

FASTER, HAYA, STRONGER

HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein became president of the International Equestrian Federation in its first-ever contested election in 2006. A pioneer in every sense of the word, she is now seeking re-election having transformed the federation from top to bottom.

By James Emmett. Photographs by Graham Fudger

Despite her protestations, Princess Haya is a pioneer and has been all her life. Born into the progressive Jordanian royal family in 1974, she became the first Arab woman to compete at an Olympic Games when she represented her country in show jumping at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. In 2006, she was elected to the role of president of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI), having previously represented Jordan at the FEI General Assembly. A year later, she became a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). She is the first Arab to occupy the position of FEI president and one of just three women to head up an international Olympic sports federation. As both an Arab and a woman, Princess Haya is indubitably a torchbearer in the sports industry. The daughter of the late King Hussein of Jordan and the wife of Sheikh Mohammed, the current ruler of Dubai, 36-year-old Princess Haya is one of the most powerful women in the world. Since that Olympic debut in 2000, she has been flying the flag for women in sport. That, however, is not a concept that sits easily with her refreshingly modest outlook. "I don't spend much time considering it," she says bluntly. "None of it is self-serving. It was the same when I was an athlete: if I'd gone into the ring thinking 'I'm the first Arab woman to compete at the Olympic Games,' I'd probably have fallen off at the first fence. But I was thinking 'where is number one? I have to use my inside leg to get to number two; watch the horse's shoulder, number three is coming up...' That's what you think about and you think like that in this job as well. So you think 'I've got to get to development; what's this national federation thinking; what's this one saying?' You don't think 'oh, I'm a pioneer'. Also, I think that being a member of a royal family, you know that if you read every day

the things that people say about you, both the positive and the negative, you start living in a false image of yourself. I grew up with that, so when you get into a job like this you just think about the job otherwise you start living a kind of pseudo-self."

As a high-profile and dynamic leader of an international sports federation, Princess Haya is in the vanguard of a movement that is in the process of elevating women to a level of parity with men in the field of sports administration. Her role is invaluable not only to the federation over which she presides, but to the spirit of equality that the world of

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sport finally seems willing to embrace. Despite making all the right noises over the years, the sports business industry has remained decidedly dominated by men. Even in the Olympic movement, often hailed as the flag-bearers for the rest of the sports world, the gender disparity is still palpable. Despite some tweaks to the makeup of the Games made in August last year – the addition of women's boxing and more medal events for female wrestlers – there is still a significant gender discrepancy within Olympic competition, something former British Olympic minister Tessa Jowell called "an embarrassment in this day and age" shortly after last year's changes.

With Princess Haya playing much more than just a figurehead's role at the helm of the FEI, and Kate Caithness, Marisol Casado, Molly Rhone and Jessie Phua – who Princess

Haya describes as "lovely, amazing women" – in charge of the World Curling Federation, the International Triathlon Union, the International Netball Federation and the International Ninepin and Tenpin Bowling Federation respectively, women are finally gaining some respect and influence in the upper echelons of the Olympic movement. Indeed, having received significant backing from IOC president Jacques Rogge, former Moroccan female hurdler Nawal El Moutawakel has become one of the most powerful members of the IOC, presiding over the evaluation commissions for the selection of the host city for both the 2012 and 2016 summer Olympics.

Princess Haya believes the sporting world has reached a natural tipping point, brought about by a sea change that took place when her generation was growing up. "I think the fact that women have kind of bubbled up in sports comes from the fact that only in my generation major sports federations started to recognise [women]," she says. "I think it was a little bit in parallel with a social movement that took place that really understood that the world would be a better place if women received a proper education, that issues like population growth and family planning would be solved as a result of having healthy, well-educated, well-fed women globally."

As Princess Haya sees it, it was in her youth that sport began to be recognised as a platform to promote a healthy lifestyle in women. "Once they'd identified it and it was science-based," she says, "it meant that [sports federations] did have serious programmes. Fifa, Fiba [the international governing bodies of soccer and basketball] and some of the rest, they gave incentives to national federations and teams who promoted women's sport and women started bubbling up."

