



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

THE IAAF'S WILD-CARD SYSTEM—the one that allows defending champions a “free pass” into the World Championships—was supposed to be a win-win situation. It was designed to guarantee that the federation and the hosts faced minimal superstar losses, and at the same time it was going to protect athletes in talent-rich nations (read, the U.S.) who fell afoul of a sometimes onerous qualifying system.

The downside was, freed of the obligation to compete in the selection meets, some superstars predictably chose not to. That meant a marketing problem at the national level. A WC Trials meet that goes two editions in a row without the presence of Michael Johnson, as happened in '97 and '99, isn't exactly what the sponsors want to see.

The IAAF had no real choice but to turn control of the wild cards over to the individual federations, which led to USATF's mandating “competition” in Eugene, which led to Greene's only running in the first round (see p. 20), which led to no small amount of teeth-grashing.

Allow me to suggest that the solution may be a relatively simple one (and no, I'm not claiming any credit for it: it's not new, and I was reminded of it by a post on a track website). What do most major tennis tournaments do with superstars in the first round? What happens to the best teams in the opening round of the National Football League's playoffs? What did the Soviet Union used to do with Valeriy Borzov in the prelims of the 100 and 200 at its nationals? What have major invitationals like Zürich done to boil a 20-man sprint field down to 8?

Can you say *bye*? There is certainly ample precedent across many sports for giving top-end performers a free pass from the first layer(s) of competition.

If a Maurice Greene—or a Michael Johnson, or a Marion Jones, or any other wild card—only wants to run a single round, so be it. But instead of wasting the single race in the heats, have them run the final! Does that mean that only 7 sprinters will be fighting for 3 spots, instead of 8? Sure, but so what? In distance races you already might have 20; in field events a dozen or more. There's obviously nothing sacred about an octet.

Would the free-pass people have an advantage in the final, not having run a previous race? Perhaps (I've heard many sprinters say that they prefer the semis and finals on the same day because the first race is a good warmup), but since they're going to the WC anyway, they're not hurting anybody's chances who is already in the race.

What about field-eventers? Basically, I'm not sure there's a problem there because jumpers and throwers—unlike runners—generally seem eager to compete anywhere, anytime. And the USATF rule (just show up and compete) allows them to bail after a single attempt anyway, should they choose. If by some miracle USATF ever sees the light and goes back to a proper field-event qualifying system, instead of those ghastly flights, then you simply excuse the wild-card jumpers/throwers from the Q round.

Does all this represent an eye-opening departure from the way the Nationals have traditionally been run? Of course it does, but when the house is on fire you don't try and put it out with a squirt gun.

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