

Mark Samuel served on the FEI Board for 12 years, first as chair of Regional Group IV and later as vice president from 2017 to 2024.
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‘We Haven’t Been So Good At Listening’: FEI Presidential Candidate Mark Samuel On Officials, The Calendar And The Limits Of The Status Quo (1/2)

General

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With the Fédération Équestre Internationale presidential election approaching in December, Canadian candidate Mark Samuel is questioning whether the international governing body has done enough to listen to the people who keep equestrian sport running.

Samuel, who spent seven years as FEI vice president under outgoing President Ingmar de Vos, says the current proliferation of show jumping series is unsustainable, acknowledges that barely half of the reforms he proposed for officials have been implemented, and sees greater certainty surrounding equestrian sport’s Olympic future than his fellow candidates have suggested.

Samuel is one of three candidates vying to succeed de Vos, alongside Sabrina Ibáñez and Jack Huang. De Vos, who became the first salaried FEI president after his election in 2014, will step down after three terms at the FEI General Assembly in Jiangyin, China, this December.

Samuel served on the FEI Board for 12 years, first as chair of Regional Group IV and later as vice president from 2017 to 2024. Now an FEI honorary vice president, he says he would relocate to Lausanne, Switzerland, to work closely with FEI staff if elected, but would decline a salary, accepting only expense reimbursement.

“I view the presidency as an opportunity to serve and to give back,” he said. “It is a vocation and a passion for me—not a job.”

Samuel discussed the challenges facing international equestrian sport, his frustrations with the pace of change at the FEI, and where he believes the organization needs to go next.

A Life Around Horses

“I have spent my entire life around horses,” Samuel said “My parents developed Sam-Son Farms when I was 6 years old and owned Canadian Club, who went on to win the individual gold medal at the 1967 Pan American Games and was a member of Canada’s gold medal winning showjumping team the following year at the 1968 Mexico Olympics while I watched with pride from the stands. We hosted competitions at our farm, and I always helped wherever I could.”

Canadian Club, who was partnered by Jim Day, delivered the only gold medal Canada won at those Games, in the team jumping competition. Samuel often returns to that victory, though his reasons have less to do with sport than with what it represented.

“He came back as a rock star from Mexico. He had pictures in the newspaper. He had caricatures drawn of him. There were media campaigns across the country with him with a gold medal around his neck,” he said. “That lit a fuse within Canada that really fueled investment and interest and sponsorship and people like me wanting to become future riders for Canada. It was huge for our industry.”

Samuel watched his family’s horses at three consecutive Olympic Games—1968, 1972 and 1976—and in Montreal they qualified in all three disciplines.

Samuel went on to become a competitive rider himself, earning regional and national championships in hunters and show jumping. He was selected to the Canadian Show Jumping Team and rode on numerous Nations Cup teams, at the 2002 World Championships in Jerez, Spain, and at the 2003 Pan American Games in the Dominican Republic.

His partner throughout those years was Darios, a Selle Français with whom he also came close to qualifying for the 2004 Athens Olympics. Samuel had earned his place on the Canadian team roughly 35 years after watching his family’s horses compete from the in-gate as a child.

“Today, my entire family is involved with horses and I still compete, showing at the 1.35- and 1.40-meter level. I’m also an owner and breeder of high-performance show jumpers as well as Thoroughbred racehorses,” he said.

Four members of Samuel’s family ride, and he has worked with the same coach, Mac Cone, for 44 years. Most of his horses have retired to his farm, where they spent the remainder of their lives.

‘I Have Never Been A Status-Quo Person’

Samuel frames his candidacy on three areas of expertise: as a businessman, equestrian and administrator. In his campaign manifesto, he describes more than 40 years as a senior business executive leading a privately held company of more than 5,000 employees with revenues exceeding $5 billion.

“So I know what it’s like to deal with a very complex organization and the FEI is a very complex organization,” he said. “I think I’m well positioned to bring strengths there in terms of leadership, board leadership, strategic planning, change management.”

But Samuel places even greater emphasis on his experience in the saddle.

“The second issue is, and maybe foremost is, I’m an equestrian. I come from the industry,” he said. “I think we’re very good on governance. We’re very good on administration. But I think we’ve perhaps lost our feel for the industry. And I think I can bring that forward.”

He says his third qualification is his experience in FEI leadership, including 12 years as a regional group chair, seven years on the executive board and seven years as vice president.