Princess Haya's own introduction to sport has been well-documented. When her



HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein photographed with her horse, New Approach, which won the prestigious Epsom Derby in 2008



Princess Haya with her husband, Sheikh Mohammed, ruler of Dubai, at Ascot on Thursday 17th June 2010

mother died when the young princess was just three years old, her father gave her a foal whose mother had also died. Princess Haya went on to find great solace in a sport she saw as a great leveller. “Now,” she continues, “this generation has actually come from the fields into administration and I think as long as that drive continues, that will continue to happen.

I’m not talking about myself, but that is the kind of woman you want in administration because it means they’re someone who really understands the job that needs to be done and not people that are placed there because of patronage or because of the women’s issue or the women’s quota. That would be a bad service for womankind.

“It is important to say that from the Olympic Committee’s standpoint, President Rogge has done a huge amount personally to promote and support the women that are in the movement. We have a lot to thank him for. I think he’s very visionary and has the ability to really make a difference. I think it is one of the things that will separate his administration in Olympic history.”

When Princess Haya says she is not a pioneer, in some ways she is right. The history of the FEI has a distinctly royal and female feel. Princess Haya was preceded by Infanta Doña Pilar de Borbón, of Spain, and Princess Anne, of England, before her, while a member of a royal family has presided over the federation since 1954. At least nominally then, Princess Haya is nothing new. The attitude with which she has approached the role so far, however, and the results she has already achieved, have been both fructifying and transformative. “In my first election, one of the things that stood most against me was the fact that the national federations wanted to know that they would have a hands-on president; they recognised that they no longer wanted a figurehead and they in fact kept telling me ‘we don’t want a princess; can you promise us that you’ll work?’ I didn’t take that personally at all! I promised to work for something that I really wanted to do. I didn’t need it for my CV; I really did want to get involved. In fact, I was very, very lucky to be on a ship where everybody else felt the same way. It’s changed in every way.”

Working an average of 14 to 16 hours a day, alongside her other multifarious commitments, Princess Haya instigated root and branch changes across all levels of a federation that was distinctly backward-looking before her election in 2006. While there was resistance at first – Princess Haya says she counted 76 times in her first week that the phrase ‘but this is the way it’s always been done’ was used – she insists that “staff in headquarters were really passionate. Everybody was keen to get to a positive place.” The governance system has been reformed and made much more transparent – the appointment of ex-general counsel Alex McLin to the role of secretary general in early 2008 ensured a much more rigorous and professional structure at the organisation; the federation’s



John Whitaker, of Team GB, competing at the 2010 Meydan FEI Nations Cup event in Rotterdam on Friday 18th June

communications strategy has been vastly improved, while the commercial operations have been completely revamped and upgraded; and a brand new home for the federation in Lausanne is also almost ready. “I think [the FEI] has changed hugely,” says Princess Haya. “Mostly the culture is very, very different and the atmosphere is different in the office. When I was being elected, during the process the year before, I really made it my job to go out and listen to the federations and try to see what they wanted to do with the sport and what direction they wanted the governing body to go in. [The FEI] had followed its natural evolution and then all of a sudden it mushroomed into something a lot bigger. It wasn’t so much that I had to promise to grow the sport, it was the fact that the sport had grown and it had to be governed with modern-day instruments and really be part of the 21st century in order to survive.

“I think when I came in,” she continues, “they were really ready for change. They elected me as much on that as on the manifesto I produced. It was based on six pillars: governance, welfare, development,

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national federations, commercial development, and our place in the Olympic family.”

Having increased transparency within the federation, provided more financial information and three-year financial forecasts, improved personnel procedures

and created an operations manual, taken significant steps to combat corruption and doping, and brought commercial revenues to a level at which they supply about half of the federation’s income, Princess Haya believes that 80 per cent of what she set out to do has been achieved. As such, she has put herself forward for another term in the FEI presidential election in November. Running against two other candidates, it is a mark of Princess Haya’s presidency that this will be the first contested FEI election with an incumbent (incidentally, the first contested FEI election ever was Princess Haya’s in 2006). In line with the new spirit of transparency and regulated governance at the federation, the election will be run by the FEI’s chair of audit and compliance, the head of the tribunal and the head of nominations, allowing Princess Haya to concentrate on the quotidian affairs of the federation. “The day-to-day work of the FEI is really my priority,”

Princess Haya and SportAccord

The last week of April this year saw the culmination of several months of frenzied work. In her role as the head of the SportAccord local organising committee, Princess Haya was responsible for bringing the world’s largest sports convention to Dubai. The event, which included meetings and discussions between all the Olympic federations, was unanimously deemed a great success and, despite not being keen to take on such a massive task again too soon, Princess Haya believes that Dubai is already feeling the benefits of the week-long conference. “I have recognised now that my future doesn’t lie in event organisation!” she jokes. “If I lose my job as a princess, I don’t think that would be my chosen line of work. The stress I don’t mind, it was the sleep deprivation that was key! It was enormous fun though.”

