

Meet Directors Roundtable

The guiding lights behind three prestigious U.S. relay meets discuss the important role their huge get-togethers play in the scheme of the modern sport in the U.S.

by Jon Hendershott

Dave Johnson, Bob Ehrhart and Scott Davis preside over annual U.S. meets featuring far more athletes than the USATF or NCAA nationals, or even the Olympic Trials.

Even though all three meets lean heaviest toward college and high school participation, each has individual aspects which uniquely reflect on the health of U.S. track.

Johnson's Penn Relays—with its seemingly countless prep 4x4s—often draws close to 50,000 spectators for its final day of ultra-hot action. Ehrhart's college-oriented Drake Relays sells out every year, the centerpiece of the university's homecoming festivities. Davis's Mt. SAC Relays runs over two weekends, and its fields—while they run from kids through Olympians—receive the most play for providing an early-season venue for the

Dave Johnson used to manage stats for *Track & Field News*. Now he's in charge of the long-running Penn Relays carnival.



nation's elite athletes.

Ehrhart, 65, is the senior member of the directing trio. The '97 edition will be his 28th as head of the Iowa carnival. A national-class vaulter in his competitive days at Northwestern (=3rd at the '54 NCAA), Ehrhart coached at Drake '69-'92.

Davis, 53, and Johnson, 45, were named directors of their meets last fall. Davis has been head announcer at Mt. SAC since '85, while Johnson was previously associate director at Penn, then interim director last year. Both are longtime T&FN contributors, Johnson serving as the magazine's statistical editor in the '80s.

Johnson and Davis recently were elected vice-presidents of the national meet directors association, a brainchild of Ehrhart's.

The Drake head served as the group's first president following its founding in '93.

At 103 years, Penn is the longest continually-running college meet in the U.S. And only a prep league meet in Philadelphia itself has existed longer. Drake celebrates its 88th meet this year; southern California's Mt. SAC its 39th.

We sat down with the three impresarios at the USATF Convention in San Francisco and discussed their roles:

T&FN: Is there one facet of directing your meets that is most difficult to manage year after year?

Johnson: I feel the thing we have to be most vigilant about is that we don't lose our focus. Which is that we are, by a long way, both a high school and college track meet.

We can't get sucked into being a meet for the elite—although they come, in increasingly good numbers and they're very important. But they're the frosting on the cake. They're not driving our attendance.

We figure that many of the people in the stands have been to one of the colleges competing—and nearly all the people in the stands have been to one of the high schools represented. That's



Cast here in his familiar behind-the-mike persona, Scott Davis now also directs southern California's Mt. SAC Relays.

our driving force.

Davis: If I could characterize Mt. SAC in one word, it's that clearly we're a development meet.

The first two days, the Amateur Athletic Foundation youth days, draw about 10,000 kids. The next weekend, we have the other portions: the high school-JCs, university-college and a substantial invitational division.

While I agree that the invitational section doesn't drive our meet either, I feel that more than Penn it certainly drives our attendance. Plus, with our weather usually being very good—and being known in the past as a meet which basically won't turn anyone away—the biggest challenge we have is, where do we draw the line?

At the '96 meet, we often had to have two invitational races. For example, we had 16 invitational 100m guys, all of whom had run 10.20 or better. How do you turn them away? It's a real problem to get everybody in, and that's the biggest challenge for our meet.

T&FN: And how about Drake?

Ehrhart: This is our 88th year coming up, so we are a very consistent meet and I don't think our philosophy has changed. We're different from the other two major meets in that we have

always considered ourselves a university and college level meet. But we also try to give fans a little dessert by trying to bring in several elite athletes.

We don't try to change things much. We have 78 or 79 events, but we run it within two days. So one thing we feel is important, but is hard to do, is start on time, stay on time and finish on time.

T&FN: *How do you all feel your special type of meet affects the health of U.S. track?*

Ehrhart: Over the past few years, we have added some grade-school shuttle relays. So we have youngsters involved. By doing this, we feel that in a few more years, many of those kids will become loyal Drake fans.

Since we have only two days, we have worked very hard to also include as many high schoolers as possible. Jim Duncan, our long-time announcer, once did a survey and concluded that for every high school athlete usually about four other people come to see that athlete compete.

So we continue to have good high schoolers, even though we don't have anyone from outside the state of Iowa. I feel that most people come first to see the high schools compete and then the collegians.

