



at the heart of horse sport

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Address given at the Opening of the Kohlshof Therapeutic Riding Centre

HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear children, dear supporters and dear volunteers

I was so delighted to be asked to perform the opening of this wonderful new centre for therapeutic riding. I feel particularly close to this project not least because when I was here in August, during the World Equestrian Games, I had the privilege of visiting and seeing the original site in action and the early stages of the work on this magnificent new facility.

Since the dawn of time when man first experienced that wave of emotion that comes with riding a horse, we have known that nothing transports the soul further away from its mortal shackles than the sensation of riding. Whatever the burden on your physical or mental frame and no matter whether this state is passing or permanent, for the time you are in the presence of a horse, your burden is lifted from your shoulders and your spirit can be free.

But the privilege of experiencing this sensation is one which is restricted to those lucky few who live in communities in whose midst there live people with the foresight and determination of Kerstin Keus. We all know that one person's strength can move mountains and by bringing her dream to reality Kerstin has ensured that hundreds and now thousands of people in Aachen and here in the surrounding area will be able to benefit from the therapy of riding. We should be under no illusion, for many, the experience will bring light into their souls and quite literally change their lives - that is an exceptional end to a beautiful dream.

The concept of riding as a means of therapy for disabled riders is one that I first learned about when I went to school in England when I was 11. Throughout the time that I was at school in England I was a volunteer groom for the local branch of the Riding for the Disabled Association. It was then that I saw for myself the extraordinary physical and emotional effects of horses on those with physical disabilities but particularly those with mental disabilities. The very fact of being close to horses and riding seemed to bring a light and happiness to their souls. I also saw for myself that extraordinary look in a horse's eye when it knows that it is carrying a special passenger and that it should not put a foot wrong and this is a look that I am certain is in all the ponies here.

An understanding of the importance of riding as therapy, across many levels, is growing around the world. So too is the understanding of riding as a sport for those with physical and mental disabilities. Not only does the

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Para-Equestrian structure give talented riders with disabilities an opportunity to compete at the highest levels of world sport, against others with similar disabilities, but, in many instances, horses provide the level playing field which offer athletes with disabilities the opportunity to compete – on equal terms – against their able bodied colleagues.

I am under no illusion that within the international governing body of horsesport, we have our own mountains to climb before each discipline within the FEI can bask in the light of a truly open discipline which caters, at all levels, for both able and disabled athletes. But we have realised the challenge and by doing so we can now make plans to achieve our goals and I am confident that we will do so.

It was here in Aachen at the World Equestrian Games that I welcomed the news that Para-Equestrian had joined the FEI family, as our eighth discipline, and I firmly believe that when history judges us in the decades to come, the start of the Para-Equestrian era within the FEI will be seen as a major milestone.

For many who will visit this extraordinary centre, becoming an international athlete is not in their mind, it will be a feat of Olympic effort just to sit on a horse and walk around the arena and that sense of freedom will be as good as a gold medal. But equally, for others, the road to Paralympic glory will start in a facility just like this but the success of the individual who wins Paralympic Gold or completes a lap of the arena will be down to common factors - personal determination, the support of a dedicated team but above all the extraordinary bond between man and horse.

I wish for this centre, its clients, staff, volunteers and, of course, its horses and ponies, that you may achieve all your personal goals, whatever they may be, and by doing so you will bring happiness to yourself and to all those around you.

Thank you