

European distance running and television ratings: A problem for world athletics

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Whereas Europe once took 70% or more of the total medals on offer at the World Championships in Athletics and Olympic Games, it now takes 50% or less. The "lost" medals are mainly in the middle- and long-distance races, where African runners now dominate and European performances have slipped. Coinciding with this change has been a dramatic drop in television viewing figures for major athletics events in the European countries whose broadcasters provide the largest share of the income for both the IAAF and the Area association, European Athletics. If the amount these broadcasters are willing to pay for the rights to show future championships is reduced, it will compromise the funding for the operation and further development of the sport. The author, a highly experienced sport administrator, argues that the sport's leaders need to take radical measures to improve the performance of European distance runners and outlines a 'Marshall Plan' of seven suggestions.

ABSTRACT

Luciano Barra has served sport as General Secretary of the Italian Athletic Federation (20 years), Honorary Assistant of the IAAF President (10 years), member of the European Athletic Association Council (18 years), General Director for Sport in the Italian Olympic Committee (10 years) and Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer of the 2006 Olympic Winter Games in Torino. He has worked at hundreds of international sport events including 15 Olympic Games, 10 IAAF World Championships in Athletics (having organised one) and 12 European Athletics Championships.

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The decline in performance standards and success by European middle- and long-distance runners in major championships that has been taking place over the last two decades represents a major threat to the viability of athletics as a mainstream television attraction and this in turn could negatively impact the continued development of the sport worldwide.

In this article I will document the situation, explain the implications and outline some preliminary suggestions for the IAAF and European Athletics.

Introduction

After a first glance at the title of this article, one might ask: what does distance running have to do with TV ratings? And what is the real size of a problem in this area? The answers are "a lot" and "big".

The situation

As in any good mystery, you can get to the plot of this story immediately but it is only at the end when the identity of the real culprit is revealed.

Table 1: Medals taken by African runners in the men's 800m, 1500m, 5000m, 10,000m, marathon and 3,000m steeplechase in the World Championships in Athletics and Olympic Games 1970-2006 (Sources: IAAF and IOC)

	Olympic Games (OG) or World Championships (WCH)	Total Medals Available in Men's Middle- and Long-Distance Events	Medals Taken by African Runners	% of Total Medals
1970-79	2 (2 OG)	36	7	19.4
1980-89	5 (3 OG - 2 WCH)	90	26	28.9
1990-99	7 (2 OG - 5 WCH)	126	85	67.5
2000-06	5 (2 OG - 3 WCH)	90	67	74.4

Those who follow the sport know well that middle- and long-distance running has been increasingly dominated by Africans, mainly Ethiopians, Kenyans, Moroccans and some from other countries of East Africa. This is not a new phenomenon. Some of these countries were producing elite performers as early as the 1950s and as early as the 1960 Olympics in Rome Abebe Bikila (ETH) took the gold medal in the marathon. But African achievements in the endurance events in the last 20 years are really of a different dimension.

Table 1 shows how the African dominance of the medal positions in the men's middle- and long-distance events at the World Championships and Olympic Games has increased since 1970. We can see that this one continent now takes far more medals than the rest of the world combined. If we looked at other indicators, such as the number of African finalists in the same races or the number of Africans in the annual list of top 100 performances in each event or the results of the World Cross Country Championships we would find similar, if not more dramatic, stories.

In the women's events, the African story has started more slowly, due most likely to cultural factors. But whatever the factors driving the success of the men they are almost certainly at work for the women as well. Indeed, we are seeing more and more great female distance runners emerging from

Africa and there is no reason to believe that they will not eventually achieve the same dominance as the men.

Looking a little closer, one sees that the rise of Africa in distance running has had the biggest impact on Europe, which previously dominated these events and could look to strong traditions and important coaching schools in many different countries: Hungary, Sweden, Germany, Russia, Britain, France, Finland, Portugal, Italy, and recently Spain. The names of the legendary champions from these countries are part of the history of athletics and their victories are still vivid in the minds of many, mostly older, fans. However, if we compare the results of Europe and the rest of the world in the World Championships in Athletics (Table 2), we see that a dramatic change in relative fortunes became manifest at the beginning of the 1990s (the story is essentially the same in the Olympic Games during the same period).

