Round one marks a huge success

Federation members united for the breed: the Haflinger World Show consolidates the role of the WHBSF as a key stakeholder body

When in the afternoon of the first Sunday in June the big event slowly drew to an end after four exciting days, from the host to the participants and viewers, everyone agreed: The Haflinger World Show has marked a clear-cut turning point. It was the first World Show held under the auspices of the World Haflinger Breeding and Sports Federation, the first to be hosted by the new direction of the Haflinger Breeders' Association Tyrol and the first to employ a wholly international judges' team – and it proved an all-round success.

On the first weekend in June, a grand total of 649 horses from 15 countries, 22 judges and some 20,000 spectators turned Ebbs into the centre stage of the international Haflinger elite. Standing in direct comparison, the 594 participating mares, some of which with foal at foot, and 75 stallions were subjected to the scrutiny of Haflinger experts and breeders from all over the world.

High expectations

The four-day event was a logistical challenge of a kind, which the Haflinger Breeders' Association Tyrol (HPT) managed skilfully. And with the Fohlenhof Ebbs stud farm, the HPT had chosen a more than suitable venue: the WHBSF's designated central point for Haflinger breeding. HPT Chairman Lukas Scheiber is rightfully proud of his team: "Everyone who had to make a crucial decision did so with a great sense of duty and professionalism. Starting with the set-up and preparations – which took almost four weeks – all the way to the ten days of taking down the facilities after the event, everyone did a really sensational job. Regardless of how long the hours were or how hard the job to be done was, we had no complaints – neither from behind the scenes nor from the front line. It was the dedication of all our staff and helpers which made it possible to look after such an enormous audience. I have been to all previous World Shows, and I can safely say that to date, not a single one managed to stick to the schedule and provide an efficient and competent service for all participants the way this edition did – from the vet check all the way to when the presents were handed out before the departure."

Prior to the event, expectations were high on all sides. The World Show was perceived as a practical test on many levels, and especially so for the World Haflinger Breeding and Sports Federation: If the effort to cooperate had failed, the Federation would have practically shipwrecked during its breaking test – live and for the entire world to see. But the outcome proved to be quite the opposite, and the World Show will go down in history as a true sea change: a clear turning point.

Closed ranks

The democratic approach adopted during the preliminary stages helped to make things run smoothly and became quite evident in the Fohlenhof Ebbs arena: While – under the watchful eye of the crowd, breeders and Federation officials – the grand jury announced the winners of each category and class, the final and formal seal was put on this new spirit which the WHBSF embodies. The objective of the event was to crown the world's finest new Haflinger horses, selected from a vast array of excellent horses from all over the world, and to do so, the individual parties responsible had to be able to rely on smooth teamwork. The harmonious atmosphere between WHBSF President Lukas Scheiber and Secretary Michael Gruber during the event is a good example of the new spirit of democratic cooperation: leadership at the highest level, in a team with clearly defined roles which is committed to a common cause, trustful in dealing with each other and extremely competent in all practical aspects. Backed by great expertise and experience, for which they are held in high esteem far and wide, in the arena the two left no doubt: They pursue the same goals, and they understand each other without many words – a quality which is much valued, especially among breeders who appreciate an honest, down-to-earth nature.
All in all, the decision makers' competence was evident in a number of fields: Wherever a significant contribution was required, the person in charge was sure to deliver a confident, professional service. This is especially true for the individual countries' *Chefs d'Équipe* who played a key role – and sometimes even acted as a buffer between the breeders and the organising team. In doing so, the team leaders provided decisive support by offering a single, competent source for any issues arising. This is crucial since the presence of a calm and unperturbed team leader can play a major role even for breeders who might naturally be a little more nervous than usual in this kind of situation: Good team leaders can ease a great deal of tension.

**The judges' role**

Having the right person in the right spot has proven a recipe for success at the World Show – and the judges worked hard to prepare for the big event. After months of intensive training and practice, the group's team spirit was sealed – and quite apparent thanks to their white shirt and red vest uniforms sporting the WHBSF logo. "The decision to involve a large number of countries in preparing the judges for the World Show was an extremely forward-looking one. The judges' work was fast and exemplary. Of course opinions differ, but what counts is that everything was debated in a professional and harmonious manner. We absolutely need the judges' help to bring our standards up to the same level throughout the different countries, and over the past few months they have gone to work in a serious, honest and dedicated way – at all times and in any circumstances," as President Lukas Scheiber put it.

Divided into categories, the horses were first evaluated by the judges' teams and then presented to the grand jury in the arena to confirm the judges' decisions. In a major undertaking, on Friday alone the three grand jury members worked from 8 am until late in the afternoon with only a half-hour lunch break – all the while mustering the highest level of concentration down to the last horse of every category. In this context, perhaps it is worth considering whether it is expedient to continue evaluating every single horse in the future, or whether it would be more sensible to judge the horses only to a point where clear differences become evident.

