

The Pony Club Annual Conference

The Belfast Waterfront

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The Pony Club's Contribution to Equestrian Sport

Your Royal Highness, President, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen; thank you for inviting me to this historic city and to your annual conference.

In this year of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in London, it is particularly fitting that we should address The Pony Club's contribution to equestrian sport. First, on behalf of all of the sporting disciplines of the British Equestrian Federation, particularly for Dressage, Eventing, Show Jumping and Para-equestrian Dressage, I want to thank you unreservedly for the contribution you, The Pony Club, have made to the success of our athletes on the World stage.

Today, my aim is to illustrate what your contribution looks like in hard factual terms. But, I would like to look to the future too and present some thoughts about what more we might achieve for those young people who ride, who want to ride for the first time and for those who have the potential to succeed and compete for Team GBR. It would be wrong of us to be content with the status quo, to stand still and in this vital year, to lack in ambition. In this regard, the timing of your annual conference today is perfect. Cherry and Judy - thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this subject at such an important moment in our history.

Before moving on, I would like to express my own personal thanks for the support, encouragement, friendship and fraternity my own family has enjoyed through The Pony Club. Some 22 years ago I was persuaded by my wife Josephine to make an application to work for the British Show Jumping Association. She did so because she had enjoyed her formative life with The Pony Club and on the Hunting field in Warwickshire. I left the Royal Air Force so that we could settle and enable our children, in their turn, to ride and to enjoy the countryside. While my son retired from the Pony Club at 11, my daughter, now an equine veterinary surgeon was a very active member and a great enthusiast in the Hunting field until she left home for university. David Forsyth, the DC in our day, and his team at the Warwickshire Hunt Branch did much for us as a family, to ensure the days of our children's intensive riding experiences were for us, the happiest of times. It is for this reason that I regard The Pony Club as one of the World's leading youth charities. Thank you all for that.

In the world of talent pathways and long term athlete development plans, the key for those starting in sport is to have fun. Fun is the key component before the serious business of

high performance and athletic prowess can start to be considered. My children had fun before they moved into academic achievement and the world of work. With that fun, came the lessons of discipline, responsibility, teamwork and learning to lose with grace and to win with humility. These are essential axioms for the business world, for sport generally and for elite sportsmen and women in particular. They are especially important for elite horsemen and women where big egos can be crushed in a second.

It is this vital grounding that The Pony Club provides day in day out for many of us. There can be no doubt that this grounding has underpinned the successes of many medallists in our sports. Let me illustrate a few of them here: William Fox-Pitt, Zara Phillips, HRH The Princess Royal, The Whitaker dynasty, Carl Hester, Dr Steph Cook, Nick Skelton.

To further illustrate this poignancy the reigning World Eventing Team Champions from the 2010 World Equestrian Games in Lexington, Kentucky, cut their teeth with The Pony Club. Quite an achievement – please give yourselves a round of applause!

Let me now turn to the future and cover some of the funding arrangements for the Rio Olympiad and the role The Pony Club might play in this regard. To set this in context, we have been able to provide funding from Sport England's grants of £112,000 to support your coaching plans over the current Olympiad.

The Government and their sports council agencies, UK Sport and Sport England, have agreed to commit substantial funds to sport over the four year period 2013-17, the Rio Olympiad, perhaps as much as we have enjoyed to date and in some regard potentially more. Never before has an Olympic Games host nation in the western world committed to significant levels of funding for sport beyond an Olympic Games. This normally falls off a cliff after the Games euphoria has died down. This commitment represents a very significant component of the London 2012 legacy for sport and is especially notable in a period of reduced public expenditure. We must therefore take our responsibilities in receiving public funding very seriously indeed. We must develop well researched plans to achieve clear objectives. They must represent excellent value for money and once agreed they must be implemented with zeal. But, first we must develop our plans.

