

# AERC Takes Action As International Endurance Abuses Continue

*As the sport of endurance has grown more popular, so have the cheating and welfare issues, and the American riders want to protect the sport they helped create.*

BY ERIN HARTY

**T**his is a story of international intrigue, of power and influence, of drugs, cheating and preferential treatment. It involves sheikhs, princesses and cowboys, viral Internet videos and lumbering bureaucracy.

It's also the story of how the participants and enthusiasts of perhaps the most organic of all the international

equestrian sports—the pursuit of riding a horse as fast as you safely can from point A to point B across natural terrain—are trying to save the sport from its own success. This story begins in the deserts of the Middle East and ends in a conference room in Atlanta where people who share a common interest in endurance all agree there is a problem and are

having a healthy debate about how to fix it.

Are you intrigued yet?

To follow this story, let's start at the beginning.

Endurance as an organized sport has its roots in the American West, with the establishment of the iconic Tevis Cup in 1955. The American Endurance Ride Conference, the sport's governing body, was founded in 1972. With plentiful wide-open spaces at our disposal and a rich tradition of exploring them on horseback, it's no wonder that the U.S. dominated the sport as it was emerging on the international stage in the 1990s (when Valerie Kanavy won World Championships in 1994 and 1998).

In the late 1990s, the countries of the Middle East started to spend their considerable resources to buoy their nascent international endurance programs. American riders, coaches and veterinarians received all-expense-paid trips to offer their expertise. Top American horses

AERC President Jan Stevens led the conversation on how to address and respond to international endurance welfare issues at the AERC Convention. BECKY PEARMAN PHOTO



were purchased for generous sums. Wealthy Middle Eastern sheikhs put up money for purses and funded competitions. There was talk of endurance potentially becoming an Olympic sport, and the funds were seen as helping the sport to grow.

In the 21st century, those investments began to pay off. Other countries started to threaten, and eventually overtake, the United States as the sport's dominant force. In the individual competition at the 2010 Alltech World Equestrian Games (Ky.), the United States finished only one rider, in 18th place, but Middle Eastern countries had five riders in the top 10.

At the same time, concerns were raised not only about the perceived influence of Middle Eastern countries on the Fédération Equestre Internationale, which financially benefitted from their participation in the sport, but also on the style of riding in that part of the world, where racing tends toward traversing a prepared path across the desert rather than the American style of tactical, slower riding over varied terrain.

Former AERC President and current Southwest Director Randy Eiland recalls writing about these dangers in the AERC newsletter as far back as March 2000. As the decade progressed, whispered concerns about doping, increased incidence of fractures, outright abuse and rule infractions at FEI events grew into a shouted chorus.

In October 2012, the FEI heard from two international federations expressing serious concerns. Wendy Laeremans, director of the Belgian Equestrian Federation, wrote of a distressing number of horses that died from exhaustion or were euthanized because of spontaneous fractures, and she requested the FEI take measures to ban the perpetrators and prevent such occurrences in the future. Pascal Dubois, national sports director of the French Equestrian Federation, wrote of the risk of "tarnish[ing] the public perception of endurance," and noted the urgent need to prevent any kind of equine welfare scandal at the 2014 WEG in Normandy, France.

## A No Good, Very Bad Year

Although the alleged transgressions had been piling up for more than a decade, 2013 may be looked back upon as the watershed year, when the shouts for change finally grew too loud to ignore.

Last March, Swiss Equestrian Federation officials added their voices to their Belgian and French counterparts and sent a letter to the FEI about the issue of doping, specifically calling out the Middle Eastern countries. SEF President Charles Trolliet wrote to the FEI of a "negative evolution" of endurance in the Middle East, as well as "dramatic incidence" of doping and instances of unequal treatment.

The SEF compiled FEI tribunal data showing that 41 endurance horses worldwide tested positive for various banned substances and controlled medications from 2010 to 2012, making endurance the leading FEI discipline for substance violations. More than 80 percent of the cases involved riders from the FEI Group VII countries (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Qatar).

Trolliet also wrote: "We abstain from listing the multitude of witnessed and documented cruelties to horses, including shocking veterinarian reports concerning health issues, tremendous fracture frequencies and dangerous treatment protocols... as well as cheating actions before and during the endurance races, in parallel with the non-taking of responsibility of certain officials and FEI staff."

