

On Athletics: Challenges and Solutions

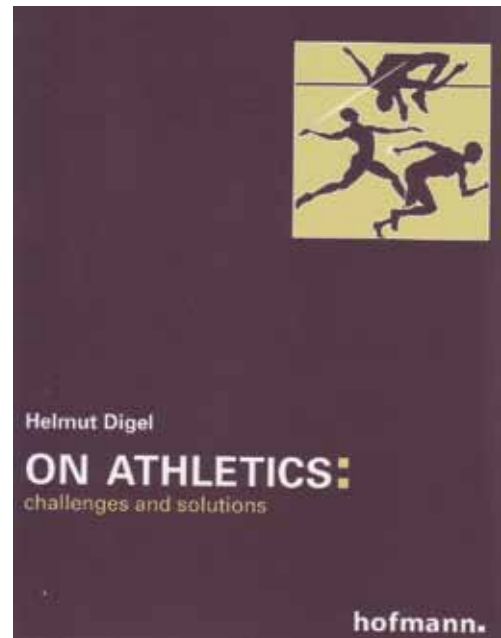
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by Helmut Digel

Schorndorf: Hofmann, 2015, 294 pp., ISBN: 978-3-7780-8900-2

The sport of athletics is transitioning through a difficult time. Particularly in light of the recent doping and integrity allegations, athletics is in a credibility crisis. But athletics has been losing ground during the last several decades for the following reasons:

- Athletics is a product of the 19th and 20th centuries. It reflects the ethos of achievement and individuality, which is typical of industrial societies. In the post-modern or informational society, the focus of sports in particular is not so much on clearly measurable performances but on the “experience value”. Therefore, adventure and fun sports, or even team sports, seem to be much more popular today than the achievement-oriented sport of athletics.
- In the mass media, athletics is much less present today than it was in the past. This is because the way athletics is presented on TV provides less entertainment value for average television viewers than watching football and other team sports.
- Even in arenas, athletics is sometimes difficult to follow for spectators since many events take place at the same time, the spectators are too far away from the action, and the results of the competitions are often communicated insufficiently.



- Today, some events are dominated by athletes from certain regions of the world while athletes from other regions have no chance of success. For example, the last white sprinter to win Olympic 100m was the Briton Alan Wells, in the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which the Americans had boycotted. Wells' time (10.25 sec) was the slowest winning time since 1956. In the long distances, the current situation is similar. Medals are almost always won by athletes of African origin. This was different in the past when

athletes of all nations had equal chances of success. It is clear that the monopoly of success held by certain groups of athletes in specific events makes athletics less interesting and sometimes even boring to watch.

- Athletics is no longer among the key sports taught in schools. Today, the focus of physical education in schools is more on team and fun sports and on teaching movement experiences in general.

All this has contributed to reducing the popularity of athletics as compared to other sports. The German sport sociologist and professor Helmut Digel, who was the President of the German Association of Athletics (DLV) from 1993 to 2001 and Vice-President of the IAAF from 2001 to 2007, has always been among the principal “whistleblowers” pointing the finger at this precarious development of athletics and its possible consequences. Twenty-nine of his articles, some of which were also printed in previous issues of *New Studies in Athletics*, are now available in this book, whose publication was financially supported by the International Athletics Foundation.

The book is divided into five sections and 29 chapters in the following order:

1. Challenges to Athletics

- International athletics on the threshold of the 21st century
- Unsolved problems in athletics and some solutions
- On the development of world athletics
- Does athletics need innovations?
- The timetable – a key to success
- Perspectives of international athletics

2. Legitimisation of Athletics

- What makes athletics valuable
- Athletics events and regional development

3. Supporting Clean Athletes

- The fundamentals to protect honest athletes

- The principle of fair play or do we need an anti doping law?
- The problem of doping and the responsibility of science

