

ATHLETICS OMNIBUS – THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF ATHLETICS

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1. INTRODUCTION

We will have a better understanding of the future of athletics, if we know more about the inception of athletics and how it evolved through the ages. Athletics have a proud and colourful history. This article will not attempt to cover the evolution process in detail. It will give a brief overview of the history of athletics. Based on the overview of the history of athletics, some analysing questions will be asked which are intended to widen your perspective of athletics as it is experienced and practiced today.

2. ANCIENT HISTORY OF ATHLETICS

Athletics has an ancient history. For the ancient man or woman to survive, they had to hunt for food. In doing so they had to throw stones or spears at animals in order to kill them for food. The very same throwing techniques were used to defend them against the enemy or predators.

The ancient man or woman often had to travel vast distances to hunt for food, and when they had the target in sight, they had to move fast to capture it, or to avoid it from escaping. In their endeavours, they had to negotiate hostile terrain and often had to jump far or high to be able to reach the targeted objective or to move to a safer environment.

The need to determine who is the fastest, the fittest or the strongest already started with the ancient man. Originally, only men were allowed to engage in activities, now labelled as athletics. The evolution of athletics did not all happen at the same time or at the same place.

Until fairly recently, it was dangerous for both participant and spectator during athletics events. Incidents of officials, athletes and spectators being beheaded by a hammer throw implement, penetrated by a javelin or falling to their death from an elevated platform were common occurrences in ancient athletics.

According to cave drawings from the Stone Age, animals were originally used as hurdles. Later hurdles were used, but the construction of the hurdles was robust and contact was avoided due to the injuries risk involved. When hurdling was introduced to the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 the construction and design of the hurdles became less dangerous for athletes to make contact with.

Steeple Chase running regularly took place during the middle ages. Soldiers were required to run on the walls of the castle from one steeple (the spire of the castle tower) to another steeple to remain fit during times that the castle was besieged by the enemy. It often developed into a competition with death defying results.

In ancient time, in Long Jumping, the athlete was required to hold weights while jumping in a dug up and levelled area from a standing position. The athlete was allowed to jump from an elevated take-off area. The practice of jumping with weights from an elevated area often lead to serious injuries and broken limbs. The athlete was also allowed to take more than one step during the landing process. This form of landing where more than one stride could be taken after landing was one of the reasons why Triple Jumping as a sport started.

In Shot Put during ancient times it was required of the athlete to throw a stone with a weight of 7.26kg as far as possible from a square approximately 2m (7 foot) wide drawn on the ground. These rules were still practiced during the 1st Olympic Games in 1896.

In Discus Throw the athlete was required to throw from a standing position, a small wagon wheel or a discus shaped object from a square area of approximately 2.5m. The Hammer Throw evolved from Discus Throw and came as a result of athletes trying to throw a wheel from a standing position further by attaching a rope to the wheel. First recordings of Hammer Throw were made in the early 1800's when athletes tried to swing a wagon wheel attached to a rope as far as possible. In the early 1600's a form of "Sledge" Throw competition existed which required swinging and then throwing a sledge attached to a rope. The sling shot used by David to slay Goliath also refers to a form of Hammer Throw. The most common Discus Throw technique was to stand sideways and swing the "Hammer" over a straight line in the same manner that a pendulum swings in a "Grandpa" clock.

A spear was used in ancient times as a weapon to kill the enemy or to hunt for food. Originally it was required from an athlete to throw a spear from horseback or a raised platform to a target. The thrower was not allowed to fall to the ground after delivering the Javelin. In some competitions the Javelin Thrower was required to throw a Javelin from both arms simultaneously and the winner was the athlete with the best average distance. The Javelins often landed among the spectators. Later Javelin Throw evolved to a run-up with the javelin landing in a prescribed landing area. The modern day Javelin Throw technique evolved in the mid 1950's.

3. RECENT HISTORY OF ATHLETICS

Although athletics have been around for thousands of years, it is interesting to note that organized athletics as we know it today has been around for less than 150 years. Up until the late 1800's sport took place in a fairly disorganized way and was a great injury risk for both the participant and the spectator. In the late 1800's, it was mainly in Great Britain and Europe that athletics became an organized sport by competing according to a set of rules and regulations. These rules very quickly spread to other countries and by 1896 the first Olympic Games took place according to set rules.

The many rule changes made the sport safer for officials, athletes and spectators which now had less chance to be beheaded by the wire of the hammer throw implement, penetrated by a javelin or ran over by a fast moving athlete. The rule also made it possible for more events to take place on the same day.

As recently as the late 1800's track events and field events took place separately and on different days. The many rules that were implemented towards the end of the 1800 have made it possible for Track and Field events to take place at the same venue on the same date.

