have a drop score and it is very easy to explain it on TV. From a technical point of view as well as for the animal well fair, a drop score is a MUST.

Definitely not fair, look at what happened with the Irish team, British team, German team...I mean scot brash had to pull out after first round, Daniel Deusser had to pull out in the team competition, Penelope didn't have her best show, Cian also had to pull out for the sake of the horse.

I mean it is just doesn't make a lot of sense when riders just fly all the way across the world and after their first round they pull out for the sake of horses and the format just puts more pressure but vice versa. I am completely against it!!

### TALAAT

The new formula is absolutely not fair for the horse and the rider. If a horse has a problem during a round the rider should not be forced to continue the round. In the new formula the rider is forced to continue the round till he and his horse collapse as we have seen a couple of times. We can't blame the riders because they don't want to eliminate their whole team and let their country down.

### NICOLAS

I was not very enthusiastic about this new formula, I think the old one was a lot better as all the riders have suggested it. 🐾

