

103rd FAI ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE – INCHEON, KOREA

REPORT ON WORK OF FAI MEMBERS, FAI AIRSPORT ACTIVITIES AND THE FAI SECRETARIAT

Dear Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

You may have heard the quote:

“To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

So I am going to start by saying something about the end.

As most of you know, I have decided that the time has come for me to move on. Whether this is a beginning of anything other than a good rest, only time will tell. But I am sure that this is the right decision not only for myself, but also for this great institution of FAI that means so much to us. Only by constant renewal can we move forward and after nearly 17 years in post, it's time for some new thinking and new blood.

Bankers have unfortunately been much in the news recently. J.P. Morgan, of Morgan Stanley fame, once said:

“The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are”.

So that's what I have done. The destination is unknown and that makes the journey exciting.

Of course I shall miss many things, and above all the extraordinary people I have had the privilege of meeting and working with over the years. You have all been very kind to me, and I have always felt that I had your full support and encouragement. I thank you for this, and especially for the many kind messages that you sent me when the news of my retirement as Secretary General was announced. My special debt of gratitude goes to our President, Pierre Portmann, as well as to all the other FAI Presidents with whom I have had the pleasure of working over the last 17 years. I have learnt a great deal from them all, and in the last 5 years have had occasion to marvel at the inextinguishable energy and commitment of our current President. He subjects himself voluntarily on our behalf to a routine which, if it were imposed on a paid employee, would certainly result in the employer being prosecuted! I don't know how he does it, but we are very lucky to have his services.

I want also to place on record the enormous debt I owe to all the FAI staff members I have worked with over the years, both in Paris and especially now in Lausanne. They have invariably given me their full support, even when things were very difficult for them. The FAI as a whole can consider itself fortunate to have such devoted and long-serving staff members. Thierry Montigneaux, the architect of our IT system, has now also been with us for almost 17 years. He and all the other staff have been paid for their work, but I can assure you that all of them have performed well beyond the call of normal duty, and I thank them all for this.

Another person who has contributed enormously to FAI in a discreet way is my wife, Angela. I could not have done what I have done without her saint-like tolerance, support and sound advice. I am looking forward to seeing a bit more of her in the months to come!

I do hope that I shall be able to keep in social contact with many of you, when you visit Lausanne or on other occasions. Maybe I will be tempted from time to time to drop in at FAI Championships to see how things are going...

So this is my last opportunity to address you, and to give you my thoughts about where we are now, which way we are heading and what the risks and opportunities are for the years ahead. I hope you will allow me to spend a bit of time on this rather than go into as much detail as I normally do about our activities in the last year.

- To illustrate my thoughts, let me focus on some of the events that have taken place these last months and draw some lessons.

When I took over from Cenek Kepak in 1993 (*incidentally he sends his best regards to those who knew him*), the world was a simpler place. Email was in its infancy, the Internet was still reserved for research scientists. FAI Championships were for amateur competitors, who often paid their own expenses. The judges and officials were all unpaid amateurs. And the championships were watched by virtually nobody. Sponsors were strictly of the local, “value-in-kind” variety – usually a local company director club member, or friend of a club member, who agrees to help out – without any real expectation of reciprocal advantage. The rare spectators who did show up very often found that there were no facilities for them. And the competitions themselves – once the initial novelty had worn off – were about as interesting as watching grass grow. There was certainly no television coverage of FAI events to speak of. Our events were for us, the enthusiasts - competitors and an inner circle of initiates.

In some respects, not very much has changed. There’s still a good chance that if a member of the public turns up unannounced at an FAI Championship, they’ll be bored, thirsty, hungry and uninformed. Sometimes, the officials will still be devoted volunteers who sacrifice their summer holidays and family lives to minister to ungrateful competitors. And there’s a good chance that there won’t be much media interest, not even locally – even though (or perhaps because) the contest lasts 10 days or two weeks.

However, it’s also possible that nowadays you might stumble across another kind of event. It’s still an FAI Championship, but a different kind of beast altogether.

