

2007 FEI General Assembly – Estoril (POR)

Some personal impressions

My flight arrived in Lisbon late afternoon and after some problems identifying the hostesses from the Portuguese NF, I was taken to the General Assembly hotel in Estoril/Cascais. Wayne Roycroft called about 10 minutes later. We met at the bar, but not before I had visited the supermarket and bought some supplies to avoid having to use the minibar. Mineral water from the shop was just 1/66 of the price offered by the hotel. At the real bar, Wayne and I were progressively joined by other FEI Bureau members (as Chair of the FEI Eventing Committee, Wayne is a Bureau member) who were assembling for their first dinner.

I used the following day to clean up a substantial part of my e-mail inbox, write a report with photos for the National Office, register at the FEI desk, talk with the many people one has got to know over 10 years at these assemblies and other events, study the latest papers distributed for the Assembly and check the FEI web for more (there were some new ones, of course). I also went for a walk along the beach in the afternoon when it had stopped raining and the sun came out for the first time.

Day 1

The Assembly started with Group Meetings. Our Group VIII meeting went through the normal routine. After reports had been read and some question asked, there was some debate about what to report to or raise with the FEI Bureau the following morning. In the meantime, all were invited to have lunch with the Asian Equestrian Federation (AEF).

The evening was taken up by the Welcome Dinner of the host federation, Portugal, held at a resort in picturesque surroundings about half-an-hour into the countryside. EFA President Geoff Sinclair and his wife Jill, who had enjoyed a private holiday in Portugal before arriving at the Assembly, joined me and the outgoing Chairman of the FEI Endurance Committee Hallvard Sommereth (NOR) and his wife Gisela, who proved to be quite entertaining. Dinner was fine, speeches too long, and background noise high. I even got up to “encourage” a couple of tables to be quiet for five minutes. The highlight of the evening was left to the end in the fresh air outside: a display of local Lusitanian horses presented by riders in traditional costumes and uniforms. It was quite impressive.

Day 2

Traditionally, each Group is given fifteen minutes or so to present directly to the Bureau any concerns, issues or special requests they have. This process has been taking place in a much more relaxed atmosphere since the Infanta Dona Pilar took over the Presidency from HRH Princess Anne. The new FEI President HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein is continuing with this much more productive approach. A certain amount of tension remains, however, especially with the presenters, who are faced with a long pedestal occupied by 20 Bureau members. FEI Headquarter staff sit in an elevated position on the side.

Group VIII was the second group to present. Our “speakers” only turned up at the last minute, so there was no time to go over what was included in their presentation. As we found out soon enough that what they told the Bureau bore little relation to what had been agreed and to what had been handed out in printed form.

For at least the last two years, it has been possible to attend the presentations of the other Groups, and many delegates make use of this opportunity. One gets a better understanding of the diversity of issues that are raised, and the different approaches taken to present these issues to the Bureau.

The afternoon was taken up with three special workshops: an Olympic update, a session on Para-Equestrian and a debate over the invitation system for higher-level CSIs.

There were about twenty “Olympic” delegates attending the Assembly, representing the various stakeholders like the HKG Jockey Club, the HKG Equestrian Company and, of course, BOCOG. The presentation went smoothly, there were plenty of handouts and the questions were not too challenging.

The session on Para-Equestrian showed large differences between NFs in the degree of progress they had made towards “mainstreaming”. What came out, however, was that this new “Discipline” wants to be part of exciting major events, particularly Dressage events. How rapidly this will be introduced in practice will depend largely on show organisers and the amount of pressure the NF can bring to bear to make this happen.

The Jumping forum was unexpectedly quiet. Maybe HRH’s comments during Group I and II sessions on the previous day had left the desired impact. The Princess had talked very firmly and sternly about her determination to stamp out corruption and her unwillingness to have the sport for sale. There was practically no opposition left to the introduction of the proposed invitation system. This is aimed at the elimination of the

“pay card” system, where some organisers force less prominent riders to purchase a “sponsor table” for 5,000 to 10,000 Euros (or more) to guarantee them an entry to the show. I was, however, stunned to hear some senior Dressage officials deny in the Meet-the Bureau sessions that a similar problem existed in Dressage in Europe. We know otherwise.

For the evening, we were invited to the AEF Dinner but not before we had attended an extraordinary Group VIII meeting called to elect a Deputy Group Chair to Dr. Ahn (KOR). We had nominated Jennifer Millar (NZL) for this position because of her long-standing development work in the Region and her grasp of issues. At some stage there was talk about Singapore’s Mr. Ho standing as well but he was replaced by a professor from Taiwan, who got elected. Dr. Ahn’s term as Chair will be over in 2009, I believe.

Not much can be reported about dinner except that I managed to confuse our table waiter a few times, causing him to call the head waiter, who spoke better English. This man was very helpful and even kept us up-to-date with World Cup Cricket scores.

Day 3

The Development Forum was well-attended. Apart from having an interest in the subject matter, people were probably keen to hear the new FEI Executive Director – Sport, Harald Müller from Germany, for the first time. Harald had been Development Manager for the International Athletics Federation. His presentation seemed rather technical but after it, the audience was broken into groups and assigned individual topic to discuss, for later reporting. Since there were more people than chairs at tables, I spent most of that time with Para-Equestrian Chair Jonquil Solt. The FEI is going to publish the results of the group discussions.

In the afternoon, after a welcome address by the Princess and after an Extraordinary General Assembly had approved the new FEI Statutes, the General Assembly proper started. The business conducted is summarised on the FEI web (and ours). I should point out that the new FEI Statutes clarify a number of matters that had not been addressed or were unclear in the previous version. One of them is the “principle” that Member National Federations are the only organisations granted permission to use FEI Rules and Regulations:

National Federations are granted an exclusive license to use, modify, print and distribute as appropriate the documents referred to in this Article, which are FEI property, for the purpose of regulating horse sport within their national territory.

Another is the requirement for FEI-listed officials to be members of their National Federation:

All Officials listed as such by the FEI must be members of their respective National Federations.

The FEI Prize-Giving Ceremony and Official Dinner (black tie) followed in the evening at the Casino Estoril. We shared a table with German NF Chief Dr. Hanfried Haring, his wife and the sports director of the Austrian NF. The entertainment program was exceptional. A group of ex-Circus Soleil acrobats appeared from all sides including the ceiling and did their acts on ropes and other apparatus to the theme Four: The Spirit of the Elements, a dazzling scenic extravaganza centred on the poetic simplicity of the elements, Air, Fire, Earth and Water”.

Day 4

The second part of the Assembly dealt with reports from various Committees and some affiliated organisations.

The subsequent farewell cocktail function around the pool finished around 2 PM in time for the official Bureau photo at 2:20 before their next meeting. Geoff Sinclair left in the afternoon whilst I stayed on (flights on my “cheap” ticket were booked out until the following day) and had dinner with Wayne Roycroft and FEI Eventing and Olympic Director Catrin Norinder, NZL President Kevin Hansen, NZL Vice President Jennifer Millar and the FEI Second Vice President Chris Hodson and his wife Lowell (also Kiwis).

The flight home was fine although it took 32 hours from door to door, with several hours of waiting time in Frankfurt and Bangkok.

Franz Venhaus

30 April 2007