

**Response to Proposed Changes to Race Walking
from International Race Walking Athletes in Canberra
January 2019**

Meeting 14 January 2019

Present:

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Introduction:

We are a group of elite international race walkers who met to discuss the proposals recently published by the IAAF Race Walking Committee (RWC). This document is intended to capture the breadth of views put forward by the diverse athletes present, and also to emphasise collective majority opinions. Where possible, we have recommended practical steps that would likely help race walking survive and thrive. We have also addressed the two main concerns from the RWC's recent discussion document, as follows.

In-Shoe Technology (RWECS):

In principle, 11 attendees were in favour of the race walking electronic control system (RWECS) and 12 were against*. Even many of those athletes who endorsed the system in principle voiced strong concerns over its implementation. Many of the concerns raised are fundamental to the inception of RWECS, and many have remained posed but unanswered since RWECS was first mooted in 2013. Our concerns include:

- The timing of its introduction (currently proposed for January 2021) is rapidly approaching, and we have seen no ostensible progress to the system since the field test in 2017. Prior to its introduction, athletes and coaches must have adequate access to the system in order to become accustomed to it, and make any necessary adjustments to technique.
- Time must also be allowed for the production and distribution of insoles, receptors, transponders and other equipment, plus relevant officials must be trained in its proper use. Some attendees even proposed introducing it first to junior competition, to give senior athletes more time to adjust to the change.
- The potential for cheating, or rigging the system, in particular the insoles themselves.
- The ramifications of failure of any aspect of the system, even (or especially) if it only affects one athlete. We have all seen occasional failure of timing chips and other, simpler electronic systems. RWECS will surely also have the potential to fail.
- The setting of national and world records, and the difficulties in comparing times in pre-RWECS races and post-RWECS races.
- How will the equipment be distributed, what will the cost be, and who will pay? Currently race walking is extremely cheap, and the sport has very few obstacles to mass participation. These advantages could be erased if the RWECS is difficult to obtain or prohibitively expensive.
- Furthermore, if the RWECS is only used at top-tier competitions, will there be instances of athletes qualifying for such competitions by racing in non-RWECS races? If so, there is a risk of creating a double standard whereby athletes are deemed legal under one system but not the other. That is if RWECS does indeed create a significant change in the sport (and if it does not create significant change, why would it be implemented?)
- What will be the allowed flight-phase time? A shorter flight time will require a greater adjustment to technique. However, a longer flight time will not address concerns from the general public who misconstrue any flight time as 'cheating'.
- Members of the public unfamiliar with race walking often accuse race walkers of cheating when they see flight time. Has any market research been conducted to determine whether or not that perception would change if RWECS is introduced? And would RWECS make the event easier to understand for race-walking newcomers?

- Will athletes still be judged for bent knees, as in the current regulations?
- Assuming that judges will still be required for judging knees, and extra officials will be required to run the RWECS, will there be too heavy a burden in conducting a race? This is especially pertinent given the increase in required officials since the pit-lane has been implemented, and a trend (at least in Australia) towards having “judges’ assistants”.
- Currently an athlete can only receive one report per judge. Can the RWECS award more than one report to the same athlete?

Irrespective of the fate of the RWECS, there was unanimous agreement that judging standards must be addressed. There exists significant variation in how race walking is judged around the world, despite the heretofore efforts of the IAAF. This is something which should be easier, simpler and cheaper to change than the RWECS, and can be done concurrently. This should be the evolution before any revolution is decided upon.

As of January 2019, judge education varies significantly around the world. There are standardised presentations produced by IAAF, but they can be presented in markedly different ways depending on the presenter. Such variations increase further for in-situ judge education, where senior judges can explicitly and implicitly influence the judging styles and thresholds of junior judges, thus perpetuating judging inconsistencies.

Far from being a mere peeve expressed by discontented athletes, such inconsistency is currently at the heart of our sport’s image problem. Novice spectators are often gobsmacked and enraged within minutes of watching international competition due to the perception of a lack of fairness. This view is even shared by a portion of the athletics fraternity. Standardisation of judging is a fundamental step in improving race walking as a sport and as a product.

10km/30km vs. 20km/50km

A majority of attendees (19 vs. 5)** opined that the current distances of 20km and 50km should be retained. Paradoxically, in many respects we do not believe that the changing or maintaining of race distances is fundamental to the current debate on the survival and growth of the sport as a whole. That is to say that the preponderance of issues currently facing race walking will remain, irrespective of the distances raced. The opportunities for growth also do not fundamentally depend on race distances being retained or altered. Furthermore, debating this point may distract from more important issues affecting the future of our sport.

Much of our discussion involved speculation which is impossible to verify without independent market research. Those favouring the 10km (or 10,000m) largely believe that this shorter distance would attract more excitement, a greater audience, and greater sponsorship. They also site a high rate of attrition from junior to senior athletes, and believe part of the current problem is the increase in minimum race distance to 20km.

Conversely, most of our group believed these proposed benefits would be negated by other variables. There was concern that the shorter race would encounter the same problems as

the erstwhile 5000m race at World Indoor Championships, and ultimately meet the same fate, leaving race walking with only one championship event. Many attendees also believe that it would be a harmfully regressive step, given that the women's 10km event has previously been abolished.