Whereas Europe once won 70% or more of the total medals on offer, it now takes 50% or less. The decrease is strictly connected to the running events and as we see in Table 3, Europe's dominance of the field events in the most recent global events has remained solid. Countries from the Caribbean are taking more and more medals in the sprint events but the biggest losses from Europe's point of view have been in the middle- and long-distance races.

Table 2: Medals taken by European countries in the IAAF World Championships in Athletics (Source: IAAF)

WCH	European medals and %	Rest of the world medals and %
1983 Helsinki	87 medals (70.7%)	36 medals (29.3%)
1987 Rome	97 medals (75.2%)	32 medals (24.8%)
1991 Tokyo	70 medals (54.3%)	59 medals (45.7%)
1993 Stuttgart	66 medals (49.6%)	67 medals (50.4%)
1995 Gotheburg	64 medals (48.5%)	68 medals (51.5%)
1997 Athens	68 medals (51.5%)	64 medals (48.5%)
1999 Seville	65 medals (46.8%)	74 medals (53.2%)
2001 Edmonton	69 medals (49.6%)	70 medals (50.4%)
2003 Paris	70 medals (50.4%)	69 medals (49.6%)
2005 Helsinki	64 medals (46.0%)	75 medals (54.0%)

Of course, we cannot forget the names of the European who in the last two decades have given the public in the stadiums and those watching on television at home great emotions and their countries great glory (see Table 4). And the results are not insignificant: in the last three Olympic Games the men's 800 metres has been won by Europeans while over the last 20 years, despite a statistical dominance of the men's marathon by Kenya (which normally has more than 50% of the top 100 athletes on the annual list) and Ethiopia, these two countries have not taken as many Olympic and World Championship marathon medals as Spain and Italy.

Looking for an explanation for the rise of the Africans, some will point the end of the 1980s. Thanks to the introduction of the World Championships in Athletics, the IAAF was able to increase its marketing activity and provide important resources to the athletics economy

(we are talking about an average of \$200 million every four years). This allowed the IAAF to apply what was called at that time the "Robin Hood Philosophy" (in other words: to take from the rich in order to help the poor) to support all the national federations and implement a well-funded development programme. Important resources were made available to those countries that previously had not been able to prepare top-class athletes or even send competitors to top-level events. The result, as intended, was that more and more countries had possibilities to produce elite athletes and experience success at the world level. Africa as a whole has benefited greatly from this programme. Just to give some perspective: the amount spent in Africa in just the last four years for development has been around \$20 million! Those who have been instrumental to these marketing achievements must be very proud because they have helped the development of athletics in many countries.

Table 3: Field event medals taken by European countries in the IAAF World Championships in Athletics and Olympic Games 2003-2005 (Sources: IAAF and IOC)

Event	Number of medals in field events	Medals won by Europe	%
Paris 2003	54	39	72.2%
Athens 2004	54	39	72.2%
Helsinki 2005	54	39	72.2%

Table 4: Notable European successes in the men's middle- and long-distance events at the World Championships in Athletics and Olympic Games 1983-2005

Event	Gold medallist at Olympic Games and World Championships (1983-2005)	Other medallist (same events)
800	WULBECK RODAL, (KIPKETER), SCHUMANN, BUCHER, BORZAKOWSKI (2 gold)	Coe, Druppers, Elliott, D'Urso, Rodal, Borzakowski
1500	COE, CRAM, CACHO	Abascal, Gonzales, Elliott, Herld, Fuhlbrugge, Cacho, Estevez, Maazouzi, Baala, Heshlo, Silva
5000	COGHLAN, BAUMANN	Ryffel, Leitae, Schildhauer, Vainio, Castro, Buckner, Kunze, Mourhit
10000	COVA (2 gold)	Schildhauer, Kunze, McLeod, Panetta, Antibo
Marathon	LOPES, BORDIN, FIZ, ANTON (2 gold) BALDINI	Cierpinski, Tracy, Spedding, Bordin, Freigang, Van Vlaanderen, Modica, Rey, Fiz, Baldini
3000 steeple	ILG, PANETTA	Maminski, Reitz, Mahmoud, Van Dick, Rowland, Lambruschini, Martin

