

THE OLYMPIC GAMES and developing countries

More than 65 percent of FISA's members are seriously struggling with financial problems, lack of infrastructure, poor club activities, partial or total lack of government support, no coaching education and, for our new members, no rowing culture and tradition, according to FISA's Development Director Thor Nilsen. They all come in under the umbrella of "developing countries". As the quota system set by the International Olympic Committee limits the size of participation and strongly emphasises universality at the Olympic Games, these countries are being given the possibility to compete at the Olympics thanks to the system of Continental Qualification.

The results list from the Olympic Games shows great differences between the winners and the crews in Finals C, D and E. Many athletes and coaches from developed countries feel discriminated against to see athletes with less quality being given the honour to participate in the world's most prestigious sports event - the Olympic Games. This is something we must

accept also in the future, and is it the price we pay to be members of the Olympic family.

The Olympic Charter clearly highlights the goal of universality and the need for countries from all five continents to be represented. Continental qualifications are accepted as the best tool to reach this goal. After analyses of population and participation, FISA decided to reserve places in women's and men's singles, and women's and men's lightweight double sculls as continental qualification categories. What are FISA doing to assist developing countries for Olympic participation, and is there any progress since the system started more than 12 years ago?

FISA's first priority is the development of our sport; that means, in short, more members, more participation in national, continental and international competition and championships and better quality

technically and physically. We feel we have made progress in this work and, with 100 of our 130 members participating in the process for Olympic qualification, we are global and have universality.

Next point is the quality of the rowers. Here we must divide up the developing countries in two groups:

- 1) Countries with a rowing tradition, but with political and/or financial problems.
- 2) New members missing tradition and infrastructure.

With Group One, FISA, in cooperation with Olympic Solidarity, have identified talented athletes and given them the possibility to participate in training camps and international regattas and championships. This has been successful and we have seen some of >>

Haidar Nozad (b) and Hussein Jebur (s) of Iraq compete in the men's double sculls at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.





In Beijing, Iran saw its rowers compete for the first time ever at the Olympic Games. Female rower Homa Hosseini was her country's flagbearer at the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games.

those athletes in Finals at the World Rowing Championships and at the Olympic Games.

Group Two is our challenge, with limited or no infrastructure, poor quality of equipment, no rowing tradition and sometimes no training tradition. The number of active rowers can be only a handful and talent identification is just a word without reality. In some parts of the world nutrition is also an issue and limits the possibility for proper training.

Again we have a strong cooperation with Olympic Solidarity for national, regional and continental courses and training camps. Boat donations are a strong tool, and slowly the infrastructure starts to develop. Our group of development coaches focus on three points; rowing technique, rigging and training methodology. We also try to identify talents for a more specific program, but this is not always supported by the National Federations due to local political problems or other priorities.

At the Beijing Olympics, 21 of the participating countries were recognised as "developing countries" and received assistance in one or another form. Only Cuba reached the A Final with one crew and two crews in the B Final, but we must take into consideration that Cuba has a long tradition in rowing, a good national structure, but are fighting with financial limitations.

The rest of the participants ended up in Finals C to E and showed good racing and a fighting spirit when they competed with crews on their own level.

The main question is: have the developing countries showed any progress in the last 12 years? If we look at the result lists, the situation has not changed a lot, but if we look at the technical level, the progress has been massive.

During the Olympics I received many positive comments about the technical level of our developing crews from international coaches following the races on their bikes. The crews know how to row, even if the physical performance is still behind international top level. There is much reason for this: a limited number of athletes to choose from, many are missing a basic training background, they are really amateurs who combine studies or work with training, and they are missing international experience. Such a platform doesn't give self-confidence but the experience they bring with them back home will give a positive stimulus for future progress.

So we are moving in the right direction with good technical progress and better understanding of physical requirements. Remember that on the day they begin to win medals they are no longer a developing country!

■ Thor S. Nilsen, FISA Development Director