“I know how to have constructive dialogue. I know how to execute change,” he said. “I’ve probably, as I said, been one of the most outspoken members of the board because I don’t think we should just have representation. We should actually have *contribution*. And that’s what I would expect from my fellow board members and executive board going forward.”

Samuel sees the FEI as both a multinational organization and a business, but argues that its role as a service organization has been neglected under the current administration.

“We are also a service organization. We are a federation of federations. I think to a degree, the FEI has lost sight of that under our current direction,” he said. “We’re very good at administrating. We’re very good at developing rules. We haven’t been so good at listening to our federations and their input into the various discussions in front of us and allowing them to be part of the dialogue.”

Samuel’s criticism of the current FEI administration is more blunt than the language in his written campaign manifesto. In that document, he reports that a two-year “listening process” revealed concerns about the FEI’s transparency, consultation and communication, including a perception that feedback from stakeholders was not being adequately considered.

The manifesto also praises de Vos for his “visionary leadership” and commends the FEI headquarters team led by Secretary General Ibáñez, one of Samuel’s opponents in the presidential election.

Despite his criticism of the current administration, Samuel emphasized continuity as his first priority if elected.

“My first priority will be to ensure that we transition seamlessly from Ingmar de Vos to myself and that the FEI Headquarters are focused and empowered to execute on the FEI strategic plan as well as to adapt to my fresh priorities and style of leadership,” he said.

With the next Olympic Games two years away, Samuel emphasized the importance of keeping “the train on the rails” and ensuring FEI headquarters staff feel heard during the leadership transition. He also stressed financial discipline, cautioning against initiatives without measurable outcomes or a clear return on investment.

“So I think that’s the first aggregated priority is to make sure that at first do no harm and move forward and maintain our momentum.”

‘We’re Actually Fairly Secure’

Samuel’s second priority is safeguarding equestrian sport’s place in the Olympic and Paralympic movements, an issue where he parts company with his rivals.

“I think maybe some of the other candidates have been a little more alarmist about that; I think we’re actually fairly secure within the Olympic movement right now,” he said. “We’ve just come off the beautiful jewel box of Versailles and how well that presented us. We also did well off camera with the other metrics that the [International Olympic Committee] looks for and that the Paralympic movement looks for in terms of what we deliver as a sport.

“So I think we’re secure through LA and we need to deliver excellent games there,” he continued. “I feel we’re secure in Brisbane as well, although the final crossing of T’s and dotting of I’s as to the events is not done."

Samuel pointed to the FEI’s connections within international sport, including de Vos’ positions on the International Olympic Committee’s executive board, at the World Anti-Doping Agency and as president of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations.

“We are quite wired-in and we also have access to the Olympic Council of other IOC members that are equestrian related that we can activate and make use of,” he said.

Samuel also expressed concern about the direction of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) under its new leadership, while acknowledging President Kirsty Coventry’s efforts to modernize the organization.

“We have a new president and she’s doing a great job,” he said of Coventry. “She has a dynamic view of the future and her Fit for the Future campaign. She wants to be more athlete-centered. I guess I would fall within that mandate of coming from the industry and being an athlete.”

Samuel cautioned that changes to the IOC’s structure could affect the rights and influence of international federations, making it important for equestrian sport to have a strong voice in those discussions.

“But they’re also playing with IF rights—international federation rights in the new structure within the IOC,” he said. “I think we need a strong voice that is being proactive in making sure our interests and the interests of the other IFs within the Olympic movement is being considered and being heard. I have a track record of doing my research, being prepared and speaking up.”

His manifesto takes a more cautious tone, describing equestrian sport’s Olympic position as “currently somewhat secure, but we cannot take that fact for granted.” Samuel also pledges to seek de Vos’ counsel and explore opportunities to expand para equestrian representation, including the potential addition of para dressage to the Parapan American Games.

‘Where’s The Rotation That Was Promised?’

Samuel’s third priority is improving conditions for FEI officials, an issue he repeatedly raised and one on which he was particularly critical of the federation’s record. He chaired the FEI Officials Working Group twice, in 2016-2017 and 2024-2025, but said many of its recommendations remain unfulfilled.

“The original working group had 13 recommendations. We took again a holistic approach to improving the state of the nation of officials and for officials,” he said. “And since then only about half of our recommendations have been implemented. And that was not within my control. And I think that’s been unfortunate.”

Samuel said he has heard similar concerns directly from officials while traveling to competitions.

“As I’ve gone around and talked to officials in the different regions of the world… I get some of the same feedback coming back to me that, ‘Where’s the rotation that was promised?’ ‘Where’s the mentorship that was promised?’ ‘Where’s the performance evaluation that was promised?’ ” he said. “I think again, it’s like anything else: this officials approach needs a champion.”

