

HORSE INTERNATIONAL Q AND A

WITH SABRINA ZEENDER,
FEI'S SECRETARY GENERAL

She took on the toughest job within the FEI in December 2014 as Secretary General; the first nine months on the job have been challenging to say the least. Remember a suspension of a whole nation, a tough deal with Global Champions Tour, animal welfare organizations on the move and a few other things on the agenda. Sabrina Zeender is the first woman on the job, tailored to perfection for the mission and she has an impressive vision

Q A sport question, how does it feel after a long "pregnancy" with a little over nine months at the rudder of the FEI ship?

A It is fantastic, it was such an honour to get the job, it has been intense and it will continue to be so.

Q What is your personal relation to equestrian sport? Do you ride, or used to as a child?

A When I was a kid in El Salvador I used to ride a lot, also as a teenager. My best friend's family had a farm where we went every other weekend. When I grew up and went to university I had less time to ride. I have always loved horses and throughout my life I have been involved one way or another, even if it sometimes just meant following the sport on TV. My time with the FEI helped of course and the closeness to the horse industry was a main attraction with the first job. I did jumping at the Jockey Club in El Salvador; at the farm it was more western riding. Unfortunately I have not been able to keep up or get back into riding. Last year I was close, I felt, as my two boys are all grown up I would find the time for my own riding. I said to myself 2015 is the year you get back to riding, and then I got this job, says Zeender with a laugh. When I studied communications in Boston I dreamt about being a TV-anchor, but that did not happen. I moved to Switzerland before that dream came true, that's when I came across an open position with the FEI and I jumped on it. Communications could wait I felt, just let me be involved in what I love and the sport.



Photo:

Q Is it correct to say that you know the FEI from inside out, being part of the organisation from 1991 and onwards? Does this help you today?

A I do know it pretty well... When I started we were 18 staff members and we were a small organisation. I have seen all the changes throughout the times. I was there when Reining became a discipline, when Para-dressage entered. FEI was one of the first sport bodies to take on Para as a

discipline. It has been so exciting; we have had some wonderful presidents in the past. I know many National Federations pretty well with all those General Assemblies over the years. I have had many different roles within the FEI; I started out in the eventing Olympic department, moved on to Finance, on to Human Resources and then back to Sport, on to Governance. It is fair to say that I have touched base with a bit of everything and for sure that is very

valuable today in my position as Secretary General.

Q How different is the sport today compared to when you started out in 1991?

A The sport has changed substantially over time, when I first came in the calendar had 440 international events in a year. Now we have over 3900 international events every year. Back in the day there were only 279 international jumping events, it is incredible how the sport has evolved over time. With all these changes the FEI needs to keep up, so today, we have 85 members of staff representing 22 nationalities, which is fantastic. It helps us to understand different cultures making us better at our job. The FEI has definitely kept up with the times and we are still doing our utmost to adapt to the changes coming.

Q The FEI faces strong opposition from the horse welfare organisations such as PETA and others for the "scandals/incidents/accidents/training methods" within endurance, eventing, dressage and reining primarily. Do you agree that it is a threat to equestrian sport or is there still time to change the image?

A We have a really long-standing relationship with the World Horse Welfare; we even signed a MoU with them in 2014. So we work very closely with them. We have a Code of Conduct for the welfare of the horse. For everyone who loves horses, horse welfare is paramount to us; it is the most important thing there is. We are continuing our efforts to educate officials, stewards, veterinarians and National Federations. This will go further next year when we launch our FEI Campus (an on-line education system). We are doing everything in our power to change the perception and enforce that the rules in place are followed, to make sure everyone understands the rules. When someone breaks the rules there are sanctions, no doubt about it.

Q Can you describe a little about the process to bring the UAE

back into the FEI family after the suspension for breaking several rules in relation to endurance events? How do you start such a dialogue after the toughest reprimand in FEI history?

A It is true; it was the first time something like that had ever happened. There were, obviously, major issues. What has been fantastic though; they understood that there were problems and they acknowledged it. The UAE went out of their way to come up with feasible solutions themselves without us having to dictate what needed to happen. It was not an easy decision to take and it was not an easy way back into the fold. It took time, several in person meetings, several telephone conferences until the Bureau and myself were happy with the way things were moving forward. The agreement is a very robust agreement; there are items in there that requires continuous improvement. The suspension could be re-instated.

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Everybody understands what's at stake. They are really doing their utmost to comply with our rules. It was really just lovely to see that by communicating and acknowledging what had happened we could come to an understanding and be really positive about it. I give my hats off to them for going really and truly behind abiding by our rules. It's been a very good experience. Endurance is a very beautiful discipline, it's about family and the Emirates have been good partners in the past and they will be in the future. In October the FEI held an endurance conference for 1400 delegates in the UAE as part of the education program following the lifted suspension. Since the interview the FEI has suspended two officials from the United Arab Emirates Equestrian Federation. First Dr Hallvard Sommersteth, Head of the EEF Veterinary Department, was suspended in September and then Abdul Aziz Mohd Yasin Sheikh, Head of Endurance, got notice in October.

