

How the USEF Can Revive the Sport Through the Affiliates

BY ARMAND LEONE • I recently attended a USHJA Town Hall by Bill Moroney with exhibitors at a top quality hunter jumper show in my area. Information was exchanged about programs and rule changes, but much of the discussion concerned the loss of smaller B and C rated shows and decrease in USEF membership. The increased costs of showing at USEF recognized shows is putting the sport out of reach for more people each year. The plethora of fees and date licensing are major factors in these increased costs for exhibitors. Attendance at unrecognized shows is growing in response. As the USEF has increased its focus on the international high performance programs and Olympic Games, its ability to provide for the national and grassroots end of the sport has diminished. It is time for the USEF affiliates to step in and address the unmet needs of the horse owners and exhibitors who do not compete at the upper end of the sport. It is useful to look at how the USEF developed its relationships with the affiliates and how the affiliates can help to fill the void at the national level caused by the need for USEF to commit resources to the international programs.

The USEF is designated as the National Governing Body (NGB) for equestrian sport by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and is the organization solely responsible for training, selecting and funding our U.S. athletes for Olympic, World Championship and International Team competition. "Protected Competitions" that are solely the responsibility of the USEF include not only the Olympics, WEG and PanAm events, but all international team events including selection trials and qualifying events. As the NGB, the USEF is also required to regulate our equestrian sport, which it does in part by licensing equestrian competitions to "coordinate the calendar", by enforcing the rules of fair play and by protecting the welfare of the horse. The duties of fielding international teams and regulating the sport are non-delegable and must be done by the USEF under its NGB obligations.

The FEI Affiliates assist the USEF in its mission to develop Olympic and World Championship athletes by developing a pipeline for athletes. Although the USEF has overall responsibility for a pipeline from the grassroots to the international level in the international disciplines, it is not required to directly

manage programs that only involve national competition below the national championship levels. The USEF oversees the 3 FEI affiliates that govern the national Olympic discipline programs: the U.S. Dressage Association, U.S. Eventing Association and U.S. Hunter Jumper Association. The 4 FEI affiliates that govern the national non-Olympic programs are the American Endurance Riding Council, American Vaulting Association, U.S. Combined Driving Association and the U.S. Reining Association. The USEF is also responsible for supporting and coordinating our international Paraequestrian program and working with the U.S. Paraequestrian Association. The USEF exercises varying degrees of control over its affiliates in calendar and rule enforcement, to make sure there is a pipeline for athletes from the grass roots to the Olympic level in all the international disciplines.

The National Breed and Discipline Affiliate organizations manage the non-international equestrian breeds and performance categories. The USEF assists these affiliates to support their members and their breed and discipline activities. However, the USEF has no USOC responsibilities to provide any oversight or funding of these activities. Prior to the USEF coming into being it was the American Horse Shows Association, and the breeds and disciplines were the backbone of the AHSA. The focus of the AHSA was enforcing fair competition, medication rules and providing dates for

the national show calendar. It was a members organization which used its dues for providing services to members. The AHSA did not have to expend financial or human resources for the Olympic effort. The Olympic effort and high performance international disciplines were funded and managed by the United States Equestrian Team (USET).

Before USEF was formed, Dressage and Eventing had developed very organized discipline associations at the grassroots level with little assistance from the AHSA. The AHSA was focused more on the more traditional American show horse disciplines. The USCTA, now the USEA, developed strong grass roots for Eventing in the U.S., as did the USDA for Dressage. Combined Driving, Endurance, Paraequestrian, Reining and Vaulting also developed similar affiliate organizations and had only a tangential relationship with the AHSA during their formative years. Jumping had no separate affiliate organization prior to formation of the USEF, as these functions were handled within the AHSA. The formation of USHJA was part of the birthing of USEF. Before the USEF formed, each affiliate organization focused on its members' national sport needs, while the USET focused on fielding international and Olympic teams. This changed in 2004 when the USEF became the NGB and the United States Equestrian Team Foundation became its funding organization.

Different affiliates have different amounts of control over the national show calendar and sport, largely as a result of the way they developed during the AHSA years. The USDA and USEA have significant independence and control over large parts of their national programs, as do the other 4 non-Olympic Disciplines. However, the USHJA, with the most USEF members of any affiliate, still has its calendar and sport controlled largely by the USEF. Unfortunately when the USEF took responsibility for being the NGB from the USET, it had to divert resources to the international programs at the expense of the lower and grass roots level programs. The void created is best filled by the affiliates assuming more control over their calendars and national programs.

The role of the affiliates in administering their national programs must increase to stop an exodus of participants at the lower levels. The affiliates can address the needs of national and

grass roots exhibitors and can help them maintain needed financial and local access to the sport. It does little good if there are only 4 or 5 epicenters for equestrian competition across the country. It does no good when the cost of showing is unaffordable or competition venues are too distant. The declining numbers of USEF members and the increase in unrecognized competition attendance result from the rising cost and lack of attention to the needs of exhibitors at the bottom of the sport.

The good and the bad news for our national sport is that the USEF is the NGB. By having to focus on fielding, training and funding the international high performance, attention and service have been diverted away from its core membership. The affiliate organizations are in the best position to fill this void and make owning and competing with horses accessible and affordable again. While some affiliates, like USEA, AERC and the AHA, have established control over their national calendars, some have not. The time has come for all the affiliates to take a more active role in managing their competition calendars and to make sure the needs of the sport at the national and lower level are met. If they don't, membership numbers in the federation and its affiliates will continue to fall.

*Have questions or need legal help?
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