

DAN FERRIS

T&FN Interview by Bob Hersh

There aren't too many things which all track experts can agree upon but one of them is certainly the identity of the individual who has had the greatest influence on American track in this century.

Daniel Ferris was Secretary-Treasurer of the Amateur Athletic Union from 1927 to 1957, a title which belied his true role with the organization—he ran it. Since his "retirement" 17 years ago, Dan has remained active in amateur sports. He can still be found daily behind his desk at the National AAU's New York office. He remains the US representative to the IAAF Council, and is considered one of its most respected members.

On July 7, Dan celebrated his 85th birthday. From his silver hair, and perhaps his slightly breaking voice, you might be able to guess that he is an octogenarian, but then again you might not. For one thing, he's had that hair for decades. Then, too, you'd probably be deceived by his unhesitating and unaided gait, his mental alertness and his general outlook and demeanor, which bear little hint of his age.

T&FN: How did you first come to work for the AAU? Did it arise from your being a runner?

Ferris: No, that came later. I got a job with the AAU in 1907. I had just finished business school and had heard that there was a position open as secretary to James Sullivan, so I took it. At the time, it was just a job.

T&FN: What have been the greatest changes in the AAU since those early days?

Ferris: Well, for one thing, it has grown enormously. When I came to work, I was the only full-time paid employee. By the time I retired, we had a full-time staff of eight. Now there are something like 28, although I can't see that they're accomplishing that much more.

Another very important difference has been the role of the district associations. The national used to get a lot of help from the district people, and the districts themselves were much more active than most of them are now.

T&FN: How would you compare the athletes of the early part of the century with those today?

Ferris: Well, of course, athletes train harder today, and have better facilities. I remember running on cobblestones myself. But there were some great ones then, too. I believe that if Paavo Nurmi were running today, he'd be right up there with the best of them.

T&FN: Who was the greatest athlete you've ever seen?

Ferris (without hesitation): Jim Thorpe. He was not only the Olympic decathlon and pentathlon champion, but he was the best at lacrosse, baseball and

football. He could do anything.

T&FN: While we're asking questions like that, how about the greatest event you ever saw?

Ferris: The 1500 at the 1912 Olympics. Abel Kiviat had just broken the world record, and there were three other strong American entries—John Paul Jones, Oscar Hedlund and Norman Taber. Any one of them could have won, but then the British fellow Arnold Jackson came along and foiled them all. I still remember that race. More recently, I'd say the 800 at the '56 Games, when Tom Courtney was passed in the homestretch and still came back to win.

T&FN: Dan, looking back over the administrative side of your long career, what achievement has given you the most personal satisfaction?

Ferris: I guess that would be the inception of the athletic exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. That goes back to 1955 when the Soviets had a chess team over here. I asked one of their representatives about possibly getting together in other sports. An exchange of letters followed, then we met with their people at Melbourne in 1956. There we arranged for a wrestling match in New



Courtesy Scholastic Coach

Ferris has been a contemporary of great American athletes since the days of Jim Thorpe. This mid-'30s shot shows him in Madison Square Garden with star miler Glenn Cunningham.

York and a track meet in Moscow, both in 1958. As you know, there has been a great series of athletic matches since then.

T&FN: What would you consider other milestones of the AAU under your leadership?

Ferris: One of the things I've always been very proud of is the Junior Olympic program, which has produced many of our great track men, including Rafer Johnson and Bill Toomey. Another is the national physical fitness program, which the AAU took an important part in and which has been significant both in terms of the national health and, back in the World War II days, in our military preparedness.

T&FN: On the negative side, I would suppose that the most troublesome problem of the AAU has been the long-standing dispute with the NCAA. Do you think that can be resolved?

Ferris: I can't understand why there was ever any argument with the NCAA. As I told Walter Byers once, if the NCAA wanted to, they could virtually take control by having the colleges get active in the AAU, vote delegates and eventually vote in their own officers. They've done this at the district level in some of our associations and they could have done it nationally.

T&FN: Is this still possible?

Ferris: Sure, why not? It could actually be a good thing for the AAU, too, if more people got active at the grass roots level. But what they're doing instead just isn't working. There is no way they can succeed as a separate organization. They've applied to the IAAF, but I assure you that as long as the AAU maintains its program, there is no chance that the IAAF will drop its recognition of the AAU as the official governing body for US track and field.

T&FN: There has been much talk lately about liberalizing some of the restrictions on amateur athletes? What do you think will come of this?

Ferris: There seems to be a tendency to let some of the bars down. One problem is that many athletes cannot afford to leave their jobs and families to make international trips on their own. A proposal now being considered will allow compensatory pay for time lost from work. That seems to me to be a good solution. Of course, the pay will not be allowed to exceed what the athlete would make at his usual job.

T&FN: What do you think of pro track?

Ferris: I think it's a good thing for athletes who want to make money by competing.

T&FN: Do you think there will ever come a time when amateurs will be able to compete against pros?

Ferris: I don't foresee that. □