



## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Craig Masback

by Sieg Lindstrom

USATF CEO Craig Masback—who made a name for himself in earlier roles as a world-class miler and TV commentator before he signed on to run U.S. track in '97—recently inked a 4-year extension of his contract.

High time, it seemed, to sound out the U.S. leader, now 49, for his current view of the sport:

**T&FN:** You've been on the job for close to 8 sometimes-trying years now. Were you ever tempted to quit and do something else?

**Masback:** I love this job. This is a great opportunity to take what I've done in my life—in terms of both life experience and job experience—and apply it to something that means a lot to me. Not all that

many people get the privilege of doing that. That background means that I can put up with an awful lot, and there have been some very challenging times over the last 7-plus years, but there has never really been a time where I said, "I don't want to do this anymore."

**T&FN:** Is there some major goal that you hold out as what you want to achieve?

**Masback:** I came into the job with my eyes pretty wide open. Therefore I've had from the start the knowledge that whatever we were going to achieve was going to be achieved through incremental progress. And I would love to be proven wrong by someone else, but the fact is the place occupied by track & field in the U.S. sports and cultural landscape is such that our best expectation needs to be to gradually improve our position on that landscape.

That's measured in a variety of ways. It's measured in how many people participate in a sport, where we were doing well and we're still doing well. It's measured in how many quality events you have, how many people attend those events. It's measured in the number of national television shows, the quality of those shows—in other words, where they're appearing, what kind of ratings they get. It's measured in sponsorship and what the economic value of the sport is. That's not an exclusive list of the measures.

**T&FN:** In what area do you think we've made the most progress?

**Masback:** I think we've made incremental progress in all areas. That was what I expected that we'd do, that's what I set out to do and that's what we've done.

It takes a real understanding of the resources that we have and don't have in order to understand what the expectations should be.

So I don't begrudge people who want to have a track & field league: "If we just had a track & field league; that's what works for other sports. A multi-city league; people would respond to that."

Just taking that idea as an example: good idea, well intended by the number of people that have proposed it. But think of the barriers to that. When would the season be? How would you ever get the athletes to compete as frequently as would be necessary to develop the fan

**"There has never really been a time where I said, 'I don't want to do this anymore.'"**

## On TV's Track-For-Dummies Problem

**T&FN:** Track fans who do know what's going on resent track-for-dummies TV coverage.

**Masback:** No one who loves track loves track on TV, right? Name someone who does. I defy you. But you've got to compare it to what else is out there. What other Olympic sports have comprehensive television coverage?

Both in terms of how much there is and how good it is, it has to be put in that context.

The one thing I can say is we have more than we did have. Do we have enough more? No. Should we have more? Yes. Should we

have better commentary? Yes. Should we have a different mix between feature material and action? Yes.

So I join in the criticism. But the fact is we have it, and by having it, it is enabling our meets to generate more significant sponsorship, which makes it possible for them to pay more prize money and to hold more events, which enables our athletes to keep their careers going, which enables them ultimately to reach their potential, which enables them to win medals—which is what our job at USA Track & Field is all about ultimately. So it's all part of a larger whole.

But it doesn't mean that people should be satisfied with how it is or shouldn't be critical. Anytime anyone has a problem with the

television coverage it is vitally important that they write to the network and tell the network two things:

"1. Thank you for covering this sport. I and my family and friends love watching track on television."

"2. Your coverage sucks because of X, Y and Z."

That will do more to encourage networks to show more and to improve what they're showing than anything else that can happen. Because even if they're an NBC show where we have a 2.5 rating, over 5 million viewers, 5 letters coming in is a lot. People voicing their opinions makes a difference; a positive difference.

loyalty? Do you become the NFL or the NBA or do you become World Team Tennis, which has always been the bastard stepchild of the tennis world?

**T&FN:** Or do you become NASCAR? I have two friends, a former sub-4:00 miler and an Olympic Marathon Trials qualifier. They have become huge NASCAR fans and neither follows track very closely. Why are we losing such people?

**Masback:** It's too hard to be a fan. There aren't enough meets, so that only if you have the good fortune to live near a meet can you go to one. What meets exist do not receive adequate visibility, not only in their own markets where they're taking place, but on a national basis. And we don't have the resources to wave a wand and change that all at once.

**T&FN:** Is it frustrating for you that many top U.S. stars skipped the indoor season and the Visa Championship Series?

**Masback:** Ultimately I want athletes to choose to compete in a way that most allows them to succeed when it counts: at World Championships or Olympics. So if that means they have to abbreviate their domestic seasons either indoors or outdoors in order to be prepared for the ultimate competition, I'm all for that, even if it is not ideal from a standpoint of promoting domestic track & field.