However, it is too easy to simply say that because of the IAAF's investment in development the Africans are now taking away the medals of European distance runners. Firstly, the results achieved by some of the developing countries in Africa and elsewhere are also due to the work done locally by their governments and federations (countries like Kenya and Jamaica have school sports systems that should be copied by many European countries), by their coaches and by those managers who have helped athletes to grow and acquire the necessary experience. We also know that there is a different approach to athletics (and sport in general) by young people in Africa and other developing countries: the elements of economic opportunity and national pride seem to be greater motivators than they are for young Europeans. And, of course, it cannot be forgotten that there are natural physiological and psychological qualities of the athletes of East Africa that are advantageous

the middle- and long-distance races. But this is part of the game.

For me it is important that, with the exception of the exploits highlighted in Table 4, the real performance level of European distance running is slipping. Yes, the Africans are good. But the fact is that, for whatever reason, the Europeans are not only failing to improve and meet the African challenge, they are not even at the level they used to be.

There are a number of ways to illustrate this point but I have selected the results over the last decade for one of European Athletics' main efforts to promote the development of distance running: the European Cup 10,000m (Table 5).

What is clear from the table is that both quality and quantity are going backwards: compared to a decade ago, the winning times for the event

Table 5: Results overview of the European Cup 10,000m from 1997 to 2007 (Source: European Athletics)

Year	Venue	Total participants	Time 1st	Time 10th	Total athletes under 29'
1997	Barakaldo	+ 30	27'21"53	28'13"10	25
1998	Lisbon	59	27'14"44	27'53"52	30
1999	Barakaldo	41	27'46"12	27'57"66	31
2000	Lisbon	+ 34	27'59"80	28'17"70	30
2001	Barakaldo	41	27'49"35	28'44"39	17
2002	Camaioire	?	27'38"51	28'21"21	22
2003	Athens	+ 25	27'45"14	28'42"90	14
2004	Maribor	?	28'11"11	29'15"61	6
2005	Barakaldo	+16	27'27"80	29'04"54	8
2006	Antalya	32	28'47"22	29'01"83	9
2007	Ferrara	28	28'17"17	29'17"10	6

are slower, the 10th place times are a minute or slower and the number of athletes under 29:00 is a quarter or less of what it was.

My point here is that Europeans cannot blame anybody for the competitive imbalance in endurance running until they are performing at the level of which they are capable.

The implications

So far the situation I have described shows a dominance of another continent over the old Europe and a slightly nuanced argument as to the reason why. But where is the problem for the sport as a whole?

Firstly, we have to consider that it is a fact that in any televised transmission of athletics the running events represent almost 75% of the broadcast time. What happens on the track affects the audience's interest and eventually the audience's size; what happens on the field has far less of an effect (and this situation is compounded by the fact that races are naturally dramatic while the broadcast techniques used for the field events normally lose the element of drama and thus make less interesting viewing).

Secondly, we have to take into account that about 66% of the IAAF's income is produced by its Eurovision contract and that income is guaranteed by the broadcasters in just five countries (UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain). The situation is similar for European Athletics, by far the strongest financially of the sport's six Area associations.

Finally, there is the fact that the ratings for the major athletics events (World Championships in Athletics, European Athletics Championships) in the largest European countries has, in most cases, fallen off dramatically, as shown in Table 6.