Davis: Mt. SAC really starts from the ground up, with the youth division. Even the final big day starts off with one of [former director] Don Ruh's favorites, the "munchkin runs" for little kids. We have a tremendous following for those races—as well as the youth and high school sections. We give the chance to compete to a huge number of kids.

We also have a tie-in to attract fans: 8–9 Sunday morning, anyone entering the stadium for the munchkin races can stay all day for free. The parents and fans of those kids can see the entire invitational section.

T&FN: *Penn's high school divisions also reach the highest competitive level each year, as do the university divisions.*

Johnson: High school athletes are more than half of our competitors. Then about 40% are collegians and the rest are junior high, Masters and club-level athletes.

In terms of Penn's affecting the health of the sport, it always bothers me when the claim is made that U.S. track is healthy because Drake had another sellout, or Penn drew 40,000. People don't understand that our three meets aren't truly indicative of the sport. They're "events"—institutions in and of themselves. They're attended because of their event status, not just because they're track meets.

What we all do to benefit the sport is the cross-fertilization between age groups. A youngster sees an Olympic champion run on the same day he does. That's a tremendous

thrill for kids. It helps keep them in the sport; and if the kids stay in the sport then their parents stay in the sport as spectators.

I feel that most of the spectator interest in U.S. track is at the high school level. Yet many of those fans, who mostly are parents, tend to drift away from the sport as soon as Johnny or Jane is through running. The key is that regeneration at the youth level.

T&FN: *Some observers believe there is a rivalry*

last available window for schools to run relays.

The other thing is, because the two meets operate on the same weekend and are so successful and crowds are great, schools want to get to at least one meet or the other. Between the two of us, there aren't many major Division I schools that are missing.

That's where having Drake helps Penn a lot. We both see a lot of schools which will split their squads. It's like a wave that goes back and



Bob Ehrhart, shown here with distance star Jim Spivey after a Drake distance win, was the catalyst behind the forming of the national meet directors association.

between Penn and Drake. Is there?

Ehrhart: I've always had great relationships with all the directors. I've never felt there is any competition between our meets—actually, we at Drake always have felt there is plenty of track to go around.

There are a lot of Midwest schools which have been loyal to us, just as there are a lot of Eastern schools which have been loyal to Penn. We always try for a good geographic distribution of college teams.

Johnson: I don't feel there is any rivalry. If anything, we have a symbiotic relationship. We need each other to survive. NCAA rules on qualifying for the nationals almost dictate that you can spend only a couple of weekends at most out running relays. A team needs to go seek qualifying marks at almost every opportunity. I feel that's the main reason the former great Midwest Relay Circuit [Texas-Kansas-Drake on consecutive weekends] has died off.

If either Penn or Drake went under, I think the other almost certainly would follow. The other meet would be out there all by itself in the

forth between Drake and Penn. One can be riding high at one moment, and the other can be higher at another moment. But there's never a time when one meet is superior to the other in all the relays.

T&FN: *At one point all three meets were on the same weekend. But Mt. SAC was the one to change. Was it mainly to spread the talent around?*

Davis: I was only a spectator then and not involved in putting on the meet. But back then, Texas and Kansas were far healthier than they are now, so there really were five relay-type meets vying for talent. I'm sure Don Ruh felt that if Mt. SAC was to remain successful, it had to change its date.

T&FN: *Have you ever considered the idea of working with the NCAA to designate certain events in each of your meets as, say, an "NCAA relay championship" to give a national breadth to some events? Or is that even desirable?*

Johnson: It's been bandied about, but nothing in official circles. But I don't think it would be desirable.

Ehrhart: At our university, we wouldn't

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want the NCAA to tell us how to run our meet. We're very independent. I feel it's key for directors to have a lot of authority.

I've never heard from the NCAA in my tenure at Drake and it doesn't sound like the other directors have heard anything either. We're very satisfied with where we are.

Johnson: Also remember that, although we're trying to put out the best teams possible, they're still developmental races. They're leading up to what teams will do for the rest of the season. Nobody's claiming that a distance

medley win means you've got the best half-miler or miler in the country. It stopped being an individual sport when you stepped on the track with a baton.

For the NCAA to declare some relay a championship, they'd have to hold their own separate meet at the end of the season. In a way, they already do, with the 4x1 and 4x4 at the NCAA itself. If they want to add a 4x2, medleys, shuttle hurdles and all that, let 'em do it.