He pledged to revisit the working group’s recommendations during his first year in office, emphasizing officials’ roles in ensuring fair competition, horse welfare and athlete safety.

“So as president, I will absolutely reinvigorate the recommendations that were brought forward by the working group and we should modernize them and make sure that they’re still appropriate and adapt them as required,” he said. “But that is a piece that within my first year, I will absolutely reinvigorate and be focused on because the officials are the arbiters of our sport. They are maintaining a fair and equitable environment for our sport. They are the ones that are safeguarding the welfare of our animals and the safety of our athletes. They do yeoman work on behalf of our industry and they deserve our respect and our support and our training.”

Asked whether officials might in future be appointed by the FEI, with organizers retaining only a limited right of veto, rather than appointed by organizers as they are now, Samuel did not commit—but he did not hide where his instinct lies.

Samuel also questioned whether more officials should be appointed by the FEI rather than competition organizers, arguing that greater independence would benefit the sport.

“Where is that line, though, between what should be an organizing committee appointment and what should be an FEI appointment is one that we need to continue to have the dialogue on?” he said. “I think the more independence we can encourage within our officials group, the better for the FEI and the better for the competition environment.”

He also questioned the longstanding relationships between some officials and competition organizers, arguing that greater rotation could strengthen oversight.

“That’s one of the reasons we put forward the idea of rotation of panels as a recommendation, because there’s a lot of entrenched blocks of panels that are very comfortable working with organizing committees and the organizing committees are very comfortable working with them,” he said. “But that does not necessarily mean that we’re getting the most robust work from them and does not suggest necessarily that they’re being the critical friends that they should be in that environment.”

Samuel said he would consult discipline directors and chairs before making changes, “because there are impacts that are quite different in Europe and North America than in the Caribbean or the Americas or in Africa.” His manifesto calls for expanding officials’ rotation across all disciplines within his first two years, increasing travel funding for officials seeking international experience and standardizing per diem payments.

‘It Cannot Continue Unfettered’

The question that drew his longest pause concerned money: with prize funds climbing and new series arriving, is there a risk that riders are pushed to overtax their horses? Samuel acknowledged both the opportunities and challenges created by the sport’s growth.

He pointed to the proliferation of show jumping circuits, including the new Premier Jumping League, the Global Champions Tour, Nations Cups and five-star competitions. While he sees the investment as a sign of the sport’s health, he warned that the expanding calendar could come at a cost to horse welfare, athlete well-being and the environment.

“I think in some ways it is very exciting,” he said. “It speaks to the health of the sport and the people are willing to invest at that level.

“However, sometimes success can also be a two-sided coin,” he continued. “Horses can only jump so many times at such a high level, and we do have a horse welfare issue of pushing them to do too much.”

Samuel also raised concerns about rider burnout as athletes travel between major competitions, sometimes competing in different cities on consecutive days. He suggested the FEI take a more active role in managing the calendar, potentially limiting the number of events held within a particular region over a given period.

“It cannot continue unfettered. This momentum cannot continue unfettered,” he said. “I think the FEI should be looking at calendar management and perhaps be looking at how many events within each geography make sense within a certain period.”

He was careful not to arrive with a figure.

“Again, I do not have those answers yet. I think the way we work towards those answers is to get the various stakeholders involved and be thinking through whether there are pragmatic, sustainable solutions that still allow our athletes, sponsors and investors to pursue the sport at their level, but that also keeps in mind the welfare issues for our horses as well and for our grooms within this environment.”

Samuel also raised a broader question about the FEI’s role in organizing competitions in a sport increasingly dominated by privately operated circuits.

“We only have the one series, but in an environment that is otherwise entirely privatized, what is the FEI’s responsibility going forward as well?” he said. “I think we have to be willing to ask those questions, even if it makes for a difficult conversation.”

His manifesto gives that question a context and a deadline. He said that the FEI’s partnership terms with Longines is soon coming to an end, and that renegotiating the deal will be “action item No. 1 in the new year.”

He sees room to strengthen the Longines League of Nations, which he helped launch, potentially through a promotion-and-relegation system that would create greater incentives for countries to field their strongest teams. He notes that the FEI has also had to fund its Dressage World Cup leagues for several years without outside sponsorship.

The second part of this story, covering horse welfare and biosecurity, the position of grooms, the one-country-one-vote system and the cost of getting into the sport, is available here.