**T&FN:** Are you happy with track on television?

**Masback:** Guess what? We get better ratings than certainly every other sport in our sort of category.

We get better ratings than the NHL. I don't know that anyone else would put us in their category, but from a television perspective, our average rating on NBC last year for 7 shows was a 2.5. That was the average rating for the NBA in the regular season on network television. Never mind cable; we're much better than what the NBA got on cable.

So we've done it on TV. We've got a story to tell: The demographics of our audience, the number of people that will watch.

As much as people moan about television and that television tells these stories and doesn't show enough events, the reason television tells stories is to give people who have no clue what the sport's about an opportunity to have some reason to be interested.

And I believe you've got to do the same thing for the live audience as well because I don't think you can assume that the people attending have any idea what's going on.

You've got to make them understand that an event's about to start and where it starts and where it finishes and what the strategy is and



In his days as a miler, Masback (r) ran with the big dogs. Here at the '81 nationals he's on the line with sub-3:50 types (l-r) Jim Spivey, Sydney Maree & Steve Scott.

who are involved in the matchups.

**T&FN:** Having your job, you are often a lightning rod for complaints. Is that fair?

**Masback:** The criticism that if I were sitting on the outside that I would make would be, "Well, it just hasn't happened fast enough."

First of all, that's valid. I agree, OK. But second of all, the only flaw in that logic is that to have made a dramatic difference you would have needed substantially more money, and I invite anyone to show me the economic model that would have produced that money.

What fuels these other sports is an investment opportunity that

people have in the sport, to be an owner of something. So you've got Phil Anschutz who [owns 5, formerly 6] MLS teams. The MLS has lost \$300 million; he's probably lost 250 of the \$300 million.

There is no model by which such a person can get involved and forecast two kinds of returns. One is an ego return: "I'm the owner of a major league sports team." And the other is an economic return.

Ironically, because when I started we had no money for what was then being called the Golden Spike Tour. Our series of elite events is profitable. Our television series makes money because there's no other choice. Not only that, our television shows make

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## On The BALCO Scandal

**T&FN:** Track has suffered a black eye—along with baseball and football—from the BALCO scandal. Do you regret that USATF and other organizations did not attack the doping problem more proactively earlier?

**Masback:** I think anyone involved with track & field should be proud of the fact that track & field, at whatever stage drug testing was in, was always at the head of whatever was being done. Having said that, what we did domestically and what the IAAF did internationally over a period of years was inadequate. And it wasn't because anyone was covering anything up or was deliberately not trying to achieve a level playing field. It was because of the technology that was available at the time, the resources available and the realities.

No one was offering to do the testing and adjudication for USA Track & Field. If we didn't do it ourselves, nobody would have done it. So we could have been like the rest of the 180 countries in the world, who were doing nothing, or we could have done the best job we could.

The reality is we did the best job we could. The reality is it wasn't good enough, and BALCO was a slap in the face.

For our sport there's no going back. The only place for us is to be the most vigorous, the most punitive, the most open about drug testing that we can be.

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money for the networks.

ESPN under the old NHL contract was paying \$750,000 per game and was getting ratings that were half of what their track meets were getting. They were generating \$200,000 in revenues against the \$750,000.

*T&FN: So why were they doing it?*

**Masback:** Well, because to be a sports network you have to have a certain amount of stuff. And one of track's handicaps is there's only so much of our stuff. Now the purists would love to see the state meets of every state on television, they'd love to see every conference meet and every dual meet of every college in the country, but realistically there's not an appetite on a national basis for that.

*T&FN: The Armory Collegiate Invitational, which I attended on Millrose weekend, was a great meet with television potential. If many U.S. stars won't come out for parts of the domestic season, why not put the focus on hot collegiate or high school meets?*

**Masback:** We have done that, and it's not as consistently as we might for a variety of business reasons, but [for example] the Penn Relays were no longer on television. That's a fact: they had lost any television that they had. We came in and we delivered the television and we changed the participation of elite athletes from Nike-vs-adidas-vs-Reebok to USA-vs-The World.

The attendance at the Penn Relays—whether [meet director] Dave Johnson would choose to ascribe it to this or not—has gone from 35,000 on Saturday to 50,000 on Saturday since we started doing that.

The Armory meet that you attended used to be a week later. Through our intervention, we got it to move to the same weekend as Millrose and, as we conceived it, it was to have been a celebration of track & field where the two meets would have been fully integrated.

In my view, there should have been images from the Friday events in the Millrose show had things gone exactly as they should have—video images. The two events should be totally integrated.

One of the reasons we suggested linking the meets in some way is that the NCAA restricts the number of competitions that college teams can take part in on a season-by-season basis. And then they have these very onerous and high qualifying standards. And that's if one person runs.

