



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

THE NUMBER OF EVENTS in which the U.S. is a major factor on the international scene has been shrinking for years. Last season only three U.S. men—the lowest total ever—earned No. 1 World Rankings. One of the latest events in which Americans have become impotent is the 800, as Sieg Lindstrom investigates so well in his fine story starting on p. 42.

As the sport expands into a truly global one, it's only logical that the U.S. share of the pie should drop. For example, starting with Atlanta in '96, there have been five Olympic/World Champs races. The medals have been won by athletes from Algeria, Cuba, Denmark, Germany, Kenya, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Switzerland and the U.S. Welcome to the United Nations.

Question: are the timetables at the Nationals hampering the U.S.'s international effort?

But as Lindstrom's story shows, the 800 is about more than just the rest of the world getting better. It's about the U.S. staying the same—or maybe even getting worse.

Even more ominous is the ongoing U.S. shortfall in the field events. And on that score, globalization is much less of a factor. It's "easy" for developing nations to come up with good runners. Running doesn't require fancy equipment or coaches with sharp technical knowledge. Jumping and throwing do. The U.S. has more fancy equipment than anybody else, but I fear there's a problem with a dearth of technique-oriented coaches—and athletes for them to work with—in these restricted-scholarship days. It's far easier to build a collegiate program around sprinters and distance runners who can double up than it is to have a javelin thrower who is pretty much restricted to a single event.

But in both the 800 (and the 1500) and the field events, I fear there's another factor at play here, and that's the truncation of the schedules at both the NCAA and USATF Championships. As noted coach Frank Gagliano explains in the Lindstrom article, "rounds prepare you." Back in the glory days of the NCAA, few races (including finals) were more looked forward to than the semis of the 800. Kick-ass, take-no-prisoners racing.

Of course, that was also a time when there were 30-plus entrants, unlike the high-teens numbers we've seen of late. There aren't enough entrants now for three rounds. That's not the coaches' fault, but it is their fault that for years now we've been saddled with too many athletes advancing to the final on time, not place. And though USATF usually runs semis (but didn't last year), the damage has already been done. We've got a whole generation of 800 runners ill-prepared to learn the intricacies of pacing and moving through the rounds.

Even more dire, I fear, is what contraction has done to the field events. Call it the Curse Of New Orleans. The abomination that was the NCAA Champs of '93 in The Big Easy was repeated there in the '98 USATF and is now standard. No qualifying round. And worse yet, competition in flights.

Forget what bad theater it is for the fans, imagine what it does to the competitive instincts of the throwers and jumpers. Over the period of 2-3 hours they're in and out of competition, perhaps competing against their toughest rival, perhaps not (USATF does a decent job of pre-seeding; the NCAA does not). But if they're good, they know they've got 6 attempts in which to get the job done. Then they go to the Olympics/Worlds and suddenly there's a proper qualifying round. Three shots, baby, or you're history. Based on the results of the last few international majors, all too many U.S. jumpers/throwers simply aren't properly prepared for that system.

Of course, an NCAA system that has come to favor time-trialing as the way to get to the nationals—with actual competition to be eschewed at all costs—has already dulled the competitive instincts of too many athletes. But that's a rant for another time.

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