Women in athletics

with Fatiha Belmrhar, Victor Lopez, Vânia Maria F. Valentino da Silva

Introduction

For some time the IAAF has conducted conferences and seminars at its Regional Development Centres and other locations that have taken up the question of women’s athletics in a general and comprehensive way. Recently, however, there has been a development in the policy and in future, these activities will be more focused and oriented on specific issues faced. This will complement the long-standing guidelines that all IAAF Development Programme measures, which are normally issue oriented, should include at least 20% participation by women.

The recent policy change was reflected in the previous edition of NSA, where both the articles presented in our Special Topic section, “Training for Women”, approached the subject from a technical and practical point of view. The idea for this NSA Round Table was to follow up these articles by looking at the on the ground realities of training and performance development for women in different parts of the world.

To that end we have spoken with three experienced coaches working mainly with female athletes, one each from Africa, North America/Caribbean and South America, to get their points of view on some important issues they, their colleagues and their athletes currently face in their specific circumstances. Our Round Table panelists are:

Victor Lopez (PUR) has been the Head Coach of women’s athletics at Rice University in Houston, Texas for more than 25 years. Among the hundreds of athletes he has coached are a number of Olympians and international class athletes from the USA, Canada and several Caribbean countries. He was the Head Coach for the Puerto Rican team at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. He is currently the President of the North America, Central America and Caribbean Track and Field Coaches Association, a member of the IAAF Technical Committee and a member of the IAAF Coaches Commission.

Fatiha Belmrhar (MAR) was several times national champion in Javelin Throw and a former national record holder. In 1982 she was the silver medallist at the African Championships. She is Member of the Women’s Commission of the Federation Royale Marocaine Athletisme (FRMA), a National School Coach and works at the National Ministry of Education.

Vânia Maria F. Valentino da Silva (BRA) is an IAAF Level II coach who also holds qualifications in Physical Education and High Level Sports Training. As an athlete she was South American Champion in the 100m hurdles in 1993 and 1996. She has coached a number of national teams of young athletes including the Brazilian team that took part in the 2004 South American Under-23 Championships.
The competition programmes for men and women have been brought into closer alignment in recent years. Would you say that we have now achieved equality in the sport?

Belmrhar: After the implementation of the latest changes to the competition programme (hammer throw, pole vault, 3000m steeplechase and triple jump), we can say that there is now equality between men and women in our sport. In addition to this important achievement, we need to point out that there is also a fair distribution of the scheduled events at the major championships and in the “Golden League”. Quickly after the introduction of the new events in the women’s programme the women showed that they have technical, physical and mental capacities, which proves that they have no need to envy their male colleagues. We can raise the question related to the fact that the combined events are based on ten events for the men, and just seven for the women. However, we can explain this difference as we do with the difference in the height of the hurdles or the difference in the weight of the implements, neither of which discredits women’s abilities.

Lopez: Although it is true that the competition programmes for men and women have been brought into closer alignment in recent years I would say that we still have not achieved equality. For example, at all levels of competition there is a tendency to schedule the events for women outside the prime times and sometimes use different rules for the women than for the men. For example, at the recent Olympic Games in Athens, in the 100 and 400 hurdles events we saw different procedures for the seeding and different conditions for advancing to the next round. In the men’s events, the athletes advanced from the semi-finals to the finals on the basis of both place and time. In the women’s events they advanced only by place. The result was that several top ranked athletes did not advance to the finals because they did not finish in the top four, despite running faster than the athletes who finished third and fourth in the other semi-final heat. That is inequality and it should not happen.

da Silva: First of all, I would like to thank NSA for the opportunity to take part in this discussion. Nowadays, a significant number of women have become involved in different aspects of track and field and therefore it is necessary to constantly study these questions and improve the training programme for women. Today, we have a competition programme where men and women are competing in almost total equality. In fact, there are only a small number of differences in a few events, such as the distance in the short hurdle races (100m for women and 110m for men), the height of the hurdles and steeplechase barriers and the weights of the throwing implements. These differences, in my opinion, emphasise fast and powerful movements, which characterise an important and determinate point in all events in athletics: the velocity. Therefore, instead of discriminating against women, the differences allow a high level of quality and efficiency in all movements related to female events.

How do you assess the development of performance for the “traditional” and the “new” (pole vault, triple jump, hammer throw, steeplechase) events for women in recent years?

Belmrhar: Performances are at a standstill and have sometimes even declined in the traditional events over the last years. Has this been caused by the strict anti-doping procedures taken by the IOC and the IAAF? Women have only recently given themselves up to the joys of competition in the “new” events and it is natural that the improvement of performances occurs at a different rate. To change a technique that has been acquired recently is easier than to change one that has been automated for a long time. However, what is
important to notice, is that the gap between the competitors in all disciplines whether they are new or traditional, is decreasing noticeably, which creates more interest and suspense, and therefore a greater show.