I would argue that the drop in the audience in the five countries guaranteeing the majority of Eurovision's income, and therefore the majority of the income to the international level of athletics, is mainly due to the decrease in the success of these countries in the running events and in particular in the middle- and long-distance events. The less the audiences see athletes from their own countries doing well in the showcase running events, the less likely they will be to tune in again. And it appears that even a continued

Table 6: Television viewer figures for selected major athletics events (Sources: IFM International Sport Analysis and European Broadcasting Union)

Country	Munich 2002 (6 days)	Paris 2003 (9 days)	Helsinki 2005 (9 days)	Gothenburg 2006 (7 days)
a) Total Viewers b) Peak Viewers				
Great Britain	a) 52.530.000 b) 6.850.000	a) 51.476.000 b) 5.035.000	a) 37.858.000 b) 3.077.000	a) 23.680.000 b) 2.470.000
Germany	a) 79.210.000 b) 5.870.000	a) 71.756.000 b) 5.836.000	a) 48.857.000 b) 4.671.000	a) 61.370.000 3.630.000
France	a) 44.170.000 b) 3.060.000	a) 84,085.000 b) 5.439.00	a) 68.029.000 b) 4.018.000	a) 49.610.000 b) 2.700.000
Italy	a) 61.920.000 b) 4.830.000	a) 34.631.000 b) 2.765.000	a) 29.586.000 b) 2.182.000	a) 54.970.000 b) 2.130.000
Spain	a) 7.730.000 b) 840.000	a) 19.563.000 2.162.000	a) 10.252.000 b) 746.000	a) 7.770.000 b) 630.000
Russia	a) 17.196.000 b) 2.618.000	a) 23.743.000 b) 1.121.000	a) 22.202.000 b) 2.181.000	a) 6.140.000 b) 703.000

strong showing in the field events cannot counteract this trend.

The logical direct consequence of a this decrease in viewer interest is that eventually European broadcasters will be willing to pay less for future contracts with both European Athletics and the IAAF. If this becomes a reality, there will be fewer resources for the sport and, therefore, fewer resources available for development.

In other words, the success of the efforts to globalise athletics and increase the opportunities for athletes in all countries to excel is threatening the popularity and therefore the financial base of the sport in its core market.

What to do?

After reading the first parts of this article, one might arrive at the conclusion that the African runners are so good and their dominance is so deep that there is no longer real competition with other rivals, particularly the Europeans, and the threat to the sport is grave. Therefore, the African middle- and long-distance runners must be banned from races or somehow handicapped to allow Europeans to win more.

My immediate reply is in capital letters: NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT. It is not thinkable that, in order to keep the television ratings high and consequently guarantee the income, the African runners should compete with an iron ball at their feet or any other impediment. The problem is not this one.

But I think it is important that radical measures are taken to reverse the decline in European distance running. I start by saying that I do not believe the situation is hopeless. If, in the World Championships and Olympic Games, some European athletes are able to compete at the same level as the Africans, it means something. It means that in Europe there are still the right talents able to win and consequently to raise the interest of the public, and the media. The athletes, therefore, must be given special opportunities or encouraged or rewarded or trained better, whatever it takes for them to realise the talent that is there.

At the end of World War II, much of Europe was in ruins and the situation looked hopeless. To rebuild the infrastructure and restore the economies, a bold series of measures known as the Marshall Plan was implemented. The result was a great success and within a relatively short period Europe was thriving and success-

ful. What I am proposing is a two-part Marshall Plan for European distance running managed, and where necessary funded, by the IAAF and European Athletics.

Firstly, we have to look at how the sport can get more out of the situation we have, including the African runners themselves. They are certainly good athletes but very few of them – there are exceptions - become what we could call stars. For all their wonderful talent, how many Africans can drive interest in the sport across borders for a number of years the way some sprinters do or the way Tiger Woods and Roger Federer do in their sports?

It is a fact that the “athletic taste” of the public is too much – negatively – influenced by the trend of the one-day meetings: the races against records, the abuse of pace making, the large number of runners from the same countries, the fact that runners all run with the same shirts making it almost impossible to recognise them, etc. We could even say when the athletes are running for records and dollars on the circuit (or in big city marathons and other road races, where there are similar issues) middle- and long-distance races are a different sport from the events where the athletes are running for medals. The consequence of this disconnect is not only a decrease in the public’s interest in the one-day meetings but the fact that too often the best African talents burn out. Too many of them do not arrive in top form at the major championships and too many have shortened careers at the top.

Because there are so many good African runners, when a good one fails at a major event or drops out of the scene there is always another to take his place. But to the general public the last one and the next one are always unknowns. The long-term connection with the fans and build up of a life-story culminating with a major accomplishment that define a star do not take place. And without stars all parts of the sport suffer.

