From July 16 to 18, 1999 the IAAF staged its 1st World Youth Championships in Athletics (WYCA) at Bydgoszcz, Poland. A new event in the international competition calendar, it provoked much discussion among officials, coaches, athletes and scientists.

The basic competition regulations were:
- Three day competition
- A limited programme
- Two athletes maximum per event and per country
- No entry standard
- Maximum two events (of which one race above 400m) plus one relay per athlete.

The basic statistics of Bydgoszcz '99 were:
- Number of Participating Countries : 131
- Number of Competitors : 1055
- Number of Men : 570
- Number of Women : 485

A pre-event letter from former IAAF President Dr. Primo Nebiolo describes best what was behind the introduction of this new event.

"It gives me great pleasure to write this brief message on the occasion of the first edition of the World Youth Championships. I personally campaigned hard for the introduction of this new addition to the World Athletic Series calendar, because we must fight harder than ever to gain the attention of young people today. But the World Youth Championships is not just another athletics competition - it is an opportunity for youngsters to gain valuable experience, to improve personal bests, and to build friendly relationships with their rivals from every corner of the world. I am confident that this new event will delight all who attend them and experience the emotions and enthusiasm of tomorrow's stars."

The relative success of this inaugural event, as well as other opinions on the championships from federations, coaches and athletes, will be discussed in our Roundtable by the following participants:

JONATHAN CHIMIER (MRI, Long Jump), SANDRO GIOVANELLI (ITA/IAAF), LENFORD LEVY (PUR), NICOLAS LI YUN FONG (MRI, Hammer Throw), ROTIMI OBAJIMI (NIG), JOEL SEVERE (MRI), FENG SHUYONG (CHN), RICHARD STANDER (RSA), VADIM ZELICHENOK (RUS)
NSA: Please, judge the event as a whole?

GIOVANELLI:

The event, contrary to what I had expected, had the consensus and adhesion of a great number of Federations. Apart from some small problems, which centred on accommodation because of the unexpectedly high number of participants, the organisation was extremely good. A lot of attention was paid to the promotion of the event and the effort resulted in a much appreciated daily presence of knowledgeable spectators, which was appreciated by all the athletes.

LEVY:

The general concept of this event is very good. However, there are some aspects that should be reviewed in the interest of the athletes' long term development - our main concern at this stage -. Firstly, the age grouping - under 18 years -. As I am not aware of a minimum age of participation, I will just draw your attention to the youngest participant in the 1st WYCA. Inga Savden (TKM) 14y 111d and the oldest Emma Ward (GBR) 17y 195d, a difference of 3 years 94 days - quite significant at this stage of development. Whereas, I would not recommend a minimum age it might be necessary to adjust the maximum age for the WYCA to under 17 years or 16+, to reduce the difference in age of prospective participants, for obvious physiological and psychological reasons. This is further justified on observing the present structure of the IAAF World Athletic Series, in particular as it relates to the World Junior Championships (WJC) - the next step in the competitive process-, which are held on even years. By the present structure and assuming that the top performers in the WYCA achieve their optimum performance at 17 years, in the year of these Championships, then the sequence will show that at age 19 - their peak junior year -, they would not have the opportunity to compete at the world level in either the WJC or the WYCA.

Therefore, it is only logical that adjustments be made in either the maximum age for the WJC or the WYCA, to maximise the athletic performance of the athlete during these developmental years.

OBAJIMI:

Despite the fact that this was a youth competition, the organisation and presentation of the event along with the youthful exuberance and enthusiasm of participation in world championships was impressive. I was happy that the organisers were able to set the stage like any major championship event to enable the athletes to get a feel of what is required to perform at an event of this level.

CHIMIER:

At first I was anxious about travelling and looking after myself in much bigger airports. On my arrival in the host country, I felt more relaxed. A guide was at our disposal and he was very helpful. In the stadium it was very disconcerting at first to see myself on the stadium screens, but I realised that I could use it to make some improvements in my next jumps. I had the opportunity, of not only making friends, but also learning about the amount of training they are doing and the facilities available in their respective countries for both studying and sport. What was missing was a coach from my country for additional moral support. I will now train harder to reach the standard set for the World Junior Championships.