Traditionally women were not allowed near the competition areas, as men were competing for honour wearing little or no clothing. It was only in the late 1800's that women were allowed to compete in a limited amount of events at organized events such as the Olympic Games.

As recent as 10 years ago, women were not allowed to compete at the Olympic Games in Pole Vault, Triple Jump, Hammer Throw, Long Distance Running or Long Distance Race Walking and Steeple Chase. Even today, many countries do not allow women to participate freely. Often the prescribed and restrictive clothing women have to wear prohibits women from performing according to their true potential.

Long Distance Running has been with us ever since the beginning of time, but it was only in the 1900's that distance running became popular mainly because of the industrial revolution that started about 150 years ago in England and rapidly changed the lives of people across the world. The increase in participation of athletes from Non-European countries also contributed to the increase in the popularity of long distance running as a sport.

With the industrial revolution still ongoing the fitness levels of men and women across the world rapidly became lower and the capacity to do strenuous exercise rapidly diminished. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the rise in popularity of walking as a sport. In recent years, Race Walking became very popular and it is estimated that there are more Race Walkers participating in world athletics today than Track + Field and Road Running athletes.

Although the International Association of Athletics Federations were formed as early as 1913, mainly with the objective to regulate the many rule changes that took place at the time, the world for the first time ever experienced a World Championships in athletics in 1984 when the 1st IAAF World Championships took place in Helsinki, Finland. The first World Championships in athletics for junior athletes took place in 1986 and the World Championships in athletics for youth athletes as recent as 1997.

The development of athletes is not a new creation of modern society. It already took place in ancient times. The very first clans practiced vigorously to increase their skills to fight against other clans to gain or defend their territories. Large sums of money were paid by slave owners and the royal families as early as 500 BC to prepare athletes for competition. Great honour and money was at stake for the owner of the slave.

Gambling in athletics and the paying of athletes for producing excellent performances have been with us since the beginning of time. It was common practice that the winner of a clash between individuals or clans could win a variety of incentives that varied from the loser's women and children to all their belongings and money.

Hundreds of years ago, in Race Walking for instance, wagers were placed on whether or not someone could walk from point A to B within a certain time. The distance between point A and B was often more than 100km far and there were no rules, regulations or judges to contend with.

4. THE FUTURE

It is interesting to note that the rules and regulations implemented in Europe and Great Britain towards the end of the 1800's, and later implemented in all other countries of the world were designed to suit the physical attributes and life style of only a few specific culture groups in the world.

The type of life style of the European led to most of the rules and regulations that all countries in the world abide by today. The exclusion of women and children in active sport, until fairly recently, also had a huge influence in the way that we participate in athletics today.

As athletics became more regulated over the past 150 years, more events could take place on one day, but the number of participant in athletics became rapidly less. The industrial revolution also contributed to the ever decreasing number of participants and spectators in athletics.

For the sport to survive the current industrial revolution, the format in which we participate must change to accommodate not only the participation of men, women and children as individuals. The sport should be able to accommodate the participation of groups, families or even whole communities in a team format.

Current rules and regulations restrict participation in large numbers. The only section of athletics which have limited success at the moment in engaging family and friends all at the same time are Road Running and Race Walking. Unfortunately, the increase in the popularity of ultra-distance running/walking and the relevant rule changes regulating ultra-marathons in recent years restrict participation in these events to the super fit athletes only.

Mainly as a result of the computer age, the life style of modern society place very little demands on the fitness levels of the human body. It is of vital importance for athletics to evolutes to meet the requirements of modern society. The question is not when, but how.

To understand what type of evolution is needed, we need to ask ourselves some analysing questions on how and why we regulate the sport as we know it today. The following questions should stimulate the thought process:

- 4.1. Why do men, women and children participate separately in athletics? It is certain that the scientists will be able to answer this question, and will be able to substantiate the answer with extensive research material. It is possible to amend the rules to accommodate the participation of the man, followed by a woman, followed by a boy, followed by a girl in the same event. The aggregate of the 4 performances can determine the winning "family". Imagine determining it at the Olympic Games, the winning family as well as the winning individual.
- 4.2. Why do we separate participating categories according to age? Why do we not separate participating categories according to weight? The determining of categories according to weight has great potential for the ever increasing obese population of the world as a result of modern technology. Participants can simply be categorized prior to the event by standing on a weight measuring scale at the start of the event, rather than the current complex and unreliable system of categorizing athletes according to age. Modern computer programmes can very easily determine the winning "family" by determining the aggregates of performance versus weight.
- 4.3. Why do we run the 100m, 200m, 400m, etc. and measure the time in which the distance was covered by the athlete. Why do we not start the event, and stop the event after 1 minute, and measure the distance covered, or determine the winner as the one who covered the longest distance in one minute, etc.
- 4.4. Why do we measure the general performance of an athlete rather than the specific performance?
 - 4.4.1. In High Jump, the winner is determined by the athlete that can jump the highest. The event excludes the participation of all athletes that are short or obese. Why can the winner not be determined by the athlete with the biggest difference between the jumping height and physical height of the athlete?
 - 4.4.2. Why is the distance in Long Jump measured from the take off board, rather than from the last touchdown of the foot in the run-up?
 - 4.4.3. Why do we take time in track events from the signal of a starting gun rather than the first touchdown of the foot on the ground after a signal was given? Large sums of money are regularly spent on electronic starting blocks to regulate the start of a sprint. An electronic touch down plate at the starting line will allow the athlete to start any time they like. Taking