A necessary consideration is the location of competition, i.e.: road or track. There was concern that fewer athletes could compete in a track race compared to a road race. There was unresolved debate around relative spectator numbers for track and road races. If walking races could capitalise on large stadium crowds then it would certainly help boost our profile and potential revenue. However, many were concerned that championship track walking races would be scheduled outside popular viewing periods. This has been observed at many track and field meetings globally. Finally, there was a strong feeling (which will be explored further in the final section) that road walks are uniquely placed to offer something special to athletics and Olympism more broadly, and that this potential is almost entirely untapped.

The 50km seems to be the most controversial event outside the race walking community, but it retains popularity for most race walking athletes, including some who hold in fanatically high regard. This is also a time where some endurance sports (most notably ironman triathlon, and ultramarathon running) are surging in popularity amongst the general public. While most viewers prefer to watch short events, there remains a large and stubborn minority who enjoys long, attritional events. In Olympic viewers, this group numbers in the tens of millions. While the current presentation of the 50km walk leaves a lot of room for improvement (on which more later), many viewers appreciate its tortuous length and difficulty. It is to the credit of race walking that we have an event even longer than the marathon, which is considered by most of the general population to be the ultimate endurance event. In any case, the fact that *most* viewers prefer short events only means that *most* (not all) events should be short in duration.

We acknowledge that there are detractors from the 50km event. However, we must ask if those who dislike the 50km event would enjoy a 30km event any more - the feeling amongst our group is that anyone who actively dislikes the 50km event would also dislike the 30km event. Furthermore, broadcasters would be no more likely to show all of a 30km than all of a 50km. The rich history of the 50km would also be lost, for an event without any notable history at all. We are not ignoring those who dislike the 50km as an event, however we believe changing to a 30km event is not the solution.

Other Ideas Worthy of Consideration:

Like all race walking stakeholders, we hope to see race walking survive and thrive through these difficult times. One gripe which took many forms was frustration with television broadcasters. Commentators invariably do a huge injustice to the sport by promulgating inaccurate or misleading information. They also inhibit viewer interest by having no insightful knowledge about competitors, tactics, or the nuances of race walking, which might otherwise convert channel-surfers to engaged audience members. Occasional guest commentary from experts has previously provided some relief, but the overall narrative driven by commentary

team is broadly terrible. Engaged, knowledgeable commentators are critical to viewer interest, and the IAAF should facilitate the upskilling of commentary staff.

Road cycling provides a good template for other more entertaining ways to present televised race walking. Pre-recorded interviews with key athletes can be inset and played concurrently with live race footage; there could be live crosses to other points of interest (DQ board, drinks station, coaches etc); athletes can be briefly introduced during the race, particularly drawing attention to those countries who are not highly represented elsewhere in the meet or Games. The status quo is not an attractive product, where a camera focuses on a race leader for long periods of time, without commentators mentioning more interesting battles further down the field, or providing any meaningful insight.

The above critique on television coverage applies equally to internet broadcasts, which is another area with huge potential for improvement. Currently, even top-tier Challenge races often don't provide a live stream. Those that do often use a single fixed camera with no commentary, and on a link that is almost impossible to find. It should be a requirement from IAAF that Challenge races provide a live stream, with a link that can be accessed easily through an official IAAF channel. A good test is whether it could be 'stumbled upon' by a general athletics fan.

Finally, video coverage should include live data from the RWECS, should the system be introduced. It would also be relatively straightforward to include athletes' heart rate and skin temperature data. IAAF has previously voiced concerns at privacy issues around these ideas, however when our group were surveyed, every single athlete said they would be happy having their information shared. We already sign disclaimers releasing our image rights to IAAF (or IOC, etc) during events, and adding biometric data would be no extra imposition.

As for the event on the ground, there is so much that can be improved. Race walking is uniquely positioned to offer a special thing to audiences (and to the sport of athletics), given that it is free, enclosed, and usually on courses easily accessible to the general public. We must move away from simply closing a road, holding a race and hoping that people will show up to watch. There are many ways to go about this, and more than one avenue can be pursued. Some examples include:

- Introducing child-friendly zones with games, face-painting, and 'have a go at athletics'.
- Live music.
- Bar and/or cafe facilities. It should be noted that in-stadium events which sell alcohol rarely descend into bedlam. 'Beer gardens' have been successfully employed in many track meets without incident, and a longer road walk is likely to be even more conducive to this style of entertainment.
- IAAF can arrange for other track and field athletes to hold 'meet and greet' sessions around the race walk course.
- Better engagement with sponsors, who can set up alongside the course.
- Junior, open-entry and regional walking races can be held at the same venue, in between championship races.

- Following the lead of some major marathons, a treadmill can be available for members of the public to try and match the pace of a top race walker.

Whichever direction it goes, IAAF should see race walking as a chance to reach out to brand new athletics fans. Every crowd member is a potential customer.

If race walking is more commercially viable, the sport as a whole will have a brighter future. The annual 'Around Taihu' multi-day race in China offers hints at a possible successful, different commercial model. This brings elite race walking together with mass-participation events, and corporate sponsorship and advertising, and shows a framework for the IAAF to explore.

Finally, there were some unresolved suggestions regarding increasing participation and reducing dropout rates among young senior athletes. We acknowledge this is a problem, and believe one solution is further promotion of under-23 competition, which is essentially non-existent outside Europe.

Participation in 50km races has also been acknowledged as a problem. We believe that on balance, the problem is overblown: while numbers in some 'traditional' events has declined, this has been offset by huge increases in participation in Asia and Latin America. If race walking wishes to promote itself as a global sport, these markets cannot be ignored.

*Eight abstained from the 'RWECS' vote.

**Seven abstained from the 'race distances' vote.