NICOLAS LI YUN FONG:

The organisation was perfect. We were well treated and taken care of. Although the Officials were very friendly, I was very anxious on the day of my competition for it was the first time I had competed at such a level and in a big stadium. During this championship, I had the opportunity to talk to other athletes so as to have an idea about their training and was surprised to learn how many facilities their respective federation or club was able to offer them. On the day of the closing ceremony, a reception was organised by the host country and these moments are still vivid in my mind.

ZELICHENOK:

On the whole, the organisation of the WYCA was in accordance with the general requirements of such competitions for young athletes. However, in future it would be better to stage such events in big cities.
with international airports, which will make the transportation of teams to the venue much easier. The presentations, ceremonies and organisation of the competition on the whole were adequate. In contrast, the accreditation centre worked very slowly.

**STANDER:**

In the IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics we are dealing with youth athletes at the beginning of their international athletics career. The organisation of the event should focus on protecting and guiding the newly found talent for the duration of the event i.e. no youth athlete should be allowed to participate in more than 2 events where there are qualifying rounds involved to ensure that the athlete does not over-compete. In the presentation of the IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics to athletes, media and the general public, the image should be projected that new talent is about to be identified rather than that world class performances will be seen.

**NSA:** How do you judge the level of performance in the different events?

**ZELICHENOK:**

Results do not have as important a significance for this age group. The most important thing is to be confident that the results were achieved due to planned, well thought out training and that the athletes still have a large reservoir of potential for improvement not only in the junior age group, but most of all as a senior. That is why the achievement of a very high level of results by athletes at 17-18 years old can be both misleading and dangerous. Too many examples have been witnessed of young stars finishing their sports career prematurely. The level of preparation of most of the victors and medal winners matched up well with the tasks set for athletes of this age group.

**OBAJIMI:**

The performance levels in the different events, particularly those in the finals in comparison to adult top class and national youth standards, were generally high. Most athletes exhibited good biomotor abilities that illustrated a high level of preparation and motivation for the competition. It is my belief that in future events standards will improve generally.

**SEVERE:**

The results show clearly the countries where particular event groups are more developed or predominant than others. For example in the sprints (men) we will find athletes from the USA, JAM, GER, GBR and NGR. In most of the event groups, we do have exceptions as one or two athletes from small countries/islands reached the finals.

**GIOVANELI:**

From a technical point of view, all expectations were superseded. In comparing the performances obtained in the various disciplines with those of junior athletes in the age group immediately above, and at the same time, keeping in mind that in some events implements, equipment and distances were different, one does not find an enormous difference. This means that the majority of the youth age group athletes at this level have trained and participated in competitions not for fun but with a serious commitment to being competitive.

**LEVY:**

The level of performance in the WYCA was of a very high standard, which compares well with performance at the national and regional level - even with the added stress - and is comparative to the standards achieved so far at the WJC. I would not compare the performance at this level with that of seniors, owing to influential factors and the wide margin of difference between one competitive stage and the next. However, it is interesting to note the relatively close comparison of the levels of performances at the WYCA and the WJC. At a glance one observe that the performances of the medalists in a number of events at the WYCA would have done likewise in the 1998 WJC (100m, 200m), or at least reached the finals in their respective events. One can also observe from the results, that there were finalists or medalists in a few events at both
Championships. This further strengthens my view for careful review of the age groupings, to allow for a transfer from one level to the next and not to allow too many repetitions at this high competitive level for young athletes. It was also obvious that what the participants lack in physical attributes they adequately compensated for with a high standard of efficiency (technique) in the execution of their respective events.

SHUYONG:

In general, the level of performance witnessed at the WYCA was far below world senior international standards. The track event performances were relatively better than the field events, this is because the performances of the field events are more closely related to the technical level of the athletes. One can see clearly that most field event athletes showed limited technique in the competitions. In comparison to average national youth standards, the level of performance in most events of the WYCA is good, the level of the track events is not far below the Chinese senior level, but the level of field events is much lower. I think that most athletes showed very good biomotor abilities, but poor techniques in the competitions. In my view this is because, these young athletes didn’t focus on the technique of one event, but on several events at this early stage of their career; On the other hand this is good because there is a lot of scope for them to improve further in the future when they specialise in just one or two events.

How do you estimate the importance of this competition for national federations, officials, coaches and athletes?

