

Country Check (10): **Belgium**

# Europe's equestrian hub



Comparatively small, yet in possession of several unique features - and a growing market. That's one short way to describe Belgium as an equestrian (sports) country. The Belgian North Sea coast is the only place for the century-old tradition of horse-back shrimp fishing, an immaterial Unesco world heritage, to be continued. Belgian stud farms have been exploring new avenues in breeding for decades. Today, Zangersheide has cloned equine stars roaming the pastures, for example.

Liège airport is a hub specialised in flights for horses. And last but not least: the fate of the FEI World Federation lies in the hands of Ingmar De Vos, a Belgian.

In part 10 of our "Country Check" series we are drawing a portrait of Belgium and its equestrian sector.



Shrimp fishing on the beach of Oostduinkerke

In an interview with Reitsport BRANCHE, the FEI president describes Belgium as a “successful equestrian country” and an “important country for horse trade” with a “great tradition in horse breeding”. Eva Vanwijnsberghe, spokeswoman of the Vlaamse Liga Paardensport (VLP), adds: “Belgium is definitely an equestrian sports country. Even in 2018, the equestrian sport is still booming and growing.” The equestrian sector in Belgium profits from several factors, as does the country’s economy in general. One factor is the country’s position at the heart of Europe.

Belgium - a parliamentary monarchy the name of which is based on the Roman province of Gallia Belgica - is a federal state in Western Europe with about 11.4 million inhabitants. It neighbours on the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg and France - all of them equestrian sports nations themselves and within easy reach of Belgium. Since 2013, King Philippe has been the country’s head of state. Charles Michel has been Prime Minister since 2014.

### THREE REGIONS

The Flemish-Walloon conflict between the Dutch (60 per cent) and the French-speaking (39 per cent) population, which has lasted since the foundation of the state in 1831, led to a breakdown of the country into three regions - the Dutch-speaking Flanders, the francophone Wallonia and the bilingual Brussels Capital Region - with their own parliaments, following a constitutional amendment in 1993. While Flanders has more professional riders and yards, Wallonia, which is characterised by rural and forestry structures, has more leisure riders.

Apart from the Ardennes mountains in the south-east, Belgium is largely flat. The highest elevation is the Botrange, 694 meters above sea level. The Belgian North Sea coast is 72.3 km long. The longest overland tram line in the world, the Kusttram, is 68 kilometres long, connecting all Belgian coastal towns. Apart from the Kusttram, horseback shrimp fishing is one of the attractions on the Belgian coast. Oostduinkerke is the only place in Europe where shrimps are still caught from horseback.

### HORSEBACK SHRIMP FISHING

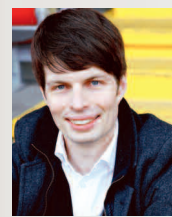
At low tide, the fishermen are riding through the waves on their Brabant horses, clad in yellow oilskins and tall boots, a southwester on their head, sitting in a wooden saddle. Weighing up to a tonne, the heavy horses are up to their chest in the water, pulling nets eight metres wide behind them. “Brabant horses do not love the sea by nature. It takes about a year to teach them how to walk into the sea and how the fishing is done,” fisherman Stefan Hanke says. “The more trust a horse has in the fisher, the better it will do.” Oostduinkerke beach is not only the place where a memorial was erected in the Paardenvissers honour, it is also the place where the horseback shrimp fishing tradition, which can be traced back to the year 1502, is continued.

Meanwhile, almost 98 per cent of Belgians live in towns and cities. This is one of the highest degrees of urbanisation in Europe. Belgium is one of the most densely populated states, with Antwerp counting the most inhabitants (520,000), followed by Ghent (260,000), Charleroi (201,000), Liège (198,000) and Brussels (177,000). The Brussels-Capital Region is inhabited by 1.2 million people. Hosting many important European organisations as well as the Nato, the capital is one of the most important administrative centres of the continent.



### A PREFERENCE FOR HORSE MEAT

In terms of food, Belgium is famous for its waffles and chocolate specialties as well as its French fries, among other things. The Ordre National du Cornet d’O is an association committed to promoting French fries being eaten from a paper bag instead of a plastic plate. According to Eurostat figures from 2012, the Belgian Kingdom is also the country still producing the largest amount of horse meat.



