

Interview: “A lot of things need to be changed”

For decades active and well connected in international handball: Gerd Butzeck (66), who has made Group Club Handball and Forum Club Handball into a respected representative body of the international top clubs.

The German Gerd Butzeck wants to become the new president of the handball world federation and is running against Hassan Moustafa – in the big HW interview he comments on his motives and goals.

HAMBURG/SOLINGEN In April, Gerd Butzeck was officially nominated by the German Handball Federation; in the meantime the 66-year-old has submitted his application documents. On December 20/21, at the IHF Congress in Cairo, the showdown between the man from Solingen and Hassan Moustafa for the presidency will take place. Which chances Butzeck thinks he has, what he took away from the EHF Congress in Austria, and which goals he advocates, he explains in the interview.

When did it become clear to you that you would run for IHF President?

Gerd Butzeck: I tried to convince the presidents of some federations as well as EHF President Michael Wiederer that one of them should run, but none of them wanted to. Some pursue their own interests, others the interests of their federations. At the end of March my friend Dierk Schmäsche from Flensburg asked me to run, because not only he believed that the current IHF President needs an opponent. After consulting with Wiederer and DHB President Andreas Michelmann I then agreed. Even afterwards I spoke with other handball officials so that there would be additional opposing candidates. As one could see at the EHF Congress now, my efforts were crowned with success. The Slovenian Franjo Bobinac and the Dutchman Tjark de Lange will also run for the presidency.

How do you feel about the fact that there are other candidates?

I expressly welcome this. It shows that handball wants more than another four years of Hassan Moustafa. Due to the IHF election system, however, only two candidates will remain in the final round of voting. If Hassan Moustafa should be one of the two, it will be precisely then that it will become clear whether there is a worldwide majority for change.

What mood in Europe did you take away from the EHF Congress last weekend?

It became clear that almost all federations in Europe are striving for a change after six office terms of Hassan Moustafa. Unfortunately, the IHF President canceled his participation in the Congress at the last moment. The re-elected President Michael Wiederer was given the task in Andau to unite Europe for a new beginning in the IHF.

About your candidacy: what are your reasons?

Something has to change in global handball; Hassan Moustafa has been in office for 25 years, he is 81 years old. Of course he also has merits, but it is finally time for a change at the top. Hence the motto of my candidacy: "Handball deserves more." It cannot be that he is re-elected merely because there is no opposing candidate. The IHF must be managed more modernly and transparently; they need more staff. Twenty people work there, at the FIBA there are 200 — and those are just some points. I have loved and lived handball my whole life, I have many contacts all over the world through my previous functions, and everywhere I hear criticism. I have many years of experience in many areas of handball — as a player, coach, referee, official, functionary and manager.

What chances do you think you have in the election?

When the DHB announced my candidacy in April, I actually did not expect such great chances, but in recent weeks and months I have spoken with many people from the handball world, and almost all of them see it the way I do. That is why I now believe that I have very good chances of becoming the new IHF President.

Which goals are you pursuing specifically?

Primarily, it is about the global development of handball. It is a matter of tapping the large markets of China, India and the USA and supporting the many small and medium-sized federations inside and outside Europe financially and structurally in such a way that they can field competitive national teams. Europe must be the engine to support this global development; I emphasized that again and again in all conversations at the EHF Congress. In addition, the IHF must provide the means to organize World Championships outside Europe as well. But even more important than any financial support is to rekindle the enthusiasm for our sport.

Besides that, handball can develop in countries without hall infrastructure through a new third discipline — let's call it Urban Handball. Handball on a basketball court or on a schoolyard. You can see in basketball how 3x3 has developed; it became Olympic in no time. There are nations where there is one or two halls in the entire country with the dimensions for handball; there you have to find creative solutions. Beach handball would also be a global solution; there is an incredible amount of potential in it.

With how many federation presidents have you already had contact?

At the EHF Congress, of course with almost all from Europe, but even before that I had spoken personally or via video conference with non-European federations. Recently I was in the Far East for a week — one federation every day. There I spoke with many who want the same change in world handball as I do. One of my most important companions is Ali Mohamed Isa Eshaqi. He has been the handball president of Bahrain since 2008 and vice-president of the Asian continental federation. In Cairo, he will also run for a place in the IHF Executive — we are basically a team. I had Zoom conversations with representatives from all continents — and of course I also listen to the concerns of the individual federations. For example, I was asked several times whether, in the event of my election, I

would contact the respective sports ministers to ensure that the federations finally get full-time staff in their offices.

