

A NEW DAWN, AND A NEW DAY..... FEI Nations Cup™ Moves Forward Into A New Century

The ability to evolve is key to the success and development of most good ideas, and it is that very attribute which leads the FEI Nations Cup™ into its second century. Back in 1909 when military teams first did battle in the arenas of both London's Olympia and the outdoor San Sebastian showgrounds in Spain, it must have seemed the most natural thing in the world to pit countries against one another on horse-back. After all, the horse was still a vehicle of transportation for armies and civilians - how wonderful it is then that our equine partners continue to be treasured for their strength, athleticism, loyalty, character and competitiveness so many years later.

In the Arab world too the horse has always had a special place, so it comes as no surprise that, 101 years after it all began, this premier Jumping series is sponsored by a company whose Arabic name, Meydan, springs from the concept of a meeting place, an environment that encourages competition, co-operation, harmony and the promotion of the ideals of commercial and sporting excellence together with fair play.

Earlier this year the iconic new Meydan Racecourse, business and residential centres were officially opened in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The scale of the project is phenomenal, and already the breath-taking 1.2 kilometre-long grandstand which has capacity for 60,000 spectators and incorporates a 5-star hotel, marina, cinema, haute cuisine restaurants and museum, has led to many an intake of breath. As an entertainment centre it is second to none, as visitors from all around the globe can attest.

The sport of the Nations Cup has created plenty of excitement too down the years, and in last year's inaugural season under the Meydan banner it certainly did not disappoint. The format is designed to ensure that only the best of the best go through to the following series, and this year teams from France, Ireland, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America will line out in the summer-long battle for supremacy. Poland and Spain earned their places through promotion from the long, tough second-division series in 2009 and it will be a considerable challenge for them to maintain their status amongst the elite. However that is the test they have chosen for themselves, and the sport's governing body, the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI), is delighted to welcome them into the fold.

The FEI was born in 1921, 13 years after the first Nations Cups were staged and, embracing the success and popularity of this exciting team competition from its infancy, has worked hard to ensure that it has remained one of the great showcases for equestrian sport. The decision to introduce a relegation/promotion system in 2003 proved a winner from the outset - not just with competitors, officials and horse-owners but also with the broader public who fill the grandstands of the most prestigious venues on the circuit. At La Baule, Rome, St Gallen, Rotterdam, Aachen, Falsterbo, Hickstead and in Dublin the roars of support from the sidelines are testament to the enduring legacy of those men who first lined out in uniform all those many years ago. Today, however, men and women compete as equals and represent their countries side-by-side.

The French are defending champions as the 2010 campaign gets underway but this is a country that knows all about the highs and lows of team sport, having been so dominant in the early years of the Samsung-sponsored series which preceded Meydan's arrival only to fall victim to relegation at the end of 2006 and thus forced to face the long climb back to the top of the game. Their spirited return was firmly underlined by their tremendous 2009 success, and as the 2010 Meydan FEI Nations Cup™ series evolves they will be determined to pick up where they left off.

However horses are unpredictable creatures, riders make mistakes, and the best in the world know that there is nothing certain until the last obstacle has been cleared and the applause has faded. This is the great challenge of the series which has long since taken its place among the elite tournaments on the international sporting calendar and which continues to delight, more than a century after it all began.