And then, one of the biggest doping scandals to hit Thoroughbred racing came to light in April involving Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, husband of FEI President Princess Haya, the United Kingdom's leading race horse owner and an endurance rider himself. Mahmood Al Zarooni, who trained race horses for Sheikh Mohammed's Godolphin Stables, received a record-setting eight-year suspension from the British Horseracing Authority after 11 Godolphin race horses tested positive for anabolic steroids. Al Zarooni also trained endurance horses for the Sheikh.

In May, large quantities of unlicensed veterinary goods were seized by U.K. authorities from the Sheikh's



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Former AERC President and current Southwest Director Randy Eiland (*right*) was concerned about endurance abuses as far back as 2000 when the sport was just becoming competitive worldwide. He sat down with endurance enthusiasts Sue and Becky Taylor, a mother and daughter from New Mexico, to discuss meeting notes at the AERC Convention. BECKY PEARMAN PHOTO

government airplane, and again in August from a farm in Newmarket owned by the Sheikh's Darley Stud. (This past February, a report commissioned by the Sheikh and Princess Haya cleared him of any knowledge of the three incidents.)

Other trainers and riders out of the Maktoum stables suspended for doping include Mubarak Khalifa Bin Shafya, Ismail Mohammed and Ali Salman Al Sabri. And Sheikh Mohammed and his son Sheikh Hamdan were both suspended in 2009 after their horses tested positive for illegal substances.

In the midst of the flurry of news coverage about the doping scandal, the Dubai Equestrian Club (of which Princess Haya is chairwoman) pulled its sponsorship of the Euston Park in Thetford, England, effectively canceling its entire season's slate of four FEI-sanctioned rides. No explanation was given. The cancellation left Great Britain's endurance riders scrambling to rearrange their schedules in order to qualify for the 2014 WEG.

In June, AERC President Jan Stevens wrote to John Long, CEO of the U.S. Equestrian Federation, urging the USEF to add its voice to those of other federations expressing concern over the current state of equine welfare issues in endurance.

"We share the alarm voiced by the European federations of Belgium, France, and Switzerland in regard to profoundly disturbing evidence of deficiencies in horse welfare issues, including an increase in equine fatalities, orthopedic injuries and serious drug violations," Stevens wrote. "We note that these letters have been widely circulated throughout world press, and that the reputation of the sport and all those federations involved is likely to become irreparably tainted if decisive action is not taken at once to resolve these issues."

Stevens also described a growing trend of flatter, more spectator-friendly endurance courses that encourage riders to race at unsafe speeds and a corresponding increase in the types of fractures commonly seen in Thoroughbred flat racing. The letter cited a 2010 article in the journal *Equine Veterinary Education* that documented one limb fracture per 236 FEI starts in the 2007-2008 European endurance season, and about 75 percent of those fractures originated from the fetlock joint (similar to the most common fractures seen in other racing disciplines). In comparison, only two fractures of the fetlock region were verified by the AERC from 2002 through 2012, in more than 140,000 AERC starts.

## Can The ESPG Save Endurance From Itself?

In response to the general outcry and the Swiss demands for a concrete plan of action, Princess Haya convened a round table session in July 2013 at FEI headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. An Endurance Strategic Planning Group was created at the meeting and tasked with creating a 10-year plan for the sport worldwide that would allow for growth and development of endurance while also maintaining a "clean sport."

Andrew Finding, CEO of the British Equestrian Federation and board member of the European Equestrian Federation, was named chairman. The group also included veterinarian Brian Sheahan of Australia, chairman of the FEI Endurance Committee; international endurance rider Joe Mattingley of the United States; Saeed Al Tayer of the United Arab Emirates, vice president of the Dubai Equestrian Club and organizer of FEI World Endurance Championships; and veterinarian Jean-Louis Leclerc of France.

The ESPG met several times and then made an initial presentation at the FEI General Assembly in Montreux, Switzerland in November. A total of 37 recommendations were put forth in the group's report, designed to reduce doping and equine injuries. The recommendations fell under four categories: growth; culture and behavior; structure and governance; and communication and marketing.

In the weeks after the meeting, the ESPG sought feedback and comment from the national federations on the proposed changes in the form of a survey. All 132 federations were invited to comment; of the 50 or so nations that are involved in endurance, twenty submitted comments via electronic survey. A group of veterinary surgeons

also met independently of the ESPG and each offered their own views.

