

2020 FISA Ordinary Congress
16 October 2020

Agenda Item 5 – President’s Report – Additional remarks from the President

Dear Delegates,

The report you will find in your Congress Agenda Papers reflects the year 2019. Before it was officially published however, I did manage to insert a few words about the health crisis which has been affecting the world for several months. I have no specific element to add to the precise contents of the 2019 Report, but nevertheless I wish to share an updated perspective on some of the points.

It will come as no surprise to you that the main subject is the global health crisis we are experiencing. Whilst throughout its history, mankind has known such crises, this one may be qualified as exceptional by its scope, its magnitude, its advancement and its consequences for our globalized society.

We still don’t know when and how we shall be able to emerge from this unpleasant episode, an episode which we would never have imagined would last so long. It is quite striking to observe the diverging, sometimes even opposing, approaches of the scientific experts and the medical specialists, which in turn make the task of governments and decision-makers extremely difficult and undoubtedly result in much confusion.

As for the facts, the impacts are numerous and terrible. First of all on the human level, and more broadly on the whole of society and the world economy. Needless to say, sport has been harshly hit by this crisis, and following the current crisis management, we will have to deal with a delicate and still very uncertain post-crisis period.

So what are the consequences for FISA and rowing?

What will be the short, medium and long-term consequences? Please allow me to answer with reference to three fundamental aspects of our organisation: the sport aspect, the financial impact, and our Olympic strategy.

The sport aspect first

2020 was supposed to be a fantastic year for the world of sport, and for rowing in particular. The outcome today is terrible! To put it briefly: cancellation of the season and our world competitions, postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. This is unprecedented. First and foremost, I wish to express my compassion to our athletes and to all the rowers who have suffered due to this situation.

Let me briefly mention in particular and without referring to the details of the developments and chronology of the crisis, my deep gratitude to my colleagues in the Executive Committee and the Council, as well as to the FISA staff, for their active implication in the management of this crisis. On Wednesday, one member of the Executive Committee pointed out to me that we were having our...50th telephone conference! This is no reason to celebrate, it’s certainly not an achievement or a performance; it simply illustrates a total commitment, and the reassurance of being able to count on a dedicated, united and responsible team. It is always easy to make comments afterwards, but decision-making is based on elements and information available at a specific point in time, and according to risk analysis and assessment of potential consequences.

We knew to what extent uncertainties around holding competitions, and more specifically the Olympic & Paralympic qualification regattas for the Games, placed a heavy pressure upon athletes and teams. Between wanting to dispel uncertainties through radical decisions, and yet maintaining a reasonable level of hope, we have always prioritized common sense as well as appropriate risk management in the interest of athletes and sports.

Whilst cancellation of our competitions became necessary, we have at the same time provided for some flexibility at a continental level. Restrictions on intercontinental travelling have been more stringent than the more flexible conditions at a continental level, even if it was not always the case. Uncertainty prevailed until the end, but all three European championships eventually took place: first, the under 23 in Duisburg, Germany, then the Juniors in Belgrade, Serbia and finally, last week-end, the Seniors in Poznan, Poland.

Let me first of all tell you how pleased I was to sense the enthusiasm of the athletes, to see the strong motivation of the teams, in spite of additional and very strict conditions due to the pandemic. All three competitions have been a major sports success. I wish to thank the Organizing Committees, the governmental and local authorities for their commitment and their constructive and positive attitude. It is a real challenge to authorize, set up and implement appropriate measures in this kind of situation.

As I have just said, all this has been possible thanks to the setting up of a very strict protocol and of binding prevention measures. The teams and the Sports Medicine Commission have been working intensively so as to develop, with the IOC and based on WHO recommendations, guidelines for the organization of competitions in spite of the pandemic (Covid-19 Pandemic - Return to Staging Regattas), so as to reduce as far as possible and to a reasonable level, the risk of contamination. Let me thank them wholeheartedly for their huge and difficult work, without which it would have been simply impossible to organize these competitions.

I insist on a "reasonable" level, since obviously a "zero risk" does not exist, neither for Covid nor for any other risk. If we are unable to accept the notion of risk, it would mean the very end of any event organization. I would even add that all those who refuse or cannot accept this notion must assume the responsibility of not participating. These experience of staging these competitions has enhanced our protocol and even if this unfortunate pandemic prevails in 2021, we should still be able to organize competitions. Of course, a significant challenge could be the possible travel restrictions.

Immediately after the 2020 event cancellations, the FISA team and the wider stakeholders were working on the 2021 season. This exercise was far from easy... but eventually they came up with a packed schedule. Our Executive Director will come back on this subject later, but here again, let me thank most warmly all those who have contributed to this work.

