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Equestrian advocates debate change and Olympics

Olympic equestrian sports hold a unique position in the modern Olympic Games and have been part of the Olympic movement since the 1912 Games in Stockholm. Equestrian sport is all about the connection, intuitive link and committed partnership between the two athletes.

The Olympic rider working in harmony with the body, mind and soul of the Olympics' strongest athlete, the horse, in a field where men and women compete equally — this makes equestrian events the most compelling at the Olympic Games. In August, 200 horse-and-rider combinations from 43 countries will compete for six gold medals in the equestrian sports of jumping, dressage and eventing.

To what greater height could an athlete aspire than to Olympic competition? However, the sustainability of the Olympic Games is a challenge equestrian sports will face in Tokyo's 2020 Olympics and beyond in a modern world demanding more transparency and participation and higher standards of integrity of all sports.

According to the International Federation for Equestrian Sports (FEI), the sole controlling authority for all Olympic equestrian sports and responsible for establishing regulations and approving equestrian programs at the Olympic Games, change is required to remain relevant in today's ever-changing sporting landscape and gain the exposure and visibility the equestrian sports deserve.

Olympic Press Committee member Alan Abrahamson complimented equestrian sports, stating: "We have a great sport. We have a core audience. What we need are more and younger fans. This is a moment of opportunity."

The FEI encourages, and now the International Olympic Committee mandates through the creation of the Olympic

Agenda 2020, that Olympic equestrian disciplines make it easier to understand, attract young and larger audiences, be broadcast-friendly and see more nations represented. What we are facing is nothing less than a reality check for equestrian sports.

A lot of the public does not know anything about equestrian sports, and there are tons of new sports trying to knock on the Olympic door. Skateboarding, surfing and rock climbing are almost guaranteed to be on the Olympic program for Tokyo, because they are perceived as cool and sexy sports.

The exciting and dramatic equestrian sport of eventing requires the same horse and rider combination demonstrate their abilities at three phases of competition — dressage, cross-country and show jumping. (See my March 29 column for further details.)

Dressage tests the gaits, suppleness and obedience of the horse through a series of prescribed movements; cross-country challenges the horse and rider's fitness, skill, courage and partnership jumping 40 to 50 solid obstacles over miles of challenging terrain at speeds up to 25 mph where any mistake of horse or rider can result in serious injury or death; show jumping challenges their recovery from cross-country and ability to jump arena fences which add penalty points if knocked down.

At competition's end, each competitor's penalty points are totaled and the lowest scoring horse-and-rider combination wins. In Olympic Games, eventing teams consist of four horse-and-rider combinations with the lowest score dropped. Many times, the dropped score is the team member who did not complete the cross-country phase due to elimination (fall of horse and/or rider, three stops on course, etc.) or retirement (horse exhaustion, horse injury, etc.) and could not continue onto the



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stadium jumping phase to complete the Olympics.

The FEI eventing committee proposed changes to eventing's Olympic format as well as significant general rule revisions for the sport to align with the IOC's agenda. These changes were aggressively debated at the federation's sports forum in Lausanne, Switzerland, this past April by 320 delegates speaking out in opposition to the federation's proposed changes, and they were met with largely negative reaction from the eventing public on social media.

One of the most controversial rule changes is to slim Olympic teams from the standard four riders with a drop score to only three riders (with one reserve combination) and no drop score.

This would allow more nations to be included in the Olympics, thus aligning with the IOC's agenda mandate to accommodate additional countries. There are 200 spots for horse-and-rider combinations and 40 countries represented. With this change, the 200 spots remain, but the number of flags increases to about 55.

Eventing representatives opposed the three-rider team concept, saying top riders all over the world welcome change, but not at the risk of horse welfare and at the risk many teams would not even complete

the Olympics, thereby creating a further unpalatable scenario for the IOC.

The United States' team coach David O'Connor said that if a three-rider team is the inevitable future of eventing's Olympic format, the format should allow stadium jumping before cross-country so more team members would not be eliminated at the challenging cross-country phase and be able to complete the competition.

Other debated rule changes include shortening the dressage test to accommodate the television broadcast schedule, reducing the level of difficulty of the cross-country and stadium-jumping courses and easing the current minimum eligibility requirements to make the Olympic Games more accessible to new nations. The debate here is whether we are really demonstrating a competition of the best riders in the world or, with these changes, are we offering a competition of some of the best riders in the world versus a bunch of people who were fortunate enough to be born in a country that needs people to compete in our discipline.

International competitor and coach Jonathan Holling, suggests that at some point the industry has to decide as a sport if it really matters so much to be in the Olympics that it is willing to completely change the heart of the sport itself.

In 2004, two phases were removed from the cross-country day, in part to maintain the sport's inclusion in the Olympics. Holling explains: "Eventing was not given the television broadcast needed to properly and effectively market the sport and too much land space was needed to run competitions at Olympic venues. The shorter format was created to significantly lessen the broadcast marketing time and the real estate required to run the event."

Holling is concerned that we are again forced to make further

cuts or risk losing our place in the Olympics — but when is enough enough?

“Now what we are talking about is changing our sport so that once every four years three people per country can go ride in the Olympics. I’m not sure that is worth it,” he said.

Holling works as hard as he can every day for his chance to represent our country at the

Olympics. “It is the journey toward that goal that I love the most. The thing is, I’m not willing to destroy our beloved sport of eventing to make that happen.”

The last 100 years of Olympic equestrian sport have presented numerous achievements, exceeded limitations, broken barriers, set records and scaled heights of endeavor. However,

the world of equestrian sports, like life in general, is changing faster than ever, such that the success of yesterday means nothing for today.

It gives us the opportunity to drive the change for tomorrow. We want to be the leaders of change, not the object of change. The sport of eventing, and more importantly the federation who speaks for it, must now decide

whether that means changing the sport for the Olympics or making changes only when appropriate for the benefit of the horse and human athletes — even if that means, in August, sitting this one out.

All proposed changes will go forward for a simple majority vote at the federation’s General Assembly in Tokyo in November later this year.