Perspective on

Endurance Strategic Planning Group

Proposal at the November 2013 FEI General Assembly

By John Crandell

The reports from the Endurance Strategic Planning Group (ESPG) presented at the FEI general assembly depict an earnest and hardworking effort by some to salvage FEI endurances status and reputation. This report also demonstrates the “systemic” problems, as described by Chairman Andrew Finding, that have plagued the FEI permeate the ESPG as well.

It is clear the ESPG recognizes the scope of issues is vast and must reach into many areas of the organization at once to incite real and lasting change. The very professionally developed schematic format and its “Plan on a Page” represented considerable expertise in planning. This work indicates that the ESPG wisely recognizes that we need to carefully develop consensus on schematic levels of this initiative before we can effectively develop details of a comprehensive overhaul.

I was very pleased to see some emphasis on education and reminders of the history of endurance riding as part of the program. Endurance testing could play a unique role in mankind’s relationship with animals if we define and regulate the discipline thoughtfully. It can even be an essential force in the long term health and happiness of equines as a sustainable species if we do this very well. We all need to remember both the noble and productive, as well as the cruel and destructive moments in endurance riding history and pre-history, to guide our path into the future. The modern era of equine endurance, the transformation of the practice into a socially acceptable and regulated form of equine testing, was founded on the interest of dedicated horseman. These were passionate enthusiasts looking for an academically valued way to identify great horses and horsemanship based on a natural spectrum of the species’ most definitive and historic abilities. The discipline has proven that it can be an engaging sport and economically sustainable, even in its most academic forms. The stringent preservation of this academic aspect of the discipline is essential to the nobility of the sport, its long-term net value to the equine species, and is at the core of any meaningful philosophy of respect for the horses.

Even as the schematic and gestural elements of the ESPG plan presented great promise, hints and examples of the concrete details of how this program might be implemented are very concerning.

Chairmen Andrew Finding acknowledged that there needs to be complete “rule by rule” revisiting of the FEI endurance rule book. While it’s encouraging that there is an understanding that the rule book needs to be thoroughly revisited, simple line item changes will not be enough, even if we edit almost every line. The inherent incentives and disincentives of the rules and award system are established more by the philosophies and basic constructs behind the document than by letter of the rules themselves. The fundamental errors of the rules, award philosophies and their motivations cannot be corrected by line item edits and definitely not by adding more and more regulations. We need the eloquence of wisdom, not the burden of more bureaucracy.

Concepts like extended rest periods and the growing horse qualifying hierarchies seem justifiable and necessary in the context of the current regulations. These ever expanding attempts to micro-manage training practice are only more evidence that the underlying motivations, which are established by the rules and awards structure, are misdirected. Even now, good trainer’s efforts are being compromised by the logistic wastefulness of compliance to increasingly intrusive regulation. Economic wastefulness mandated by the FEI system only amplifies the competitive advantages of wealth, and limits the number of participants that are interested in participating at the financial support level.

We cannot correct these embedded inefficiencies without going deeply into the core constructs of the system, such as the very definitions of the CEI “\*” levels, and then reconstructing from there. The endurance rules and policies could be much simpler and much more effective at encouraging noble behavior we could all be proud of.

The most detailed example of the ESPG’s intentions, the proposal for a professional trainer registry, was presented by a group member from a region that has already licensed and ranked trainers within its federations for almost two decades. This is also the region that has seen the most overwhelming concentration of rule violations and subsequent animal abuse in the same time period. The entire world has seen the results of philosophies like using a professional trainer’s registry to institutionalize the limiting of accountability at the trainer level.

One of the most common quips among those that bear close witness to Dubai endurance racing is “I guess another groom will be sent back to India (Pakistan) over that one”. Fingering someone that is not only easily replaced, but is also suspected of disloyalty to the regime would be a doubled bonus, and a signal to others that might express independent thoughts. Larger scandals sometimes require more significant scapegoats, so someone of higher rank in the systems, such as a veterinarian, assistant trainer, or even a principal managing trainer must take the fall.