Hosting the world’s top sports administrators for a week was crucial, insists Princess Haya, not necessarily to show Dubai off, but to allow the fledgling Dubai sports industry to benefit from the experience, knowledge and ideas of the best minds in the sports world. “I discussed with His Highness Sheikh Mohammed what would be the best face for Dubai in SportAccord,” she says, “and we really wanted to show that we understood where the sport family was, literally; that it had just been through the [IOC] Congress in Copenhagen; that it had just finished with [the] Vancouver [Olympics]; and that people were tired; also the fact that we were normal human beings and Dubai was always a place associated with money and this false ceiling of reality, and we wanted to make it a meaningful event for people who understood how the country was made,

she says, “and I feel strongly that the national federations will judge me on my performance rather than my rhetoric. I kind of mean to minimise the campaign and just do my job to the best of my abilities and if they see that I’ve done a good job then I’d hope that they’d re-elect me.”

One area that Princess Haya has had

Princess Haya with Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the UN, at SportAccord in Dubai



how it would be sustained and what our value system was. So it wasn’t about the wow factor, it was about really providing a nice atmosphere that was conducive to networking, and that’s really how our country was built. I think that that was probably achieved because we’ve had a lot of feedback and interaction with people since then and it’s gone beyond the event itself. But I’m positive about what it was. But when you decide to work like that, it means a hell of a lot more effort and that’s what makes the difference, rather than just throwing a budget at it.

“Actually what made it very tiring,” she continues, “was having to organise the event and to run around and try to pick up everything at the same time. Having that array of minds and intelligence in our country that were looking around and throwing ideas in the air about what could be done, that was something that

unarguable success in is the commercial development of the federation. Revamping and centralising the federation’s offering, introducing an official broadband television channel, an iPhone application, awards programme, magazine and computer game, as well as changing the federation’s web address from horsesport.org to fei.org – “because

was absolutely priceless for all of us. The point was to see how we could benefit from the best structures and to manipulate the structures to create something for ourselves that was absolutely tailor-made to our region. We don’t have the same model as South America, Africa or Europe, and from that point of view, it was necessary to take a bit from everywhere and to really see how we would build our foundation in the Gulf and that was the process that was happening in real time. That was very tangible. We’ve been working since SportAccord on restructuring the sports council there and really laying out the foundations while it’s still fresh in our minds – we’re beaver away on that side. That’s not under me, it’s under His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed, but I’m happy to help where I can. But I do have to say that Hein Verbruggen and the SportAccord team were just the best. We had a really great time.”

I’m dyslexic and I kept seeing ‘horses port’ rather than ‘horse sport’” – has seen commercial revenues swell. Over the course of the last five years, top level sponsors Rolex, HSBC, Alltech and Meydan have come on board, more than doubling the FEI’s commercial revenues from around US\$4.5 million in 2005, to just over US\$12 million ▶

last year.

The capture of Meydan as a major sponsor is particularly significant. The new Dubai racing brand, comprising the gleaming new Meydan racecourse as well as the city being built around it, is now a key partner of the federation as well as the title sponsor of the FEI Nations Cup, an eight-event show jumping series that culminated this year at the world famous Dublin Horse Show on Friday 6th August. On more than one level, the Meydan signing has demonstrated a tangible link between equestrian sports and the racing industry. It is a link that Princess Haya, as a racehorse owner and the wife of one of the most prominent figures in the racing industry, herself embodies. “I think that people in the general public refer to the motor racing industry and say that rally car driving is different from Formula One, even though the common denominator is a car,” she says. “But in our case, because of the issues that we have like transport and quarantine, the links are an awful lot stronger because the common denominator is an animal that needs to be cared for in the same way regardless of what discipline it goes in. So from that point of view, our nature-based links are very strong; our scientific links are very strong – there’s a huge overlap in these industries. Traditionally, though, we were looked on as the poor cousin of racing and we weren’t really an equal partner at the table. And I think that recently, maybe a little bit as well to do with the recession, a lot of people have started realising that not everyone can ride a race horse, but every little girl has a picture of a pony or a princess riding a pony somewhere.”

