

An Insiders History of the IAAF World Championships in Athletics

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Introduction

The importance of the creation of IAAF Athletics World Championships to modern athletics cannot be overstated. The championships, first staged in Helsinki in 1983, have transformed international athletics and set it on the path to the sport – good or bad – that we know today. Helsinki and the 11 editions that have followed have increased the public profile of the sport around the world, made the IAAF a wealthy organisation and been the foundation for all the IAAF's events and development activities, as well as those of the six Area Associations, over the last 28 years.

What has happened at the championships themselves – the competition results, the great stories of the athletes, the organisational aspects – has been well documented in the media and in publications by the various organising committees, the IAAF and others. But there is more than that to it. As the General Secretary of FIDAL (the Italian athletics federation) during the time leading up to Helsinki, the organiser of the second edition of the championships in Rome, 1987, and an advisor to the IAAF President throughout that same period, I was in a privileged position to observe many of the personalities and discussions that took place behind the scenes and eventually gave us the event and all that is around it.

With the centenary of the IAAF approaching in 2012 it might be a good occasion to share some of the interesting but little known story of the event and its impact on the organisation. I believe that a look at this key chapter in athletics' history can be valuable because big anniversary celebrations are often closely followed by strategy and programme initiatives and it is important that these are planned with an understanding of the context of where the sport has come from and just how it got to where it is today. Although the future of the world championships and athletics will surely be different from the past, it is valuable if we can learn from what has happened so that perhaps we can focus on what is important and avoid repeating unnecessary mistakes.

The championships before the Championships

It may be hard for some today to imagine a time when there were no world championships in athletics, a time when the sport was emerging from the era of amateurism and a time when the concepts of broadcast and marketing rights, information technology and globalisation were foreign to most of us. The first question that might be asked: Why had the IAAF never staged a World Championship before 1983?

It could be said that the reason there was no world championships was because there were already two world championships. Let me explain ...

Up until the 1970s, the sport of athletics was strongly dominated by the Anglo-Saxon world, both politically and in terms of performance. From the end of the Second World War the President of the IAAF had been Lord Burghley, who later became the 6th Marquis of Exeter. At the same time he was the President of the AAA (the Amateur Athletic Association, which was responsible for athletics in England and Wales). It is not by chance that his Rolls Royce had the number plate AAA 1. Under Exeter, the IAAF was a very conservative organisation. Its field of work and ambitions were limited and it survived, like most other international sport federations, on the yearly subscription paid by the affiliated national federations. In addition, it received a fee paid by its European Committee (which eventually became the European Athletic Association and then European Athletics) for the right to organise the European Championship in the even-numbered years between the Olympic Games. We are talking about some thousands of pounds, but for that time it was a considerable amount of money.

Exeter had made an agreement with Avery Brundage, whom he thought he would succeed as President of the IOC (International Olympic Committee), to recognise the athletics competition of the Olympic Games, as the "de facto" World Championships in Athletics in exchange for 20% of the Olympic TV income.

In this case, we are talking of some hundred thousand dollars every four years, again, a lot of money for that time but more interesting is the percentage. If such an agreement were in place today it would mean some something like 200/300 million dollars for the IAAF!

As President of the AAA, Exeter also oversaw the annual AAA Championships, which took place in the famous White City Stadium in London and was open to non-English athletes. Normally a great event, it attracted big crowds and earned a substantial income for the AAA. For most of the world's top athletes it was a "must" to compete there. In fact, it was considered by many to be the real World Championship in Athletics.

With two events serving the function of world championships and a good income for both his organisations, Exeter had reasons to be satisfied with the status quo. Neither he, nor the athletics federations around the world nor the athletes themselves would have been the source of a strong motivation for the IAAF to create its own championships, the way some other international federations were doing at the time.

Enter Paulen

In the mid-seventies things started to change. Exeter decided to retire from his international posts and so, during the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, the IAAF elected somebody who was already two years older than its outgoing president - Adriaan Paulen from The Netherlands. If anybody considers that this was not the right move for the IAAF, they would be wrong. Paulen had been in pole position to become president for many years and he was well prepared with many new ideas.