**Lopez:** In the new events with the exception of the triple jump, we are still years away from the total development of performances. Because the events are so young and women are still adjusting to the new demands of the techniques, we cannot come to conclusions about whether a world class marks now will still be world class in the future. That is the case with the pole vault, hammer and even more so in the steeplechase. Therefore we have to be careful when we set the qualifying marks for these events for championships because with rapid improvements in the general level of performance it may be that an “A” mark this year proves to be a just a “B” mark the following year.

**da Silva:** The development of training methods, especially in athletics, has led to improving physical capabilities, which are necessary for improving performance. Nowadays, a very important tendency, which has influenced positively the acquisition of good marks, is strength training. Considering this point, we can understand how a good number of women have been able to achieve better marks in these new events year by year.

**Belmrhar:** It is clear that there are differences in the sexes, as far as the training is concerned. The difference between male and female physical attributes can be briefly listed as follows:

- Menstruation periods
- Robustness, height/weight
- % of fat in body tissue
- Less upper body capacity for strength

From a general point of view, women have morphological, physical and physiological characteristics different to men but we must not forget that men, like women, are all individually different. So the aim of training lies in adapting programmes and techniques for each athlete, depending on his/her features and capacities, and not according to the sex. In my opinion, a woman’s training programme should not be a reduced model of a male athlete’s programme, but must answer to that athlete’s individual specificities.

**Lopez:** The same training methodology and training planning that applies to men applies to women. As far as volume, intensity and density is concerned there should be no variation except that the coaches should pay attention to individual characteristics and qualities. Perhaps the specific gender characteristics that we need to observe are those related to the female reproduction system. Those are menstruation and the development of the women’s secondary sex organs, such as hips and bust as the result of normal hormone reproduction and growth.

**da Silva:** Although men and women have physiological differences, which are relevant when we are preparing a training programme, it is important to emphasise that these differences don’t characterise the conditions for improving performance. Actually, one of the most important points to be considered in training is the specificity of a training programme. High-level work for any athlete must be individualised and carefully respect biological individuality. In other words, female athletes need specific work to improve their capabilities and increase performance, just as men do, and not only a reduced version of a male athletes’.
Some coaches think that the height of the hurdles is too low for the anthropometrical characteristics of female athletes and therefore the technical objectives and choices are different in the women’s hurdles events than in the men’s hurdle events. We also find that in the women’s shot put, the linear technique predominates and that nearly no one practices the rotational technique. Would you agree that we are seeing gender specific techniques in athletics?

Belmrhar: The average size of a female athlete is, almost by definition, smaller than a male athlete. The stride of a female runner is therefore shorter than a male athlete. Women run the 100m hurdles with the same number of strides between the hurdles as men use in the 110m hurdles. Therefore, it is logical that the hurdle height for men is greater than for women. I am against to the idea of setting different targets according to the sex of the athlete, the choice depending essentially on the athletes’ features. However, there should be a scientific study based on measurements and biomechanical findings in order to show if and how different hurdle heights would bring better results for the women in both the 100m and 400m events. We can see that some tall female hurdlers are obliged to shorten their stride between the hurdles of a 100m, but the problem is the same for tall male runners. Regarding the rotational and linear shot put techniques, it is clear that the traditional technique is more used by both sexes, as it is more efficient. If women don’t use the rotational technique, it might be because it is technically more difficult, which is underlined by that fact that very few men are adept at it. It certainly would have been adopted by women if its superiority in terms of efficiency had been shown by male athletes. Therefore, I don’t think that there are specific techniques for each sex, the coach must be capable of adapting the technique to each athlete’s characteristics, whether it’s a man or a woman, depending on the athlete’s profile.

Lopez: I do not think that there are gender specific techniques in athletics since I believe that women can adjust to any technical demands as well as men can. However, the situation we see is that in some events, because the equipment and implement used are not as demanding as the men’s equipment and implements, female athletes adjust their technical demands to their needs. For example, we know that most of the top women could manage a higher hurdle in the 100m hurdles event, let’s say 91cm. But since the rule is that the height is 84cm, female hurdlers have to display a more sprint-oriented technique to be successful. It might look less demanding than the men’s technique but they still have to go over the hurdles, although with less clearance or flight than the men. In the shot put, my belief is that the implement is so light that the women are better off using the glide technique in order to accelerate to maximise the forces that they apply to the shot. The men’s implement is heavier and therefore the rotation technique is better to maximise the acceleration to exert the greatest amount of force and velocity. Also, women’s coaches probably do not want to deal with the rotation technique as it is more complicated and takes longer to master it.

da Silva: In my opinion, each one of the events in athletics, female events and male events, requires a special technical work. In fact, to achieve better results, it will be necessary to make a consistent programme, which focuses on technique exercises and respects biomechanical aspect, to guarantee an efficient and correct movement in every single event.

Where do you see the greatest potential for women to develop their performances in the in the so-called “power-events”?

