

OVERVIEW

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Race walking: great progress - and more to come

Palle Lassen

Origins of race walking

It gives me great pleasure to see an issue of "New Studies in Athletics" dedicated to race walking. I am sure that readers will be reminded that the discipline of race walking has been a fully fledged element of the world athletics programme since the 1908 Olympic Games. I am also sure that this issue of NSA will be an important contribution to the growing world literature of the sport.

The origins of race walking as we know it stem from the dawn of international competitive sport in the latter years of the 19th century. Around the turn of the century the British writer Mr Innes in his book "Race Walking - A Primer of the Sport" gave the following definition of the discipline of walking:

"To run is to move on the ground with the legs in such a manner that both feet at every step are off the ground ... as distinguished from walking.

To walk is to move alternately setting one foot before the other without running, so that one foot is set down before the other is taken up."

This first definition of the difference between running and walking is essentially the same as that currently in force in the IAAF Handbook. Evidently the study of technique to achieve maximum speed whilst avoiding lifting was already a subject of close attention and analysis in the days of Hugh W. Innes.

In his book, he goes on to say:

"The sprint walker, if he is going at a great pace, ought to have his knee quite straight at the beginning of the stride. The reason is obvious. You can reach

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further forward with a straight leg than with a bent one. And so in each case the heel comes into contact with the ground, the weight is transferred from the back foot to the front."

He concludes by saying that:-

"A bent knee throughout the stride inevitably will lead to lifting when the pace is increased to racing speed."

Since 1968, when the Mexican walkers first came on the international scene, great progress has been made both in the speed and the skills of race walking. Spectator interest has grown in line with improvements in performance. However, the world records for 50 km and 2 hours were set in 1979 and the 20 km record has stood since 1984. These are rather long periods for world records to stand.

There are of course some road walking performances which surpass these world records, but official world records are required to be set on a track with continuous judging throughout the whole race in order to validate the performance.

Problems of judging

It is true that in race walking, as in every event, it is the world class athlete's goal to perform to the limit of his ability. This is especially so in supreme international competitions such as the World Championships in Athletics, the Olympic Games, and the IAAF World Race Walking Cup. In race walking however there is the added difficulty that, in reaching for the limits, athletes need to stay within the definition of walking as set down in the rules. These rules are known and accepted by athletes, coaches and judges alike. Race walking, therefore, must be considered as a technical discipline within the athletics programme.

Notwithstanding the knowledge of the rules, the experience and objectivity of the judges, there is always the danger, and the fact, of controversial decisions and subsequent contentious debate over the interpretation of the rules. This is nothing new

and has occurred since the earliest days of race walking competition. Nor is it restricted to race walking. Controversy is endemic in every sport where the opinion of judges can be a major influence on the result; whether it be the marks given by judges in skating or gymnastic competitions, or crucial decisions made by referees and line judges in ball games.

The use of technology by way of slow-motion, freeze frame, and numerous photographic techniques in order to "catch out" and confront judges and athletes is the "in thing" nowadays and creates and promotes public controversy. Of course, these devices are often used by people who have neither the background to watch and judge the sport properly nor goodwill towards it. But we cannot make the technology "go away", nor do we wish to. We ourselves gain great value from it in our training and education in order to widen the experience and the perceptions of both athletes and judges.

We have to recognize that the human eye does not work with the same speed as the camera. Neither does it have the facility for freeze frame or action replay. The judges do not have these facilities that set out to prove that an athlete is breaking the rules. Judgements have to be made on the spot while the event is in progress. We have no alternative but to leave these decisions to the judges alone, within the limits of their "equipment" to exercise their responsibility.

However, maintaining the credibility of race walking and the respect of all those associated with it – coaches, athletes, judges, commentators etc. – requires us to take a serious approach to the understanding and interpretation of the rules through training, education and presentation.

Educating judges

Over the last 10 - 12 years there have been great improvements in the education of judges, and it has been apparent that the courage, consistency and quality of the

judging has had a beneficial effect on competitions and results. This has been particularly evident in Championship level events. However, I must acknowledge that it is still necessary for us to give high priority to the widespread education of judges in order to achieve consistency and high quality. This needs to be done at the level of the IAAF as well as in each of the Member Federations. This work must include both theoretical and practical education. It cannot be done in a single seminar, and needs to be continuously updated. I also feel that walking must be included as a part of the all round education of officials, along with all the other track and field events, as we do not want to create a "walking family" regarded as a specialized "one-eyed" group.

The International Athletic Foundation, on the recommendation of the IAAF Walking Committee, set up a study, led by Professor Brüggemann of the German Sport High School in Cologne, on "The Biomechanics of Race Walking". This study covered not only the technical performance of athletes but also the observation by judges of athletes in competition. The report was positively acclaimed by the Committee and it has stimulated intense discussion. It is hoped that a further study can be arranged in order to develop new and relevant proposals to benefit both the athletes and the on-going education of judges. A broader study may also have an influence on IAAF Rule 191 governing "Walking".

Visions of the future

The future of race walking offers the fascinating vision of a branch of athletics that captures the imagination of untold masses of people who seek to participate in events which improve their fitness and to enjoy the social involvement of their family and friends. If we take into account the extraordinary popularity of long distance running events, and consider the relatively less daunting challenge of "going for a long walk", the potential for mass walking

events may be enormous. But the future of our sport also offers a challenge to those with the talent and application to master the technique of the sport in order to perform the discipline to the limit of its definition.

A vital aspect of the future of race walking is the fact that it can be mastered just as well by women athletes as men. Since the beginning of the 1980s we have seen a veritable explosion of high quality performances by women athletes outside Europe. This is an important factor in promoting race walking as an all-round, universally available sport that takes place throughout the year.

The future also holds the promise of more literature on race walking. In 1989 the IAAF published its pamphlet on "The Judging of Race Walking". Two further booklets are already planned: "The Organising of a Race Walk Competition" and "The Coaching of Race Walking".

Conclusion

The enthusiasm and dedication of volunteer officials and organizers has always played a vital role in the family of athletics. Our sport needs plenty of officials all prepared to carry out their tasks in a fair and objective way.

We must realize that criticism will always be with us. This is a healthy thing and serves to keep all those involved in active athletics alert. In its best sense criticism implies an effort to see things clearly and truthfully. No one really escapes criticism, and the more eminent the person the more criticism may be expected. We must not worry about this. Fair and constructive criticism has always been accepted and used to improve the all-round development of our sport, and we will continue to use it this way in the future.

