



EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Moving towards a sustainable future

Now the dust has settled, **Brendán Bergin** explores the lasting legacy of the 2020 Olympic modern pentathlon and how the sport can move forward



THERE has been a lot of controversy following the difficult scenes on view in the equestrian leg of the Olympic modern pentathlon event. While many are now saying that removing the equestrian component altogether is the solution, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and to understand the sport from its origins to derive the ethos. The sport has its foundation in the military, emulating the tests that a soldier would come across in battle. The sport first came on the Olympic scene at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912 and has been an exciting staple ever after.

In modern culture, with social media and keyboard warriors becoming ever more powerful, care must be taken to discern the truth and logic from the sensationalised headlines.

Developing the way equestrian sport and modern pentathlon structure their equestrian ethos would seem to be a more logical starting point. Standing over the maxim that 'this is the way we have always done it' would seem a dangerous precedent. In the ever repeating history books change is an essential progression to ensure the continued existence of equestrian sports.

The pressure of the sport

It is very easy standing on the sidelines to criticise the actions of the athletes and to slam the emotional nature of some of the performances. It must be remembered that while the Olympics are the highest echelon of sport, the games still enjoy amateur status.

In the equestrian leg of Olympic-level modern pentathlon obstacle height is 1.20m, which includes both a double and a treble, and the length of course is 355-450m, very similar to what you would find in an SJI of the same height.

There are not many amateur rid-

ers who would accept or be capable of a 'catch ride' on an unfamiliar horse round a 1.20m course. Horse and rider combinations have 10 minutes to work on the flat and a further 10 minutes to jump a maximum of five practice fences, offering little opportunity for any kind of horse and rider partnership.

The lottery system can either put the second athlete on the front or back foot depending on how the previous round has gone. If the first rider has problems on course the second rider will likely inherit the same. The reverse is also true.

How the world see us

The Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne (UIPM) are going to have to look forward and assess where their social license stands after this year's equestrian event.

Modern pentathlon has 109 years of evolution, now it is time for the equestrian leg to undergo some change to ensure the sport has a future! As ever, equestrian sport has to step back and understand the way the public perceive what we are doing. The continuance of equestrian sport is by no means a foregone conclusion, rather it is in the gift of the public perception and acceptance.

The past number of months have shown a huge amount of publicity harmful to how equestrian sports are perceived. The public do not differentiate between racing, dressage, show jumping, eventing and modern pentathlon, rather they see them all as horse sports.

Potential evolution

One of the potential changes is that teams could either supply their own team horses, or perhaps the height of the courses should be revised to reflect that these athletes are riding an un-

known partner. One of the main arguments against athletes bringing their own horses is that riding unknown horses provides a 'sterner test'.

In international eventing the maximum height is 1.30m at five-star level, only 10 cm more than we expect these pentathletes to ride on an unknown partner. In all other FEI horse sports, a fall either from the horse or the rider, results in elimination.

This seems to be a sensible precaution for both horse and rider safety and welfare, both of which now need to be under review following Tokyo. Great traction has been achieved by lobby groups by showing fallen horses being remounted and continuing to jump.

This continues to chip away at our social license to continue with equine sports into the future. We are at a tipping point. If we don't start changing what we are doing in equine sports, we will fall victim to modern cancellation culture as the general public become more aware of the harm we are doing or are perceived to be doing.

It is of critical importance that when animals are used for entertainment or sport that their needs as sentient beings are looked after and that they are not viewed purely as a competition instrument like an épée (fencing sword), pistol or a pair running shoes.

The future

The future lies precariously in the hands of those who have the power to change what is happening and those who criticise. As an organisation the UIPM legislate on the formatting, rules and administration. This enshrines their role in promoting good welfare, athlete fairness and maintains the integrity of the sport of modern pentath-



Ireland's Natalya Coyle dreamt of a 2020 Olympic medal in the modern pentathlon but her hopes were dashed after a difficult round when her horse Constantin refused a number of fences.

lon. The trainers and coaches need to ensure that their riders are prepared to meet the requirements of what is legislated. This includes a significant amount of 'match practice' jumping to the level on novel horses, under competition conditions, in a variety of different locations.

Finally, and most fickle and unstable, the future of all equestrian sports and activities lies in the non-equestrian public's perception. Now is not the time to entrench, now is the time to grow, develop and learn. If we don't change the tide of public opinion, equestrian sport is heading in the direction of the dodo - extinction.



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