Enforcing that link, the Alltech World Equestrian Games, the FEI’s flagship quadrennial event, will be held outside Europe for the first time this September, in the USA’s racing heartland, Kentucky. “It’s a momentous occasion for horse sports in general,” says Princess Haya. “I think what they’ll give to horse sports is immeasurable. Really the fact that it’s in Kentucky is huge. Sport belongs to the globe and federations that accept or agree that they should have a global reach are going to be the federations of the future.”

Having brought equestrian sport so far, the two major dots left on Princess Haya’s radar are increasing the commercial revenues further – “50 per cent isn’t where I want to be; I would like to see that at 70 per cent, that

would just be starting to be healthy” – and aiding the development of the sport across global boundaries.

Princess Haya aims to find solutions to transport and quarantine issues across the world, something that will aid the growth of all horse sports. “Many of the issues we face – ‘unclean sport’ – come from the root fact that people are competing in such an overcrowded space,” she says. “If the world opens up to them, then they won’t have to cheat. They will be able to earn a living. [We had] our first Olympic Games in Beijing – Hong Kong for us, but we were still able to open a road to mainland China thanks to the legacy the IOC gave us, and now to look to the future of Rio: for me it’s an inspiration and an added propulsion to sort out transport and quarantine, the main issues facing our national federations now. We’ve been going

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through research numbers now about what horse-based statistics we have that affect the GDP in different countries, and we came up with one stat that for one horse you have four associated people who are given a job. That’s in Europe. If you just think about if we’re now able to open a door to China, and horse sport becomes big there, what that will mean not just to our national federations, but to the breeding industry and the horse owning and training industries as well.”

While her role within the FEI has become increasingly outward-looking as she seeks to redevelop a sport that has already scaled the heights in its past, Princess Haya has been equally instrumental in her role at home in Dubai. As a prominent Olympian, she is of course a natural proponent of the importance of growing sport in the Middle East. Dubai, she believes, is now at a crucial stage of the development of a plan her husband conceived almost a decade ago. “I think that many people don’t realise that His Highness Sheikh Mohammed always had a

strategic plan for sport in his country and it came from a necessity really: the fact that the fast-changing lifestyle in the Arabian Gulf has led to us having a young generation – and we’re looking at statistics in healthcare – that has a 40 per cent rate of diabetes in children. There was a growing trend towards buying or renting athletes so that sport became spectator sport. The face of modernisation was also happening so quickly, so he really felt that he had to identify the key sports that had historical roots in the area and that that would protect the younger generation and protect their values through such a speedy development. Obviously the same man knew exactly what he was planning to achieve and I think if anybody else had known what he was planning they would have been shocked. But he did; he picked the right package of sport to do that. I had the benefit of understanding what he had in mind, and early on he did have to attract high-class events. And to a large extent, people started to have this image of Dubai and other large countries in the Gulf as just being about staging top events. It was really an image that was synonymous with money; that you can buy an event and it’s all about the biggest prize money. But actually that was the fastest way to enter the market, and to enter it at the top of the pyramid and build the pyramid down, so to speak. And it’s very smart. But really we’ve come to the middle tier now, which is building the thinkers and the knowledge base there.”

As soon as that pyramid is complete, Princess Haya believes, Dubai will be in a position to host an Olympics of its own. She doesn’t know how long it will take and insists that there is no point bidding if a valuable legacy doesn’t immediately spring to mind. “I believe you need to finish building the pyramid and then you’re capable of saying ‘I would like to think about a Games’. The ultimate answer is that I don’t know a natural legacy right now. How fast we’re able to answer that question... could be months, could be weeks, could be days, could be years.”

Months, weeks, days or years, as soon as the base of the pyramid is built, Dubai and the Middle East could do a lot worse than have Princess Haya at the helm as the Olympic pioneer that brings the Games to the Gulf. ■