Belmrhar: Nowadays athletes who practice the strength events have different morphological characteristics to their elders, the champi-
ons from the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed the throwers in the third millennium are much more svelte and slim than their predecessors, indicating a radical change in the way they prepare for their event. From the dominance of big, strong, voluminous athletes we now see more reliance on dynamic and well-proportioned bodies. Modern training tendencies aim mainly at developing the speed of the movement rather than sheer strength. The practical aim is to apply greater speed rather than greater strength to the implement. If we agree in principle that female athletes’ upper limbs are less strong than those of male athletes, the logic we have previously stated is correct. This idea is also valid regarding other events such as the triple jump.

Lopez: Definitely in the hammer throw, since women with a low centre of gravity are able to learn and master the technique easily. Another event in which we have not seen the true potential of women expressed yet is the pole vault. The sprint events and the horizontal jumps are more or less at their peak. We cannot compare the actual results in the sprint events, shot put, discus and javelin with the results from the 80s as we know that, unfortunately, those records were done when there was a lot of use of doping.

How do you assess the situation of female coaches? Are there enough women involved at all levels of coaching and if not why?

Belmrhar: Being a Moroccan sport manager, I will answer this question according to the reality of my country. If at the athletes’ level of participation, there aren’t any differences between the men and the women, there is a big gap at the level of technical management. The main reason lies in the fact that the number of women who have access to the required education is very low compared to men. Given that a minority is often suppressed, if the women coaches are capable of acting at the level of training in athletics, the sports schools essentially take care of the detection of talent and introduction to this sport. Should any young talents be identified, they are immediately entrusted to male “experts”. For example, there are presently no woman coaches for our national team. Regarding the clubs, it is exactly the same. There are very few women coaches, apart from some former athletes, who have leading coaching roles in clubs.

Lopez: There are not enough women involved in coaching worldwide and the main reason is cultural. In too many regions of the world, there still a lot of discrimination against women. But slowly progress has been made, more and more we see female coaches. We have a long way to go but I think we are on the right track.

da Silva: Despite the great number of female athletes around the world, we haven’t had effective participation of women coaches in high level training programmes. The reason can be cultural and social. I mean, most women need to attend many obligations, and there is not much time for the exclusive dedication to study deeply or to travel constantly.

How might we promote increased participation of female athletes in the different age categories?

Belmrhar: In order to promote women’s participation in athletics, a policy aimed at increasing the practice of this discipline in all the country’s regions (including the rural) should be put in place. This strategy should automatically collaborate with the sports sector, the ministry of education, the national Olympic committee and the local authorities. It requires compulsory sports education in primary schools. To heighten public awareness amongst the young, it should offer competitions in order for them to participate and eval-
evaluate their skills. It is also important to increase the parents’ awareness through non-governmental associations, emphasising the benefits that sport can bring to the youngsters. A decentralised educational system should be introduced for the local sporting elites, which will enable them to follow their studies at the same time as their sports training, at an academic and university level. Given the fact that I have the opportunity to work in an academic environment and am responsible for sport and education, and I am certain that setting up such structures depends on the government’s will, as the potential does exist.

**Lopez:** I think through school programmes we can encourage females to participate in our sport. One good way to motivate and promote the sport among females is the scholarship awards. Also, I feel that we should have a worldwide programme of mentorship where our top athletes visit our most developing regions and give talks and presentations to girls in schools and clubs.

**da Silva:** It is necessary to develop an educational programme where girls can grow in the sport. It is also important to respect the different stages of training to give enough time to prepare them to reach high-level competition. Igniting an interest in sport during the teenage years can add value to a girl’s athletic qualities as well as her individual characteristics as a woman. It is also important to educate girls and prepare their personalities for a hard work.

**Belmrhar:** In order to increase women’s participation as coaches and technical officials, quotas should be specified in the education centres for sports managers. It should also be possible to give access to specialised training to former athletes in order for them to gain the required skills. We must point out that at the III World Conference on Women and Sport: “New Strategies, New Commitments” organised by the IOC in Marrakech in 2004, one of the recommendations involved increasing the number of women in sport (at all management levels). That would result in a greater participation of women in the sport in general. Participation in the different events should be equal for all continents. It is unacceptable that nowadays we still find events that are dominated by the same country, for example the sprints with the USA and Caribbean. In my opinion, the IAAF that should put in place special development programmes for particular disciplines at the High Level Training Centres, in Dakar, Mauritius, Kenya, etc. This operation should enable different regions from around the world to see the emergence of elite athletes in events now dominated by privileged countries. That way the competition would spread out and make it a more attractive scene. I would like also to underline that the women athletes themselves have an important role in promoting female athletics by attending Galas, taking part in TV shows and by organising sporting events for all of us.

**Lopez:** I think every IAAF Member Federation needs to do a better job in this respect. They need to actively recruit and motivate women to become coaches and officials. A lot of our federations are just waiting for people to come to them instead of aggressively going out and recruiting women and men. This is even more the case when we expect the coaches and officials to work free for the federation, which is the reality in the CAC region where very few women get paid for coaching or officiating.

**da Silva:** It is necessary to regularly promote meetings where women will be able to exchange important information, not only with other women but also with male managers and coaches, so that it will be possible to prepare them gradually and constantly, until a large number of women will be part of athletics teams.