

**INQUIRY INTO GRANTING OF CONTRACT NUMBER
OoS17/18-021 BY THE OFFICE OF SPORT**

Name: Ms Berni Saunders

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Written responses to this submission published by resolution of the committee 10 November 2021 are hyperlinked below:

- [Ms Julie Farrell](#)
- [Mr Peter Dingwall](#)
- [Mr Barrie Smith](#)

Hon Daniel Mookhey MLC
Chair, Public Works Committee
Legislative Council Parliament of NSW

Email publicworks@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Mookhey,

Re: Contract number OoS17/18-021 with the Office of Sport.

I was gratified to learn that the lack of integrity and self-serving objectives of many Australian equestrian administrators who have been/are in positions of authority and power is set to be scrutinised. I wish to thank the individuals responsible for their efforts to set up an Inquiry that affords those with concerns an opportunity to make a submission to the Public Works Committee.

Relevant Background and Involvement

I have been actively involved in many facets of equestrian sport for 45 years as a competitor, coach, coach educator, judge and judge educator/mentor, sports official and as an equestrian media representative in my professional life. I have trained many dressage horses with 8 reaching FEI level and earning me a place on the Victorian Dressage Squad on 5 occasions. I worked my way up the judging ranks and proudly served as an A Level (Grand Prix) Dressage Judge, Judge Educator and Mentor, NCAS SSTA (Skills Specific Trainer and Assessor) Coach and Coach Educator. I have officiated on a number of Committees and devoted many hours to ensure that Australian equestrian sport was an attractive outlet for like-minded adults and a worthwhile, wholesome activity for young fans learning specialist skills and the community values afforded by being a part of this wonderful activity.

I consider myself fortunate to have been able to mix business skills with my passion, resulting in the birth of the on-line magazine for horse lovers Cyberhorse, the first such portal for equine enthusiasts, which was launched the day the Internet went live in Australia in 1994.

Cyberhorse grew rapidly and in the early days was listed as a top 300 sporting site on the www. recording 2 million unique visitors per month. Cyberhorse covered the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 and as I had an office to work from and accommodation, I did not need to apply for a media pass. In following years Cyberhorse's popularity qualified me for official accreditation to represent Australia's media contingent at two World Equestrian Games (2002,2006) and two Olympic Games (2004,2008) and I have covered all of the major Olympic and WEG qualifying events in Australia for the best part of 20 years. I am extremely proud of my contribution to equestrian sport, supporting enthusiasts and helping to grow the fan base and secure a future for all concerned.

The Sydney Olympics was a very special time and it is relevant to note in this submission that all Olympic equestrian competitions are held outdoors as per IOC directives. As such, the SIEC indoor arena was included at the Horsley Park facility simply to provide a covered warmup area with catering, office space and other facilities for the comfort of competitors, coaches, national officials and suitably accredited personnel in times that they were not taking part in scheduled events.

All Dressage and Showjumping competitions at the 2000 Olympic Games were held outdoors on the main, purpose-built Olympic arena. The SIEC indoor arena surface was installed to the best international standards and considered by all to be "fit for purpose". At

the time of the upgrade, it had been in use for 17 years and during that time I have covered many competitions and equestrian events and have not heard any negativity from competitors or officials. It goes without saying that arena maintenance is necessary and ongoing in order to keep any competitive riding surface in good order.

In a period that pre-dates today's social media platforms, Cyberhorse set up a "Forum" (chat room) to provide a place where horse lovers and competitors could "virtually" congregate and share stories and experiences. As one of the moderators, I quickly identified that there were many stories relating to mismanagement, cronyism, favouritism and rubbery implementation of Equestrian Australia's rules (EA or collectively with the six states) in matters that evidence undue favour to those on the "inside" and actions or lack thereof, that left "outsiders" to fend for themselves without the support of a fair and transparently managed Member Protection Policy.

In the quarter of a century 1995 – 2020, I have witnessed some very troubling and controversial management decisions made by Equestrian Australia and/or the states, with the most vitriolic of these highlighting unfair and unfathomable Olympic and WEG Selection decisions that have favoured riders that do not seem deserving of team or individual selection to represent Australia.

As a consequence of my calls for transparency and accountability I have made enemies who accuse me of “bringing the sport into disrepute” (what a joke). In 2012 my Equestrian Victoria membership renewal was refused. I am sure you can imagine that after a lifetime of service and the personal achievements that were recognized in competition results, inclusion on judges lists, official media acknowledgements, coaching and training engagements, this was distressing and evidence that the people behind this “below the belt” action felt they could “quiet me” by cutting off access to the sport I love.