OBAJIMI:

Currently, I will score the importance of this WYCA competition by National Federations as relatively low. But for the future my estimation is that it will become an avenue by which they can maintain the interest of high school athletes in the sport beyond school days. We all aware of the high drop out rate amongst youth athletes in this age bracket as they come to the end of their school days. But with the introduction of the WYCA, a higher level of competitive target can be set that will help in keeping their interest in athletics.

GIOVANELLI:

In my opinion, the event should be judged as being decisively positive and important. A. For the Federations that have found and will continue to find in the future the opportunity of verifying the work that has been carried out in this special age group for the promotion of sport, with those of other Federations of countries with different cultures and preparation programmes in athletics. B. For officials and coaches who have found and will continue to find the possibility of enriching their experience and their knowledge and being recognised for their work, which is often overlooked.

In the final analysis, everything results in a major motivational boost and therefore a greater commitment in favour of our sport.

LEVY:

The WYCA will allow the national federations to identify their world class / level athletes at a much earlier age thus giving them the opportunity to correctly harness and develop their skills. Hopefully, with another world athletics event added to the calendar, younger / inexperienced core of ITO’s will be introduced / appointed and given the opportunity to gain much needed experience at the world level. This would justify our TOECS program and motivate our trained ATO’s. Coaches gain very valuable experience by having to prepare athletes to compete at this level.

Those who are given the opportunity to coach teams at these Championships enter the international area at the appropriate time, which would allow them to grow with the athletes they coach. Hopefully, the national federations would incorporate more / new coaches to function at the different levels of the competitive series and allow them to move forward with the athletes as they go up the competitive ladder.
SHUYONG:

The national federations now have a reason to organise competitions for this age group and should pay more attention to the development of athletes at this age as a result of the IAAF starting to hold the championships. In doing this, the federations will have more chance to identify and develop young athletes with good potential. Coaches must realise that taking part in the competitions is a very important part in the development of young athletes, so they will pay more attention to the training of these athletes, especially in the technical training elements within the field events. There is a danger that some coaches may make the training for young athletes too narrow and make them specialise in one event too soon. It gives the young athletes motivation and goals in their training, and they may commit themselves more to the sport. It also gives these athletes a chance to test themselves in the international arena at an earlier age, gain experience and the opportunity to observe the performances of other athletes and learn from other athletes.

ZELICHENOK:

The WYCA can serve as a kind of "trial" competition for the National Federation. The results and medals should not be over estimated, but can act as the basis for an evaluation of the reservoir of potential talent being developed. The WYCA is a very good practical international grounding for Officials. For coaches and athletes The WYCA should form the basis for evaluating long-term preparation programmes. The result is not that important taking into consideration the biological age differences, total period of training undertaken, social and training conditions and other factors.

Do you think that the introduction of the WYCA was a sensible completion of the IAAF competition program?

NSA:

Yes. The IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics plays an important role in introducing the young athlete to high level competitions.

SEVERE:

After the introduction of the World Junior Championships in Athletics and the launching of the Coaches’ Education Programme, the introduction of the WYCA filled a missing link. Thus each and every country was offered the possibility of developing a youth policy with a view to the most talented individuals participating at the WYCA.

LEVY:

The IAAF Competition program will only be completed with further review of the present structure as it relates to the WYCA, the WJC and the inclusion of a world U23 Championship. For those of us whose major concern is development, it is quite evident that there is a missing link between the Juniors and seniors and this needs urgent attention. Studies have shown the alarming attrition rate of athletes within this age grouping for various reasons. The transfer period from juniors to seniors (3-4 years) is perhaps the most difficult within the training and competitive processes, with athletes having to exercise extreme patience and perseverance. The lack of motivation and top competitive opportunities at this stage (intermediate), amongst other variables, have resulted in the withdrawal and exodus of a vast number of athletes world-wide from Track & Field to other sports. A Championship at this level (intermediate) would not only cater to the elite junior performers as they progress out of the age group but would also highlight late developers (bloomers) thus enhancing continuity in the developmental process.

GIOVANELLI:

The introduction of the event has led to a better understanding of the event outlets for the age group, which based on the results obtained, needs to be given more consideration and organised thought.

