



from the editor

E. Gary Hill

LAST MONTH'S LIST OF MY 10 SECRETS to improving one's viewing of the sport included "Think of the sport as field & track." Anybody who was at Stanford for the Nationals and paid attention to coverboy Adam Nelson and his compatriots during the intense action in the shot surely knows what I meant. Watching people throw and jump can provide every bit as much excitement as a footrace, even if not as consistently.

The USATF men's shot was eye candy of the first order, from Nelson's crowd-pleasing pre-throw routine, to the rash of PRs to Nelson's getting the only men's meet records of the whole weekend.

Adam Nelson
helped show why
the sport can be
field & track

As Nelson later noted in his IAAF Diary, "The crowd stayed put, stayed rowdy, stayed frenzied and stayed with us. The crowd clapped and encouraged all of the finalists to bigger and better things."

He's right—the atmosphere was rock-concert electric.

Why, then, did the competition leave me with such a sense of loss? Because—excuse

me while I cue a broken record—I know how much more the event could have been were we not stuck with a flights system. This abomination breaks up competitions for athlete and spectator alike. How could it not? The first flight of throwers takes 30-45 minutes for their three attempts... then a 15-20 minute break for the second flight to warm up... then 30-45 minutes for flight two to throw... then another warmup break before what should be the "real" action begins.

As noted in this space before, marks from rounds 4 and 5 tend to be low on excitement no matter what system is used, and I'm an advocate of the only-4-attempts protocol, but normal jump/throw competitions tend to ramp up a bit in the final round. Not here.

Nelson's heroics aside—getting a meet record 72-10³/₄ on his final put as he did—last-round marks of significance were virtually nonexistent in all the jumps and throws. Of the five men's events contested with flights, exactly 2 of 40 final-rounds competitors (Nelson, plus John Godina in the discus) got their best mark in the sixth stanza. The women, aided by an anomalous 5/8 in the hammer, tallied 9 out of 40, still a pitiful total.

It's apparently, and understandably, just about impossible for athletes—save an intensity genius like Nelson—to maintain the psyche of the early rounds when a mid-competition warmup is thrown in. It's even harder on the fans, the ultimate second-class citizens when it comes time to set up the way meets are run.

To USATF's credit, at least their flight system has attempted to make things better for both fans and athletes by seeding the flights, with the better throwers in the second one. That means their six attempts come in fair proximity and people like Nelson, Godina and Toth go head-to-head all the way. Contrast that with the NCAA shot, where the four 70-foot types were split two and two. Whole lotta drama going on there. Particularly in a 19-man field (USATF had only 14). There's probably no truth to the rumor that two of the guys in the first flight earned their Masters degrees while waiting for their final three throws.

How to fix the problem? Assuming that USATF management hasn't become too paralyzed by years of the NCAA-inspired protocol, and actually likes doing it that way, it comes down to a matter of a host site's carrying capacity. There are only so many pits and rings available. So you either need to eliminate "other" events going on at the same time or hold the meet over more days. More days is a tough sell in a non-Olympic Trials year, so it has to be elimination of other events. Moving the multis to a different site was a great first step, but replacing them with the Juniors just put us back at square one.

All we are saying is give field a chance.