I am committed to honesty and transparency in equestrian sport, so continued to ask for accountability on Cyberhorse, and also set up a Facebook page where more recently, I have shared newspaper articles and offer my observations and reflections as a personal opinion.

On many occasions I have been asked to “go in and bat” for EA (or State based) members who have felt wronged or left without voice but reluctant to put their name to a complaint for fear that they too will have their membership cancelled or some other sanction and/or exclusion exercised in order to shut them down. There is a strange dichotomy at play here, as the people who are affected by the improper or unjust actions of EA are left in a state of tacit acceptance and seldom ask questions or “make a fuss” for fear of repercussions. So, the bad guys win and hold on to their power. This draconian style of sports management has seen Equestrian Australia’s membership of 26,000 in 2010 reduced to around 12,000 (or less) today. These figures are difficult to compare on a like-for-like basis - as EA management engages in coverups, double counting and trickery to hide the truth.

Contract No OoS17/18-021

Following on from the above, the matter of the Sydney International Equestrian Centre arena resurfacing, contract number OoS17/18-021 with the Office of Sport has attracted my attention. After viewing the documents obtained under Freedom of Information, I am concerned that nothing will change unless the toxic culture of this sport is overturned in favour of egalitarian, transparent and accountable management.

Surely, it is unusual for an organisation such as ENSW to make a submission for funding all or part of a government owned and managed facility? In particular I ask that this Inquiry identifies on what authority Equestrian NSW CEO Bruce Farrar wrote to the Minister of Sport on the 13 March 2017 requesting that the warmup and indoor arenas at SIEC be upgraded for the specific purpose of international dressage competition? It is clear that Farrar’s involvement was very close to beneficiaries with compelling evidence of improper bias, and yet, no one seems to have read the warning signs that he and others were abusing their positions of power and privilege. Did anyone check on the ENSW CEO’s assertion that the Australian Dressage Committee had raised concerns about the arena surfaces was true? Were copies of the relevant meeting minutes provided in evidence?

I also raise concerns that there was an unusual level of interference from the Chair of Equestrian Australia, Judy Fasher who is a known Farrar adherent and used her influence to rally support for the project by enlisting so called expert comment from Eventing riders Shane Rose and Stuart Tinney, neither men are Olympic dressage riders, yet both signed

alarmingly similar letters in the same type face with an implied suggestion that the letterhead was the official EA letterhead, which it was not. Surely using a fake letterhead is a fraudulent misuse of Fasher's position and power? It seems that usual EA procedures and protocols were not observed and then CEO Paula Ward was not involved, as would be customary. A cynical view of the personal affirmations by Rose and Tinney would have that these testimonials were contrived and written by Ms Fasher, who seemingly called in favours and threw caution and integrity to the wind.

It is unlikely that the claims made by Ms Fasher reflect those of the EA Board or would stand up to scrutiny from independent experts such as arena installers who have met the international standards determined by the world governing body, the FEI. Ms Fasher has made a number of assertions that cry out for independent clarification and her position of trust has been negatively affected by those who have taken the trouble to look at how the real stakeholders in the sport (the members) have been misrepresented and betrayed. Judy Fasher was subsequently forced to stand down in a controversial vote of no confidence.

The examples of questionable behaviour by the sport's paid and volunteer personnel as detailed in this submission are typical of the modus operandi of EA's (and the states') power brokers and go to the heart of the impropriety and self-serving objectives that have all but brought equestrian sport to its knees.

While the funding submission in question focused on the need to upgrade the arena surfaces for the Olympic sport of Dressage, as mentioned earlier, Olympic dressage is NOT held indoors so this is another gross inaccuracy designed to mislead and defraud.

The list of supporters for this swizz is impressive and at first glance compelling. It is clear that the ill-informed support tendered by Stuart Tinney, Shane Rose, Julie Farrell, Dr James Whitfeld (partner at Randwick Equine, a sponsor and professional service provider to ENSW Board Member, Alexandra Townsend) have influenced the funding application and ensured its approval. However, in the fullness of time, cracks in their independence and expertise have emerged, and it is now known that the undisclosed use second hand materials pulled up from Alexandra Townsend's property, Wallaby Hill, confirms reports of substandard workmanship, dubious disclosure and a lack of transparency in many aspects of this government funded project.

