



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the
World Championships for Icelandic Horses
Oirschot, Holland
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Kæru vinir, dear friends,
lieve vrienden, liebe Freunde

It is an honour and pleasure to address you here at the World Championships for Icelandic Horses. This tournament has been a great success, a testimony to the Icelandic horse, “þarfasti þjónninn” as we have long said in Iceland. That phrase translates as “most useful servant”. For well over one thousand years, this sturdy animal has been an integral part of life in Iceland. I will not tire you with a long historical lecture but in the first centuries, Icelanders rode unshod horses. You therefore needed many horses for long journeys, for instance when chieftains and their entourage rode to Þingvellir, the parliamentary fields, or to their local assemblies. Keeping fine horses was a symbol of wealth, and giving away noble steeds was a sign of grace and generosity. Take this tale of Hrafnkell in the Saga of Hrafnkell:

Hrafnkel had one animal in his possession that he valued more than others. It was a dun stallion with a dark mane and tail and a dark stripe down its back, which he called Freyfaxi. He dedicated half of this horse to his friend, Frey. He had such love for this stallion that he made an oath to bring about the death of any man who rode it without his permission.

Stallions were also used for recreation and entertainment. The ancient “hestaat”, the horsefight, could be a cruel and bloody affair – often the beginning of a long chain of feuds in the medieval sagas – and the last known event of this kind is said to have occurred in the mid seventeenth century. At that time, horseshoes were widely used and there probably was around one horse in the country for every two inhabitants.

Right up to the mid-twentieth century, the horse remained essential for farming in Iceland; it was indeed a “useful servant”. Today, elderly Icelanders can recall how you were supposed put heavy loads on horses, or how you should pick horses to work together, based on their character and strength. All this is now part of history. First, we got the Farmall tractors from the International Harvester Company, then the even more popular Ferguson model. The machines had more horsepower, they brought progress.

We need to move on with the times. Horses no longer toil in Icelandic fields and fortunately our entertainments are civilized, unlike the horse fights of old. At the same time, we want to honour our traditions and heritage. That’s why this convention is so vital for us Icelanders; it makes us proud that people from abroad also cherish and value the Icelandic horse, our trusted companion for over a thousand years. Thank you all for your participation in these World Championships, maybe we will meet again at the next event, in Berlin in 2019. Thank you! Takk fyrir!