The resulting feedback was incorporated into a final set of proposals that was presented at an FEI endurance conference in Lausanne on Feb. 9. Finding noted that the responding federations gave 32 of the 37 proposals an approval rating of over 80 percent; the remaining five proposals all had an approval rating of over 50 percent. Meeting attendees further debated the proposals, as well as the establishment of “key performance indicators” that would allow progress to be measured going forward.

Although the Lausanne conference showed widespread general agreement among the federations, the most notable commentary may have been in what wasn’t said—no Middle Eastern federations were in attendance, and only one (Qatar) responded to the survey.

And then there was the little matter of the video. In a bit of serendipity that seems to encapsulate the entire international endurance dilemma, on the very day that the federations were meeting in Lausanne to discuss allegations of doping and abuse in the Middle East, a blatant incident of abuse excerpted from the official live video feed at the Sakhir CEI\*\* (held the day before the conference in Bahrain) went viral. The clip depicts the winners, Tarabic Carl and rider Sheikh Mohammed bin Mubarak al Khalifa, slowing down near the finish before people jump from a car following the horse, and one chases it on foot, striking it.

The FEI gave the rider a yellow card and fined him about \$575. The Bahraini National Federation also suspended both the rider and the groom for the rest of the endurance season.

### The American Response

As the largest national federation, representing the country that is arguably the birthplace of the sport, the AERC shouldered a special burden in the international discussion. The organization’s Board of Directors wrote a letter to the ESPG in December 2013, after the FEI general assembly in Montreux, outlining their recommendations.

The Board’s first concern: Is the FEI

truly committed to change, and not just paying lip service in response to bad publicity? “While we understand that some proposed changes may take more than a few months to show measurable improvement, we recommend an immediate demonstration of commitment through a change of leadership within FEI, and especially within the endurance leadership of FEI, that will demonstrate and symbolize FEI’s dedi-

cation towards correcting the increasing international perception of compromised integrity within FEI,” wrote Stevens on behalf of the AERC Board.

The letter recommended transparency in reporting of equine fatalities; major penalties for “responsible individuals” (which could include not only a rider or owner, but also a trainer, veterinarian or stable) for infractions of FEI rules

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and code of conduct; and more extensive drug testing, among other recommendations.

The following month, the AERC's Sponsorship Committee put forth a motion to the organization's Board of Directors to prove they meant business. They proposed having the AERC stop sanctioning endurance rides that intend to hold an FEI event concurrently with the AERC event, if the FEI did not incorporate enforcement of proposed policies put forth in the AERC's December 2013 letter by June 30, 2014.

AERC International Committee members vehemently disagreed with the proposed motion, however. "Approval of this motion proposal would be a counter-productive method to affect the changes desired by AERC," was their official response. "A much better solution is for AERC to remain in its current active and positive role and thus retain its voice and strength to help direct the changes that will be made within FEI... The AERC International Committee feels very strongly that any careful consideration of the true issues at hand cannot lead to any conclusion other than that we, and the horses and the sport we wish to honor and protect, will be best served by putting forth a united voice. The consequences of division would be far-reaching, unforeseeable in totality, and potentially extremely damaging. The impetus for change within the FEI governing structure has reached a point of inevitability, and the opportunity for AERC to be an integral part of that change should be enthusiastically cultivated."

The AERC's membership was deeply engaged in the issue, with discussion on an official Facebook group topping out at more than 600 comments. Only about 6 percent of the group's membership is involved in international competition, either as riders or officials.

And thus, the stage was set for the AERC's Annual Convention and Board of Directors meeting in Atlanta on March 6-9, where the motion to stop co-sponsoring rides with the FEI would be considered, discussed and voted upon.

### **USEF To AERC: Present A United Front**

USEF CEO John Long spoke at the first of two BOD meetings at the AERC Convention, and while the organization's rank-and-file members weren't able to speak during the meeting, they could observe, and they quickly filled all the available chairs and standing room around the periphery of the meeting room.

Long urged the BOD to work within the existing FEI framework to effect the changes they seek.

"The FEI knows that they've got a problem on their hands, OK?" he said. "There are many, many countries in the world that are not happy with the situation that has presented itself in the last couple of years. There is a problem, and we know that we've got to fix it. You're going to hear me say this a couple of times tonight—I believe you fix problems by staying involved. I believe you fix problems by staying in the game. You can't fix problems on the outside.