Funding for sport will come primarily from the National Lottery as well as from the Exchequer. It is important that we continue to play the Lottery! In our case, as a national governing body for sport, we will be competing with other NGBs for a share of the funding pot. A key element of the work of the British Equestrian Federation, as the recognised national governing body, is to lead in bidding and managing the investment in equestrian sport. We are working on these bids for the Rio Olympiad now and this why the timing of your conference today is excellent as it provides the opportunity to examine the role The Pony Club might play.

In our bid to UK Sport we are asked to define:

- how many athletes in the Olympic and Para-equestrian disciplines we need to achieve medal success in Rio
- and what systems we need to achieve that success.

We will be assessed against other sports based on:

- our track record of medal success
- the quality of the systems we use to achieve success
- the quality of our governance structure
- and the potential we have to win medals in Rio.

In respect of our track record, you will see in this graph an increase in medal performance for our senior riders over the last decade. Let's us hope that the performances in Greenwich continue the upward trend.

I would like now to concentrate on the role we play with Sport England and what is primarily their community based set of objectives. I will also comment for those with interests in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, what I want to cover for England has a qualified relevance for all.

Sport England's strategic direction has been to increase the levels of participation in sport. They have been looking for people to be engaged intensively in sporting activity for 30 minutes at least once a week. Their other area of interest has been to support the pathways for talented athletes so that they may be promoted to the UK Sport funded high performance programmes. Please bear with me as I dip occasionally into sports council language! I hope to make this clearer on the screen shortly.

Sports England's approach for the Rio Olympiad has changed. This is because the approach has not been working. Of the 46 funded sports, less than half a dozen have increased their levels of participation. In our case we have been flat lining for a while and in recent months our levels of participation have dipped. Many sports are far worse off than us. It is my belief that the new direction plays to our strengths. The team at Sport England is now inviting us, and other sports, to:

- Increase participation amongst the 14-25 year old age group
- Increase participation amongst the adult population
- Improve the sporting experience for existing participants
- Deliver high quality talent development programmes creating a strong pathway to link with the UK Sport high performance programme
- And, to increase the growth in participation by people with disabilities, including those with talent.

This direction plays to our strengths because, in The Pony Club, you encapsulate the 14-25 age grouping perfectly. We also have an excellent talent development programme working well for Dressage, Eventing and Show Jumping riders. It includes our very high performing

and hugely talented Para-equestrian athletes. In the Riding for the Disabled Association we have a quite outstanding organisation entirely integrated within the Federation and we score well in this area. Similarly, we are well regarded as we do so much to support girls and women while in many other sports the female “drop off” in participation is a particular challenge.

The recent British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) survey illustrates the strength of the levels of activity amongst women and girls. It shows amongst regular riders, as you will no doubt be aware, that women and girls outnumber men and boys at a ratio of four to one.

Another graph drawn from the BETA survey shows that in 2010/11 48% of regular riders were under the age of 24, this is adding the 23 and 25 % together on the right hand side here. This figure has decreased from 55% in 98/99 and 49% in 05/06. The survey also tells us that 1.6m people ride regularly. Thus, given that 48% of regular riders are aged under 24, we are led to believe that the membership market for The Pony Club amounts to some 750,000 young people who already riding.

So, what does this mean for you and for our funding application for the Rio Olympiad?

In this slide, I set out the areas of our current focus and the relative importance we are considering as we develop our plans. You will see that we are currently placing a very high level of ambition for those aged 14-25, for those who have talent in all of the sporting disciplines of the Federation and for those with disabilities.

Before moving on to some specifics, I should address the status of the devolved administrations as I make considerable reference to UK Sport and Sport England. In the high performance field, where we are funded by UK Sport, we seek to select the very best riders in Great Britain who are committed to ride for Team GBR in Dressage, Eventing, Show Jumping and Para-equestrian Dressage. That’s pretty straightforward.

Where our Sport England funding support is concerned, we may operate and deploy our funding in England alone. However, we always seek to use the staff and systems we develop in Scotland and Wales too and will, where our contractual agreements with Sport England allow, support the broader GB interest in both nations. We do not normally work in Northern Island although the charities in membership of the Federation do so. In Scotland, SportScotland provides funding support for Horsescotland and leadership for the equestrian community in Scotland. Sadly, the funding values there are not as great as we would like. Similarly, the Sports Council for Wales, not itself hugely well funded, has provided very small grants.

