



International Rafting Federation

Report from the President

New Zealand 2013 Congress to Indonesia 2015 Congress

I begin this report with great optimism and enthusiasm for the IRF and the progress that we have made during these past two years. In New Zealand during the 2013 Congress, I was elected President of the IRF to replace Rafael Gallo who had decided to step down after serving as President since 2007. I decided to take on this role after much encouragement from my good friend and co-worker Sue Liell-Cock, our Secretary General, and several other IRF Board of Directors (BOD) members and delegates with whom I have had the pleasure of working with during my previous roll as a BOD member and co-head of the Sport and Competition Committee (S&C Com). I have enjoyed my work as President very much, and I continue to feel a deep passion and commitment towards this organization. With your help, I hope to continue to lead us forward towards meeting the objectives and mission that you, our members, have entrusted in me and the other members of the IRF BOD to fulfill.

As President, I have been very active working directly with Sue who remains as the dynamic center-point of the IRF – whose responsibilities puts her in the position of receiving and sending out the bulk of IRF correspondence between our member organizations, BOD members and committee members; as well as organizing virtual meetings, discussions and votes of the BOD, and keeping the various committees on point towards achieving the objectives that have been given to them.

Sue and I (who live on opposite sides of the globe) are only able to meet in person during Congress, but we usually exchange several emails each day and have an occasional Skype conversation as we discuss the best course of action to take during the conduct of daily IRF business. As several of the Committee Heads have been relatively inactive during these past two years— some due to life changes (Deb Cook and Petra Plecita became new mothers during this time!) and a few others seem to rarely be available— Sue and I have often found ourselves, out of necessity, steering the IRF ship alone or with minimum input.

In this work, I cannot praise Sue enough for her unwavering dedication to task, and passion for the IRF. Although this was already abundantly clear to me in past years, it has become even clearer to me now that without Sue, the IRF would be in sorry shape, and I dare say that it would very likely not exist at all. As President, I am attempting to take some of this load off of her back and to carry it with her. Thanks for all you do for us Sue!!

So many things have happened during these past two years that it is difficult to report on them all. Instead I will report on the key issues of concern and our accomplishments:

Coming out of the New Zealand Congress, my immediate focus was to find ways to improve on the **professionalism of our A- and B-level events**, increase IRF revenue so that our financial situation was on a more solid footing, and to secure locations and commitments for the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 WRC's.

Working closely with Sue and Deb (new Head of the S&C Com), I have rewritten and updated most sections of the official Race Rules to make them clearer and more understandable – an especially important issue for our

members who must translate them into their own language. Other updates in the rules have been made to eliminate confusion and redundancy, and to codify with more exactness what is expected of our judges and competitors. Already this work seems to be paying off with fewer protests at our competitions. As a part of this move towards professionalism, I will also be working with Eric and the Judges Committee to develop a system for performance rating IRF Judges so that we can better ensure that our A- and B-level events are staffed with our best Judges; and we have set aside a stipend to help compensate these judges for their effort and dedication which until now has been completely voluntary and paid for out of their own pockets.

For the **2014 R4 WRC**, I exchanged dozens of emails and made three separate trips to Brazil to meet with officials of the government, private industry, and officers of the Brazilian Canoe Federation (CBCa) to discuss the particulars of the championship, receive firm commitments, and discuss several serious issues that occurred after our agreement contracts with the CBCa were signed. Unfortunately a severe drought had created water shortages at the Itaipu Canal – primary venue for the WRC; delayed payments to the IRF for hosting fees and deposits created cash shortfalls in IRF accounts and forced us to pay to fly the Jury to Brazil (one among many issues); and broken contract obligations by the CBCa created a very challenging situation that had us all wondering until the last moment whether the event would occur. In the end however, after a great effort by our IRF judges and administration, and the local CBCa staff, the WRC was somehow patched together and completed.

Because of the broken contract, the CBCa forfeited its deposit to the IRF and these funds were used to partially cover the added expenses incurred by the IRF as a result of the CBCa shortcomings. The problems that arose during the months leading up to the Brazil event, and the complaints that we received from competitors and our member organizations about our host, also resulted in my updating and hardening our process of examining and accepting WRC bids, and rewriting our contract terms (which will become effective with future hosts) so that hopefully these types of issues will not reoccur.

The Brazil 2014 event was also used as an opportunity to call together a meeting of the Congress to discuss the IRF financial situation. It was agreed by the Congress to implement a **new membership and competition fee** structure which would raise the fees slightly for all members (as an overdue inflation adjustment), and which I designed to more fairly weigh competition fees so that our larger member organizations who fielded the most teams at races (and thus received the most benefits and services), were required to pay more. This new structure has resulted in increased revenue to help fund IRF competitions and has contributed positively towards IRF financial solvency.

