

Open letter from Stephan Conter to The President of the FEI

Stephan Conter  
Brussels, April 18<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Mr. President

In consequence of your recent decisions and those of the FEI, I had wished to attend on this April 10<sup>th</sup> to the works and forum organized by the FEI on the occasion of the "FEI Sport Forum 2017" in Lausanne.

Indeed, regarding the important and profound modifications that these decisions entail and the major perturbations for the riders, the show organizers, the federations and more largely to the entire community of equine show jumping, it seemed important to meet, to listen and to react in order to make my voice, our voice, heard.

This voice is the one of an actor on the ground, someone who thrives everyday to develop equestrian sport at various levels, to make it live, grow and shine with a triple ambition : quality without concession, accessibility and freedom to create, to be entrepreneur. These three inseparable aspects seem to me to be the vital core engine of the chance to guarantee a free choice of actors, a diversification of offers and the free expression of entrepreneurship that ensures diversity and quality.

It has now been weeks that I've been receiving invitations and incentives to speak up or act. I first wanted to take a step back as well as a few initiatives in order to collect points of views from others and finally to analyse the current situation.

It seems to me that now is the time to share with you, Mr. President, my opinion, my point, my fears and my vision. I am not the official spokesperson of a lobby of any kind, nor the one of any federation or whatever else but looking at the daily amount of contacts and messages I get, I believe my position to be widely established within the community of equestrian show jumping, the community of the riders who do a remarkable yet very hard job with heart and ambition as well as the one of the organisers who try to develop projects aiming at promoting in a balanced way self progression, sport, show, quality and visibility of our sport. This community I'm talking about, on a large scale, is feeling rather shocked, worried, destabilized and not respected by unclear rules and the fact they are going in various directions at a various pace.

The FEI, during the session dedicated to CSI/CSIO requirements / paycards and moderated by John Madden presented an excellent view of the situation as well as a good summary. This session tackled most of the questions everybody had after learning about the new rules and decisions in application.

The front intentions of this so called open and transparent presentation needs to be taken with distance especially when the time allocated to questions and answers got reduced to a minimum, just like the time taken to exchange or listen to the feedbacks of the assembly. The fact that most of the questions were diplomatically eluded by off topic answers didn't help either.

Let me refer to the questions asked by Mr. Henk Nooren to John Madden that were left dangling without a proper answer. An example of pure political silence coming from a communication strategy of a very distant age.

A few minutes thus of questions and answers concluded by unilateral conclusion claiming an overall and general agreement on the new rules; an agreement apparently obtained over a wide majority of concerned people, federations.

Let me, Mr President, express my doubts about this conclusion.

In fact, on the one hand, federations were asked to position themselves regarding a large global package of various topics. The new rules were only a mere part of the topics and were approached by only one angle : the one of general principles without questioning the concrete and practical modalities and their negative consequences.

It was a take it or leave it deal. The new rules couldn't be the object of a separate vote.

On the other hand, if true majority there was, to support the new rules, this majority was obviously built by federations that represent, with all due respect, countries that are miles away from our actual sport and that don't truly represent or reflect the reality of our sport and who won't be able to reach our level before ten or even twenty years.

These countries, far from our sport but who still accumulate 80% of voting right validated decisions that don't impact them or very lightly maybe but heavily affect others. Others that truly build our sport.

Then, whether we like it or not, one must attest that the great majority of horses and riders who are FEI registered are European or have a European origin.

The equestrian industry is also present in majority. Sadly, no special position was given to this engine role Europe has. It was your responsibility Mr. President, to make sure those decisions would be discussed, debated, prepared and finally taken, keeping into account this parameter.

