

SPORT'S NEW FRONTIERS

FEI PRESIDENT HRH PRINCESS HAYA, HEAD OF THE SPORTACCORD CONVENTION LOCAL ORGANISING COMMITTEE IN DUBAI, IS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE AND ENERGETIC LEADERS OF WORLD SPORT. SHE TALKS TO KEVIN ROBERTS ABOUT HER VISION FOR SPORT AND DREAM OF AN OLYMPIC GAMES IN THE GULF REGION.

DUBAI WILL ROLL OUT the welcome mat for sport's leading administrators and their growing retinue of advisors, commercial partners, strategists and suppliers when the SportAccord Convention arrives in town in the last week of April.

And nobody will be awaiting the event more eagerly than Her Royal Highness Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan, for whom it represents a convergence of several interests.

Princess Haya, who is married to Dubai's ruler, is both the president of the SportAccord convention Local Organising Committee and one of the most influential and energetic heads of an international sports federation.

An international show jumper who competed for Jordan at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, Princess Haya is president of the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI), which she has set about transforming since her election in 2006.

Today she remains the only woman at the head of an international Olympic sports federation and a passionate advocate of inclusivity in sport, particularly among children.

She is also a natural advocate of the potential role of the Gulf region in world sport and believes SportAccord's visit to Dubai will be mutually beneficial. "Hosting this event can help this region find its place in the world of global sport," she says.

"The timing is perfect for the international sport community to be exposed to the decision-makers in this region, and vice versa. We both benefit from

that exposure and build new partnerships based on mutual respect. Doing that will benefit the world of sport and the people of this region."

Even before her election, Princess Haya was committed to the notion of change for better governance in sport and nothing has altered in the intervening years to change that view.

"Sports governing bodies are responding to the same pressures that affect all institutions. There is a growing demand for better governance in the world of sport, just as there is in the business world. Financial pressures and changes in communication are also forcing change," she says.

"Sports organisations have tended to be inward looking. It is easy to get caught up in internal politics. The move towards good governance and transparency helps keep the focus where it should be - on serving the sport and the athletes.

"As we bring more professionalism to sport governance, we also have to respect traditions and the unique aspects of the sport family. We have to continue to value the people who built the sport under previous governance structures as we modernise those structures. We need more statesmanship and less politics."

The clamour for greater professionalism in governance has never been louder. While the opening of new media channels offers sports exciting new communications opportunities, there is a clear imperative to adopt new and more creative approaches to generating revenue from all sources.

Princess Haya believes that changes in communication are both a challenge and an opportunity. "Sport governing bodies exist to serve athletes, and I think we all share the goal of bringing young people into our sports.

There is a growing recognition that we have to be more creative and more nimble in how we communicate. Athletes, and certainly young people, are often ahead of us in sharing the kind of information that we should be providing.

"All of it boils down to a focus on service. The sports that have seen the biggest growth, like cricket, have made big investments in infrastructure and human resources that have a direct benefit to the sport."

The FEI itself may be seen as a case study of change in sports governance. Change has, says Princess Haya, been profound and sometimes painful but significant progress has been made.

"We have improved governance, taken steps to increase and diversify our financial resources, and improved our communication.

"We have increased transparency, providing more financial information and a three-year financial forecast. We have improved personnel procedures, with job descriptions, employee appraisals and more job security. We created an operations manual, which fully documents processes and procedures at the federation.

"We will soon have a new headquarters in Lausanne. We have also taken steps to clean up



Princess Haya - Getty Images Sport

our sport and reject corruption, by outlawing paying wildcards. We launched the 'Clean Sport Campaign' to combat doping.

"We have enlisted a new set of top-quality sponsors - Rolex, Alltech, HSBC, and Meydan. Last year, we launched our official broadband TV channel, FEI TV, on which we broadcast live our premier competitions as well as a wide selection of archive and lifestyle features. We've raised CHF 12 million (\$11.5m) as seed money to kick-start our projects through the 'Friends of the FEI.'