In addition to membership fees, I also focused on **increasing revenues** by growing the acceptance of the IRF Guide Training and Education (GT&E) program among government officials around the world who are responsible for approving river guide certification. Although unknown to many of our member organizations who are primarily focused on competition, the GT&E program contributes almost half of all revenues needed to keep the IRF financially solvent. To this end, I am directing efforts to increase the number of qualified IRF GT&E instructors in areas of the world where rafting is prevalent but the IRF GT&E scheme is relatively unknown. I am also working closely with Gaspar Goncz (BOD member and Head of the GT&E Committee) to institute new guidelines to insure that our instructors and assessors are kept abreast of new training and assessment advancements, and are among the top professionals in the industry. These efforts are being made to insure that the program continues to grow, and that the IRF Guide Certification is recognized around the globe as the single most important certification needed to ensure that raft guides and river safety personnel have met or exceeded an international minimum standard.

In April 2015, as a GT&E Assessor and the IRF President, I travelled to the USA (where the largest concentration of river guides in the world resides) to meet with top rafting and river safety leaders to educate them on the IRF GT&E scheme. I forged an agreement with the world's leading river safety certification organization '*Rescue 3 International*' whose key instructor trainers have accepted and recognized the GT&E scheme. Together we have developed a joint rescue and guide training program where river guides may be certified by

both the IRF and Rescue 3 International during a single course. This new program is now underway and has been taught in the USA, Chile, India, and several other locations, and we expect it to grow exponentially into other countries. I plan to continue this drive for GT&E recognition for the next several years.

In addition, with the work of Gaspar and the assistance of IRF Vice President, Peter Micheler, we have been able to add Austria and Switzerland to our list of countries who officially recognize and require their countries river guides to hold the GT&E certification.

Also we will continue to build on our relationship with the **Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA)** which was initiated and nurtured by former President Rafa Gallo— a relationship that has excellent potential to grow acceptance of the GT&E certification among some of the most successful river tour operators in the world.

I am also pleased to announce plans to hold a first-ever **GT&E conference in 2016**. I brought up this idea with Gaspar and Sue, and they have both enthusiastically agreed that this is a necessary step in the growth of the program. The conference will provide an opportunity for assessors and instructors from around the world to meet and discuss common concerns and issues, and opportunities to renew and upgrade their certifications and training. The conference will coincide with the annual River Guides Competition that the IRF sponsors (under the guidance of Gaspar) in Europe each year, so we expect an excellent turnout, and hope to make this conference a yearly event.

On another front in GT&E development (in my other life as a software developer), I have created an **automated online system** which will make the process of registering participants, and issuing certifications and renewals in the GT&E scheme much easier for instructors, assessors and administrators. The online system will be ready for testing in early 2016 and should be fully functional shortly afterwards.

As another potential revenue stream, I have been working with Sue, Gaspar, Jim Davis, and a few other individuals during the last two years towards creating a pilot program so that the IRF can begin **certifying river tour operators**. The idea for this program grew from conversations with a number of tour operators who expressed a keen interest in obtaining a company certification much like we offer to river guides, which would be awarded to river tour operators who follow industry best practices. The program is currently set to begin a testing period for the next two years so that we can determine its viability, and to adjust the assessment requirements as needed to insure that the certification retains a high value. Both Gaspar and Jim Davis will be attending the 2015 Congress to discuss this new program and bring everyone up to speed. Jim, who has done the lion's share of work in developing the program, will host a special meeting during the Congress to discuss the particulars of the program in detail.

I have also been looking at new ways to **secure sponsors and hosts for the WRC**. In particular, I have decided that rather than passively wait for our member federations to bid for the right of hosting a WRC, that the IRF should actively pursue the locations and venues that we prefer (and need) to remain successful. Our first effort in this new approach was to contact *Wadi Adventure Park* located near Dubai, U.A.E. to see if they would be interested in hosting an R4 WRC. An inquiry letter and a detailed proposal was drafted by myself, Pieter Bekkers (BOD member and head of the Media Committee), and Sue which was dispatched by email. The proposal was met with keen interest by *Wadi Adventure* officials so a meeting was quickly arranged whereby Pieter and Dirk Ladiges (IRF Judge Assessor) were dispatched to *Wadi Adventures* to meet with the park managers, see the location firsthand, and discuss the finer points of how the partnership would work.

Unlike past host/organizer relationships, the idea behind this Wadi/IRF partnership would be that the IRF would organize and manage the race, and Wadi management would provide the venue, accommodations, food, and other aspects. Many emails have been exchanged since then, contract negotiations have ensued, fine points have been further debated and discussed, and I am pleased to announce that we are on the verge of securing the *Wadi Adventures Park* as the site of the 2016 R4 WRC. I feel that our success in this first attempt at proactively securing a WRC host and venue could very well be the precursor for how many future event venues will be secured.

I also have been attempting to set up meetings with potential 'big money' **commercial sponsors** who have a history of sponsoring adventure and extreme sports events such as *Adidas*, *GoPro*, and *Red Bull*. In March 2015 I had a very productive meeting with top *Adidas* executives who were visiting Chile for a commercial production, where I was able to present several sponsorship package ideas to them. *Adidas* expressed keen interest in the idea of sponsorship of a WRC sometime in the future. Nothing is yet concrete, but do I intend to continue to aggressively pursue large commercial sponsors for our future events during the coming years.