4. General Aspects of Athletics' Development

- The athletes' village
- Perspectives of Sport at the beginning of a new century
- Draft of a visionary sport policy
- Future outlook for the coaching profession
- Talent identification and promotion
- Spectators in Olympic sport
- The risks of the Youth Olympic Games
- Evaluation of the first Youth Olympic Games
- Faster, Higher, Longer – The future of top-level sport
- Intersexuality and high-performance sport
- Sport and sexuality
- London 2012 – Everyone's Game
- Risks of elite sport
- Competition between sports

5. Specific Aspects of Athletics' Development

- Ukraine – a model of success
- Development spotlight – Brazil
- Towards effective organisational structures in sport federations – from amateurism to professionalism
- How to improve the World Championships in athletics

Digel's primary motive for criticising the current situation and development of athletics and raising his warning finger is his love of the sport and the value he attaches to athletics. This love is also expressed in the collection of photos in the middle of the book. These not only convey the various aspects and facets of athletics (e.g. faith, success, high emotions, friendship, equality, passion, elegance), but also its inherent fascination.

Digel makes it convincingly clear that athletics is valuable because it

- is a characteristic example of the whole culture of physical performance and may be regarded as a model for an achievement-oriented society;
- provides an opportunity for experiencing and practising political participation;
- promotes a sense of equality between individuals;
- includes movements which form the basis of most other competitive sports;
- provides opportunities for personal enrichment;
- can be used as a valuable educational tool;
- provides occasions to bring people together;
- provides athletes with opportunities to achieve their personal potential independent of their level of ability;
- is a leisure activity to increase one's physical fitness and well-being;
- contributes to a "culture of assistance";
- is seen world-wide as "the universal sport";
- is a particularly suitable and worthwhile field for scientific study;
- promotes harmony with nature;
- is a medium for cooperation between individual nations and with developing countries.

If athletics is presented, taught and performed so that it emphasises all these aspects it may be said to be valuable. If, however, these values are neglected and if, in particular, the value of athletics is put into question by cheating through doping, violation of the principle of fair play, and playing down such cheating and violations, athletics will lose its justification.

Digel offers many solutions to the current problems of athletics. In his view, the highest priority must be to uphold the principle of fair play and all the other rules of the sport. Anyone practising fraud through doping must lose the chance of victory and be deprived of the opportunity for financial profit. The fight against doping must be conducted on the basis of an enlightened partnership between the international federations responsible for the rules of

the sport and the athletes. In a written contract added to an Olympic passport each Olympian should sign his or her obligation to comply with the rules of the sport. The same must apply to all other people contributing to top-level sporting achievement and to everybody in the entire system of Olympic sport. The credible fight against doping must not only include control, prosecution and punishment, but it also involves that young athletes are convinced that top-level athletic achievements may be attained without manipulation and fraud.

To increase the entertainment value of athletics and thus its popularity, Digel submits the following proposals:

- The attention of the spectators should always be directed to one competition only, i.e. to the contest of a limited number of finalists in one event. During this competition no other activity should take place.
- The breaks between the competitions should be as short as possible and the duration of the individual competitions must be exactly planned.
- The time schedules of the individual competitions must be more exact and equal. This means that in most events the individual actions of the athletes must be reduced and the time spaces between the trials of the individual athletes must be shortened. This may also involve creative and spectator-friendly rule changes.
- The dramaturgy of the competition programme should be changed. This means for example that the duration of an athletics meeting should be limited to two hours at the most. The complete event should be incorporated in an all-over programme, i.e. there must be a pre- and post-programme.
- There should be new forms of visualisation and communication. Particularly the jumping and throwing events are in need of new methods to make them more visible and

to present them in a more attractive way. In the throwing events, for example, lifting platforms might be used to put the athletes at the centre of the spectators' attention.

- Track-and-field arenas should be built in such a way that the interests of the spectators are satisfied. This means that their architecture must allow for better entertainment, information and communication.

Although some of Digel's ideas and suggestions may seem futuristic, they may offer the chance for athletics to hold its traditional place

not only as the highlight of the Olympic Games but also among the great sports of the world.

Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer



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