Is handball even perceived outside Europe?

Of course — for example in Egypt, Tunisia, Brazil, Argentina, in the Gulf region, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia as well as in Japan and Korea — all countries that are successful on the global stage or have been. But there are also very many white spots on the global handball map. In many places there are indeed federations, but neither a league system nor a national team. The IHF, that must be conceded to Hassan Moustafa, is financially well positioned. High revenues were generated — but they were not invested in global development; instead they were hoarded in a Swiss account. That cannot be the point for a world federation.

The IHF also needs to reposition itself in media terms; together with its marketing agency Sportfive it has to find other distribution channels — for example with many highlight clips from World Championships that can be used free of charge. Only when children can see the stars on television or on the internet will they want to emulate them. Without visibility it does not work. And with regard to World Championships, one more point: there is absolutely no point in playing in a half-empty 15,000-seater arena; better a fully-packed 4,000-seater. Otherwise, fans watching on TV or on a phone are presented with a bleak picture — and sponsors are also much easier to win with a great atmosphere.

Again and again there are voices that, if handball does not position itself globally, its Olympic status is in danger. How do you see that?

In an IOC evaluation of all Olympic sports, handball has slipped from category C to category D. The most important criterion in the evaluation is television ratings with 40 percent; in addition, among other things, worldwide spread counts with 20 percent, plus further regulations. At Olympic handball tournaments many smaller nations such as Norway and Iceland or Croatia and Slovenia take part. That speaks for the good work of the federations — but they are only small TV markets. If we were to succeed in having countries like India, China or the USA qualify for the Olympics, that would be a quantum leap in terms of ratings. Overall I do not currently see Olympic status in danger, but the global handball family is called upon to position itself more broadly so that it remains that way. The IHF has recognized the problem and increased the number of participants at World Championships to 32 countries. As a result, the number of non-Europeans participating is increasing. In Germany this may perhaps be seen as a dilution of the competition, but without participation in a World Championship there is no state funding in non-European countries.

PLANS AND PROGRAM

These theses and topics are pursued by former referee and today's official and manager Gerd Butzeck in his candidacy as President of the International Handball Federation:

- Maintain Olympic status through investments outside Europe.

- Outdoor/Urban handball: “We need something similar for handball to what basketball has with 3x3, either as 3x3 or 4x4. For that we need a new field size. 40 x 20 meters are not available in many places in the world, but there are basketball courts everywhere. According to the rules of beach handball, it can be played on sand, grass, hard courts and even on street courts.”
- IHF structure: “To be able to work sustainably, the IHF must be reorganized in terms of its structure, with more participation of all stakeholders and a separation between elected members and full-time staff. The operative team must be expanded in all areas (organization, development, competitions, communication, etc.). The introduction of an age limit is advisable in order to limit the term of office of all elected bodies.”
- Development program: “We must give nations outside Europe the opportunity to host World Championships. We must support them financially so that they can take the next step in their development.”
- Handball as a grassroots sport: all development programs must include handball at the grassroots in order to attract young people, but also to keep older people in handball. Larger handball nations can cooperate with emerging nations.
- Future markets: set up efficient programs for countries such as China, India and the USA, but also identify other potential markets. With a view to the 2032 Olympics in Brisbane, promote Australia.
- Rule changes: “A 500-page rulebook is too complex if you want to get young people to become referees. In an expert commission the rules must be simplified — also in the interests of fans and media.”
- Club World Championship: “The Super Globe is an excellent idea, but it must be held on all continents. My dream is a Super Globe in Madison Square Garden in New York. In addition, there should also be a Club World Championship for women.”
- Fight against match manipulation: education of referees and players at IHF level, and the use of new technologies.
- Modern communication: “To communicate internally with the member federations and externally with media and partners and to improve the image of the IHF, a communication team must be set up and all channels, in particular social media, must be used.”
- Global coverage: yes to live sport, but global free use of highlight clips, in order to make handball accessible to a broader audience globally.
- Learn from other sports — for example ice hockey or basketball.