Turning back to the specifics, I have worked most happily with Judy over the last 20 years and know that we think alike. We have recently discussed the potential for a further collaboration with you, The Pony Club. As a consequence, I am proposing that we do three things together.

First, I have proposed that we develop a high quality talent development programme specifically designed for The Pony Club. As so many of our successful athletes have started their careers with you there must be potential to introduce a yet more defined pathway for your very best riders. This should enable the best to be identified earlier and at a younger age and for them to be given access to a funded high performance coaching programme. This would probably need to be developed on a regional basis to reduce the need for travel. I suggest we aim to base it on the programmes we have been running for some time for older more experienced riders and geared, in consultation with your specialists, to meet the specific needs of your best athletes. The numbers of athletes will not be large. The competition for places on such a programme would be highly competitive. Our aim must be to find and support the very best riders with the long term potential to win on the World stage and particularly Gold medals at the Olympic Games.

This slide illustrates the pathway we have in mind; it is one we have used before in our World Class Performance work and now includes the deeper and wider level of support we think might be achievable.

I make reference to success at Olympic Gold medal level because, despite our overall success, we have not won as many medals, at the highest of peaks, as some would think. Our Olympic Gold medal history is shown on this slide.

Secondly, I believe we need to work on the issue of supply and demand. The BETA survey I have drawn on helps us to understand the needs of the broader equestrian community. The experience of other sporting national governing bodies and at Sport England illustrates that we must know more about the specific needs of our industry so that we understand better what must be supplied to meet the demands of potential athletes and in our case, riders. In our discussions, Judy briefed me on the excellent survey of your Associate membership. It illustrates that those who retain their memberships in this age group do so because 24% of them are attracted to the competition you provide and 21% stay for the training. Indeed, 42% would like more training opportunities.

This snapshot provides a really excellent feel for the future needs of your Associate members. Our suggestion is to extend your survey to encapsulate the thinking and wishes of all of your members falling in the 14-25 age groups to add to the detail you already hold.

This leads to my third proposal. Once the full survey detail is to hand, our respective teams should be able to develop fundable programmes to help retain and recruit new members to The Pony Club. Using this new intelligence and having developed programmes and with your agreement, we will seek the funding from Sport England to support the wishes of your young people.

You might well say, as wonderful hardworking volunteers: "We can hardly cope with the current numbers in our branches and centres". If that is so, I believe the plans should include more support for you; perhaps additional volunteer training courses, recruiting schemes for volunteers, more training offers for officials, more support for coaches and so

on. Such schemes are all fundable, as long as we can provide evidence that they will lead to more young people taking part in more sport and then that we can show statistically the initiatives have worked.

I can make no promises of funding success. What I can promise is my determination and that of my team in seeking to find a way to generate support for you to achieve two things:

- The development of your most talented athletes to help in sustaining your excellent tradition in the production of medallists
- And both retain and increase the number of Pony Club members.

Not surprisingly, the nature of this level of ambition has to be well argued with cogent plans, underpinned with good evidence. It is an ambition, in my judgment, worthy of the effort and one incidentally I have already discussed with our colleagues at Sport England. I believe it to be an enterprise worthy of our joint effort.

Your Royal Highness, President, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games takes place in 142 days time. Much is said and discussed about the legacy from the Games. It means different things to different people in different parts of the land.

In the context of today's conference, I believe one legacy we have is the potential means to give more of your best athletes more support if they justifiably aspire to greatness. It means too that we have the opportunity to give more young people the opportunity to have fun in being active members of one of the finest youth charities in the World. You have achieved a huge amount, you already have a huge membership and you have been very actively involved in the formative years of many of our best championship riders. I very much hope that we can find a way to build yet further on your success and share in the ambition I have set out today.

Thank you very much.