Here, there might be a title sponsor who has agreed to put cash and a fleet of cars at the disposal of the organizers in return for guarantees of prominent media visibility and places in the VIP hospitality area. Guests are fed canapés and champagne whilst having the intricacies of the competition described to them in detail. A big screen transmits pictures of the action in real time. The officials and judges, even though they are still considered to be “volunteers” in fact receive stipends for their services, in addition to travel and accommodation expenses. The competition rules have been modified to be more attractive to the general public, even though this might mean abandoning traditional formats and shortening the length of the event. Sophisticated technology is used to track the competing aircraft and spot breaches of rules. The event is live-streamed on Internet, and a “highlights” TV programme is distributed worldwide.

What is happening here? Why are these “new-style” championships springing up?

At least four social trends are coming together.

- First, competitors are becoming less and less tolerant of amateur standards of organization. They make sacrifices to attend FAI Championships, even if it’s only to give up summer holidays. They expect the officials to be at least as competent and professional as they are as competitors. And they make their views known (sometimes with the directness and lack of courtesy that is also a feature of our times). If an official is constantly criticized – or worse still insulted – he is much less likely to continue volunteering to officiate free of charge. (We have even had cases this year of actual or threatened violence against officials. Who wants to spend his summer holiday in fear of getting beaten up?)

- Second, the general public in the most developed countries are used to being spoiled, and are therefore intolerant of poor standards of presentation. If invited to watch an event, live or on television, they expect it to be presented professionally, and not to have to waste their time staring into the middle distance with nothing happening.

- Third, media companies are constantly on the look-out for “content” – film of any sort to fill the schedules of hundreds of TV channels world-wide. And companies are looking for novel ways of selling their goods and services, including sponsorship of sport. The “Business of Sport” is difficult to ignore. The whole anti-doping movement is closely tied to the fact that there is now money in sport. Slowly, some of it is beginning to trickle into air sports. Just as the dividing line between news and entertainment is becoming difficult to draw (are the latest antics of “celebrities” really news?), so is the dividing line between sport and entertainment.

- Finally, people in work have much less time to devote to their sports and leisure activities because pressures at work are much greater than they were and partners at home (especially professional women) are less tolerant of extended absences. I remember hearing frequently that somebody’s wife was “a gliding widow” – implying that she hardly ever saw her husband, because he was of flying... but she stuck with him nevertheless. Today’s spouses – probably rightly – are less tolerant.

So what of the future? It is clear to me that the FAI competitions of the future – whether we like it or not – will probably have to be:

- Shorter
- More professionally organized
- More interesting for the public
- Partially financed from commercial sources.

As the President has noted, we can still keep our traditional championships if we wish. But we cannot expect others to pay for them, and the costs of running such events are going to continue rising disproportionately because of the increasing scarcity of willing and competent volunteers, and the expectation on the part of competitors of professional standards of organization.

My successor will have to help steer FAI through a clash between the values of commercial companies and those of non-profit associations.

Those of us who are dyed-in-the-wool non-profit association people need to accept that many of our activities are very costly. Unless we are prepared to pay these costs entirely out of our own pockets, we are reliant on others somehow to help us. Those who are best placed to help are commercially motivated companies and individuals. But they also need to learn that sporting associations are not show-business companies, and that democratically decided rules have to be respected.

This creative tension will, I am sure, carry us forward to the next stage of air sport development, but at the moment the real debate is still at an early stage.

I mentioned the increasing scarcity of competent volunteers who are prepared to run competitions. This can also be seen in the administration and management of FAI, with fewer and fewer qualified candidates coming forward to take over the key posts in Commissions. So far, we have been very lucky at the central FAI level, but it can only be a matter of time before FAI too is confronted with demands to pay people to do work that until now was done by volunteers. Some international sports federations already pay their presidents. Let’s hope that the special characteristics of air sports mean that we will continue to avoid this problem

for some time to come, but it seems to me inevitable that we will come to depend more and more on professional, paid staff.

Let me mention something that has not been discussed much so far. The working relations between paid professionals and unpaid volunteer officials in FAI, have until now generally been very harmonious and trouble-free. This is unfortunately not the case in all federations. There is a risk in FAI too that the present excellent partnership could degenerate, if in future – with an increasing shortage of good volunteers - the paid professionals perceive that they are under the authority of people who are not so well qualified and competent, and for whom FAI is not necessarily the top priority. This is something that needs to be watched carefully.