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Despite its small size - Belgium is nearly as big as the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia - the country is a hub in Northwestern Europe and very much a transit country, and as such one of the most important industrialised countries in Europe. In 2017, Europe's second largest port of Antwerp handled more than 224 million tonnes of goods, which is more than Hamburg (137 million tonnes) and Bremen (73 million tonnes) taken together. Strong exports helped overcome the economic crisis quickly. Compared to Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region, Wallonia has significantly lower economic potential, though.

### IMPORTANT TRADING PARTNER

The EU member, which had a gross domestic product of 438.2 billion euros in 2017 (and rising), is an open economy with a relatively high price level and as such an important trade partner for Germany. In 2017, Belgium exported goods worth a total of 381.0 billion euros and imported goods worth 360.2 billion euros. With an import share of 13.8 per cent, Germany is Belgium's second most important supplier, behind the Netherlands (17.2 per cent) and ahead of France (9.5 per cent). In 2017, 16.6 per cent of all Belgian exports went to Germany (France: 14.9 per cent, the Netherlands: 12.0 per cent). For Germany, Belgium is the fourth most important trading partner as regards foreign exports.



According to the EWalTop interest group, which includes about 15 Belgium equestrian businesses, there are approximately 17,500 full-time equivalents involved in Belgium horse sports as well as 2100 businesses “with an insignificant number of insolvencies”. A study on the economic importance of horse breeding carried out between 2008 and 2016 emphasises the economic importance of the horse sector. In Flanders alone, 1750 equestrian businesses create an added value of 219 million euros for the Flemish economy, according to the Vlaamse Confederatie van het Paard (VCP) association.

The umbrella organisation of all equestrians is the Federation Royale Belge Des Sports Equestres (FRBSE) with approximately 77,000 members. The FRBSE predecessor association “Comité central hippique Belge” was one of eight national associations that founded the FEI world federation in Paris in 1921. Since 2014, the FEI is headed by a Belgian president, Ingmar De Vos, who has also been an IOC member since 2017; as was the case from 1946 to 1954, when Gaston de Trannoy was head of the world federation.



*“I wish you a long and happy retirement!”*

Christian Ahlmann, show jumper:

The autonomy of the Belgian regions, which has increased strongly in the past few decades, also becomes noticeable in the administration of equestrian sports. Since 2000, the Belgian federation has been divided into a French- and a Dutch-speaking wing. The Vlaamse Liga Paardensport (VLP) included 600 riding clubs and 38,948 members in 2017, according to its own information. With more than 37,500 members and 700 affiliated clubs, the Ligue Equestre Wallonie Bruxelles (LEWB) is the fourth largest sports association in the French community of Belgium.

### EQESTRIAN SPORTS IN THIRD PLACE

Cycling is the number one national sport in Belgium, yet horse-riding is prac-



Ludger Beebaum and his horse of a century, Ratina Z - live and as a statue

tised by the third-most people (more than 200,000, with one in ten owning a competition license), according to EWalTop. For women, equestrianism is the number one sport. And there is another ranking that sees horses in Belgium in the first place, although it is more or less based on estimates – at least according to the “Health and Welfare of European Equidae in 2015” report. According to the report, Belgium has the largest share of horses in the world, in relation to the population, counting 47 horses per 1000 inhabitants.

One of the most important heavy horse breeds is the Brabant. The Belgian breed has provided the basis for many other very important heavy horse breeds. In the WBFSH studbook rankings from August 2018, Belgian Warmblood horses hold the second position in the jumper breeding ranking. Half of the show-jumping horses winning medals at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 were Belgians.

“I wish you a long and happy retirement out in the pastures in Lanaken, siring many offspring that are blessed with your ingenuity,” is how the former leader of the world ranking, Christian Ahlmann, said farewell to his horse Taloubet Z at the beginning of 2018. Taloubet Z comes from the Belgian Zangersheide stud – the letter Z is the signature feature for Zangersheide (“singing heath”).

### UNUSUAL WAYS

Zangersheide founder Léon Melchior – Ahlmann is in a relationship with his daughter Judy Ann, who runs the stud by now – ventured down unusual paths early on and was, at first, derided. He not only did cross-breeding with various lines, but was also the first to artificially inseminate broodmares.

The apparatus the first stallion had to mount to this effect, Melchior had built from a motorcycle tire. Currently, the stud is trying to make history by cloning equine stars. There are already several clones of Ratina Z, the most successful show jumper in championships, who was honoured with a bronze statue by Ludger Beerbaum following her death.

