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AN OPEN LETTER BY JOËL BOUZOU, OLY



My fellow sport lovers and friends,

I write to address the misunderstandings caused by an inaccurate and wayward attack on our International Federation in recent days.

Discussions around the future composition of Modern Pentathlon and especially the Riding discipline have stirred emotions since UIPM announced the 5th Discipline consultation process on November 4. This is nothing new. There were question marks around Riding when I competed in the 1980s and early 1990s (even the IOC President, Juan Antonio Samaranch, suggested after the Olympic Games Barcelona 1992 that horses should be replaced by bicycles).

This conversation has never gone away and now that it has reached a critical juncture, it is vital that all opinions are supported by facts.

Let me first address the divisive suggestion that only UIPM member federations with fully

developed Modern Pentathlon programmes should be allowed to vote on the selection of a new discipline. To repeat UIPM's statement of Nov 18: "Each member federation of the UIPM is entitled to a vote. None shall be denied, excluded or discriminated and all shall be heard."

An Olympic pentathlete declared recently that athletes do not meet pentathletes from some countries in major competitions. However, this does not mean they are not active. They compete in other UIPM competitions – they just don't have access to horses in their country and this is the whole point for the change!

We should also tackle the suggestion that the UIPM Executive Board, in initiating the 5th Discipline consultation process, acted unconstitutionally. The EB has made no attempt to amend UIPM Statutes or Competition Rules – any decision over a change of the UIPM Statutes, a potential new discipline, etc. will be made by the UIPM 2022 Congress. All the EB has done is accelerate the process of proposing in time a new format to the IOC for the consideration by the IOC Programme Commission in relation to the Olympic Summer Games Los Angeles 2028. Our understanding is that no sport, event or component discipline is guaranteed a place at LA 2028.

Now that we have tidied up these matters of democracy and process, let's get to the heart of the real debate: the horses.

When Baron Pierre de Coubertin invented the Modern Pentathlon, horses were not only used in military warfare but they were still a part of everyday life in many echelons of society. Today, horses are an expensive luxury inaccessible to the vast majority of people in the world. What can be 'modern' about a pentathlon discipline that excludes the vast majority of people in the world?

In the same way that Coubertin could not have known what would constitute 'modern' in the 21st century, long after his death, we, as the guardians of his legacy and our beloved sport, cannot know what it will mean to be the complete athlete 30-40 years from now. But we must not sit still – we must try to embrace the future and acknowledge the pace of change. That can include making difficult decisions about consigning some parts of our sport to the past.

Equestrian sport is a magnificent spectacle. I can tell you it is also a massive thrill to ride a horse over jumps at the Olympic Games. But the excitement comes at too great a cost. Horse welfare cannot be guaranteed and nor can parity of competition, because of the draw that has dashed the dreams of so many athletes who would have been worthy champions. Too often the best performers have been eliminated by an unfair and random factor.

A new Modern Pentathlon without Riding will create a more level playing field. I ask all athletes who are distressed or angry about the consultation process to consider this. Also, I urge you to look back over your journey and imagine you had been training in a country where high-quality horses were rarely (if ever) available.

The privileges you have enjoyed, and which I enjoyed, are denied to the majority and that's why I feel we need to embrace a future without Riding. As President of the World Olympians Association I have seen the organisation evolve towards a 'service to society' model and UIPM has a moral obligation to move as much as possible in that direction. In time we will see more countries represented at the Olympic Games, a deeper pool of athletes to add value to Mixed Relay and Team competitions and a much bigger and more egalitarian sport.

Innovation has been the watchword of UIPM for several decades. Gender equality has long since been established. Under the Presidency of Klaus Schormann we have made a series of changes to the sport and all of us who competed or coached or simply loved watching Modern Pentathlon have had to ask ourselves if we were doing the right thing. Safe and sustainable shooting.

Combined running and shooting branded as Laser Run (which only got through Congress by a single vote – and today it would be unimaginable to have a competition without it). The Pentathlon Arena (which was sadly almost empty in Tokyo for reasons we could not control).

Looking at our sport today, and how it will be presented at Paris 2024 with a 90-minute showpiece, I am utterly convinced that we are doing the right thing. There is nothing ‘modern’ about a Modern Pentathlon that forever stays the same.

He or she who wins the Olympic Modern Pentathlon should be the complete athlete. But this involves more than excelling in five sporting disciplines, more than showcasing mental, intellectual and physical skills. It also means embracing the status of responsibilities that come with being a global role model. The Olympic champion has to have a wide influence that stretches far beyond the current pentathlon niche, and we need role models who can push kids from the street to sport, from violent crime areas to virtuous athleticism and citizenship. Role models who can contribute to the betterment of society.

Opening our doors to a wider global society will raise the profile of the many super ambassadors who represent our sport now and who will do so in future.

As for Modern Pentathlon, the sport needs to be more affordable, more accessible, more appealing to all societies and more sustainable. I’m sorry to say that Riding, for all its wonderful charms, has become a hindrance to our goals of global development. In my opinion, it is time to erase our reputation as a sport for high society and the elite – before it is too late.

Yours in sport,

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