



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

AMERICA'S MOST WANTED? I was recently involved in an animated discussion on an Internet chat-list regarding the behavior of the Sacramento police during last year's Olympic Trials. I was in a definite minority when I defended their keep-people-seated mandate. I noted I had been so happy at the way they had helped keep sight lines open (well, as open as possible in a stadium with a horridly shallow pitch) that after the meet I went to the highest-ranking officer I could find and gave him my hearty thanks.

The majority position on the list was that the local gendarmerie had been far too zealous, and had compromised the viewing experience of many fans.

Standing up during track meets: a way to alienate longtime fans of the sport?

The two sides in this spirited debate appear to be split generally—but not completely—along age-based lines, with older fans more likely to be in the stay-seated camp. At this point I hasten to add that the pro-seat people don't vote that way simply because they're getting old and don't like to get up: it's because that's how they learned to watch meets. But people now

want to treat track more like one of the big ball sports, where being boisterous is part of the picture.

The pro-stand people were adamant that being forced to sit through a meet somehow compromised their ability to enjoy the proceedings. One poster made the strong argument that by curtailing standing the sport was driving away fans that it so sorely needs. The counter-argument is that there's no guarantee that these "new fans" were ever going to come back to another meet anyway, and that allowing unrestricted standing could help drive away the entrenched fan base. Now that's a terrible two-edged sword. How to gain new fans without alienating existing ones?

That the stand/sit debate exists at all is a terrific sign, by the way, because it means that there were enough people in the stands to create a problem. At far too many meets these days you can choose which 127 seats you want, set up your own volleyball court and enjoy the proceedings without disturbing your neighbors. It's the presence of lots of neighbors, I surmise, that leads the older generation to be sitters. They started in the sport at a time where all major meets played to packed houses, so having the good manners to stay seated became quickly ingrained. Good manners, or getting tired of somebody behind you yelling "down in front!"

Penn Relays director Dave Johnson also suspects that older patrons are more likely to want to remain seated because they like to write in their programs, which is one of the joys of the sport that appears to be disappearing.

Were the Sacto cops overly zealous in their getting the job done? I personally saw no evidence of excess, but one fan (and journalist) whose opinions I greatly respect said, "The three cops who were assigned to 'control' the section where I was sitting took people out of the meet for standing between events."

If that happened between all events, then it was indeed over the top. But how you feel about field events undoubtedly represents a significant part of the standing equation. There are many people for whom only the races matter, so they feel they aren't causing anybody a problem when they stand between races. Meanwhile, people behind them may well be intensely following the discus, or the triple jump. In the three-ring circus that is most track meets, one should always assume that there's something going on somewhere that somebody wants to watch.

The bottom line on Sacramento? From the places where I sat, my take is that the police allowed the crowd to behave as crowds do at all sporting events: you stay seated until something truly exciting is happening, then you go berserk, and it's accepted by all. Nobody is quicker to jump to his feet than I when it gets down to the nitty-gritty.

If the crowd-control people are going to err, I'd much prefer that they err on the side of good manners and keep people seated. But as Dennis Miller would say: I could be wrong.

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