"We are communicating with stakeholders in a variety of new ways. To create a stronger presence on the internet, we changed our web identity from horsesport.org to fei.org and improved the content. Last month, we launched 'FEI EquiTests,' an iPhone application designed to help riders learn, reference and practice FEI Dressage tests.

"We have a new awards programme, the 'FEI Awards.' We launched a magazine, 'FEI Focus.' We have a new monthly communication that provides information on all FEI activities and we have created a global IT network called 'FEI Family.' Then we also worked with [video game manufacturer] Atari to create a digital video game, 'My Horse and Me.'

And after what has been something of a whirlwind of activity, it is time to take stock and allow them to bed-in. "We need to give all of our stakeholders time to embrace these changes," Princess Haya says.



HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein FEI President and President of the Dubai Organising Committee for the 2010 SportAccord Convention

Princess Haya's work and interests focus on humanitarian issues and human development concentrated primarily on health, culture, sports and education.

In 2006, she was elected President of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) having previously represented Jordan at the FEI General Assembly. She is the first Arab to occupy the position of FEI president.

She is a member of the IOC Athletes' Commission and IOC Commission for Culture and Olympic Education, and since 2007 has been a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Princess Haya is also currently a member of the Honorary Board of Directors of the International Paralympic Committee, Vice-President of the Royal Windsor Horse Show (UK) and President of the Princess Haya Initiative for the Development of Health, Physical Education & School Sports, Dubai.

"We also have to listen to their suggestions on other changes, including adjustments to the changes that have already been made. The whole point of the modernisation process is to better serve our sport and the athletes, both human and equine. We have to ensure we are giving them the tools they need for our sport to thrive."

And while modern communications techniques have made it easier for federations to learn from each other, HRH admits that there is still more to be done.

"We can learn a lot from each other, and we do," she says. "While each sport is unique, there are some commonalities, especially when it comes to staging events and the business aspects of sports administration.

"We copy best practices from other federations and try to avoid their mistakes. Modern communication has made it much easier to share information and ideas.

"That said, we can certainly do better. We all tend to exist in our own world. The truth is, it is often hard to find the time to learn what other federations are doing. That is why SportAccord is so helpful. It provides a valuable forum for international federations to share ideas and information, and to work together to solve common problems.

"It also helps develop personal ties that encourage communication throughout the year. It can be quite helpful to have someone from another

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federation that you can call for advice when you need it. We need to go beyond sharing knowledge and look for ways to share resources.

"There is often intense competition between federations, which can be healthy. But we can also draw strength from one another by pooling resources. We can also learn from sport organisations outside the Olympic Family, including professional commercial leagues. If all the federations and sport organisations worked together, we could find out what the 'power of sport' really means."

The Princess' commitment to sport and its potential is crystal clear. She believes sport is not simply important to society but a vital element of a balanced and healthy life.

"Sport enriches our lives, mentally and physically. It helps young people acquire the traits they need to succeed. It teaches self-discipline and teamwork. It can provide hope and a sense of purpose to people in desperate need of both," she says.

"It obviously improves health and anything that can have such a positive impact at the individual level will have a positive impact on society.

"I am passionate about this because I have seen the power of sport in my own life. Having lost my mother when I was three, I was very fortunate and I will be forever grateful that my father encouraged me to take up riding. Equestrian sport has had an enormous influence on me. It gave me a chance to test myself and to find out what I could achieve in an arena where ancestry and family connections offer no advantage. My teammates became my larger family.

"It has given me some of the happiest moments of my life, moments shared with my father and my family. It led me to my husband, Sheikh Mohammed, who shares my passion for the sport. Those joys now come full circle as I experience the thrill of seeing my own daughter on her pony."

And while her views have been formed by personal experience, she also sees the wider picture very clearly.

"On a societal level, sport is a great equaliser. Once you are on the field of play, race, religion, income and ancestry no longer matter.