"The challenge to the AERC and USET is to stay wholly engaged,



In 2013, three separate doping scandals occurred in Great Britain involving horses belonging to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and husband of FEI President Princess Haya. The Sheikh was subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing. KIT HOUGHTON/FEI PHOTO

perhaps in a way that we haven't even been engaged before," he added.

Long stressed, with the exception of the FEI Group VII (Middle Eastern) countries, his counterparts around the world at other national federations were having the same discussions within their organizations and their members.

"I think we're in complete agreement," he said. "What's happened has got to stop. We've got one part of the world that is hijacking the sport for the rest of us. Everybody around the world is having the same conversation that we're having now. So there's a tremendous amount of support throughout the entire world to get this problem fixed, to get it fixed once and for all, and to make it happen sooner rather than later."

Long urged the BOD to wait for the final report from the ESGP, which will incorporate the feedback from the national federations and be presented at the FEI Sports Forum in Switzerland on April 28-29. He was optimistic that the report would shorten the time frame from the initially proposed 10-year plan, would incorporate many overdue changes that enjoy very wide support, and with an unprecedented amount of international pressure behind them, he expressed confidence that change would, indeed, happen. He suggested developing a task force or working group that could meet after the final report and hit the ground running with an action plan for making sure that proposed changes do, in fact, come to fruition.

Long also addressed the "elephant in the room," the AERC's threat to stop co-sanctioning FEI rides, saying he thought it was the wrong approach. He argued that the two groups had more power together, working within the FEI bureaucracy. But he also emphasized that the group's strong stance—or, as one BOD member put it, "saber-rattling"—was, in fact, helpful in working the politics of the organization.

"The work that you've done has increased the visibility of the problem, and the good noise that's coming from our side of the pond is making a difference," Long said. He added that the reason Mattingley was added to the ESGP (which was initially comprised of

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—RANDY EILAND

only European members) was because of intense lobbying by the USEF for an American, bolstered in part by the strong opinions expressed by its national counterparts.

"If we stay together and nothing good comes out of this over the next six months or a year, then we'll walk away from it together. We'll do it together," Long said, to a round of applause. "If we separate now, then it's the old divide and conquer."

The convention also featured a "hot topic" open session to discuss the international component of the AERC, where anyone was welcome to express an opinion.

On Sunday, the BOD met again for more discussion and, eventually, a vote. To address concerns about "punishing" American international riders, the motion was changed to remove the threat about dual sanctioning, but maintained an intention to explore the possible formation of a new international organization if the FEI doesn't demonstrate measurable progress by Jan. 1, 2015. The motion passed unanimously.

"The major thing we wanted to get done was for the AERC to make a statement and not sit on the sidelines like we had for the last 15 years. We needed to get up with the world and

make a statement," said Eiland, who authored the motion.

The text of the amended motion, as passed, reads:

"In order to address the growing alarm among AERC members that mounting drug violations and fatalities and fractures in international endurance riding conducted in some Region VII countries by the FEI are injuring the reputation of our sport worldwide, the AERC shall immediately notify the FEI, through USEF, in writing of:

"1. The AERC's grave concerns that drug violations and horse fatalities and fractures are excessive in FEI endurance events by some participants from Region VII countries, that the flat courses and high speeds characteristic of FEI international rides contribute to horse injuries increasingly similar in severity and frequency to those occurring in flat track racing, that some FEI officials inadequately enforce the FEI's own rules, and that the administration of FEI events favors certain competitors and member countries over others.

"2. The AERC's intention to consider joining the exploration with like-minded endurance groups in other countries of the formation of a new international organization to conduct international endurance riding events if the FEI does not demonstrate measurable progress towards addressing the AERC's concerns by January 1, 2015. Measurable progress would include, but not be limited to, greater transparency in public reporting of fatalities and fractures occurring at or associated with FEI endurance rides.

"The AERC looks forward to working with the USEF to prepare a joint response to the ESGP Report that meets both organizations' interests. The AERC's International Committee is directed to monitor and evaluate the FEI's progress towards meeting the AERC's concerns. The AERC's International Committee is also directed to prepare periodic reports to the AERC Board who will determine yearly if meaningful and measurable progress is being made. The AERC shall continue to support the efforts of the USEF to improve the FEI's conduct of international endurance riding and shall remain affiliated with USEF." 🐾