

“ Starting with a description of the sort of indoor athletic meetings that take place in N. America the article goes on to discuss ways in which meeting promoters can increase the popularity of indoor events, both for the athletes and the spectators, by thoughtful methods of presentation. Good presentation should not only make the events exciting for the spectators and athletes but should also ensure that everybody is kept fully informed at all times of exactly what is going on. Several ways are suggested for providing exciting competition in the track events and for clearly informing spectators of the exact progress of distance races. The important role of the meeting announcers is emphasised, especially in regard to the way in which they can bring the field events alive, by directing the spectators attention to them and giving out immediate information of performances achieved and records made or attempted. ”

Patrick Reid is the meet director of the Ottawa International Indoor Games and Canadian national coach for the high jump.

## 1 Introduction

To most of the general public, athletics (track and field) is a summer sport. When the public hears that an athletics competition is being held, they know it means long hours of competition, spread over 2-3 days on a field large enough to accommodate a 400 metres eight lane track. It is a very predictable event with little room for creativity in promoting events.

Indoor athletics competitions are very different. Traditionally held in indoor hockey arenas in North America and indoor competition halls in Europe, indoor athletics can be highly entertaining.

In North America, indoor competitions basically fall into five categories:

- collegiate dual or triangular meets (2-3 schools competing with most events on the programme. Usually 1-2 athletes per school are entered in each event.)
- collegiate invitation meets (Can be up to 10 schools attending, with performance standards set that athletes must have reached in order to enter.)
- collegiate conference meets which lead to and include national championships
- invitation 'open' meets, with collegiate male and female divisions, a junior college division, open division and, in some cases, a masters division
- the final category is the commercially sponsored North American Grand Prix series, which includes anything from eight to fifteen events on the circuit.

Indoor athletic competitions require meet organisers to consider the promotional side of the event presentation. This does not necessarily mean 'gimmicks', but there have been some interesting gimmicks used in the past. When the 'professional' (I.T.A.) track and field circuit was born in the 1970's, mechanical lights placed at intervals around the track on the curb would allow spectators easily to

see how close the middle and long distance runners were to world record distance pace.

Then there was the 'Devil Take The Hindmost' gimmick. During laps of a 1500m, or 3000m. race, a runner dressed like a 'devil' in a red costume with fake horns on his/her head would jump on to the track and chase the pack of runners until succeeding to catch up to and touch the last runner. This person would have to drop out of the race immediately. The 'devil' would run off the track hide and wait for a lap or two before jumping on to the track and pursuing the runners again.

These ideas truly are 'gimmicks' and I do not think they are necessarily complimentary to the sport. The following are some of the more appropriate ideas that have proved successful in promoting indoor athletics.

## **2 Event planning and presentation**

Having good competitors is one prerequisite for event success, but does not necessarily guarantee that the event will be exciting to watch. Eight world class 1500m runners running along in single file and kicking on the last lap is not always exciting to the general public. 'Rabbits' or pace setters are common additions, as is the practice of meet directors arranging bonuses for the runner(s) leading after a certain number of laps or graded bonuses for final finish times. These incentives ensure races will be more entertaining to the audience.

## **3 Field events**

The indoor long jump, pole vault and high jump are always crowd pleasing events. The jumping order and information about who has passed a height and who is currently leading is one area where creativity helps the spectator.

Huge three sided boards that have slots into which competitors' name cards can be easily slid are essentials for communication to spectators. They can clearly tell the spectator who is leading and a series of three red markers beside the name allows the spectator easily to follow the competitor's attempts. A white marker is used if a competitor passes.

The announcer and programme graphics can help promote the height factor in the vertical jumps. 'Competitor X is now attempting a height equal to the height of a van' or, 'a height equal to that of a pay phone booth' are excellent comparative descriptions to allow a spectator to appreciate the height contested.

## **4 Track distance races**

The biggest problem in North America for spectators watching a distance race is trying to calculate the race pace. On the short indoor tracks it is difficult for a spectator to evaluate the race pace (it is sometimes difficult for the competitors to keep track of the race pace for the same reason!). It certainly helps to have an official with a double sided cue card that says 200m, 400m, 600m, 800m, 1000m, etc. depending on the race distance, standing beside that distance spot on the track.

## **5 Nothing replaces competitive events**

The key to any indoor event is to have a closely contested competition, which is why relay events are so exciting.

In invitation events, meet directors who do not have a world class field, look for balance. They select from a long list of available competitors and, since the numbers of competitors are restricted indoors for most events, some meet directors may turn down the late entry of a single world class athlete who would race out in front leaving the field behind.

## **6 Country dual meets**

Nothing replaces head to head team competition by a host nation and a visiting nation. Scores are compiled during the whole evening based on results and an active announcer keeps the crowd informed of the standings. Events move along quickly with two athletes per nation competing. This is the most appealing way to cover a lot of events in a short period of time.

## **7 In conclusion – go with your main event last**

Everyone remembers the lasting impression of the final event. If you have a world class sprinter, you can have heats early and leave the final to the end. If you have a class 1500m field (North Americans still like the mile), then this event is a traditional evening finale.

If you think in terms of spectators or newcomers to the sport, you have to think about promotion. Curiosity about the presence of a world class performer will bring out new spectators once, but only through creative promotion can we hope to persuade spectators to choose indoor track over the many other indoor sporting activities available which are in competition with athletics.

