

Equestrian Canada votes in favour of Olympic and Paralympic changes

Equestrian Canada (EC) voted in favour of proposed changes to the equestrian Olympic and Paralympic format for Tokyo 2020 during the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) General Assembly in Tokyo.

The proposed changes were created by the FEI to address the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recommendations within the Olympic Agenda 2020 which call for an increase to the number of countries participating in equestrian sport while staying within the existing quota of 200 athletes.

Some of the driving factors that influenced EC's voting decision included:

- Protecting inclusion of all current equestrian disciplines at Olympic and Paralympic Games.
- Avoiding reduction of the Canadian Equestrian Team's presence at the Games, since the new format includes three athletes plus an active reserve (who has the ability to compete and earn medals).
- Backing the effort of the FEI and IOC to increase global representation at the Games.
- Protecting the current format of disciplines at all other major games, including the FEI World Equestrian Games.
- Simplifying the format of equestrian sport in order to make it easier to understand and therefore more appealing to a broader audience.
- Supporting the collaborative approach and open dialogue that led to numerous revisions to the format proposal prior to the vote at the FEI General Assembly.
- Embracing the Olympic format change that will result in five additional team spots for jumping, thereby increasing Canada's qualification opportunity.
- We believe the changes proposed by the FEI will help protect the inclusion of equestrian sport at the Olympic and Paralympic Games by increasing global representation, and making the format more readily understandable in order to attract a broader fan base, said EC President Jorge Bernhard, who attended the FEI General Assembly in a voting capacity on behalf of EC. While change is never easy, it is often necessary. In this case, we felt compelled to support a change that has the potential to help bring better understanding and more engagement to equestrian sport.

A total of 107 national federations voted on the proposal. EC was among 96 national federations who voted in favour. Voting against the proposal were Albania, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Latvia, Luxembourg, Monaco, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Romania and Switzerland. In the Paralympic vote, Great Britain was the only nation to vote against the proposal.

After discussing the FEI proposal with a broad range of key stakeholders, and participating in the final debate session held with more than 300 national federation delegates Nov. 21 at the FEI General Assembly, EC senior leadership came to the decision to vote in favour.

It is my understanding that Canada arrived at the FEI General Assembly very well aware of the positions of our athletes and disciplines regarding the Olympic proposals as detailed earlier in the year, explained Mark Samuel, FEI Group IV Chair and member of the EC Jumping Committee. Having said that, the role of national federation representatives is not to simply vote a position. That could be achieved through an online vote. Rather, the delegates' responsibility is to participate actively in the dialogue with the FEI and other delegates, negotiate for changes, listen to contrary opinions, learn about issues and amendments . . . and then to distill all of that into an informed decision for their national federation. I believe that our EC delegates did exactly that.

Terrance Millar, a current EC Board member who has been a pillar in Canadian equestrian sport for more than four decades and filled the role of Team Leader for the Canadian Equestrian Team at the Rio 2016 Olympics, was also part of the Canadian contingent onsite at the FEI General Assembly.

Following the London 2012 Olympics, the FEI, as a conduit to the IOC, performed an audit of equestrian sport, which made it clear that we need to broaden and evolve equestrian sport or risk one or more disciplines being excluded from the Olympic program, explained Millar. There has been a lot of discussion involving riders and other stakeholders over the past two years since the need for change was put forward by the FEI at the Sports Forum in 2014. While opinions regarding the vote were not unanimous across all disciplines, as a national federation, EC had an obligation to consider all sides and angles in order to do what was best for equestrian sport as a whole, rather than voting based on the collective opinion of any one discipline.