If the circumstances of the offense are such that even powerful media and information controls cannot deflect blame to someone haplessly innocent and powerless, then someone of loyalty or value to the regime must take the fall. These persons are likely to know too much about where the directives are really coming from, or may represent strategic political alliances, so they must be compensated to retain their loyalty. These same persons also know that overt demonstrations of extreme loyalty, taking personal risks such as throwing races, or joining in on rule violations in a “one for all and all for one” manner are seen as acts worthy of exceptional generosity in gifting.

It is in this manner that influence and incentive to cheat transcends and blurs the boundaries of stables and their ownership of record. The overt presence of cheaters driving their choice of a fleet of gifted luxury vehicles, and of banned trainers pensioned or promoted to an active role supervising assistant trainers, has been the powerful driving force of a depraved competition culture.

This environment has made the worst violators secure, wealthy, and powerful, while the honorable horsemen in their region have been ostracized. This duality of the mechanisms is the most fundamental reason the region fell to such deplorable depths so completely and so rapidly. Ethically weak and incompetent FEI stewardship simply added the credibility and cloak of that brand, sold at a relatively low political price.

Suggestion of an enforcement strategy based on the professional career sensibilities of trainers is therefore a preposterous statement that offends the intelligence of anyone with exposure to the environment that spawned the current outrage. Like so many rules and policies now embedded in the FEI system, implementation of such a program would only further institutionalize the shielding of the ultimate financial and political sources of inappropriate directives. Any measure that further inhibits tracking of these depraved incentives to their political and economic roots will only make the systemic corruption issues worse, not better.

“You can fool some of the people, some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time” – Abraham Lincoln

Trainer licensing at this time, and in the manner presented, is therefore a proposal that would be counterproductive to the purported goals of the ESPG. At best it could only result in the better concealment of the roots of moral poverty. It will eventually necessitate new cycles of rules and regulations to further address the un-remedied issues and will extend the burden of an expanding bureaucracy to the rest of the world.

The chairman of the ESPG further endorsed and applauded this proposal in the proceedings of the recent FEI general assembly. This has only raised questions about the competence of the ESPG itself, and particularly of the integrity of the selection process of its members. It’s time for us to question why the FEI needs to be so diplomatic as to publicly advance the offerings of the fox on the security of the hen house. This repeated occurrence in rule and policy development has become an open source of embarrassment and a divisive wedge in the equestrian endurance community.

The Chairman went further to suggest the future of endurance riding lies in modeling after flat racing. Traditional flat racing has been in a popular decline in much of the developed world for the last half century. The simple fact is that the new sources of wealth that might support flat racing have become wary of its marginalized record and publicity. Even those that don’t fully understand the sport have developed a visceral sense that something is fundamentally questionable about the sports economic institutions and influence on equine genetics. The obsession for genetic development toward an unnaturally narrow performance attribute is a source of inherent conflict with the principals of wholesome and sustainable well-being. At this time it is widely understood the flat racing is only supported at its present level by extreme financial commitments of an increasingly few wealthy people that are insulated from the pressures of modern morality.

It only seems apparent that endurance riding must advance in the direction of the “Sport of Kings” by the trajectory of the aforementioned rule and reward guidance. Following flat racing as a model is not a wise and sustainable long-term path. The entire world is evolving much too fast in an opposing direction. Equine endurance tests can be a leader, and not a trailing victim, of the advancing public awareness if we manage this discipline with a regard for its potential academic values.

While the public has been presented with an ESPG program that is just what it wanted to hear in schematic approach and background rhetoric, the closer we look at the most detailed visions and proposals, the more utterly alarming it becomes. The devil is in the details.

It is a fact of human interaction that we most efficiently develop new concepts in relatively small groups. This however depends on the fortunate or wise assembly of the right individuals, as the contribution of each is critical to the outcome. The FEI has now put itself in a position that will eventually require it to withdraw the most detailed aspect of the ESPG proposal and restructure the personnel and visions of that group in order to retain the support of the broader endurance community worldwide. The can has only been kicked down the road. The biggest debates and conflicts still lie ahead.