Just as importantly, he had around him a number of intelligent men with a new vision for athletics. The first was his electoral campaign leader, Artur Takac of Yugoslavia, who, after useful IOC experience, particularly with organising the Games in Montreal, was himself re-elected to the IAAF Council. Then there was the newly elected council member, Ollan Cas-

sell, the Executive Director of the Amateur Athletic Union of the USA. Finally, he was strongly supported by Horst Dassler, the owner of adidas, whom he had probably met at the time of the 1968 Olympic Games, when Paulen had been the IAAF Technical Delegate. These three were, in different ways, the forces that helped to drive Paulen's wish to change athletics.

Dassler and his team had the foresight to educate Paulen, Juan Antonio Samaranch, who would become the IOC President in 1980, Joao Havelange, the President of the international football federation (FIFA) and Primo Nebiolo, who would eventually succeed Paulen at the head of the IAAF, in a new understanding of the role of world governing bodies in sport. This view was that they could not just restrict themselves purely to governance and technical legislation but that they had an obligation to develop their sports through staging championships and other events funded by the sales of television and marketing rights.

With the support of Takac, Cassell, Nebiolo and others, new events were introduced to the international athletics calendar, most notably the IAAF Golden Series and, in 1977, the IAAF World Cup. These proved successful from both the sporting and commercial points of view. The sport was changing and clearly the next step was a real World Championships.

At the 1978 IAAF Congress in Puerto Rico, just two years after his election in Montreal, Paulen orchestrated two historic achievements. First, he brought the People's Republic of China in as a member of the IAAF (remember, Mao had died just two years before and the country was only starting to open up to the rest of the world). Second, he convinced the congress that the IAAF should stage a world championships starting in 1983.

From decision to reality

Of course, the decision to include the World Championships in the IAAF programme was not enough. It was also necessary to establish the framework, to set the financial rules, find

organisers, and then attract the necessary partners. The organisation of the World Cup had already rippled the waters in the commercial area, both with television and sponsors, but a World Championships would be a totally different operation.

Those eager to organise the championships had many ambitions and not by chance the two countries who decided to bid were among the most important countries for athletics in Europe: Germany and Finland and the two bidding cities - Stuttgart and Helsinki – were, according to Nebiolo, cathedrals of athletics because of their long traditions of hosting events.

The decision was taken at the IAAF Council meeting in Paris on the eve of the World Cross Country Championships in 1980, only 16 months after the decision of the Congress to have the World Championships! Helsinki defeated Stuttgart, with the voting 11 to 6. It was a surprise, at least for the Germans, who had a big TV group in place. Helsinki's arguments were as follows: both candidates are obviously competent and have good facilities and the experience to arrange a great championships but the IAAF should give preference this first time to a small country, because in the future it is more likely the event will be given mostly to larger countries. Helsinki also emphasised that because Finland was a politically neutral country, there was no risk of boycotts – those days the boycotts of the Olympic Games in Montreal and especially Moscow were on everyone's minds.

A year and a half later, Paulen, by then nearly 80 years old, stepped down as IAAF President and Nebiolo was elected to take his place. Many people have thought that Paulen did not like Nebiolo. Surely he was very much afraid of the ambition of the younger man. But he understood that Nebiolo might be the only person in the IAAF who could properly lead the realisation of his dream of the world championships. Reluctantly, but with honesty, he decided to withdraw his candidature and pass the baton. Needless to say, Dassler and Samaranch helped that decision. For Nebiolo,

the election was a gift that allowed him to fulfil his great capacity as organiser and negotiator.

Fittingly, Paulen stayed on as the Organising Delegate of the first championships. He found that Helsinki was ready and the motivation of the Finns was unbelievable. The local organising committee was chaired by Carl-Olaf Homen, the President of the Finnish Athletics Federation and one of the finest leaders of athletics in the world. It was not by chance that after the championships, he became the President of the Finnish Olympic Committee and then, in 1987, the President of the European Athletic Association. In the end, every aspect of the organisation was perfect and a standard worthy of our sport was established.

More importantly, the event itself fulfilled everyone's dream for success and gave the world images that will never be forgotten: seven sold-out days in the historic Olympic stadium, the knowledge and enthusiasm of the crowds, the beauty of the Finnish capital with its northern blue sky. It was a magical week in which we saw all the greatness of athletics and were convinced that the future of the sport was golden. Among my personal memories of Helsinki 1983 are the victory of Helena Fibingerova (CZE) in the shot put, a full stadium's collective joy over the last and victorious throw of Tiina Lillak (FIN) in her country's national event, the javelin, and, of course, the glorious international debut of Carl Lewis (USA).

