

Sports Decision Makers Summit – Keynote Speech by IAAF CEO Jon Ridgeon - 10 July 2019

Good morning. My name is Jon Ridgeon and I'm CEO of the IAAF, soon to be known as World Athletics, when we rebrand later this year, and it's a role I started back in March.

Now my address this morning is about the relevance of sport. And whilst I suspect many of us are talking about relevance today - searching for that holy grail - I want to perhaps look at this challenge, in a slightly different way. Let's start with the assumption that SPORT IS RELEVANT. In fact, it has never been more relevant.

But often, we're all too focussed on achieving more spectators, more data and more money into our sports, to concern ourselves with the wider positive impact that sport can actually make.

Now commercial success is important, of course it is. But if we only see sport as a product, then we are no different from washing powder, cereal or pencils. As sports, we're often fighting for a share of discretionary spend in a cluttered market. But I would argue that's not relevance, that's just good business.

So we 'sell' our products to broadcasters, rightsholders, sponsors and cities, for much the same return as advertisers sell products on behalf of companies – for eyeballs and data.

These are models that, for many of us in the Olympic sports space, are now in reality offering diminishing returns. Sport needs to be more than just another commercial product.

The answer I believe is that we need to connect with people in a different way – a deeper, really emotional connection, for the long term.

Despite the best efforts of the advertising industry, I would argue that very few people are really emotionally connected to their laundry powder. They will switch if a better offer comes along. If sport is also seen as just another product, we will face the same threat.

So before I talk about some of the solutions that might allow the world of sport to connect with people in a deeper, longer-lasting way, let me first

share with you, some data to help illustrate why sport has never been more relevant, and why it is essential that we are all collectively up for the challenge.

Let me start with some statistics from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and The Lancet Global Health report, published last September.

1.4 billion people, that is one quarter of the world's population, are not doing enough physical exercise. A figure that has barely improved in the last decade, and in fact is getting worst in many countries around the world.

Globally, 23% of adults and a staggering 81% of adolescents – that's defined as those aged between 11 and 17 - do not meet the WHO global recommendations on physical activity for health, and by the way, that threshold is pretty low, as I will explain in a moment.

Inactivity levels vary considerably between countries - It can be as high as 80% in some adult populations, with the highest rates of inactivity being in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Americas, Europe & Western Pacific regions, and the lowest by the way, being in South East Asia. This means that generally, high-income countries are now the least active in the world.

So what is WHO's standard for inactivity? It is doing less than 150 minutes, or 2 & a half hours, of moderate activity a week, or 75 minutes, 1 & a quarter hours, of vigorous activity. That equates to roughly 20 minutes a day of moderate activity like walking, or 10 minutes a day of aerobic activity such as running, swimming or riding a bike fast. AND 81% of 11-17 year olds globally do not even manage to meet this level. That to me is unbelievable.

The main reasons for inactivity, according to WHO's global study, is increased urbanisation and the issues associated with it. They believe this has resulted in several environmental factors which discourage participation in physical activity - including high-density traffic, low air quality, pollution, lack of parks & pavements, limited sports and recreation facilities, plus for some, the risk of violence. And in the Western World, many believe that you can also add time spent on technology to this list.

Undoubtedly these are all barriers, and I will come back to these in a moment, but there is another factor that is equally important, and its

about the challenge of creating the sports habit, for life, from a young age.

Researchers from the University of Geneva in Switzerland only last month released a new study. They followed 1,200 pupils over a two-year period to find out at what age children lose the desire to exercise. Their results were equally shocking - they found that from the age of 9, the positive reasons for exercising begin to be replaced by the motivation of getting good educational marks or improved image with others.

To back this up, it was reported only this week that for the first time in history, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has revised down its life expectancy forecasts for future generations, **by more than two years**. And the primary reason for this, is that it predicts rising obesity rates will have greater impact on life expectancy than advances in medical science.

So, if 81% of young people are largely inactive and they come through a school system that rewards good grades and a society that measures image above sporting involvement, then I fear for the future health prospects for many of our young people.

We need to help young people to develop a sport habit that will lead to a healthy lifestyle when they become adults. You see the challenge for sports. We create more games, new experimental and shorter formats, more eyeballs and more data, which is good for income generation, but I'm not convinced it creates the sporting 'habit' for life. Unless this is solved, we may ultimately be fighting for fewer and fewer people who have any interest in sport.

Don't get me wrong, as well as creating a sporting habit in people, I do realise we need to evolve our sports with new formats to remain attractive in a world with more and more choice.

One of the first things I did when I took up my new role in athletics, was to review our competition landscape, modernising the Diamond League product, which is how many people follow athletics week in and week out. I've also started work on a new global circuit, that is designed to make more sense of top level athletics competition outside of the Major Championships.

As someone who has spent my life in athletics - as a former athlete, Meeting organiser, broadcaster and creator of new events for both elite and amateur athletes, this is where my passion lies.

Which leads me to the main thrust of my talk today. Sport is relevant. And I believe more relevant than it has ever been before, BUT, and it's a big BUT, we need to seize the opportunity to make real change before we miss the opportunity to appeal to a whole new generation.

