

World Haflinger Congress

A coming of age

On 29 April, the 2017 edition of the annual World Haflinger Congress took place in Marleno/Marling (I). Set against the evocative backdrop of the city of Merano/Meran with its vineyards and picturesque plains, the event at Kellerei Meran Burggräfler was opened by Dr Erich Messner, President of the Italian National Association of Haflinger Horse Breeders (A.N.A.C.R.HA.I.), who in his welcome words stressed the significance of the World Congress as a platform for a substantiated exchange based on central focus points. WHBSF President Lukas Scheiber then gave an introductory presentation outlining the first steps of the Federation. In his trademark clear and frank way, he examined both the initial difficulties and the many milestones achieved in the development of the World Federation ever since it was founded in Ebbs (A) in February 2013: the joint judges' training initiatives or the two large-scale breeding and equestrian sports events held in 2015 – the World Show in Ebbs and the European Haflinger Championship in Vermezzo (I) – to name but a few.

With the help of many individual and yet crucial steps, the WHBSF has grown into a solid umbrella organisation for all Haflinger associations, in which the two organisations in charge of the original stud books work together to harmonise Haflinger breeding at international level. And this concerted effort is all the more relevant today: With the new European Union animal breeding regulation (EU-Regulation no. 2016/1012) entering into force in 2018, the role of the home organisations will increase significantly. Having both original stud book organisations working together under one roof in the Commission of Experts for the Haflinger breed to provide clear guidance and competence in the interest of Haflinger breeders in all member states is a symbol of the policy adopted by the WHBSF: one based on a lasting, intensive cooperation.

A central focus on breeding – backed by scientific findings

The congress also featured a number of scientific topics to reflect the fact that results are best obtained and consolidated using an outcome-oriented, substantive and long-term approach. This attitude also resonates in the way the Federation is managed – a style much appreciated by the member organisations, as the recent elections have shown: President Lukas Scheiber and Secretary Michael Gruber, both outgoing and eligible to re-elected, as well as a large majority of the Board of Directors and of the Audit Committee were confirmed in office.

The chosen constellation once again shows that the members have acknowledged the achievements of the past four years, and that they appreciate that working together across all borders brings a whole host of benefits for sports and breeding in each member state. And the congress agenda, too, paid tribute to this philosophy: Michael Gruber led the way with a presentation of the recent working paper detailing the joint evaluation system and the linear description. Without concealing the issues and difficulties which inevitably arise from the effort to merge several differing systems, he described the work of the task group in charge and pointed out the advantages of a system which guarantees comparability throughout the breed and especially on the international market. He finished by encouraging all parties involved to muster the necessary courage and trust, since working towards a joint objective may sometimes mean having to open up to new things.

In providing a summary of the planned evaluation system, he carried over into the next expert talk: an overview of the insights collected on Italian Haflinger breeding from data gathered with the help of the linear description system over the course of twenty years, presented by geneticist Dr Antonia Samorè of the University of Milan. In her talk, she highlighted the opportunities of pooling relevant sets of data from global sources.

A strong umbrella organisation for the Haflinger horse

To successfully perform on the international market, the breed needs a steadfast umbrella organisation, as the following speaker illustrated: Seoknam Hong of the South Korean racing authority KRA gave an account of the progress made with the more than 100 Haflinger horses which between 2013 and 2016 were imported at the initiative of KRA from different countries in a state-subsidised programme. In his report, he underlined the importance of the support received by the WHBSF in matters of Haflinger husbandry and breeding. Until 2013, the breed had been virtually unknown in South Korea. Now, its popularity is increasing rapidly – a fact which he predominantly attributes to the height, conformation and attractive looks of the Haflinger horse.

Dr Thomas Druml of the Vienna University of Veterinary Medicine explained the possibilities arising from the cooperation between different breeders' organisations and bringing together genetic data: His studies of the genetic population structure in Haflinger horses are based on data analysing high-density genomic information on horses in South Tyrol/Italy and in Austria. Recent developments have repeatedly shown that scientific data plays an increasing role in breeding, for instance to preserve genetic diversity in cases where excessive selection procedures towards a determined ideal have led to losses in the basic genetic pool. The discoveries of the study presented will be intensively examined and discussed by the Commission of Experts for the Haflinger breed.

With this year's congress, the WHBSF direction has offered the public a glimpse of the specific steps taken in these first four years. It may not always be easy to bring together a large number of different breeders' organisations which for many decades have worked with sometimes vastly different systems – but with this year's elections, the members have quite clearly expressed their unreserved approval of the direction adopted by the Federation. The World Haflinger Congress, too, serves this purpose: Taking place every year at the occasion of a key breeding and sports event in one of the member states, it is designed to be an annual information platform. After all, exchanging information and experiences is an essential requirement which allows all stakeholders to always be on a par with each other. This year's range of topics may have been high-profile, but the results which can be deduced from them in both the near future and the medium term in a direct and distinctly visible way once more corroborate the importance of this event.

The election outcomes at a glance:

President: Lukas Scheiber (HPT, Austria)

1st Vice-President: Norbert Rier (ANACRHAI, Italy)

2nd Vice-President: Mathieu Ringler (France)

Board of Directors

Emily Bambridge (Haflinger Society of Great Britain, UK)

Giancarlo Gigatti (ANACRHAI, Italy)

Walter Werni (ARGE Austria)

Hans Schiller (FN Germany)

Norbert Schumacher (Luxembourg)

Wolfgang Kreikenbohm (associate members' representative)

Kontrollausschuss

Audit Committee

Edy Biot (Luxembourg)

Jaroslav Drazan (Czech Republic)

Chuck Hendershot (USA)

Secretary: Michael Gruber (Provincial Federation of South Tyrol Haflinger Horse Breeders, Italy)