

VIEWPOINT

Javelin throwing for women

Wilf Paish

We now live in a world of equal opportunities, with women holding key positions in politics, industry and all other walks of life. Gradually, athletics is becoming emancipated, we are seeing more women, from more nations at our major Games. Events like the 400 metres Hurdles, Marathon, etc., are comparative newcomers to the programme, and one can only hope that the inclusion of the Triple Jump, Hammer and Steeplechase will totally liberate the sport since there is no physiological reason limiting women's participation in such events.

However, there is one move, that could be made immediately that would make the sport fairer and that is to make a similar change to the dimensions of the women's javelin as was made for the one used by the men just over a year ago.

As a compulsive thrower, and one who has spent a lifetime studying all aspects of the event, including the aerodynamics of flight and the manufacture of the javelin, with a fair degree of success, I was the harshest critic when the rule change for men was first mooted. I claimed that it was unethical as it would force all associations into an unnecessary, massive, investment of capital to restock javelins. I argued that there was a simpler, far cheaper way out of the situation by limiting manufactures to the 80 metres rated javelin. Nothing has since influenced me to change my views on this

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issue. However, that is history, the rule was changed and there was nothing I could do about it. The problem was that the delegates at the IAAF meetings were confused as to why the rule needed changing, with many believing that it was for safety reasons only. With the possibility of several throwers exceeding 100 metres, there became a realistic hazard of a javelin floating into the crowd, or competitors participating in a peripheral event. That was a sufficient reason alone for changing the rule, and one might add that does NOT exist for women, with the current situation likely to remain, certainly for the rest of this century.

However, many of the more enlightened delegates were concerned over the correct interpretation of the javelin landing rule. With the distances being thrown, and the limitations imposed by the specifications governing the dimension of the javelin, it was becoming impossible to judge a fair landing.

As far back as the early sixties, when the aerodynamic javelin started to become the vogue, I foresaw the problems that could arise. I even recommended a rule change and the use of a marking agent to give officials a visible guide for the landing place. I am convinced that this still would have been the best solution to the problem. Again that is history, but it is a problem that must be addressed by the women for their event.

The Javelin Throw for men is now a superb, spectacular and consistently FAIR event. While the distances thrown are down by about 12%, it is all relative. The crowd now gasps as they see a javelin land beyond the 80 metres marker. Only the purist, the minority in the crowd, recognizes the 10 metres

difference in flight range. Likewise, it is probably the purist, together with the media, who have created the obsession for records. The most important factor now is that SKILL (together with the trainable elements of speed and strength) predominates over CHANGE. I have spent a career in the sport arguing with officials, who in my eyes had victimised one of my athletes. That is the nature of the beast (coach). When in such an emotive situation, I was never a realist, I did not pause to think of the impossible nature of their job, forced on them by manufacturer motivated by quite a different set of criteria. Now, when I am approaching an age, when such emotional outbursts could adversely affect my health, the officials, in their wisdom, have in part (I still coach women javelin throwers!) protected me.

With the men's javelin, little is left to chance. As the well trained school teacher would say "It has stuck in"! Since the rule change I have not seen one error of judgement. I have not seen evidence of the "floater" being drifted dangerously out of the sector, or to an unrealistic record distance aided by a fluke wind. The final medal placings rest more with the ability of the athlete, less with the elements or with the whim of an official. THIS MUST BE GOOD FOR THE SPORT.

However, I cannot say the same for the women's event. Of the competitions I have watched closely this year, about 80% of the throws have involved the field marker judge in having to make a quick, on the spot, decision on landing. They have validated throws, which to me were clearly foul and vice-versa. The pressures on officials must be immense, indeed at one meeting the

crowd quite clearly affected the ultimate decision. While the scruples, or partisanship, of an official have not been openly debated, it will become a thing of the future as more and more emphasis is placed on winning. Nevertheless, less than innocuous suggestions were made by rival groups following the 1972 Olympic Javelin for men, the 1980 Hammer and more recently the Long-Jump in the World Championships. Anything that will make the situation easier, on the one hand for the official, and harder for the cheat on the other hand, must be the aim of our sport.

So, my advice to the ladies is please *change the rules relating to the specifications* for your javelin. It will be fair to all. As with the men, you will come to terms with the decreased distances. Surely, it is the winning that is important, not the record achieved. When

Emil Zatopek was interviewed by Tony Ward, he emphasised that history would remember his Olympic medals and not his world records. Does one really want to be a world record holder as a result of a freak wind, or the whim of an official?

Could I also offer some advice to the IAAF and the manufacturers. The move to make the sport fairer for all, as such a rule change for the women would do, it is necessary for every one to be fair. I was assured that when the new specifications were introduced, they were so tight that there could only be ONE javelin. Is this the case now: where only the colour or finish quality can affect the being of a different model? If this is fact, can it be made known to all of those involved, particularly in the purchasing.

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