

DRESSAGE Ireland

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Chairperson's Closing Address 2023

Thank you all for your attendance, as you know I have completed six years on the board of Dressage Ireland, two and a half as a board member and three and a half as Chairperson. As with all organisations rotation of Directors is most important for the dynamic life blood of any progressive organisation. So tonight marks the end of my term on the board. When I took over as Chair in February 2020, I knew it would be no easy task. The challenges began early as the admin, company secretary, finance and IT roles became vacant as all these had been filled by the very knowledgeable Norbert Von Cramon who retired from Dressage Ireland after decades of service. So, we set about filling the roles one by one and concentrated in running the organisation in the best way we could. The finances were the first issue we needed to get to grips with as the finances were at an all time low due to the substantial figure of €50,000 being contributed by the previous board to HSI High Performance for a team to go to the Olympics. As Chairperson I set about leading the board in some cost cutting exercises to increase finances. Of course, it didn't stop there we had a website that was on its last legs and was unfit for purpose. So, with limited resources we set about the website revamp. This was a considerable undertaking and the scoping took many months of work from then board Director Richard Mc Cracken and DI member Sarah Logan and the admin staff. As with all projects of this type we had teething problems and like any change, some members found the unfamiliarity hard to cope with. Over time and with suggestions from members: I must say it is now much more user friendly, albeit if we had an unlimited budget at the time we could have had a much better one already tried and tested, however this could have cost over €100,000 and we couldn't have afforded that. Another board director at that time Sarah Mellor was also a great help to get the banking more

streamlined. As we were still managing our way through all that; the world was hit by covid.

Covid as we all know was life changing, and administratively it was a nightmare as guidelines changed weekly and the worry of running the sport in a compliant manner was at times a major struggle.

But with every cloud there is a silver lining, which came in the form of the covid relief grants for sporting organisations. Grant applications are inordinately detailed and difficult especially in relation to financial figures, predictions and estimated losses from lack of activity ect.

Sarah assisted us with our first grant and subsequently office staff Jane, Claire and I worked on the subsequent grants. I am pleased to say our efforts paid off and we were successful in all three applications.

Covid made us all look at things differently and to allow the sport to continue we had to think of alternatives to the Winter Championships which in 2021 ran over two separate days in two different venues . We also held a AGM and election by zoom , which with limited resources we ran ourselves with assistance from the board and DI members and I'm glad to report it went well.

Being aware of the need to contain costs I set about a concentrated effort in developing contacts with new sponsors to assist us in the running of the National championships and Winter finals .in the previous three years The National Championships and Winter finals had incurred accumulative losses of up to €38,000 so it was important to reach out and engage with sponsors.

Thankfully our efforts have been successful and it's fair to say that in 2021 we ran the Winters and Nationals without any losses. In 2022 in amalgamating the Winters finals and Nationals we didn't incur any losses and in 2023 with my information to date the Nationals ran more or less within budget and the winters a little over budget. So significant improvements have been made. With rising inflation and insurance costs, it's vital to keep finances in check. As Chairperson I have

endeavoured to ensure we as a board are discretionary about spending and continue to build bridges with sponsors and members within our organisation with specialised skill sets. Health and Safety is a subject I took seriously and I advised the board to engage a Health and Safety specialist Olga Murphy, to assist with health and safety requirements and to ensure Dressage Ireland complied with Insurance and governance criteria. Olga streamlined Health and Safety documentation and also provided training to regional committee's. A lot has also been done during my term to facilitate good financial oversight. The use of sage a financial management system, a bookkeeper and the use of online banking by central and regional committee's has been monumental in keeping finances transparent and easily identifiable. Board Members attended Governance workshops ran by HSI, and we in the board are in the process of updating policy documents in accordance with our governance adoption journey. As Chair I have always tried to be as open and as available as possible to regional committees and members in general. I have used every occasion to promote Dressage Ireland among other disciplines, the public at large by media interviews with Horse & Hound, The Grassroots Gazette, The Independent, The Irish Field, through our social media platforms via podcasts and demos ect. Our Dressage showcase at the RDS has grown hugely in popularity, with full spectator stands on the Dressage demo day. This has only been achieved through a very professional approach, public relations videos and with the help of our amazing riders. The public love the dressage to music displays. In the promotion of Dressage, inclusiveness and making the sport accessible to all is vital to its growth. It is the one sport whereby young, mature, able and Para and neuro diverse athletes can compete and participate in and it's also gender neutral. In relation to neuro diversity Dyspraxia, Asperger's, and dyslexia are only some conditions that come to mind. To assist such athletes I led the board to a better understanding of dyslexia and any conditions that impair