If one miler from Arkansas goes and runs

at the Millrose Games, that counts as a team competition so essentially the NCAA played a critical role in killing the big arena meets. Coaches had to choose between taking one athlete and having that count against the whole team, or taking the whole team to an NCAA-type qualifying meet, which essentially is what the Armory is.

By making it one meet, then you get past that so it was no problem having the Collegiate Invitational sprints at Millrose. It was the same meet for all intents and purposes.

So your suggestion is a good one—we've done it to a limited extent and we should do it more.

*T&FN: What kinds of meets would you most*



Masback hosted IAAF head Lamine Diack at last year's Penn Relays, a meet with burgeoning attendance.

*like to see more of?*

**Masback:** I think more country-versus-country events or matches between regions. That is my big idea. That's what gets people turned on. There's a difference in the ratings for championship events and Olympic events and for invitational events. The invitational meets—the international invitational meets especially—are just too much the same. They're concentrated in a very small geographic area and it's just not that interesting to people. You may have read that we've been very instrumental in working with the USOC to bring about this USA-vs-China-vs-Russia match that's going to take place in Seattle.

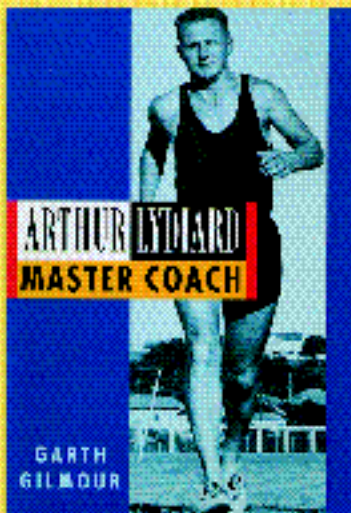
*T&FN: After Millrose many people I spoke with complained that the music during the shot was too loud. They hated the presentation. I might be hearing just an "insiders" echo chamber, but does USATF survey the paying public on these questions?*

**Masback:** What we do is routinely—but not every meet—survey the crowd about favorite events, favorite athletes, presentation changes.

When we did head-to-head sprints for women in 1999—we ran two qualifying rounds of four women, we qualified the two winners for the final, they ran head-to-head—that was meet in and meet out the most favored competition of the meet. That's what the fans said they wanted to see again. The women at that time didn't want to do it again. They and/or

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their agents didn't want to do it.

Previous surveying has shown that the shot

put is one of the most popular events so that's why you see the shot put center stage.

We hire or engage intern-type people to systematically ask questions, and our sponsors do it too.

*T&FN: What's your sense concerning the "too loud" complaints?*

**Masback:** My sense is if the sport doesn't change it will disappear altogether. That's an international phenomenon, not just here in the U.S., that the sport has to change. That's not to say that that presentation was perfect, but if you don't try things you'll never know "what if."

I hope we do hear from people about that Millrose shot put, both negatively and positively. It was a strong statement; it was not a neutral presentation. It seems to me either you would like it or you wouldn't like it. I don't think you could necessarily come out in the middle.

I wish we had tried more stuff like that previously because I don't think it's something that you can ever get right the first time you try it. Inevitably, you're going to have to try different things.

*T&FN: What do we as a sport have to sell this year? What gets you excited for 2005?*

**Masback:** What gets me excited is this whole new generation of athletes which emerged from the beginning of the Trials and through the Games. And what they were able to achieve as a group against all odds. You had a sport that was battered and beaten for a period of months leading up to the Trials in the ignorant speculation that there would be dominance at the Trials by people who would not be able to compete at the Games because of drug problems when, in fact, those people were not a factor by and large.

New people emerged who by all rights should not have done well. They theoretically didn't have the experience or the seasoning required. And many of them were college athletes for whom there had already been a long season. Yet they did do it. And that's a great thing.

*T&FN: It seems that U.S. track gold medalists are not as famous as they were in, say, 1972. The Olympic bump is not as big as it used to be.*

**Masback:** I think it's too early to tell. We're just getting into a new season. There's been a major piece in Sports Illustrated on Jeremy Wariner, and the returns home of Lauryn Williams and other athletes have received lots of attention locally and nationally. Toby Stevenson really seems to be somebody who has taken on a national persona. So I think it's too early to tell.

I think the world is different now. It's not just about a single achievement anymore; it's about a record of multiple years of achievement. And we've got a lot of young athletes now who have a chance to have multiple years of achievement at World Championships and Olympics. So let's see how they do. □



CHRIS COLEBETTY IMAGES

**In '94 Masback ran in the special 40-year commemoration of Roger Bannister at legendary Iffley Road. Coincidentally, in '78 that had also been the site of his very first sub-4:00 too.**