Q But if you want the agenda to be about horse welfare wouldn't it be just as easy to say for instance; we will only have races up to a 100 km, we will skip the 120, the 160 km?

A We are now doing our own monitoring and checking, analysing the statistics to see if there may be in the future needs to be a change in the formats. It is an on-going discussion and it is scientifically monitored so that we can come up with the right solution. We have people on it and we need the proof, by the next FEI sports Forum I hope we will be able to present the results to our stakeholders.

Q Especially jumping is evolving rapidly into a high numbers game meaning money pouring into the sport thus meaning more and higher level events with large sums of prize-money. Will this be the cause for introducing restrictions over time on the number of starts each horse does as the utilisation of each individual goes up significantly? With the FEI's "Fit to Compete" protocol that basically gives carte blanche for

a horse with a strange moving pattern to start is there room for welfare concerns?

A There are horse inspections at every event; this is a built in protection to ensure that the horses are fit to compete and that will always be the case. It is true that we do have a very full calendar. But we believe that these are well managed and even though we will say that the prize money is very high I wouldn't say that it is a bad thing. It brings our sport to the spotlight, it helps our athletes and it makes it more interesting for the audience, I think that is a good thing. The horse inspections are there to protect the horses and that is what I rely on. I am not an expert or a vet so I cannot really comment on what goes on. We have to rely on the vets with this task.

Q Can the FEI cope with competition from Global Champions tour? Already causing riders to choose prize money over medals?[Scott Brash, Rolf-Göran Bengtsson for the EC in Aachen, Christian Ahlmann at the WEG-2014]

A No, I do not believe it is a threat to the FEI championships. Just look at how full the stadium was in Aachen during the EC in August. We have amazing heroes out there competing. The beauty of the other events is that you can actually go and see them as a spectator; they are open to the general public. So, I do not really see that as a threat. And when you see the events it puts the spotlight on the sport on new locations just like the Furusiya Nations Cup or the Longines World Cup Finals. On the contrary, I think it is all good; the sport reaches into places where it normally would not come.

Q Equestrian sport is unique in terms of gender equality; men and women compete on equal terms, one of the many fascinating aspects of the sport. As a woman in an organisation previously dominated by men in suits, do you see yourself as a role model for gender equality? Did you dream about a CEO-position in

the beginning of your career?

A To tell you the truth I think it ticks the box. Our sport has had women in very important positions before; we have had a woman president since 1986. Personally I am extremely honoured to have this position as CEO for the FEI. I sincerely hope it serves as a role model. It is also very important for the IOC to have women in power. We have Maria Gretzer, show jumper, she is the chair of our athletes committee and our representative within the Bureau. She has the ability to explain our sport to people outside of it and that is extremely important. There are women around, no doubt about it.

Q What is your favourite position when visiting the big shows? Presenting the trophy, following the competition from the stands, spending time in the warmup or something else? Are you widely recognised today, is it hard to walk alone?

A What I like the best is to sit in the stands and watch the sport, that is the very best. If possible in the Riders Stand but I just want to be as close as

possible to the arena. That to me is the top of it all. I am still not recognised and have no trouble moving around, I can be anonymous if I need to and I hope to do so for some time.

Q It the public eye the FEI only seems to care about broadcasting rights and the money related to selling them. Are all the disciplines forced to change to accommodate the broadcasters requirements? Do we do our sport for TV only today?

A No, we don't but one thing is for sure; the sport needs to remain relevant. The broadcasters and we have one thing in common, we respond to the viewer-needs. If you think about the attention span of the youth nowadays it is a lot shorter, it is nothing like it was 10-20 years ago. I can tell, just by looking at my sons, they will watch something for 7-8 minutes and then they will switch if it hasn't caught their attention. The sport need to remain relevant, it needs to be sexy, interesting, contemporary and engaging while keeping all those traditional values that we treasure so much. We are not catering to broadcasters needs; we are just staying in the game. We have a lot of competition from other sports, people out there competing with us for the audiences' attention. We do not need to change to be like others but we need to change to stay relevant and attract new audiences that are for sure. Preaching to the already converted is not going to do anything for us. We need to engage new audiences, new TV-viewers, people who are at the apps looking for the latest thing.

Q What is your biggest challenge in the coming two years? Where will the FEI be in five years?

A It is exactly what we talked about; to remain relevant in a changing world. To keep the sport interesting to those who not necessarily understand it, to get new fans out there. I mean, we have living legends still doing the sport, people like Ian Millar. We need them and the newcomers like Bertram Allen. We need new people to follow us. The biggest challenge for the FEI will be to remain relevant and interesting for everyone and engage new fans. As for FEI within five years I have a clear vision. I would like to see equestrian sport as a top-10-sport worldwide, which is what the FEI strives for. We have to work our way towards that. How I am going to do it? That will be the topic for our next interview, says Sabrina Zeender. ■