One of the Agenda Items today will refer to the Tokyo Games. I wish to emphasize the enormous amount of work being accomplished by the IOC and the Japanese stakeholders since the decision to postpone the Olympic Games. Imagine all the contracts that need to be reviewed, the competition venues, the Olympic Village...with the apartments already sold! The hotel rooms...and all the rest. A gigantic undertaking, and we can only be thankful to the IOC and our Japanese friends who are maintaining the Olympic Games in spite of a very difficult environment. The costs generated by the postponement are significant, and much effort, a spirit of compromise and many sacrifices will be needed, even if the athletes will not be impacted in their performance.

What will the pandemic be like in 2021? Nobody knows. The IOC is reasonably but decidedly optimistic. Various scenarios are being studied, with or without a vaccine, this here

is not the key question. For us, we still have the problem of the qualifications. This subject will also be presented by the Executive Director.

Second aspect: the economic impact

Nobody can deny the terrible economic fallout of this crisis. Even if States strongly acted as a buffer when they massively intervened in order to prevent a catastrophe during lockdown periods, some sectors suffered cruelly. Sport will be affected...but to what extent in the long term is difficult to assess, since 'business' models vary significantly between sports.

At FISA, our approach is extremely conservative. The Treasurer will present our short-term budget proposals, and I will let Gerritjan provide the detailed explanations of the principles we follow. I think I may say that we have always managed our finances rather prudently. I am therefore particularly appreciative of the Executive Committee's decision, a few years ago under the authority of Denis Oswald, to create a reserve fund which today is proving its value for the pursuit of our activities. Our rather conservative approach consisting in budgeting only guaranteed resources is equally relevant.

Today, the uncertainty about the future compels us to be even more vigilant and careful and to adopt even tighter policies. Even though we did receive governmental help, as well as a loan from the IOC, in anticipation of the Olympic revenues, we must limit ourselves to essential expenses...at least for the moment, until the celebration of the Olympic Games and the payment of Olympic revenues, which despite many positive signs are not totally guaranteed as yet. Our Treasurer is inflexible – and rightly so – as regards this point. All the budget information will be presented to you later.

Another consequence: our Olympic strategy

We have pursued our approach, which is well known to you as we have been sharing it with you since the beginning of the process and have discussed extensively with you on the subject. I make reference to the letter from the IOC Director General on June 9, 2017, in which he announced the Executive Board's decision about the Rowing Programme for Tokyo as submitted by FISA after being adopted by the Congress. This letter, already at that time, insisted on the need for further dialogue about the question of the lightweights in the next Olympic programme. I don't wish to dwell on the details of this matter, let me rather just summarise the situation by using the headlines I have used in several of my reports and at various stages: **“from a defensive attitude to an ambitious proactive approach”**.

At the end of February 2020, we submitted the preliminary file for the Paris2024 Programme to the IOC Sports Department; it contained the ambitious proposal to add three coastal rowing events to replace the eliminated lightweight double sculls. Discussions with the IOC were consistently open and very constructive. We were able to introduce the discipline and to share our arguments within a more general perspective around the stakes of Agenda2020 for example. I am able to say that reactions were very positive toward the sport aspects of this discipline which has great relevance in many ways. The attractiveness of the discipline was confirmed to us by OBS.

Then came the health crisis which disrupted our plans both in terms of timing and context. Item 5 d of the Agenda for the Extraordinary Congress deals with this subject: the Paris2024 Programme for rowing. We will then have to vote on the programme. I suggest we go into more detail on this tomorrow, when we reach item 5 d.

Governance

I will move away from the subject of Covid and the crisis for a moment, to say a few words about governance. ASOIF (the Association of Summer Olympic Games Federations)

published its 3rd Report on IF Governance in June. This analysis is the outcome of a self-assessment process which is moderated by an independent agency. Here I wish to emphasize our consistent progress in this regard, despite our very limited resources. Without wanting to comment upon the ranking, I want to assure the Congress that we are dedicated and committed to continuous improvement. The assessment tool applies equal weighting to criteria, though I am of the opinion that not all audited aspects have a similar impact on good governance.

One example, which ought to make us quite proud collectively, is that FISA is the federation boasting the highest representation of women at a governance level, be it the Executive Committee or the Council, and this without artificial quotas. I shall not say more. Our complete report has been published and is accessible on our website.

Conclusion

Dear Delegates, I have reached the end of the additional remarks I wanted to make. To conclude, I will simply say that we are in the midst of very turbulent times. This crisis is terrible and impacts us all. It already has had a considerable impact and will continue to do so in the long term...but we are not able to completely assess the gravity of the impact; uncertainty is much too acute as yet! Nevertheless, against all odds we must pursue, we must fight, we must steadily continue to move forward...adapting to this adverse environment, for the good of our sport and for the athletes of today and of tomorrow.

Finally, an optimistic note. Realism and prudence do not exclude optimism. As leaders, our task is of course to manage crises when they occur, but it is equally important for us to see beyond and to anticipate the world after the crisis.

Jean-Christophe Rolland
16 October 2020