memory and in doing so we made the decision to change our rules to allow callers at the National championships and Winter finals. After all Dressage is primarily about harmony between a horse and rider it should not be about memorising a test, which was actually blocking many athletes from participating. I am proud to have made a difference to the confidence and ultimate happiness of such athletes. Life is short we need to make it easy and enjoyable. Another rule amendment in 2024 will state that beige or white competition jodhpurs may have a black, navy or grey seat. This is as a result of a growing awareness of female riders concerns to be able to compete in comfort and free of anxiety. It is worth noting that 72% of all riders are female.

Another initiative I on behalf of Dressage Ireland got involved in was the Grassroots Gazette HAY campaign, The HAY Campaign – “How Are Ya” is an Equestrian Mental Health Campaign for the purpose of getting people talking about mental health. It has increased awareness that it's ok not to be ok, and the steps people can take to help get better, and in doing so has educated people to support each other during difficult times.

Another opportunity I identified was for the judges committee to access funding through the latest covid grant application. We have recently been informed that they were successful in their application and with the funding they now hope to develop an online judges training system. The judges committee are an integral part of Dressage Ireland and the close ties with the Board means that we can collaborate to improve and grow the sport.

Another proactive role I took in agreement with the board was to seek the advice of a Human resource's expert to oversee the recruitment process for a full time Office Administrator. The position became vacant as Jane Averil our previous office admin was snapped up by Dublin City Council.

I was also fortunate enough to have the services of a David Kearney an advisor on data

protection law and GDPR to assist with Board with such matters.
I have always put the interests of Dressage Ireland first and in doing so set aside my own personal goals. I suspended my training on the High-Performance squad as I needed to advocate for the rights of Dressage Ireland, one cannot point out conflicts of interests or of loyalty or unfair practices if one is in any way conflicted.
Being assertive to the needs and rights of Dressage Ireland as the national affiliate running the sport in Ireland didn't occur without difficulties or controversies. I can honestly say I have always led by example, always mindful of being courteous, politically correct, transparent, straight and accountable, leading with open communications. All decisions and actions were taken with the knowledge or agreement of the board. Of course, I wasn't always liked for exposing governance issues at higher levels, but time has now shown that there was substance and fact behind mine and the boards concerns. However, that said it's now important to move forward as there is no future looking back!

As you can see being Chair of Dressage Ireland with a membership now nearing 1000 members entails a lot, it meant I had to become proficient in lots of areas, leadership, governance, finance, Human Resources, Insurance, Health and Safety, Safeguarding, GDPR, data protection, grant applications as well as manage the day-to-day activities of a busy sporting organisation, strategise and at times but not too often manage conflict.

So, it's been a busy few years but I am confident that the organisation is in a better place going forward, a lot has been achieved and there is more to do. To assist with an informed and effective strategy for Dressage Ireland I'd like to have been able to formulate and create more surveys to get the views of our members so the organisation could be more member led however, time waits for no one but I'm sure the new board will endeavour to do so.

The other thing I'd like to have done is a National convention, whereby coaches, riders and judges could all assemble for a day or two with International Coaches/Judges to provide a day of education for us all. I have made enquires with some International names regarding same which I will pass on to the board.

A Dressage Ireland ball would be a lovely addition to the calendar and if there were any volunteers present to organise I'm sure it would be much appreciated! Challenges I foresee for the organisation are around continued sources of revenue through grants and sponsorship and increasingly we as equestrian's need to be acutely more aware of social license. Opportunity for increased engagement with Horse Sport Ireland in relation to High Performance planing and execution would also be welcomed.

It's been a busy few years and it has been a role that required me to hit the ground running and I guess I have been ever since! In this time I learned a lot about myself, my strengths and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. I can say whole heartedly that I always acted in the best interests of Dressage Ireland and was the best chair I could possibly be; however that could not have happened without the support of the Board both past and present, the judges, rules and grading, hearings, Elevate, regional reps committees and admin staff who all work as a team to make it all happen.

On a personal note I'd like to thank my friends and family, particular my husband Kevin, Shane, Rory and Niamh who like the supporters of other volunteers kept me going when times got tough.

But as my parents used to say what's doesn't kill your makes you stronger! I believe the the board of Dressage going forward are a strong and well-informed team and I know they will, like I did, work relentlessly for the good of the sport. So, with that I say Goodnight and Thank you.



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