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EHF Competitions Conference for Men's Handball

The EHF Competitions Conference took place on 18 – 19 April in Vienna, Austria. Over 180 handball experts and specialists from all areas of the sport and the handball business came together for this unique event, with the prime objective of working on and laying the foundation stones for a long-term European Competitions' Plan.

Tor Lian, President of the EHF officially opened the event, underlining the necessity of finding a balance, working together in the interest of a system of cohesion and the need to listen to all interest groups. Jean Brihault, Event Chairman and EHF Vice-president, accentuated the continuously changing balance and stressed the need to be flexible, while thinking globally. He emphasised the importance of the objective and requirement of a long-term plan. IHF President, Dr. Hassan Moustafa, gave the IHF address and welcomed the participants; he stated that the event represented an elite cross-section of European men's handball.

Vision behind the event

The sport of handball has seen rapid changes over the past decade, especially on the European continent. The number of different interest groups within the sport has increased in line with the ever increasing interest in the sport. The stakeholders of top level handball rarely have the opportunity to get together to talk constructively about handball's future path, which is just one of the reasons why the EHF saw this event as being paramount to the sport and its continued development.

As EHF President Tor Lian confirmed, *"This event had been on the handball calendar for many months. We know that there is a diversity of interests in today's handball business. Our job in these two days was to bring everybody together, make steps in the right direction to secure a cohesive system of balance - an extremely complex task, yet a very important one."*

Event Design

Emphasis was set on the importance of an open-communication policy when preparing for the event. Key note speakers from the major branches of the sport made presentations on three key areas. These presentations set the tone for discussion forums in groups. The results were then presented, which clearly identified the important areas and trends necessary for a long-term plan.

Handball the Brand

Gerhard Hrebicek from the European Brand Institute made a presentation on product branding, focusing on handball. He spoke of handball's potential as a brand, saying that the brand handball can only work as an umbrella brand with all components working together.

National Teams, Club & Players – A system of mutual benefit

The Danish national coach Ulrik Wilbek was joined by a club manager and a former top player: Xavier O'Callaghan and Serbian player legend Dragan Skrbic to present the importance of a system which benefits all sides. All three speakers spoke from their own personal viewpoint, while emphasising the need for global thinking in the interest of handball. They highlighted the importance of this crucial equation of "national teams – clubs – players" in top level men's handball, while acknowledging that there is also a natural degree of conflict, which needs attention. It was agreed that a "give and take approach" is necessary to reach the desired goals for handball.

Competition balance – System and Calendar

This topic was presented by Jan Tuik, Chairman of the EHF Competitions Commission. This is a central topic and one which necessitates continual revision to correlate with the demands of the sport and the market value.

All parties are of the agreement that this needs attention and the calendar must also be harmonised. The majority of participants were in favour of reducing the number of international competitions from five to four in a four year cycle as an initial step. The participants however also stressed the importance of national team competitions as flagship competitions for the sport, but finding the optimum number is key. It was decided that market studies are necessary to establish the market value implications for the events and top level handball.

A proposal was made to introduce a intercontinental cup for those nations in need of more international matches.

Scheduling of the major international tournaments was a subject. Three windows were identified for international events: January, June and September, while it was agreed that a June slot would not be in the interest of the sport of handball. Further studies will be made to decide the right step.

The topic was concluded with a presentation by European Market Research Experts on the matter of Handball & Media. The media world plays a decisive role in the development of a sport and is an important partner in finding the optimum plan for the competition balance. All were in agreement that the handball calendar has to cohere with the demands of the market

Focus: Athletes

Sport scientist, Hans Holdhaus, and former Spanish player, Jaume Fort Mauri, presented the key topic, focusing on the athletes. It was stressed that the athletes are paramount. This was a line which was continuously stressed throughout the course of the event. The participants actively discussed the integration of athletes in the system and the necessity of a forum within the European system for them to have their say.

It was also repeatedly stressed that athletes should receive further support after the end of their career and service to the sport. The EHF CAN (Competence Academy Network) is currently looking into this actual matter by setting up an academic network to support players' further career, while retaining them in the handball family.

The number of playing dates was also a matter brought up, focusing on European club and international competitions. The players present, the coaches and the sport scientists stressed the need for additional rest days during major tournaments. All participants were in agreement. This is matter which will be implemented at the next European Championship.

It was repeatedly mentioned that more players should be used. This said however, statistics show that the Official Squad system allowing for more players, which was introduced in 2004, has not been fully used at EHF tournaments.

Conclusion

Jean Brihault concluded the event, underlining the rich content, tolerance, and solidarity. It was unanimously agreed that a permanent dialogue is necessary for all stakeholders. While there are fields that conflict with each other, using the example of sports medicine and market demands, there is a mutual understanding. The EHF Vice-president ended his conclusion by stating,

"Today the basis for a moral contract between all stakeholders and the EHF Executive Committee has been agreed upon".

Tor Lian, EHF President brought the constructive and fruitful event to a close, stating that the event had been of paramount importance for the future of European handball. All the matters will now be actively dealt with as a matter of priority and a commitment to all stakeholders has been made.