T&FN: Might it ever be possible to consider a new kind of relay circuit: Mt. SAC on the second weekend of April, Penn or Drake on the third weekend and the other meet on the last weekend of April? Or does getting NCAA qualifying marks restrict the time too much?

Ehrhart: The problem at our university really involves academia. The trustees have always mandated that we run on the last Friday and Saturday of April. We've talked about changing, but it's way above the level of the director. It's at the university level. Also, moving to an earlier weekend would bump us into the Kansas Relays. We've always had great relations with them.

Johnson: Another big problem is that we're always playing with weather, one way or another. Comparing results between Penn and Drake always has been unfair, because we get almost the same weather Bob gets, but about three days later.

But the big thing is, if we move back a week, we'd then run into conference meets and high school league or district meets. Penn is the tail that wags the dog of track in the East. At the championship end, high schools end with the state meet and work back to district, conference or league meets. Then you're back to Penn, in mid-season. So if we moved, we'd have a great effect over scheduling of both high schools and colleges.

Ehrhart: And university exams are getting closer and closer. We're starting to feel it even now. Some schools could be in exams either late in April or early in May, so that can hold back athletes from competing.

T&FN: Do you help any schools monetarily to get to your meets, or is it entirely up to them?

Ehrhart: We try to help six or eight teams on a geographic basis. It isn't a great deal, but it's something. Yes, it can make the difference for some schools whether or not they come to Drake. Every year, we get calls from schools saying they would like us to help them come, but we just can't.

Davis: Our situation is limited because we get zero money from Mt. SAC. Of the five major relay meets, we're the only one that isn't held at a four-year school. It's a two-year junior college. There is tremendous support, from the president's office on down and they bend over backwards for us. But financially, we absolutely have to stand on our own. We can't help people come to our meet, although sometimes we can help with hotel rooms.

T&FN: So what do you do to get some of the superstar athletes you each have had? Does someone else get them to the meets?

Ehrhart: We used to be able to do it just with our attendance. Just the last couple of years we have gotten involved with corporate sponsorship on a small level. We're making moves this coming year to get more such sponsorship from the city of Des Moines.

So we're just starting to deal with elite athletes and agents and we feel that corporations will have to help us in this area. We like to have a few such athletes and we'll probably find that's where the money will have to come from.

T&FN: Will agents and athletes waive a fee to help out a meet, or is it all just business as usual?

Johnson: For all the elite athletes we've had at Penn, we don't even discuss fees. We flatly refuse to pay fees or expenses. What we do offer is a lane on the track and a slot in a very

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tight time schedule. Our philosophy is that whatever money we have to go into a travel budget is going to the colleges. That's the backbone of our meet.

What we often do is work with USATF Development committees and provide a small number of hotel rooms for those athletes. But the event committees decide which events are held. We provide the chance to bring athletes together for development competitions, but we don't provide the resources.

T&FN: *What is Mt. SAC's situation, since you have so many more invitational events?*

Davis: We've been very fortunate in that agents like Joe Douglas, John Nubani and others who represent the best of the elite have been very helpful. Every Mt. SAC since 1980 has had some quality Santa Monica TC people. Yet we don't pay a dime. We could get a corporate sponsorship of a million dollars and I'm sure it would be used to bring in college teams. It is completely against our philosophy to pay elite athletes.

Also, we're lucky in that we rarely have weather problems. Athletes know it usually is nice at Mt. SAC. But a key for us is that the meet is early enough in the season so it's a real check for them to see where they are in their training. Then they still have time to modify their training if necessary.

Ehrhart: I'd like to say something about the elite athletes. We have had Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson, Gwen Torrence and many other world-class athletes. In terms of weather, we've had both snow and sun.

But not once in my years as director has an elite athlete not competed. The year Carl ran, it snowed in the morning. I called and asked if he still would compete. He said, "Of course I'll run." Michael Johnson was the same. People should know that the elite athletes *do* care that the spectators are happy.

T&FN: *Is there anything for each of you to change in your meet to maintain its success?*

Ehrhart: We'll make some additions this year, since we try to follow the NCAA schedule of events. So we'll add the women's pole vault and hammer. We try to stay abreast of the additions to the national program.

But we also have to realize that we're in the entertainment business. So it's important that directors put on an entertaining program. We charge spectators to get in, so they expect something in return. As long as we remember there are classic events, people will come to see those.