Like many people, I believe that it will be in the interest of athletics to restore the “competitive” feeling of the races over the course of

the season. This will help the popularity of the one-day meetings and it will be good for the athletes, who will not be continuously stressed by the search of records. With improved prospects for longer careers it will make sense for the sport and sponsors to invest in the media and public relations training that will make the athletes even more valuable as spokespersons and role models and then help them after their competitive careers.

As part one of my plan, I suggest the following four measures be applied to the one-day meetings:

- 1 Limit the number of pace makers to only one per race and only allow them in a maximum of 50% of the middle- and long-distance events at a meeting. This will increase the emphasis on competition and make the races more accessible to everybody. As a result, the motivation of all athletes to try to win races and the interest of the spectators, in the stadium and at home, will increase.
- 2 Make all runners compete in their national vest or something else that makes it easy for spectators to distinguish them from each other. This variety reduces the commercial intrusion (while encouraging sponsors to support federations) and will help the spectators identify the athletes and follow them through the race.
- 3 Oblige the meetings to produce number bibs with the name of the athlete as is already done voluntarily by many organisers. This would also help spectators to identify the runners in a race.
- 4 Do not allow more than three or four runners from any country in races at Golden League or Super Grand Prix meetings. A similar limitation (possibly only two runners) should apply to the Grand Prix and European Athletics Premium meetings. European Athletics Permit meetings should be reserved for European athletes only. The intended effects of this would be more opportunities, greater motivation for Euro-

pean athletes to compete in high-level races and an increase in the international (as opposed to local) interest in the meetings because more countries would be involved in each race. It would also have the effect of limiting the opportunities for athletes from other Areas to compete in Europe and thus increase the pressure on those Areas to build up their own competition systems to meet the needs and demands of their athletes.

A second area we need to look at is more general measures to promote distance running, and athletics, in Europe. There are any number of good ideas to be considered but to provoke debate (and hopefully action) I will propose the following three:

- 1 Particular care should be taken with regard to amending national rules covering participation of foreign runners in marathon and road race events. At the moment the situation is a total mess and in Europe the majority of the races (and the prize money) are won by Africans, even in events that are meant to be local. Some observers have suggested that this situation is driving talented European endurance athletes to the triathlon or out of sport completely. The aim must be to create a co-ordinated system in which the presence of a limited number of foreign athletes helps motivate and challenge local/national runners without overwhelming them.
- 2 European Athletics should launch a major project, linking all its Member Federations, to promote middle- and long- distance running. It should include methodological education, training camps and an obligation on federations to enter their athletes in certain competitions, even if their standards are not so high (How can you improve if you do not compete?). The IAAF, the major marathons and sponsors should all show their commitment to the sport by providing funding, logistical assistance and ideas.
- 3 European Athletics should call on the continent's rich history in the distances. In a

recent worldwide poll of journalists, the 10,000 metres at the 1971 European Championships was rated the best athletics event of the last decades. Are we making use of this inspirational moment or the many role models we have? We must teach our current and future generations the tradition they have inherited through short videos, website features or other appropriate means. We have to invite our heroes to speak about their experience to the participants at the European Athletics Junior and U23 Championships. The aim, of course, is to inspire and motivate our talents to invest their efforts – both for their own good and the good of the sport. Such a programme could also link to the mass running movement so that large numbers of people are inspired and develop a connection with athletics (as opposed to running or jogging).

Conclusion

The current trend in the middle- and long-distances is a real threat to athletics' ability to grow and survive and it is symptomatic of the general challenge we in the sport face. The fact is that athletics is not the world's most popular sport and there are many sports working hard to push us further down the list. Starting with the IAAF and European Athletics, we need to be more humble, to look around at what others do to survive, to promote and to modernise. Then, we must find the political will to do what is necessary to implement effective measures. Importantly, we have to recognise that this matter is urgent and time is not on our side.

It is my hope that the suggestions I have outlined here will be considered, elaborated and implemented for the good of athletics.

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