We need to come together, not compete against each other, to collectively campaign for sport. Not just our own sport, but all sports. As individual sports we will still compete with each other, of course we will, but it should still not prevent us from coming together to try to make some fundamental changes in the lives of young people around the world. It is simply the right thing to do.

The richest areas of the world are the ones that appear to be struggling most, to meet even basic levels of activity. These same countries spend a vast amount of tax payers' money on creating campaigns, to encourage people to be more active in their daily lives.

Millions and millions of pounds, dollars and Euros are spent telling the public to take public transport, walk up the stairs, eat the right foods, etc, etc, etc. Sadly however, it's just not that easy. Telling people what is good for them rarely leads to deep seated change – it can't do, or the statistics would be better.

What if this money was instead spent on creating school sports programmes & developing facilities where people can exercise safely. What if funds were provided to re-establish clubs and amateur leagues that bring communities together and cater for all levels of ability, and we incentivise lifestyle choices that include sport.

For our part, we at the IAAF are committed to campaigning to governments, cities and local authorities to A) get them to understand the problem we are facing and B) help to change the current decline in community health.

Why? Well whilst I accept I'm a tad biased, I believe athletics is uniquely placed to make a difference.

More people run than do any other sport on the planet. An estimated half a billion people around the world run regularly. Running (and walking) is accessible to almost anyone. It doesn't cost much, it is the basis of so

many different sports, can be done as a group or individually, and has exceptional benefits to people's health – both physical and mental.

As an example of what we are doing to encourage even more activity, only last month we organised a pilot campaign called Run 24:1. It's a global campaign, led by our National Member Federations, coordinated by us at HQ, that encourages thousands of people in cities across the world to come together on one day to run (or walk) their first mile.

We started in the East (it was Fiji this year) and worked our way across the globe with a different city each hour, ending the 24 hours in the USA. 24 cities in 24 hours perhaps doesn't sound a lot, but still some 75,000 people came out to participate.

This year we also encouraged our Member Federations to get schools to organise a 1 mile run for their pupils on global running day – 50,000 children from 400 schools in 48 countries joined in. Next year it will be even bigger and better again. Why? Because it is fun, not overly challenging, and social, with people coming together as schools, families and friends to do something worthwhile for their health. We have to make athletics as a sport more fun and more social.

We also want to create a real legacy in the cities around the world that host our World Athletic Championship events. We have already started staging mass participation events at our major Championships. But we want to go further and get a commitment from host cities that they will create facilities and spaces for people to run and walk more, once our major events are over.

In some cases, this will be just a well-lit park, in others, it's the creation of clubs and leagues, renovating existing facilities, or finding ways for people or schools to use the venues that have just hosted our Major Championships. We have a long way to go, but no city should ever stage any of our major events, or yours either, without creating a better sporting future for those communities.

We are also completely overhauling our kids athletics programme. We need to inject more fun and flexibility into the sports experience in schools. We need programmes that teachers can and want to teach, that can fit into any space available and that children will enjoy wherever they are in the world. If we do not embrace this challenge, then we will have a far greater problem in 10, 20 and 50 years time, when our children and their children, only know how to watch sport, not actually participate in it.

Now, I don't want anyone believing that the IAAF is only interested in campaigning for grass roots sport. This is absolutely not the case. Like all of you in this room, we are working hard to evolve our elite formats, an experiment with new ideas. Some will work and some will not, but having the confidence to try new things and at times even fail is all part of the sporting journey.

Elite sport will always remain crucial. It is the phenomenal talent, the dedication to excellence, the outstanding achievements that make our athletes stand out and become the role models that society craves. This is one of the reasons why sponsors and broadcasters want to be part of our sport.

So let me try to sum up. First, I believe that sport has never been more relevant than it is today. Young people and communities need sport to be part of their lives. Our children need to see the fun in sport, which means it must be taught well in school. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that their citizens have the right facilities, safe facilities, with clean, unpolluted air, so sport can be an important lifestyle choice.

This is not just good for business now, it's good for business in the future. Funding health services that exist to remedy the ills of the most inactive society this world has ever seen, is clearly nuts. Spending huge sums of money on information campaigns about health and fitness needs to be looked at, if they are at the expense of introducing practical school programmes, plus, for example, taking simple steps, such as cleaning up roads and pathways so people can run safely.

This isn't a single sport campaign. It's a collective sports campaign. We need to pool our resources, share our strengths and get sport firmly planted in schools, with better facilities at local level so habits set at a very young age, become lifestyle choices as everyone grows older.

If you remember just one fact from my speech this morning, please let it be that 81% of young people around the world between the age of 11 and 17, do not manage to exercise even moderately for 20 minutes a day or 150 minutes per week.

Sport – and that's most of us in this room – can and need to change these statistics. Sport will rarely be a lifestyle choice for adults, if they haven't picked up sport as habit much earlier in their lives. So let's come together and do something collectively do something about it.

Thank you for your time.