STANDER:

In South Africa, athletes between the ages of 15-19 years generally start to specialise and therefore make final decisions on which sport interests them the most. The IAAF
World Youth Championships in Athletics contributed significantly in helping age group athletes to choose athletics as their sport. By exposing officials to international competition through the medium of youth athletics, they will be more experienced when representing the athlete at junior and senior level. By having an IAAF World Youth Championship in place, it is much easier for a coach to motivate the athlete to become involved in athletics.

OBAJIMI:
I strongly believe that the introduction of the WYCA is a logical completion of the IAAF competition program, particularly with regard to development programmes. This is even more so when one considers the situation of other sports such as football that our sport has to compete with for the attention of our youth. Football for example, has had an event in this age category dating back to the 1980s, which in the case of a country like Nigeria has had a tremendous spill over effect. Apart from being the means where a number of our current senior national players gained their first international exposure, sponsors in a number of different ways have got involved in youth programmes such as academies and holiday camps to identify with different youth programmes.

ZELICHNEOK:
Competitions for this age group are important. However the event should not have been given the status of a "World Championships", but could have been named "Youth Athletic Days" or "Athletic Hopes", etc. The additions to the programme for the second edition of the WYCA, which were approved by the IAAF Council, seem to be very reasonable.

In China, there are age group competitions for the under 16-age group and these require the athlete to compete in 2 events, which are stipulated by the federation; e.g.: a 100m, runner must compete in the 200m, a long or triple jumper must compete in the 100m etc. The position of the athlete depends on the scores they obtained as there is a scoring table supporting the system. This is good to avoid the young athletes specialising in just one event too soon.
We have learnt from many lessons in the past. Lots of young athletes have shown very good performances in competitions when they were only 15 or 16 years, with very few of them going on to reach a high level when they progressed to senior level. Overall, creating these championships is a very good thing, but the IAAF must find ways to avoid the tendency of early specialisation with young athletes due to the introduction of the WYCA.

GIOVANELLI:
The one thing that I feel I should strongly recommend is to not get too carried away and to make the WYCA, a miniature of the WCH. Instead we need to give technical assistance to the Federations which are less developed, to wait for more statistical data before changing or adding events and to avoid the athletes having to compete too much in a few days. Finally, we must pay great attention from a human point of view to the young athletes who represent the future of our sport.

LEVY:
A. World-wide definition and standardisation of 'Age Group' competitions to coincide with the IAAF competition programme. Presently in our region (NACAC), we have established competitions in both the U17 and U20 categories.

B. IAAF established guidelines / programmes of events for age group competitions.

C. Established restrictions for the participation of youth athletes in senior competitions / events.

D. Replace the present Medley Relay (400-300-200-100) from the WYCA, because of its composition and illogical sequencing and replace it with a standard medley (400-200-200-800) or the 4x400m. The 4x400m is run at all levels (national & regional) in our region, by athletes within this age grouping, whereas Medley Relays of this nature are encouraged in 'Fun Athletics' at a much earlier age and not what should be included in world / international level as a true model of the competitive events.

E. Recommend regional and continental Youth Championships with similar age grouping and competition programme as the WYCA.

SEVERE:
I would recommend:
A. The introduction of combined events.
B. Continental Cadets Championships.
C. A coach accompanying each delegation.
D. Set standards (taking into consideration the 30th ranking for track events and 20th for field events) based on the first championships.

STANDER:
Athletics South Africa recommends that the IAAF World Youth Championships should focus more on team competition and less on the individual performances. The best 5 performances of the athletes from a country should be calculated on a points system similar to that of the IAAF Scoring Tables to determine the winning team. Relays should also feature more prominently in the IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics.

The 4 x 100m, the 1000m medley relay (400m, 300m, 200m, 100m) should remain and the 1 mile relay (800m, 400m 200m, 200m) should be added to enhance the spirit of team competitions.

The addition of the combined events to the event list of the 2001 IAAF World Youth Championships is welcomed. This will ensure that the interest of young athletes to participate in the combined events will be developed at an early stage.

OBAJIMI:
Area Associations and Confederation must be empowered to conduct their own competitions. The area competitions can be used as the basis for qualifying for the WYCA, provided they meet the set standards.

This will be more competitive means of allocating quotas for the WYCA than the current situation of country-by-country quota, that will in turn encourage the Area Associations and Confederation to be more actively involved in the development of youth competitions.
If you're serious about sport, you should be reading ICSSPE BULLETIN.