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PRESIDENT'S VIEW: WHAT A JOURNEY FOR OBSTACLE RACING – AND WHAT A DESTINATION



When the members of World Obstacle voted nearly unanimously to confirm the terms of the MOU signed in 2023 to dissolve the global governing body of Obstacle Sports during their General Assembly in Nice on 15 March, confirming their integration fully into UIPM, tears were flowing at the top table – and no wonder.

It has been a fantastic journey to get to this point. The evolution of Modern Pentathlon has progressed steadily, as sports do with each Olympic cycle, and within UIPM, for over a decade we have been interested to explore how we could bring in more athletes, reach new audiences and create new opportunities for growth including mass participation events.

This goal led to a meeting at the headquarters of Spartan Race in Boston, where we first met Ian Adamson, and then visits to Spartan competitions in Boston and Colorado Springs. What we saw there galvanized our ideas regarding mass participation in the multisport sector.

It was immediately clear that this was not a niche activity – it was a global movement, with

thousands of participants in each event, a devoted community and a completely different kind of energy. I can recall being invited to sign a board on the course, and I inscribed the words: “The Olympics needs this.” It was a spontaneous moment that happened over 10 years ago but it captured a genuine feeling – that there was something here with real potential to hit the mainstream.

Ian, the Founding President of FISO (Federation Internationale de Sports d'Obstacles), was deeply invested in building that movement. He was a visionary, but also a pragmatist – someone who didn't just talk about ideas, but went out and built them, sometimes quite literally. I remember him constructing courses himself for some of the test events we would later run together.

Over time, he became not just a counterpart in discussions, but a true partner in exploring what obstacle sport could become within a broader multisport landscape.

In those early days, our focus was not on reforming Pentathlon. It had nothing to do with horses, and nobody was talking about replacing any discipline. We were investigating ways to expand – how to embed mass-participation sport into our ecosystem, to create new pathways for athletes and new ways for people to engage with our multisports and, frankly, be physically active. Obstacle, as an emerging and dynamic urban sport, seemed to fit that vision.

Spartan soon experimented with integrating our laser-shooting discipline into some of their OCR courses. It was an early attempt to bring elements of Pentathlon into that environment, add a different skill and see how we might connect with a much broader base of participants.

From there, we continued to explore. In 2018, during our Pentathlon World Cup events in Cairo and in Pomona, Los Angeles, we introduced unofficial, experimental obstacle tests alongside the official competition. They allowed us to try something new – incorporating running-track obstacles into the Laser Run environment. The idea was to add a new layer of excitement in the Laser Run, something like a more demanding version of the steeplechase, but adapted for pentathletes.

The response from athletes was immediate. The format was fast, intense and, above all, fun. There was a sense that we were tapping into something different – something that could evolve alongside Pentathlon without changing its multisport essence.

Looking back, that period was one of curiosity and experimentation. We were testing ideas, building relationships and learning from a community that was growing rapidly in its own right. I stayed closely connected to that development, attending annual World Obstacle Congresses and continuing the dialogue about where our paths might converge.

There was a natural pause after those early experiments – a sense that obstacle sport itself was still developing, and that we needed time to better understand how it might fit within our world. We applied for a Mixed Relay in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics with obstacles built into the Laser Run. Like so many applications from other sports, we were not successful. Then the COVID-19 pandemic brought everything to a halt.

And that's where things stood until the Tokyo Games (taking place in 2021), where unforeseen incidents changed the course of our sport forever.

If you've read this far, you probably know the story. In Tokyo, it became apparent that we would have to turn the evolution into a revolution. Back in Monaco, the UIPM, on the recommendation of its Innovation Commission, launched a consultation to consider alternatives to the Riding discipline, and 62 sports were proposed as potential replacements. At the end of a thorough evaluation, Obstacle racing won out.

During this process, as I had a seat on the UIPM Executive Board as NORCECA President, I recused myself from voting on the New 5th Discipline decision. I also resigned as a member of World Obstacle.

Finally at the end of this arduous process, Obstacle racing, still governed by FISO, was now part of an Olympic sport with over 100 years of heritage. A Memorandum of Understanding between the UIPM and FISO was initiated by Shiny Fang, our Secretary General, and then signed by Dr Klaus Schormann, my predecessor, and FISO President Ian Adamson in 2023. The potential for a full integration was now obvious, but a lot of work remained to be done.

Luckily, Ian and his fellow FISO stalwarts thrive on hard work, and recent years have seen a remarkable effort to inform, reassure and encourage the Obstacle sports community into realising the potential of full unification.



Understandably, it took time to convince everyone that it was unlikely that the sport could realize its own ambitions unless it embraced integration with the IOC-recognised International Federation that had seen its potential and has already put Obstacle on the Olympic map, with a new Pentathlon format of Fencing / Obstacle / Swimming / Laser Run approved for Los Angeles 2028.

That's exactly what was confirmed in Nice on 15 March. The Olympics does need this, to further

engage youth by providing relevance, and I can't wait for our sport to show the world the incredible value that Ninja-style Obstacle racing can bring to the Games. Linking heritage and innovation to be, as our IOC President Kirsty Coventry says, Fit for the Future.