The faulty workmanship has resulted in an overpriced installation that cannot be deemed fit for purpose and has caused horse injuries with negative reports being tendered by Officials to the FEI (Federation Equestre Internationale). Cover ups are evident, but eye witnesses raised awareness and the "Arenagate" mess has brought shame to the people who were trusted to do right by the equestrian community and Australian taxpayers. How do we progress a sport like equestrian when this sort of publicity is making its way into the public domain through social media and mainstream news outlets?

It is clear that the expenditure of \$1m+ has failed to improve the arena surfaces and due to the acceptance of the most expensive tender from the least experienced tenderer (Barrie Smith Motor Sport) the SIEC facility has lost customers and the improvements that were promised. It is clear that Bruce Farrar lied when he said that the additional income to SIEC from hosting events would be \$400,000 per annum with an improvement to the Net Cost of Service of about 30%. This sort of misrepresentation goes to the heart of why an Inquiry is needed.

I trust that the Public Works Committee Inquiry will take a long hard look at the acknowledged but undisclosed conflicts of interest and the fact that the successful tenderer was far from an arm's length supplier. The ENSW President Peter Dingwall saw his son

Stephen benefit. Stephen Dingwall is married to Barrie Smith's daughter Nicky and also works for Barrie Smith as manager of the arena surfacing arm of the business that sells the German "Otto" brand ebb and flow technology. In Australia, similar styles of "insider trading" would contravene the corporate governance laws that are strictly applied where public trust and integrity are imperative to fair trade (banking, real estate brokerage, public auctions and stock market trading, to name a few) with the perpetrators of malpractice potentially facing sanctions that are levied to deter others from engaging in opportunistic business practises.

In the matter coming before the Office of Works Inquiry, the autonomy of paid management and officers of the sport that has enabled them to exploit or favour personal connections when recommending products and services, will be reviewed. Questions about the how and why this happened have opened a "pandora's box" of graft and corruption that has usurped the many acts of improper and unconstitutional conduct that have taken place in Equestrian Australia's history.

ENSW is a state Olympic sporting body that focuses on competition based activities. The failure of ENSW to work in the best public interest sees two threads emerging which will, or should, impact on the future of the Sydney International Equestrian Centre.

Firstly, the growing public discontent over the treatment of horses at the Olympics has seen the rise of PETA lobbying the IOC to remove equestrian sports from Olympic competition. <https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2021/08/15/peta-horse-sports-olympics/?fbclid=IwAR2Bj2etTofvzDUxaXHfm05684cQhk7VL-tnWqlxT2ejBKm-ffsWIQ5TtwY>

Secondly, there is strong growth in grassroots equestrian recreational activities such as trail riding, non-Olympic horse sport, equine based recreational activities and therapy/wellness sessions that make the 96 hectares of parkland areas at the SIEC a prime location for the more hobbyist enjoyment of horses. These considerations will necessitate a re-think of how the entire land holding and its fixed competition assets can be used to make better use of the natural environment and close proximity to the city.

A new activity roll out for the SIEC could add short term accommodation such as glamping and cabin stays for families and friends in a beautiful piece of the Western Sydney Parklands, giving the government an opportunity for wider community usage and deliver "whole of sport" participation with a move away from the present restricted use that fosters elitism and gives power to the sycophants that thrive on it. Seeing this amazing facility opened up to attract wider participation would be a very fair way of making better use of publicly owned recreational facilities and benefit community health and wellbeing.

There are a number of overlooked sectors that could make good use of the facility. NSW Pony Clubs and a move to encourage the formation of NSW Adult Riding Clubs in the style of HRCav (Horse Riding Clubs of Victoria) which is a successful model that governs independently run clubs with around 9000 members in its state of origin, but currently has very small numbers across the borders. Pony Club Australia and HRCav are well established member organisations that offer great support to adults and young equestrians alike as they conduct and support traditional equestrian disciplines and also include a number of environmental modules such as orienteering and specialised activities in their programs. Why aren't Pony Clubs, Adult Riding Clubs and other worthwhile organisations such as RDA (Riding for the Disabled) welcomed as regular users of the SIEC?

Special interest clubs and businesses with an equestrian theme would be excited to have access to the SIEC facility for education, personal development, welfare, camping, nature trails and a wide variety of equestrian sports for adults, families and children. This is a publicly owned asset and the custodians have an obligation to make it accessible to as

many people as possible to enable them to enjoy the fresh air and environmental splendour that brings a touch of country to city folk and many visitors to this region.

