



SOENKE LAUTERBACH

## A LOOK INSIDE THE GERMAN EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

By Khaled Assem

ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL AND LEADING EQUESTRIAN FEDERATIONS IN THE WORLD IS THE GERMAN EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION. THIS YEAR, THE GERMAN EQUESTRIAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE CELEBRATED ITS CENTENNIAL, A REMARKABLE 100 YEARS OF GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT. ON THIS OCCASION, THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE GERMAN EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION, SOENKE LAUTERBACH, GRACIOUSLY TOOK THE TIME TO SPEAK WITH HORSE TIMES ABOUT THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF HORSE SPORT IN GERMANY. HERE IS WHAT MR. LAUTERBACH HAD TO SAY.

**The German Equestrian Olympic Committee celebrated its 100th anniversary this year. As the Secretary General, how would you describe the history of top-level equestrian sport in Germany and its particular success story?**

Equestrian is one of the most traditional Olympic sports in our country. In the early 20th century the sport was dominated by members of the armed forces. This was partly due to the fact that the cavalry still played an important role as such horses were always available. Secondly, cavalry officers often had a rural or aristocratic background and had been close to horses all their lives. However, the results of German competitors at the Olympic

Games in 1912 were not up to the basic expectations and therefore, the Crown Prince founded the German Olympic Committee for Equestrian Sports (Deutsches Olympiade-Komitee für Reiterei, DOKR) with a view on improving performance in the following Games. Even though there were no Olympic Games in 1916 due to the First World War, the DOKR continued to exist. It was managed very professionally by real horsemen and management experts throughout the past 100 years until today.

In the 1950s the DOKR moved to Warendorf where it is still located today. Being a member of the German National Federation, it is managed by the same staff and in the same

way as the top sports department of the National Federation.

The wider the base of a pyramid is, the higher the pyramid can be. Our greatest advantage is the broad base of horses and riders. This results in a comparatively large number of top horses and riders who have risen to the highest levels of international sports – and this has remained unchanged since the middle of the last century and we strive to keep it as such. Also, there is a high density of events in Germany, providing our athletes with the opportunity to compete at all levels every week.

Consequently, with the help of our core values and horsemanship, education (of horses and riders),



Headquarters of the German Federation & the German Equestrian Olympic Committee

dedication and professional management and support by DOKR, Germany has become, maybe, the most successful country in equestrian sport.

**Looking back, what do you consider to be the highlights of professional German equestrian sport and what would you qualify as particularly challenging moments?**

It is difficult to compare certain top results against others in our long history of successful participation. But I will mention a few that appear to be very special to many.

Even though the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 took place during a time no German citizen can be proud of, we can be proud of the unique success of German equestrian athletes who won all six gold medals at these Games. This will surely remain undefeated.

The double gold medals of Hans Günter Winkler, the most successful jumping rider of all times, and the legendary mare Halla at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1956 brought Germany back on track after the Second World War. And these two, together with other athletes

such as Fritz Thiedemann, acted as fantastic ambassadors for “the new Germany”. For several decades, from 1976 to 2008, the dressage team won all gold medals at the Olympics.

And finally, the rise of our eventing teams during the past ten years is probably the most impressive proof of our strength. Following disastrous results in 2000/2002, the DOKR set up a special programme for upcoming riders and was lucky to employ top trainers. This, in combination with other measures, resulted in double eventing gold at the Games in 2008 (Hinrich Romeike and Marius), in 2012 (Michael Jung and La Biosthetique Sam FBW), as well as other victories at several European and World Championships. Michael Jung, who is called the most “complete” rider in the world by many, can serve as the perfect example for our education and training philosophy. He may well be succeeding Mark Todd who was named “rider of the 20th century” by the FEI.

But there have also been dark hours in our sport. Best known is, for sure, the poling (To pole a horse is to raise the pole as to hit the horse’s legs when jumping a fence) scandal

in the early 1990s. And there were several cases of doping and prohibited medication in the past 10 years where German riders were also involved. We had to overcome these situations that are in a way comparable to the current situation in endurance in some countries. This was a tough and painful process for us. But in the end it worked and I think it is fair to say that we came out of this stronger than before.

**The German Federation is one the most influential in the international equestrian scene. Please allow us an inside look into how things work there.**

Our National Federation is built on three pillars: sport with 17 Regional member organisations, breeding with 25 member organisations and then the 58,000 personal members. There is no special structure that separates the different disciplines, and I consider this crucial for the development of the sport. We are lucky to have a lot of real experts in our committees and counsels as well as among our 160 staff members at the NF headquarters.

Within the sports sector there are 710,000 club members organised in 7,700 equestrian clubs. Of course



Fun & early education in horse sport

not all these people compete. But 3,600 horse shows accommodate 1.5 million starts in competitions every year. An average of 80,000 athletes compete with 137,000 horses. This may again provide some understanding for the broad base of athletes I was referring to earlier on.

But we are far from being perfect; there are another one million riders who are not listed in our clubs or as personal members, and we have not been able to attract them to our organisation so far.

**What are your major goals for the Federation in the near future?**

We are just going through a major strategy process to define the goals until 2020 and the way forward to achieve them. One of the challenges involved is to set priorities. Economically, more and more difficult times will arise and we will be unable to continue with everything we have been doing so far.

Having said that, among our top priorities will be to remain one of the most successful nations and to win at least four medals at the Olympics in Rio in 2016. We have just issued new training and education rules and these partly new standards need to



During the 2012 FEI Sports Forum

be established among all trainers and riders. We are also seeking to identify new income opportunities to fund our work. This is important because we cannot count on growing subsidies from the government in future. And we are striving to attract more members, be it the personal members department or in our riding clubs. For both we are already developing and running a special campaign.

**On the international side, the FEI has had to overcome major challenges; what do you think have been the greatest achievements of the international body so far and where do you see an urgent need to do more?**

In recent years, the FEI has benefited from fundamental growth. We have more fellow member National Federations and income has risen significantly. And my impression is that FEI Headquarters works more efficiently than ever. There is a great team in there, supported by volunteers from all continents.

Members of the FEI are of very different developing standards and this makes it challenging for the FEI to serve all members equally. They need to avoid any perceived

conflict of development versus top sport. I am well aware that Europe especially is considered to be defending its interests against the rest of the world. I do not feel that this is the case, and the FEI should help to keep this impression low or reduce it to zero.

Endurance is currently of great challenge. The FEI Endurance Strategic Planning Group (ESPG) has identified the problems and proposed urgent measures to be taken as well as a long term strategy. All these must successfully be implemented and a change of culture be achieved. Otherwise I am not sure if this fascinating discipline has a chance to survive in our equestrian family. As Andrew Finding, Chair of the ESPG, said: “Failure is not an option”.

**About Soenke Lauterbach:**

Mr. Lauterbach came into office in January 2009 and was Secretary General of the Hong Kong Equestrian Federation prior to this current position.