There were also many "firsts" in Helsinki that present day organisers should remember. Among the important developments introduced was the multi-feed television production, lead by YLE's Raimo Piltz, with four individual productions for the different types of events and one integrated feed to be provided to the largest ever number of international broadcasters.

Helsinki was followed by Rome 1987 and Tokyo 1991 during which period the decision to hold the championships every two years was taken. Then we had Stuttgart in 1993, Gothenburg in 1995, Athens in 1997, Seville in 1999, Edmonton in 2001, Paris in 2003, Helsinki in

2005, Osaka in 2007, Berlin in 2009 and now Daegu in 2011. It is not easy to say which one was the best. Each had its positive aspects. But still, Helsinki 1983 must be near the top of the list due to the venue, the perfect organisation and the fact that, as Nebiolo said, Helsinki it is a cathedral for athletics as much as St. Peter's is for the Catholic Church.

Impact on the IAAF

Under the leadership of Nebiolo, the IAAF was changing its skin at the same time as the first World Championships were being organised and because of the success of Helsinki this process continued throughout the Nebiolo era. The organisation expanded, became more sophisticated and more professional. The reach of the sport grew, as evidenced by the increase numbers of Member Federations and federations that participated in subsequent editions of the IAAF World Championships in Athletics. It is interesting to read the participation data (see Table 1).

From the small offices in Putney, the IAAF headquarters was moved to prestigious Knightsbridge, just behind the famous Harrod's store and later to Monte Carlo. Nebiolo himself preferred private planes to sleeping in airport car parks, but he was not doing it only for his personal ego. He was convinced that the IAAF needed the different, higher profile approach of an impressive office and a jet-set president in order to realise all the potential of the future that others were to catch their first glimpse of in Helsinki.

In 1982, it was the time to negotiate the first contract with an American television network. NBC, at that time out of the Olympic programme, wanted to show to the world that they were capable of showing athletics – the Queen of the Olympics. A young former basketball commentator, Alex Gilady, was just one year earlier appointed as their European based representative. The ambitions of NBC matched those of Nebiolo and the first contract of over one million US dollars was signed at the Ritz Hotel in London.

Table 1: Number of federations and athletes, medallists and finalists at the IAAF World Championships in Athletics 1993 - 2009

	Federations Present	Athletes Present	Countries with Medals	Countries with Finalists
Helsinki 1983	153	1355	25	39
Rome 1987	159	1459	27	43
Tokyo 1991	167	1517	29	46
Stuttgart 1993	187	1689	36	57
Goteborg 1995	191	1804	43	58
Athens 1997	198	1882	42	64
Seville 1999	201	1821	42	57
Edmonton 2001	189	1677	42	63
Paris 2003	198	1679	43	62
Helsinki 2005	191	1688	40	61
Osaka 2007	197	1800	46	66
Berlin 2009	202	1895	37	62

The next step was to sell the marketing rights. Inspired by Dassler, the IAAF was moving into another dimension. A Dassler ally and commercial partner, Patrick Nally, the creator of the still existing system of packaging events and sponsors, had, through his company West Nally, the contract for exploiting the Helsinki marketing rights. At that time his right arm in athletics, Tony Webb, was linked to a well-known Japanese advertising agency and through this to a company little-known in Europe - TDK, producer of videotapes. TDK were to be offered the main sponsor package of the championships, which included their brand name on the athletes' number bibs. Nebiolo, Homen, Cassell and Nally met half an hour before the negotiation to decide the price. The proposal was to ask for something in the region of US\$250,000. Nebiolo listened as the others discussed the exact price and then took the floor to announce: "We will ask for one million

dollars". That was the request. TDK accepted without discussion and became the first major international sponsor of the IAAF World Championships in Athletics. Since then, they have been on the number bibs of all the men' competitions at the championships!