"The equality of competition can be particularly empowering for women and young girls. For far too many of them, sport is the one opportunity they have to break free from societal norms that stifle their creativity, their passion and their dreams. Sport has been enormously helpful in opening doors for women beyond the world of sport."

But whilst sport checks so many positive boxes, Princess Haya remains realistic and acknowledges that it does not exist in some kind of vacuum.

"As an integral part of society, sport is susceptible to all of the negative aspects of society. I agree with IOC President Jacques Rogge that doping is a direct attack on the integrity of sport.

"As part of our effort to guard against doping, the FEI launched the 'Clean Sport Campaign' last year to give all of our stakeholders the information and the tools they need to protect our sport. It was a call to action as well as an effort to ensure a consistent and professional anti-doping effort.

"I'm also very concerned about societal trends that are leading young people away from sports and physical activity. We shouldn't just focus on challenges to elite sport. Individuals and society need sport at all levels. Computer games, videos and other sedentary leisure activities are now competing with sports for the time and attention of young people.

"We can see the results in the rising levels of youth obesity and other negative health indicators in many countries around the world. Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and other ailments related to inactivity are among the greatest killers we face worldwide. In my region, 40 per cent of children suffer from diabetes.

"We must ensure that all children - boys and girls, able bodied or challenged - have an opportunity to participate in sport. The important thing in sport is not to do well, it's to do - to participate. It is literally a matter of life and death.

"That is really what motivates me now that I am no longer an active competitor. I want to do all I can to encourage participation in the sport I love."

Today the Gulf region is becoming an increasingly important centre for world sport. Of course, much of the region is exceedingly wealthy, but it would be wrong to suggest that the region's apparent fascination for sport is simply the result of a desire to raise global profile by splashing the cash.

In fact, years of increasing prosperity have led to changes in lifestyle which have become the driver for sport in the region at participant level. There is a need as much as a desire for sport.

"This region used to enjoy an incredibly healthy and fit lifestyle. It was an outdoor lifestyle, full of movement and closely tied to nature," she explains.

"The modernisation process since then has completely disrupted that. We have the high diabetes rate in children and cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death.

"Sport helps provide the activity that daily life used to provide. It also helps preserve the cultural identity and heritage that is detrimentally threatened by modernisation. Equestrian sports have a direct link to the nomadic Bedouin lifestyle and traditional Arab culture. Arabic poetry, which served as the journal of daily life, often celebrated horses and horsemanship. The traits of nobility were the ethics of horsemanship.

"Sailing is directly linked to seafaring trade and the pearl industry of the past. In pre-modern times, it was common for people in this region to spend half of the year on land, the other half at sea.

"The cosmopolitan nature of Dubai and the UAE has encouraged interest in a wide range of sports, which has been incorporated into our economic development strategy. My husband, Sheikh Mohammed, decided 10 years ago to make Dubai a premier sports destination as part of the economic diversification, but, more importantly, to protect the sport heritage that flows from the Bedouin culture."

And Princess Haya is in no doubt that focus and investment is paying dividends in every way. "It is absolutely. Both economically and in terms of encouraging interest in sports in the region. Learning about sports and seeing the world's top athletes encourages others to try their hand."

Staging SportAccord will naturally help cement Dubai's growing status in world sport and is likely to create fresh awareness of the Emirate's event hosting capabilities.

Princess Haya says one of her dreams is for the region to host an Olympic Games in her lifetime and that the immediate ambition is to be recognised as being capable of staging the Games.

"Getting to that point will provide benefits that will trickle down at every level to make a better future for our people," she says.

"This region offers first-class venues, a commitment to the values of sport, enthusiasm and a can-do attitude.

"Hospitality is an integral part of the culture of this region. We want every visitor to feel welcome and special, no matter who they are or where they are from. I am sure you will see that attitude on display at SportAccord.

"Hosting events here also gives people around the world an opportunity to learn more about our culture and heritage. One of the great things about sport is it helps break down barriers between people and reminds us of our common humanity. The world needs that more than ever."