


Perspectives of International Athletics

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29:2; 73-76, 2014

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What is the state of athletics?

At first sight, the sport of athletics appears to be extremely homogenous. Forty-seven events define the contents of its world championship and are hence the reference point for the term athletics, as it is used almost all over the world. But, in fact, the development of the sport is an uneven and profoundly differentiated phenomenon.

The performance levels in the different disciplines vary greatly and from nation to nation and from continent to continent. The same can be said for public and media interest in athletics competitions. In respect to participation, the numbers of men and women, children, youths, grown-ups and masters athletes also show wide differences.

If we look at the continents, Europe still shows the best developmental situation, even though the importance of the sport is declining there. And the losses in Europe are only partly compensated by gains in the other continents. To a limited extent the reason for that can be found in the problematic situation of the sport in America. Athletics in the USA, or track and field as it is known there, can only attract the attention of the mass media and public through the Olympic Games. In the ranking of the various sports in America, athletics plays a rather subordinate role. Compared to American football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey, athletics only very rarely succeeds in attracting large-scale spectator or media interest. This is especially detrimental to the development of the sport as a whole, as in many events the best athletes still come from the USA.

In Asia, positive developments can be observed in both Japan and China. Since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, a continuous upswing in the popularity of athletics has taken place in China. The Chinese athletic association has been succeeding with its efforts to attract public interest, which include systematic work in training and hosting many international competitions. The sport is gradually becoming part of the scene in the Arab region, especially in Qatar but in India it is not making much of an impact at all.

African athletics is by no means as strong and dynamic as the impression created in Europe by the long list of top performers from Kenya, Ethiopia and occasionally other coun-

tries. The reality is that differentiated athletics structures can be found in little more than 15 of the continent's 50 countries. The situation in South America is similarly critical, where, with the exception of Argentina and Brazil, there are hardly any intact athletics structures.

The problem becomes clearer when one turns to the Youth age group, by which I mean the 14- to 18-year-olds. Almost everywhere in the world athletics is attractive to younger children but at the same time there is a drop off in participation in the early teen years. In schools, athletics is losing its leading position to sports that have simply been more aggressive in fighting their way into the physical education curriculum. It is probably still the biggest sport in school competition systems, but in some parts of the world school competitions have lost much of their former importance. Importantly, if an educational system follows the trends in the rest of a consumer society, as we see many countries of the world, children's habits and interest in physical movement will be neglected and athletics will be among the sports that are hardest hit.

The issue, of course, is complex. For example, the question of coaches is extremely relevant for both the quality of athletes and the number of participants. One can see that nearly everywhere in the world the situation is marked by the fact that it is very difficult to recruit and retain new coaches. The salaries offered are rarely attractive and job security is very low. In some countries the main source of new coaches is the parents of young athletes, but as their children leave the sport few of these parent-coaches remain. Former athletes who move into coaching often rarely help with building up new stars or participation levels. Moreover, investments to improve the quality of coaching through education and certification systems suffer from the fact that the programmes offered are actually too good and that many course participants intend all along to take what they learn and their qualifications to another sport or country where the personal financial rewards are greater.

A further problem can be found with regard to competition officials and other volunteers. Especially in the established athletics nations we see an increasing number of elderly referees. Part of the picture is that in aging societies, which includes most of Europe, retired people have the time to take on voluntary work such as sports officiating. But another, more worrying aspect is that not many young people are interested in this type of activity in any society. The voluntary structures that athletics depends on to deliver local competitions, and to operate clubs, are endangered, especially in Europe, and it is hard to see how they can be revived.

How will the TV coverage of athletics develop?

Without any doubt the media coverage of the 2012 Olympic Games in London was a highlight in the history of world athletics. In a sold out stadium, top class performances were presented every day, which met with a positive worldwide response. The audience numbers and market shares were higher than ever before.

However, broadcast figures for world and European championships have been stagnating for some time, though in both cases the market shares are still sufficiently high, so that it is possible to market the television rights to these competitions. One hopes that as the world recovers from the financial crisis of 2007-2009, the position of these flagships will strengthen. But it must be said that other athletics events are finding little or no interest from the mass media. The revenue generated by indoor meetings comes to just 5% of the total and all other meetings to below 1%. In the coming years, this situation can improve with the global economy, but it depends on how attractively athletics can present itself.

The current conditions for the IAAF are favorable, as the EBU (European Broadcasting Union) has purchased the European rights for the World Athletics Series of the IAAF for the next four years. But in some European coun-

tries the situation is problematic, e.g. in several Eastern European countries, where state TV stations have not been willing to purchase global athletics broadcasting rights in the last years, and it is critical in athletics nations like Spain, Italy and Greece. For Asia the IAAF has two powerful television contracts with Chinese and Japanese broadcasters. The situation in Africa is secured and there is a positive development in South America. But the biggest challenge remains the US market, where there is almost no television presence for athletics apart from the Olympic Games and the Internet can only provide some compensation.

How will the athletes' chances for advertisement develop?

