

XANDER BRETT

# EURO RIDERS MAKE POINT

**Xander Brett** profiles the FEGENTRI interational amateur riders federation.

In Great Britain and Ireland, our point-to-point world stretches from Scotland to Cornwall, Derry to Cork. Homespun facilities host laymen and women desperate for a taste of race-riding adrenaline.

On the Continent, there's no such circuit, though no fewer enthusiastic non-professionals. The diagnostic to that dilemma? FEGENTRI, a federation that brings together amateur riding clubs from across the world. The organisation is celebrating its 70th birthday this year. Initiated by five nations, it has grown to embrace 25 and counting, fixtures scheduled as far away as Morocco, Mauritius, Turkey and the USA.

"They might not have point-to-points," says Charlotte Rinckenbach, FEGENTRI's general secretary (she has the coveted task of touring many locations on its exotic circuit), "but many countries are still channelled by amateur riding."

On the Flat, separate categories cater for FEGENTRI's male and female participants. There's a mixed-gender championship over jumps – known as the FEGENTRI Gentlemen's League Championship – and a budding FEGENTRI Junior pony racing operation, overseen by Cécile Madamet.

"We've different types of members," explains Rinckenbach, who completed the Godolphin Flying Start programme after obtaining a Master's degree. "The USA hosts a race and sends a lady rider, while Mauritius, Morocco and Turkey host a race but don't send riders. In Mauri-



Alice Keighley after winning the 2023 FEGENTRI race in Mauritius – credit Abx. photo: Insel David Dunsdon

tius and Morocco, the FEGENTRI races are one of the only opportunities amateur riders have to compete."

The jubilee season got underway on March 20, Ireland hosting leg one of the FEGENTRI Gentlemen's League Championship. Stages now wind their way through major jurisdictions, stopping en route at lesser trodden venues... Czech provincial tracks, for instance, and Sweden's Strömsholm, which hosts but one meeting a year. In Britain, it'll swing by Chelmsford on Thursday June 19.

"Most countries put a FEGENTRI race on their big days," says Rinckenbach. "In France, we stage races on the Prix de Diane and Grand Steeple-Chase de Paris cards. It's very important for us to be represented at those meetings. Some might be less famous – Hungary's Derby day, for example – but they're still well-known in that country."

FEGENTRI aims to establish "long-lasting friendships based on

respect and solidarity", contenders of assorted languages brought together by a common equine passion. Nathalie Belinguer is a patron. Elie Hennau, now general manager of France Galop, was president until last year. David Dunsdon and Patrick Mullins (right) sit on the board.

"It's about discovering different countries and spending time with local people," Rinckenbach continues. "FEGENTRI creates a huge network of contacts. We've alumni all over the world, something we call the 'FEGENTRI family'. Many of our graduates become leaders in racing, perhaps in training, breeding or broadcasting. They might also make it as important businessmen and women outside racing, but still with cherished memories of their time with us. FEGENTRI is often something close to a graduate's heart."

A particular raison d'être of the federation is, it seems, to keep small countries in the spotlight, their

amateur clubs hoisted onto a stage shared by larger racing counterparts. Last year, while France's Jonathan Plassard took male World Champion honours, Sweden's Elin Hedman was crowned female World Champion, the same nation's Elliot Öhgren securing a FEGENTRI Gentlemen's League laurel. Sweden also claimed top spot in the Junior Championship. Aline Jigrud, Novale Andersson and Linnea Östlund flew the blue and yellow flag.

"The journey started when I was little," says Elin Hedman. "I started pony racing, which we have lots of in Sweden. I really wanted to compete in FEGENTRI, and I made it one of my

goals. It's a chance to make good connections and ride at beautiful tracks. I thought it was really special to ride on Prix de Diane day at Chantilly, but I liked Casablanca too. The atmosphere is incredible, having so many people cheering for you."

Hedman's mother, Bernita, was a jockey, later running a riding school. Now, her 21-year-old daughter is making the professional plunge, taking out an apprentice licence this



Andrea Picchi, Charlotte Rinckenbach and FEGENTRI Lady Riders in Pisa – credit Ippodromo San Rossore



year, spurred on by FEGENTRI's "good motivation", which she says helps young riders persevere as they enter the next chapter of their riding lives.

"FEGENTRI is a global brand," concludes Rinckenbach. "It's very important for small countries to have it in their calendars. It asks a lot of them to invite competitors and arrange experiences. Many riders start with pony racing before progressing to amateur racing, and perhaps going on to professional licences from there. It's very important for them to experience international racing, whether as kids in FEGENTRI Junior or when they're older."

The 70th anniversary in mind, delegates will no doubt hear the popping of a few bottles of celebratory champagne at this year's general assembly. Seven decades since its inception, FEGENTRI sails into the future with confidence in its mission, and with countless new participants ready to hop aboard.