Davis: I believe we're the only meet to contest every event. Our philosophy is that we'll contest everything, although we don't have quite the number of relay events per se that Drake and Penn have. Yet we're still jammed to get everything in three days.

T&FN: *Do you see the potential for any changes in the near future in the way you run your event?*

Johnson: From what we've seen in the last few years with new technology coming into the sport, there's a lot we can do in terms of expanding the schedule, adding more events, more competitive opportunities.

Also, technology has shown that we can do much, much more in how we present things.

Production values, the presentation of the meet, the flow of the meet, all can be improved dramatically now with scoreboard and timing technology. The next wave of what we do in the sport isn't necessarily going to involve athletes. It's going to be how we present the sport to the paying public.

T&FN: *Your meets all do well because there are directors, and a lot of other people, who love them and want to see them prosper and continue. Are there enough people like that today to keep them successful in the future?*

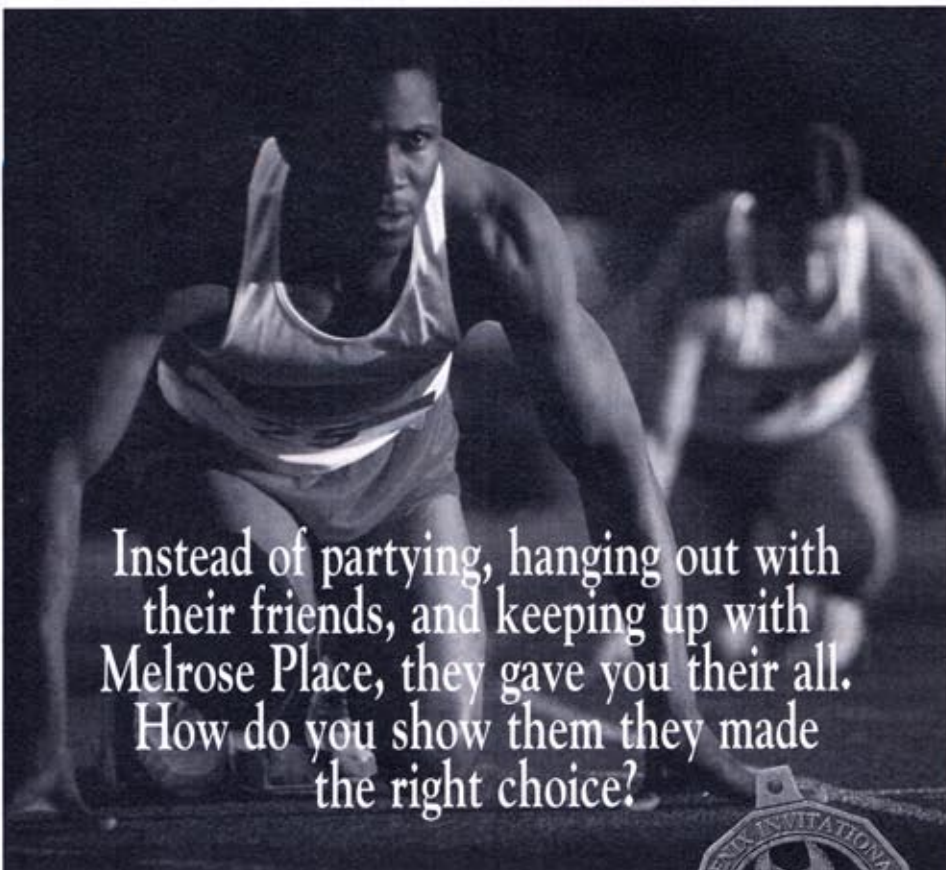
Ehrhart: At Drake, the Relays are homecoming. It isn't football, but the Relays. So many alums come back every year, not only to see the Relays but also to see their friends and classmates. So we try to aim something every

year at those fans.

Davis: Mt. SAC is so young compared to the other two meets, a lot of people have been on board since 1959, so we're able to recruit new people because they can see a continuity built over 38 years.

Johnson: I think there will be people to maintain the meets, although I don't feel they are strong because of the directors or who runs them. If you tried to start one of these meets from scratch, it would flop.

But they exist because they have been around for so long, they have become an institution unto themselves. Because of that, there will be successors in every facet of what's needed to perpetuate them, just because people will want to be involved. □



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