This brings me to the question of the overall structure and management of the FAI. When I first came into contact with the FAI in the mid-1980s all the talk was of the amount of independence that Air Sport Commissions should have, and how much power should be held by the central FAI. A quarter of a century later, nothing much has changed. It is still the main subject of debate, and for a good reason: the FAI is an organization that could not be created if it did not exist. Nothing could persuade the archers to join forces in a single federation with shooting simply because they both try to hit targets. Similarly with canoeing and swimming, just because they both use water. The FAI exists for historical reasons, and that is our unique strength. It would be tragic to lose the great strength that comes from the combination of very diverse activities. But we obviously cannot stand still. Change is inevitable and desirable. My perception is that future revenue streams will come not from our national member organizations, but from our sporting events and other activities run by our Sporting Commissions. For this reason, the onus is on Commissions to take the lead in proposing a new model for the financing of the central FAI structure in which members of FAI staff can be funded by, and dedicated to the work of one or more Commissions.

The move to the Maison du Sport International, announced by our President yesterday, gives us an ideal opportunity to expand the number of staff in the Secretariat. I can well imagine that in 5 years time we will have several additional members of staff in the Secretariat who are paid for by Commissions and devoted full-time to looking after the interests of Commissions, something which we have hitherto tried hard to do, but with only limited success because of the vast amount of work and limited time we have.

When I moved to Paris in 1993, I was, as some of you know, a pure-bred gliding man. But I have now had an opportunity to see and experience all forms of air sport, and can see the pleasures and challenges that each present. I am absolutely certain that each of them would lose enormously by separating from the rest. I hope I have been able to contribute to calming down the antagonism that was so rife in the 1980s between the central FAI and the Commissions. However, I believe that these conflicts could very easily erupt again. I hope that all Commissions recognize that the central FAI is there to support and promote all air sports and will urge their delegates to stop speaking of it as though it were a separate alien entity. I also urge the FAI Executive Board to continue working on ways of improving the structure of the FAI so that the committed enthusiasts of each sport feel that FAI is “their” federation.

Finally, in this section on how I see the future, it is clear to me that we can promote air sports better by exploiting three great opportunities.

First, we need to shift the centre of gravity of FAI from Europe towards Asia. This is where there is enormous scope for growth. The presence here with us in Incheon of so many Asian delegates shows the amount of activity that is already going on – perhaps mainly in parachuting, paragliding and aeromodelling at the moment, but certainly other sports will soon become more prominent. Later you will be asked to adopt a motion seeking to get air sports into the Asian Games. I urge you to support this motion.

Second – and this also relates to the Asian Games – we need to develop synergies with other sports organizations, including Sportaccord, to bring our sports to the public. Many of you in Turin saw the stunning indoor aeromodelling event, with aerobatics set to music. This was pure spectacle as well as competition. And it can be mounted in almost any sports hall. Just think of the number of opportunities that exist to show our sport in the intervals of other sporting events, whether basketball, ice hockey, volleyball or handball. The fact that participation in the Olympics is an impossible dream does not mean that we cannot get into other multi-sport events. We are already in The World Games, with parachuting, and next time perhaps with other events too. To that can be added the Asian Games, and perhaps Masters Games and others. We have to keep alert to the opportunities that are out there waiting to be seized.

Finally, we need to consider whether it is appropriate for the FAI to become involved in meeting a need that has become increasingly clear to us in the Secretariat in recent months. More and more cities around the world, especially tourist destinations but also places that wish to put themselves on the map, are looking for spectacular air sport events as attractions for the general public. Until recently, they have turned to commercial organizations to provide what they are looking for. However, recently several have approached us, saying that they want the security of working with the recognized international federation, rather than commercially motivated and possibly unreliable independent company. At present, our capacity to respond positively to such requests is very limited. But the provision of spectacular small-scale multi air sport events using concepts developed for the World Air Games, could generate a significant revenue stream for the FAI, if that is what our members want.

So much for my “tour of the horizon”. I will watch with great interest what happens in the next few years. These will be exciting times for my successor and the FAI management team.