**I must thus strongly deny, Mr. President, this conclusion that pretends that everybody would agree.**

Together during the last 10 years, all of us , riders, sponsors, owners and organizers, we have brought the jumping to an unprecedented level. Everybody worked with his own means, with his objectives and his ways. On this field, we cannot deny that the organization of the Global Champion Tour played a precursor and important role. It incited everybody to bring improvements where it was possible, encouraged other organizers to look for similar levels (of the same value). This is positive and remarkable. Ensuring perennality, enlargement and development of what has been built is essential, instead of taking little concerted, unthought and destructive initiatives for our sport.

Concrete reality, behind speeches and lectures of current Monday 11th, seems to prove that FEI is implementing a clearly unbalanced two-speed system, favoring a serie or certain organizations on the expense of others, this creating distinctive rules for certain events. The

ones, disfavored are submitted to the 80% rule of invitations owned by the FEI and the federations. The others not being submitted to that disastrous constraint.

Those rules are devastating on the long term for our sport and will lead to the slow death of 5\*-competitions. This will only lead to a monopoly situation. Thus, Mr. President, on top of the legal matters related to a situation of monopoly, a grave threat to our sport.

Why, Mr President such a decision ?

Once again, it is facing that threat that I feel forced to express my vision on the situation and on the goals to achieve.

Today already, and even more tomorrow, rules and restraining evolutions suggested by the FEI, imply in numerous cases that riders don't have or only rarely have the choice between different competitions or cannot materialistically afford or don't have the freedom to take part in all the competitions of a certain level. They, thus, cannot accumulate ranking points. Such a discrimination, induced by the FEI must now be changed without restraining the free economy of Jumping Shows organizers but, on the contrary, favour a free concurrence that will guarantee a large choice and increased accessibility for the riders to high level competitions so permitting to collect a maximum of ranking points.

This, and you should be the guarantee for it, Mr. President, will only be attained by applying to our sport common principles of equity and free concurrence.

In one word, I want a system where down-levelling isn't the guide, but a system where a rider and his horse, ranked 200 for example have at their disposition real chances, providing talent follows, to collect points and grow within the world ranking.

In today's context, and in the future, there simply is no chance nor perspective of evolution, being purely and simply rejected by the system.

To reach that goal, I officially ask you, dear Mr. President, a moratory agreement of a few months on the new dispositions allowing so to reflect and build something balanced for 2018 by correcting the trajectory and by really considering the diversity of situations that exist in our sector. The equestrian industry, the organisation of competitions are not in the hand of just one person, just one organizing body or one specific group. I therefore ask you not to content yourself with only one voice, or one interested person, but on the contrary to hear and listen to all the parts (riders, owners, sponsors, organisers) in their globality, to analyse the range of the different options present on the table in order to give everyone the same chance to collect points, ensuring everybody faces the same opportunities and challenges, cavaliers and organizers.

I thus advocate, with all my strength a real reflexion by the FEI and a true dialogue.

The public opinion within our sport requests clarifications regarding rules that advantage some more than others. It is indeed time that all understand, not to boycott the rules, but that all the organisers get treated equally and follow the same rules.

In the future, it is necessary to have one set of similar rules **for all** 4 and 5-stars competitions.

The national federation of the country organising the competition should have the right, (isn't it normal?) to invite 15 to 20% of riders who registered for the competition. The balance remaining under the freedom of management of the organiser who has the possibility to invite (or not, depending on the strategy developed for the competition) the 15 or 30 best riders in the world.

A similar number of ranking points must be offered at the occasion of every 5 stars jumping (or 4 stars) and this without considering the glitter, the glamour and the prices linked to one or another organisation. The organisers who wish to offer bigger, nicer, more luxurious competitions should have the opportunity to do so and should be encouraged towards such initiatives.

As the costs of such more luxurious competitions are higher, the related registration costs will be impacted, but each and every rider should have the possibility to decide whether he chooses to take part or not, wishing to go towards competitions that are more affordable. !

But in all cases, competitions of the same level must provide the same number of ranking points and those must not be linked to the prize money that can vary from one contest to another, according to the commercial attractiveness the organizer wants to offer, following his means or goals.

