

Good afternoon!

First of all, thank you very much to the EHF for the invitation to speak and participate here! It is fantastic to come here and meet so many good friends from my many years in international handball!

At the IHF Congress where I was elected, I stated that it was my hope and intention that we would have more collaboration and less competition and prestige between the IHF and the EHF in the area of rules and refereeing; I am happy to see clear signs already that this is happening;

Of course, it is then important that we see the main issue in generally the same way, and the focus and the agenda of this EHF Convention shows that we do; for instance, the demands on the top referees are indeed increasing and changing, with more emphasis on non-technical skills; more support for the referees is clearly needed from delegates and other officials involved in managing the game; and we must indeed be prepared to listen to good ideas from other sports; we cannot isolate ourselves; so I congratulate EHF to this very relevant agenda;

I want to tell you that in the upcoming IHF Symposium in Bangkok, Chief Referees and instructors will get a more in-depth opportunity to obtain information and to discuss the new trends in refereeing, moreover in a joint effort with the top coaches of the world; I hope as many as possible of you will come; you can register through the IHF Web site, and Manfred Prause and I are ready to give you more information.

Just 8-10 year ago, when discussing possible rules changes, we in IHF/PRC were getting a lot of pressure to make changes that would introduce more speed or action. So we did focus on faster movement, less interruptions, more effective playing time and so on. Now, in the light of the experience in Athens and Tunisia, we hear people say that we need to put on the brakes, because the game is moving too fast. Perhaps it is not really moving too fast, except that some less skilled teams might try to play a faster style than they are really able to control.

This faster game, what forms does it take? many more attacks per game, faster transition from defense to attack, more pressure through quick throw-offs. What do the defenders do: well they move out in new defensive tactics and meet the attack further out; or at least they do not stand still and wait for the attackers to make contact; they cause or provoke collisions and interfere with the opponents; several pairs of players might be in close contact or be moving at the same time;

The effect for the referees: much more to watch or to anticipate; no opportunity to get parked in a comfortable diagonal with an easy overview of a predictable offense; more running but also more agility with more quick moves is needed. But especially there is a need for quick reactions, an ability to switch focus rapidly and to observe correctly. If you cannot do that, you miss situations completely or you catch only the second part of a confrontation and therefore misunderstand it.

Can our older, experienced referees handle this adaptation? Not always! Experience is still useful, but an adaptation to new challenges and increased emphasis on cognitive skills is clearly moving us in the direction of looking for younger talents with more flexible minds and bodies. Most of the problems in Tunisia were not related to bad rules interpretation by experienced referees; they were related to difficulties in seeing and understanding correctly what was actually happening.



And if one looks at our lists of IHF and EHF referees we find that there is indeed a need for a generation change. In the IHF list we have too many 42-45-48 year old referees who never were good enough for a World Ch and have even less chance now with the new demands. And even worse, in the EHF list currently there are too many 38-40-42 year olds who are already too old to make the step up to the IHF level.

We are just now in the process of testing and moving up 8 younger EHF couples so that Europe will be able to fill the places that we expect to give Europe in the 3 Junior World Ch in August. Otherwise we would have had to give these places to other continents. Imagine that! And if we look at the situation for 2007 it is worse! In the entire EHF list there are less than 10 additional couples where both are less than 35, which is our normal limit for allowing couples to go for IHF testing, and some of these couples are from countries that already have all their places on the IHF list taken by strong and young couples.

I estimate (and Sandor Andorka agrees) that during 2006 we urgently need about 10-12 young new IHF couples from Europe, so this means in the next months one must identify 12-15 couples, most of whom are not yet even at the EHF level, so that they can first be tested for that level and then evaluated at that level. Too many countries, in all continents, are still stuck in the old tradition of moving people up based on age, the older first and the younger must wait. This is no longer possible! As our age limit for Junior WC is 40, then our limit for moving up to the IHF level cannot be higher than 35. This means you must identify and propose younger couples to the EHF level; otherwise you will be left out!

And when you next month are asked, like every year, to submit names for the IHF List, do not routinely come to us with the 42-45-48 year olds, just because they are not yet 50. There is an IHF regulation that we have not used much, under which those who have been on the list for 7 years without qualifying for some kind of WC must be moved down. We will make use of that rule unless you voluntarily drop couples who have just been taking up a place for a younger couple. We do not want to take away the honor and pride of the referees who once passed an IHF course. They should keep their diploma and their pride, but they should not automatically keep their places on the list until retirement.

And the IHF list is in many ways losing its old meaning. The purpose was to show which couples were eligible for a WC or a WC qualification. But very few countries have 3 couples who are WC candidates. Most have 2 or 1 or 0 such couples.

So we are now creating what is more like a real IHF list, the way it was intended to be. This new concept is the Global Referee Training Group. If you are not selected for this group, then you can effectively forget about a WC for the next 4 years, and you are not really an IHF referee in practice. If you are young and on the way up, you may get your chance next time; but if you are old and not selected, it is a strong hint that you should concentrate on the continental level, which in Europe certainly is interesting enough.

The main purpose of the Global Referee Training Group is to train, test and evaluate couples from all continents during a 4-year period, in the hope that we will get a more homogenous group with standardized rules interpretation, and strong cognitive skills, with more referees capable of moving up to the absolute top level, increasingly also from the other continents. They normally have much less opportunity to gain experience to develop their talent, and this is what we want to try to compensate for in the Program.



I do not have time here now to get more into the details of the Global Referee Training Program. Referee Chiefs will get further explanations when we send out the letter inviting you to confirm some of your IHF referees. We also plan to have the information on the IHF web site, and of course you will learn much more about it in the IHF Symposium in Bangkok

However, there is one final point that I want to make. As I said, among other things, the Program is intended to help talented referees from other continents move up faster through increased training and experience. Much of this experience must come through opportunities offered in European countries and competition.

You might ask: why should we help non-Europeans compete with our own referees? But this attitude would be too selfish and short-sighted. It is inevitable that the proportion of non-European referees will increase in the WCs in years to come. It is obviously of benefit to the European countries that play in these WCs that the referees are as good as possible. So I ask each of you to follow the example of EHF itself and until now only a very few countries, to make places available in some tournaments or to receive non-European couples for some weeks of match training at the appropriate level. Portugal has started setting a good example, but we need many more of you! Also, another reason for helping out in this way is that we recognize that younger IHF referees from Europe could benefit from experience in other continents, and then we could arrange a kind of exchange.

Thank you for your attention, and feel free to approach me with questions during the rest of the weekend!

Christer Ahl

President of the IHF-Playing Rules and Referees Commission