After securing a contract to hold the **2017 R6 WRC in Japan**, I traveled to Japan to meet with government and local officials and sponsors, to examine the venue and facilities, and to witness the Japan National Selections being held at the venue. I am happy to report that there is much excitement and pride among the Japanese people about hosting the 2017 WRC and I feel quite confident based on my experience there that this could possibly be one of our best WRC's ever. I was also able to offer a GT&E assessment during my visit which was enthusiastically taken by many of the local area river guides. Japan has numerous great rivers and recreational rafting is very popular — I expect and hope that the GT&E scheme will begin to grow exponentially in Japan during the years to come.

On the **conservation side of the IRF**, every year it seems we are in a constant and never-ending struggle to preserve and protect the world's whitewater rivers that are the life-blood of the IRF. I have worked closely with Emilia who has co-led the Conservation and Recreation committee efforts to research and develop a 'Top 10 List' of the most endangered and the most improved rafting rivers in the world today. We will attempt to update this list annually which will help to keep our members and the rafting public at large abreast of important conservation and recreation issues as they relate to rafting. The IRF is in the process of forging bonds with important regional and international river conservation groups such as *International Rivers* so that we may use our combined clout to shed light on these rivers. Our goal is to hopefully raise awareness of the endangered rivers which need our protection, and to recognize and express our gratitude towards the entities responsible for helping to protect the rivers which have been removed from harm's way. It is up to river users like ourselves who know these rivers most intimately, to garner the passion and devote our time to defend and preserve them for ourselves and for future generations.

It must also be said that we, perhaps more than any other international sports federation, are experiencing firsthand the **effects of climate change** on our planet. At the 2013 New Zealand WRC, and the 2014 Brazil WRC, unusual and sustained droughts created low water conditions that negatively affected these competitions, and the scheduled 2014 Euro Champs had to be cancelled due to record flooding that destroyed the venue and created wide-spread devastation in the Balkan region. Numerous other local and regional competitions have had to be cancelled or rescheduled for similar reasons. The 2015 Indonesia WRC is also being effected by unusual climate conditions that have prolonged the normal dry season. There is little doubt that climate change will continue to affect future IRF competitions which will pose great challenges for our event hosts and the IRF administration.

To wrap up the year and in preparation for the 2015 Congress, I have taken a pen to the **IRF Bylaws** (with help from Sue) to reorganize them and bring them up to date with the way the IRF currently conducts its work. The Bylaws are the most important document that we have, which gives authority to the Board of Directors and the various committees to do their work, as well as detailing the direction and objectives that the IRF should pursue. As we prepare to join the Sport Accord (a key ingredient for the IRF to gain wider international acceptance among our international sports federation peers) it is important that our Bylaws are accurate and legally correct. I have also added a number of changes to the Bylaws to allow IRF administrative processes to flow more smoothly (such as codifying the existence of an Executive Committee).

These Bylaw updates and changes have been reviewed and approved by the BOD majority and I urge all of our members to carefully read through them and vote in support of them during the Congress. I also ask all of our members to vote in support of the 2016 budget that was prepared by Sue so that our plans for 2016 are funded.

I will finish this report by **also acknowledging** the regular participation in BOD discussions and decisions by our Vice Presidents, Peter Micheler and Oleg Grigoryev —especially for Peter’s help in fleshing out changes in the Race Rules and insights into our relations with the International Canoe Federation (ICF), and Oleg’s constructive criticisms and thoughtful analysis in many areas of concern to the IRF.

I also would like to acknowledge Deb Cook’s wisdom and insightful participation in leading the Sport and Competition Committee and during BOD discussions during these past two years, even though her new baby has (understandably) dominated her world during this time; and Rafa Gallo’s constant participation, support, and encouragement - especially in the conservation and tourism areas.

Among the BOD members, Pieter Bekkers (with much appreciated help from his wife, Christel) deserves special praise and recognition as he is involved in all aspects of the IRF – from being key in securing the 2016 WRC, to working closely with Yuni on the 2015 WRC, to assisting with GT&E card management as well as running GT&E courses, to managing the IRF’s Euro Account, to running Judges courses as well as being active on the S&C Com, GT&E Com and Judges Com! A huge thank you must go to him for all his time and energy provided.

Last, but not least, I want to **thank Yuni (Amalia Yunita) and the Indonesian Rafting Federation** for their hard work in bringing the WRC to Indonesia this year. I know that for Yuni, this has involved much personal time and sacrifice. It is people like her that keeps the IRF alive, vibrant, and moving forward.

Thanks again to everyone for electing me as your President. I hope to continue to build on this trust during the years ahead and I look forward to speaking with many of you during the WRC and Congress in Indonesia.

Yours in Rafting,

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