“Belgian breeders have always been very liberal and European thinking,” FRBSE spokeswoman Edith De Reys points out with regard to the three stud books, Belgian Warmblood (BWP), Belgian Sport Horse (SBS) and Zangersheide Horse. “The stud books were not closed like all the other European stud books. Breeders were always allowed to use foreign stallions and take foreign mares to breed with.” “Belgian horses have an excellent reputation,” the public service broadcaster (RTBF) quotes Anne Laure Lejeune of the Confédération Wallonie Bruxelles du Cheval (CWBC).

## Country comparison:



### Belgium



### Germany

Square kilometres	30.528	357.376
Inhabitants	11,4 million	82,7 million
Largest population group	25 to 54 years (40,0 %)	25 to 54 years (41,4 %)
Birth rate	1,7	1,5
Population growth	0,7 per cent	-0,2 per cent
Gross domestic product per capita	38.583 Euro	39.180 Euro
Unemployment rate	7,1 per cent	3,8 per cent
Utilised agricultural area	1,3 million hectares (43,9%)	16,7 million hectares (47,9%)
Largest city in terms of inhabitants	Antwerp (0,5 million)	Berlin (3,5 million)
Number of large cities (more than 100,000 inhabitants)	10	80
Umbrella association	Federation Royale Belge Des Sports Equestres/FRBSE	Deutsche Reiterliche Vereinigung/FN
(members)	77.000	(687.036)
Number of riders	0,2 million	3,9 million
FEI tournaments	170	331
Number of competition horses	few thousand*	147.000
Total number of horses	0,35 million	1,3 million
Equestrian trade fair	-	spoga horse, Köln
Equestrian fair	Flanders Horse Expo, Gent	Equitana, Essen
Number of equestrian magazines	approximately 10	60
Number of equestrian specialist shops	approximately 100	more than 1.500

\*No specifics available. However, there are 20.000 riders owing a competition license, many of which have several horses (up to 20 animals). Sources: DOSB, EWUtop, FEI, FN, FRBSE, GfA, VFP, estimates

## THE HORSE INN

True horse specialists can also be found at the Liège Bierset (freight) airport. Every year, thousands of horses are transported to international tournaments abroad from there. Thanks to the “Horse Inn”, opened in 2016, the number of equine passengers in Liège is expected to rise



Léon Melchior (deceased in 2015): a maverick and the founder of Zangersheide stud

to 10,000 per year. For comparison: Frankfurt Airport has more than 2000 horses take off every year. Liège Airport has invested 2.6 million euros in the project. “We expect at least 500 aircrafts per year for horses alone,” Luc Partoune, General Director of the Liège airport, is quoted by the Belgian broadcaster BRF. “We enjoy a reputation of extraordinary quality at an international level.”

With Cavalor (horse feed), Compositi (stirrups), Dy'on (equestrian clothing/equipment), Göbel (importer of equestrian sports articles and clippers), Kentucky Horwear (horse boots, accessories) and Kevin Bacon's (hoof-grease), six companies from Belgium attended the spoga horse in the autumn of 2018. Thomas Tuytens, CEO of Kentucky Horwear, estimates that there are about 100 equestrian retail businesses in Belgium. “Among these retailers there are about 20 businesses offering high-end products and five shops that really stand out, creating a turnover of more than one million euros.”

## BIG ONES GETTING BIGGER

Tuytens has made the observation that, Belgium, too, sees the big shops getting bigger and more successful, while small businesses are getting into more and more trouble. Large retail chains, on the other hand, do not work in the Belgian equestrian industry, either, the Kentucky Horwear CEO explains. They are non-existent. “Belgium is a completely different country compared to France or Germany,” Tuytens says. “People in Belgium like to spend more money on quality products and services, on average.”

Nevertheless, Decathlon is in a strong position in Belgium, too, with 33 retail shops. The only store of the Dutch retail chain “Epplejeck” located outside the Netherlands can be found in Zaventem near Brussels Airport.

The large impact Germany companies used to have on the Belgian equestrian retail sector is dwindling, though, according to the Kentucky Horwear CEO. They had relied on their leading position too much in the past, neglecting the increasingly global competition. Tuytens: “We see lots of new brands coming from Italy, France, the Netherlands and even Scandinavia that are very present in the Belgian market. They have taken a lot of market share from German companies.”



Ingmar De Vos, Belgian FEI President