It is obvious that the costs of organizations that benefit from permanent, thus cheaper structures, are not to be compared to the ones who organize events thanks to temporary "top of the lines" structures. Those different structural types must be able to welcome 5 stars competitions. There are enough permanent structures in Europe; more widely, the FEI should be able to promote more 5 stars, so that more riders would have access to them.

Therefore, it is necessary to support, through simple for-all rules, the emergence of more 5 star competitions, among others, without reducing the sports requirements but lowering the minimum money prize a 5\* must afford. For example, one could already organize a great 5-star price with 150 000€ prize money. This would see the birth of more 5 star events. Furthermore, as I said before, it would offer the riders a wider choice: the simultaneous organization of many 5 (or 4) stars during the same week-end would enable more riders to take part to competitions of equivalent level, accumulating ranking points. They would not be subject to conditions that few can fulfill nowadays, either for financial reasons or due to the lack of choice, or because they do not belong to the top 30.

Thanks to this procedure, each rider would select, in the 5 stars or 4 stars, the competition he wants to take part to, as well as the amount he wants to pay for it.

Such a system introduces greater accessibility for a larger number of riders, a kind of democratization without leveling down in the distribution of ranking points.

This is the reason why I imagine, from my point of view, a completely renewed system, which would enhance more 5 star contests, still allowing free enterprise as well as the development of prestigious competitions full of high-level experiments.

As previously said, Mr. President, we will not succeed by reducing to 20% the percentage of the invitations in the hands of the organizers and to 80% the ones belonging to the FEI and the Federations without being financially involved.

According to this approach, many 5\* will disappear, with the formerly evoked consequences: less choice for the riders and a monopolistic situation.

Some words about the 1,2 or 3 stars ...

More than elsewhere, one must leave a total freedom of invitation to the organizers.

In fact, there is an enormous amount of competitions of this type. The offer is really important. One must leave free choice to the participants to choose in the wide range of offers, the contest he wants according to the luxury of the event, and to his own budget...

It is thus not necessary to complexify the invitation or the registration system. We must also face the fact that coaches and their clients want to participate together to the same competitions. If they have to be chosen by a federation and if the trainer is selected but not his clients,( because they are not chosen according to the rules of the FEI), you are going to annihilate the entire organization of the coaches and their riders/clients.

This is a system that cannot effectively run.

I imagine as well a comprehensive reform of the Nations Cup, that historical contest that gathers the interest of medias, sponsors, audience and riders. I want that test to end in a blaze of glory. My suggestion is to sum up both prize Money of the Grand Prix and of the Nations Cup. One should, for example, have one unique competition on the Sunday afternoon, with 2 rankings. One individual, one per team.

In both rankings, the riders would have the possibility to accumulate ranking points. In this competition, , the 5<sup>th</sup> rider of each country would take part but would be in line only for the individual ranking.

There would be two prize givings and two possibilities to accumulate ranking points. This will revive our Cup Nations making them attractive for the best riders in the world and motivating them to hoist the flag of their country!

What I would like too is to introduce a 6\* category, with more ranking points for contests with undeniable letters of nobility, offering off the beaten tracks and qualitative sports experiences. I am thinking, among others, to the Grand Prix d'Aix -la Chapelle, to the Calgary Grand Prix, the Grand Prix de Genève, final of the Global Tour, the World Cup final, the World Championship and the finals of the main championships.

Those few suggestions shouldn't be considered as absolute certainties, another truth, but rather like working possibilities that I want to animate in this moratorium of urgent and necessary reflexion.

To conclude, in its status, FEI sets this goal: similar and fair conditions allowing all the riders to take part to the competitions.

The new planned regulations planned to be implemented and related to the participation to the contests, does not meet that goal. I am very worried about that and insist once more on the vital necessity for our sport: a FEI moratorium allowing a large and real exchange, to reach a viable and beneficial consensus.

Stephan Conter