The international judges' teams consisted of judges from eight different countries who had previously undergone several months' worth of training and practice, ensuring that they had all had a chance to work together in the line-up earmarked for the World Show. This has proven the right and in fact only way to put together a team of high-profile judges who will evaluate the horses using an approach which is not about individual interest but for the benefit of the whole breed. Now, any development to further improve this line of action must be initiated by the WHBSF itself, since it is the only entity which has the possibility to provide sufficient top-class horses for the judges' training. Limiting the activities of the international judges' teams to the five-year intervals of the World Show would cause considerable imbalances: The horses which the judges would evaluate in between the World Shows would strongly differ in terms of numbers and quality, making it virtually impossible to streamline the judging approach.

With Hannes Neuner, Andrea Sgambati and Walter Werni, the grand jury consisted of the top three judges who in their long-standing careers had most certainly evaluated the highest possible number of first-rate Haflinger horses. President Lukas Scheiber was nominated grand jury president and given the decisive vote for any cases of disagreement.

Walter Werni’s running commentary of the Show was well-received by the audience: In his usual professional manner, he highlighted the advantages of each horse and gently explained any flaws without ever causing offence. His good example demonstrated that ideally, judges should have not only a well-trained eye, objectiveness and expertise but also considerable rhetorical skills, allowing them to back their decisions with substantial reasons to make them plausible for anyone involved. The WHBSF will ensure that this virtue too will continue to be fostered in the future.

**Promoting and expecting competence**

In its different stages and procedures, the World Show has clearly shown where the Haflinger world should put its focus in the future. It was interesting to observe how the different parties involved
settled into their role as a new team on its first assignment together. Bearing in mind the circumstances and negotiations required to found the WHBSF, when the first meetings were still marked by a certain amount of reservations and stereotyped impressions, the now smooth collaboration is by no means a matter of course. But Ebbs left no doubt as to the qualities of each party involved and as to where the future of the WHBSF is headed. The World Show accentuated who is committed and available, who is able to work under pressure, who is not afraid to advocate for the common cause and who is passionate about the Haflinger breed.

Of course, all of this applies not only to those involved in getting the event to run smoothly: "All countries did their very best and helped the organisation wherever possible in an exemplary manner. On Saturday and Sunday, every country had the chance to present itself from its best side. It was this opportunity which really gave the event its international flair. Now that the World Show has put such strong wind in our sails, I am convinced that the next steps to be taken within the Federation will be much easier. We have managed to strengthen the trust which we have worked hard on during the past few years, and we have created a solid foundation upon which to continue," President Lukas Scheiber explained.

**Tipping point**

Now, all eyes are set on the future: The World Show has marked a sea change, and now there's a sense of "before the Show" and "after the Show", Secretary Michael Gruber sums it up.

But which direction is the WHBSF to follow from here? It is no doubt essential to preserve the current variety, since breeding at the highest level needs an ample basis to thrive. Suitable platforms for presentation are yet another prerequisite: Large-scale shows are key indicators for the status quo of breeding and its developments – and an ideal display of the Federation's breeding aims. And yet, along the way, the variety in breeding must not be neglected. It is fundamental to create a wide foundation to avoid excluding anyone.

Achieving all that requires everyone's participation and a series of international events between the World Shows: shows in northern Europe, the Benelux countries and Eastern Europe (first and foremost in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia) as well as more young horses' shows in South Tyrol/Italy, northern Tyrol and Bavaria. Or, as Secretary Michel Gruber put it, "we need fixed dates which add momentum to the Haflinger world. The World Show has set the course for the near future, and now it is up to us to continue all the good work which has gone into preparing it. This is no time to sit back and rest on our laurels. Organising a major international event every five years is a sensible plan, but in between we must create a number of occasions to celebrate the Haflinger breed with the right intervals in terms of place and time – events that offer a similar attraction and fascination and complement the World Shows."

President Lukas Scheiber provides more detail: "If there is one thing which this event has taught is, it is that the exhibition parts and show aspects of the schedule have generated the most interest: In fact, we were twice forced to close the grandstand due to overcrowding."

"We must continue to push forward the great versatility of the Haflinger horse and at the same time move our sporting events on to the next level. It is crucial that we promote and support Haflinger sports events with all means available to us – there is huge potential that still remains untapped, especially among the ranks of our young breeders", he added.

Or, as a successful breeder from Tyrol reflected: "It is quite enviable to see how unprejudiced the younger generations from around the world are in dealing with each other. Especially the young breeders from northern Tyrol and South Tyrol, who have clearly moved on and left all those years of competing to become the number one in Haflinger breeding far behind.

And that is the right way forward: equipped with nothing but a clear focus on the Haflinger breed and its countless virtues – which, after all, it has just impressively demonstrated to a very large audience at a World Show to remember.