the concept of the winning family, or winning team further, why do athletes in track events start all at the same time rather than one after another.

- 4.4.4. Why do relay races have fixed exchange zones? Why can the exchange not be adapted by the Coach or Team Leader according to the strengths of the individuals in the team?
- 4.4.5. Why do we use implements with fixed weights in field events rather than weight adjustable implements? Modern technology is capable of manufacturing one basic implement with the capacity to add weight as needed, or even to shape the implement as needed. Why is the Shot Put round and not shaped to fit the hand?
- 4.5. Why do we participate in events, allowing athletes to use various techniques, but use only one method of measuring the performance? In Shot Put, who is the best athlete using the O'Brien technique; who is the best athlete using the sliding technique or who is the best athlete using the free style technique? In High Jump, who is the best athlete using the Fosbury Flop; who is the best athlete using the Eastern Roll; who is the best athlete using the free style technique, etc.
- 4.6. Why do some North African clans not feature strongly in Javelin Throw when spear throwing is very much part of their culture? Why do labourers that lift heavy equipment on a daily basis not feature in events such as Shot Put or Discus Throw? The answer lies in the methods and rules that are used in Javelin Throwing competitions today.
- 4.7. Disabled athletes are categorized according to their disability e.g. the physically disabled athletes are categorized according to the amount of limbs that the athlete has lost. It is encouraging to note that the many categories in disabled athletics are not seen as a stumbling block. Disabled Sport has developed the capacity to compete all in the same event, at the same time on the same venue, but the performance is recorded separately.

The use of aids in disabled athletics broadened the scope of options available in athletics significantly. It is exiting to observe how some disabled athletes, with both legs amputated below the knees, is now competition with the aid of spring loaded blades, enabling them to run times fast enough to qualify for the Olympic Games for able athletes.

5. CONCLUSION

The history of athletics has taught us that the sport was originally used for survival purposes; later it was used to remain fit and healthy, and in recent history the focus shifted to uniformity, safety and excellence.

History also taught us that the format in which athletics were practised during ancient times differed from country to country. In ancient competitions the emphasis was on the final result, rather than the method that was used. The free style techniques and few rules that were used at the time confirm this fact.

In ancient history the sport was tailor made to suit society's need to survive. As the sport evolves over time, the sport became more focused on excellence and as a result it became less accessible to the average member of society. The large amount of rule changes that took place in the late 1800's and early 1900's changed the focus in athletics to the method on how the performance was achieved. As a result, in the early 1900's the free style competitions were replaced with competitions where all competitors used very similar methods.

With the exception of Road Running, Cross Country and Race Walking, the rules as it is applied today significantly reduces the capacity of the sport to accommodate large numbers of participants. The rule changes in the late 1800's and early 1900 have favoured certain life styles and body types.

Life styles and body types differ from country to country and from culture to culture. Free style athletics will give a better reflection of the specific skills of athletes in the various countries and will encourage larger participation of the relevant societies. It will also reduce the gap that exists between athletes with poor facilities and athletes competing in well developed facilities.

Will future rule changes encourage larger numbers of participants in athletics, encourage families and communities to participate, or will the demands of the highly specialized world of technology have an impact on the way that we practice our sport. Will the future see the sport specialising in such a way that the sprints races takes place on one day, the distance races on another day and the field events on yet another day?

The scientists are rapidly gaining knowledge on advanced sciences such as nano-technology and cloning. To what extend will advanced technology be used to shape the way we participate in athletics. Will advanced technology such as nano-technology and cloning be utilized to enhance performance, or to replace redundant human body parts and organs of a few elite athletes.

The world of electronic games is growing in popularity at an astonishing rate. Will we in future use 3-D reality athletics games, with us as the passive participants in the game?

We can not assume that athletics will remain untouched by the industrial revolution that is gaining momentum. The underlying principle in our minds should be that "the only real constant in life is change". The question is how and when the evolution in athletics will take place? Will change be fast enough for athletics to survive the current industrial revolution?

The future of athletics will be determined by us!

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