I feel qualified to make this prediction as I currently work as the General Manager of Woodlands Trail Riding in Melbourne where beginner trail rides and a variety of equine activities are conducted in the magnificent Woodlands Historical Park, just five kilometers from Melbourne's Tullamarine airport. On busy days up to 100 sessions take place with a wait list and non-booked riders are turned away. Woodlands services the strong demand for pleasure riding, equine therapy, pony parties and recreational activities designed to foster the love of horses and support the special needs of children and adults. I see huge possibilities for the SIEC facility and its environment, meeting the growing demand for similar equine activities. <https://www.facebook.com/woodlands.melbourne>

SIEC is well appointed with cabins, toilets and shower blocks, stables, veterinary and human drug testing facilities, meeting spaces, communal BBQ's and picnic furniture along with kitchens/catering facilities at the riders retreat building as well as the indoor arena. What is missing at the SIEC is a café/restaurant that would attract horse people and non-horsey patrons and all visitors to Sydney. This addition would be a significant profit centre in its own right and showcase horse sport, serving to increase participation and add financial sustainability.

The SIEC indoor complex would be a perfect venue for the lavish extravaganzas that are conducted by the "top end" performance horse sales agents such as the Andreas Helgstrand/Ulf Moeller consortium that recently purchased Australian Olympian Mary Hanna and husband Rob Hanna's property in Drysdale on Victoria's Bellarine Peninsula. The objective business plan of these international luminaries is to attract local and overseas buyers to Australian auction sales modelled on the highly successful German owned PSI (Performance Sales International). The prices achieved at these lavish events are more akin so the selected Thoroughbred race horse sales, and visionaries see that Australia is well placed to become a major supplier to the Asian nations that are taking more interest in equestrian sport. The start lists for the equestrian events at the recent Tokyo Olympic Games will support the potential for this concept. Such innovation and expansion will boost the opportunities for Australian horse breeders, trainers and the entire performance horse support and supply infrastructure along with increased government tax receipts.

Australia has been left behind since the cessation of Ulli Klatte's Belcam annual auctions and the Lochinvar based NSW Equestrian Centre sales that enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm of Australian Olympian Heath Ryan and his vision for Australia as a strong force on the international scene. Heath has kept up a presence with Ryan's Horses Auction of the Stars and uses venues all over the country. There is no doubt that Australia could raise the bar and cement the SIEC as a buying/entertainment destination for local and international buyers.

The presence of Equestrian NSW at the SIEC is stifling the growth of participation in wider equestrian activities. The organisation rules with a theme of elite exclusion, this is inappropriate and financially limiting. To reimagine the SIEC as a people's equestrian facility, it will be important to relocate ENSW from its current premises. Perhaps the Office of Sport could offer space to ENSW at Sydney Olympic Park, in Homebush? Such a move would help to change the culture of the SIEC making it more welcoming and user friendly, with the added bonus of increasing rental income making it less reliance on taxpayer contributions to meet the high annual running costs.

I have based the above reference to the ENSW address as known to most, but acknowledge that in more recent communications the mailing address for ENSW is

I was not able to find any announcement of the change of address at the time of writing this submission. Google maps show the Camden address to be a private residence.



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For the Office of Sport to rebuild its tarnished reputation resulting from matters relating to contract no OoS17/18-021, staff at the SIEC who are members of ENSW should be allocated to positions within the department at other locations as public faith in their integrity is lost, and it is doubtful that they can work effectively with this cloud hanging over them.

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The Indoor Arena Surface

The arena surface material was second-hand and contaminated. Remediation work on the defective surface has failed to remove all the foreign particles. Before COVID restrictions interrupted bookings, the “new” surface failed to attract additional dressage competitions. The venues of choice for most EA affiliated competitions are Willinga Park at Bawley Point NSW and Boneo Park on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria.

To provide certainty and assurances to those who hire the SIEC indoor arena that the surfaces are safe and free from any introduced material and fit for purpose. The present defective materials must be removed and replaced with an easy to manage multi-purpose product that will suit a wider range of equestrian sports, demonstrations, show classes and commercial purposes.

Oliver Hoberg an FEI footings expert who is based in Kuala Lumpur provided technical advice at the recent Tokyo Olympics. He may assist the Inquiry via Zoom or email his recommendation of a more suitable surface that is cost efficient and low maintenance. Oliver Hoberg’s contact details are as follows:

I hope that justice prevails and the outcome becomes cause for reflection that sets Australian equestrian sport on a pathway which leads to reform and recovery.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Yours faithfully

Berni Saunders (Ms)