Marketing the IAAF's TV-attractive events to sponsors can still be achieved successfully with little effort. This fact can be documented by the IAAF marketing contract with the Japanese agency Dentsu. Here an annual increase can be recorded, and very important business corporations are still partners of world athletics, including companies like Sinopec, Toyota, Seiko, Mondo and TDK. Japan's Canon corporation has lately been added to this group.

The number bibs at championship events represent an especially attractive advertisement asset. The value, however, will only be obtained as long as the sponsor is well-visible on the bib and the athlete. If too many brands want to advertise for their own products in the relatively small space of the athlete's vest, the value is reduced drastically. Hence there are restrictions in world athletics in respect to the number and size of the logos. In this context the question of the achievable surplus value arises. Yet the possibilities of marketing the athlete's chest have to be called rather limited in athletics. The question why the participating nations must not wear any advertisement on their national jerseys in world championships, and why next to the national emblem one can only see the outfitter and the race number sponsor, is primarily a question of the signed contracts and the rights gained from them.

In the interest of a mutually desired contract loyalty, changes can only be applied jointly or one can come to new agreements once new contracts are negotiated. Presently the contract with Dentsu clearly regulates that additional sponsors are not allowed on the chest of the athlete. But in European Athletics' advertisement guidelines the association has granted one logo to the national associations, so that a direct marketing of this logo is enabled.

What are the future challenges for athletes and officials?

The quest for a positive image of athletics can probably be counted as one of the sport's most important challenges. The doping abuse of the past decades has made athletics the sport in which the most anti-doping tests are carried out worldwide. But the efforts to date still do not meet the demands of the problem. Top performances by athletes are generally under suspicion and the clean athlete enjoys almost no protection at all. The athletes are in a performance trap from which the federations have not offered them a way out until today. The fraud of several top athletes leads to scandals, which at regular intervals leads to a negative public image of athletics. As an Olympic sport, athletics is in danger of being pushed into a similar role as has been the case with cycling for a long time. Decisive counter measures are necessary. The exemplary testing system of the IAAF has to be maintained and extended. It has to be examined whether there are any wrong incentive systems in athletics that encourage doping fraud rather than prevent it. But first and foremost, measures have to be found that enable the clean athlete to document her/his integrity in a publicly comprehensible way. Additionally the punishments for severe doping offences have to be increased.

The problem of financing future athletics will not become any less important. Athletics is almost entirely dependent on financing through the government. Without governmental support organised athletics is not imaginable today. In the face of the given doping fraud the question arises if this governmental

support will be granted in the future. This issue is primarily about the continuation of the pedagogical importance of athletics. It has to remain dependable that athletics is important in the public school system, and that athletics as high-performance sport is of cultural significance for the respective society. Only in this way the financial support through the governments can be ensured also in the future.

The question of the stadiums and facilities for athletics is important as well. Until now it was natural that athletics could rely on these being made available by the government. Today this is questioned. Athletics' marriage with football has been subject to a unilateral divorce. Nowadays stadia are increasingly built as event arenas, in which there is no space for athletics. Hence the quest for athletics stadiums to host major events is difficult. It is also problematic that local 400m tracks are often not much used, which is why their maintenance and their future are not secured any more.

A development that could become dangerous is single discipline competitions, which are organised privately today. The high jump takes place in the shopping mall, shot put on the market place, and pole vault on the beach promenade. The necessity to offer all 47 events is now less understood and the consequences of such a development are uncertain. Once athletics takes place outside of the stadia, one can ask why athletics stadia will be needed at all. But it is obvious that some disciplines urgently depend on a stadium, while others are treated in a privileged way by this outsourcing. New means of income become available to the relevant athletes and the involved people, which the other events do not have at their disposal.

This raises the question of a fair evaluation of sporting performances. This has been discussed for a long time. Fees for internationally outstanding performers vary considerably from event to event. The same is true for the achievement bonuses and sponsor contracts. What matters in the future is finding an appropriate balance between athletic performance and available resources.

The adaptation and modernisation of athletics seems inevitable. From a temporal point of view a further increase of events is not reasonable. On the contrary, a reduction is sensible. This will probably lead to distribution conflicts within athletics itself. Athletics in the Olympic Games cannot be the standard for athletics as it takes place apart from them, because the success of athletics in the Olympic Games is bound to the concept of Olympism. At best, this concept is motivating for the rest of athletics, but it cannot be imitated.

Therefore the IAAF and its Member Federations have to find their own way of modernisation, and this must be marked by creative features. Socially, the spectators have to come from all walks of life and comprise all age groups. Athletics has to be equally attractive to both children and seniors, and wherever athletics is publicly presented with its competitions, it has to be attractive enough to entertain people pleasantly. The entertainment preferences are subject to constant changes. Meeting these interests of the spectators means changing the presentation of athletics constantly, as well. The same applies to the offered variety of events. As long as one remains in the existing, traditional competition structures, one does not meet these needs.

In this context also the athletes events and meetings must change. They have to adapt their presentation to the expectations of the spectators if they still want to be attractive enough with their performances in the future. This is equally true for both the duration of the competitions and their dramatic content.

Modernising athletics means that all involved must be willing to question themselves. If one succeeds in this endeavor, then one does not need to worry about the future of athletics.

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