With the new partnerships and resources, the IAAF had to changed its attitude towards commercial activity and Nebiolo took great advantage of the creativity and professionalism of many people. In the late 1980s, Cassel together with Marketing Director Jon Wigley and his staff (among them Penny Belcham and Paul Bristow) drove the complicated machinery of all the commercial agreements, of the organisation of the championships, of the bidding and of the creation of other events such as the IAAF Grand Prix. Even today, many of the documents used by the IAAF, such as the TV production guidelines (inspired by Alex Gilady and Manolo

Romero), the Athlete Representatives Rules, The Advertising Rules etc. are almost the same as those created by that pioneering group.

The new resources also allowed the IAAF to have a different position in relation to the other international federations. With the existence of the World Championships in Athletics, the IAAF could no longer claim from the IOC the 20% of the Olympic TV rights. But Nebiolo was able to use this to his and the IAAF's advantage. He proposed to Samaranch that the money be divided equally among all the international federations, and with the good will generated he was elected President of ASOIF (Association of Summer Olympic International Federations). In his ASOIF role later he secured an agreement that all international federations would also share some extra money from the IOC's marketing activity. Later, Samaranch ruled that there would be a different split, no longer equal, and athletics received the largest share of all. This arrangement is still in place.

Commercially, it was much easier after Helsinki to sign multi-million dollar contracts. Nebiolo's skill in dealing with these matters brought the IAAF to excellent deals. Perhaps the most incredible was signed at the time when the IAAF had decided to stage the World Championships every two years and satellite TV was promising to revolutionise the television market. In the mid 1990s, to keep the IAAF's events on terrestrial television, which was in the interest of both athletics and its partner the EBU (European Broadcasting Union), he was able to secure a four-year deal for 130 million dollars plus the production costs of all the IAAF events (something like another 25 million dollars).

The money coming in helped the IAAF to enlarge its development programme around the globe and raise the level of performance of the athletes in many countries. But at the same time this development work weakened the relative strength of European performers, particularly in the running events, causing disappointment by the EBU in the consequent decrease of the European audience.

Looking to the future

Like any activity depending on a mass audience in today's world, the IAAF World Championships in Athletics faces a number of challenges and it is, of course, the job of the IAAF to address these and find solutions on behalf of the sport. For example, the championships will have to remain attractive to organisers and the host cities that support them. It seems that there are bidders and potential bidders for the coming two or three editions. But will this remain the case? The cost of staging the championships has risen to many times more than what was spent in Helsinki and it is approaching the point where few cities will be able to find the necessary funding. At the same time other sports events are being created, often designed to meet a specific marketing need for a more cost effective price and able to adapt without a heavy burden of tradition. The IAAF must constantly seek a fine balance in order that its product remains relevant and attractive and the market has enough players to remain strong and dynamic.

Even more important is television and the related area of technology. Surely in the last 20 years many aspects in this area have improved. The IAAF World Championships in Athletics are as enjoyable to watch at home as in the stadium. In fact, the type of information and replays you can now get on television is impossible to match in the stadium. However, in recent years the TV audience for the event has drastically diminished, in spite of increasing hours of coverage. This is connected to a number of factors including the fragmentation of television channels and TV platforms, the much larger amount of sport on television, the preference of young people for the Internet and the weakness of running events in Europe. The solution will not be simple. In my opinion, following the trend put in place by many other sports, athletics in general and the IAAF World Championships in Athletics in particular need a more compact format and better use of technology. The experience of football shows us that 90 minutes in front of a TV set is too much. We cannot expect a large TV audience of the younger generation to re-

main seated for four hours, it is just not going to happen. For me, this area is the existential challenge for the sport and the IAAF cannot afford to rest in its efforts to find solutions.

Conclusion

The IAAF World Championships in Athletics have transformed all aspects of the sport, mostly for the better. The existence and success of the event is the result of a combination of vision and the work of extraordinary individuals like Paulen, Nebiolo, Homen and the others mentioned here.

No situation remains the same and in today's world the pace of change is accelerating. The changes we see in television, technology

and the youth market, just to name a few, present major challenges to the sport, the World Championships and the IAAF. If we are to remain successful these need to be addressed constantly.

The future won't look like the past, but we can learn lessons from the past. For me, the main lesson of the history of the World Championships in Athletics is that the sport needs people who are visionary, intelligent and passionate enough to innovate and take risks. We need to find these people and support them.

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