

KEEPING TRACK

Written by Rod O'Donnell

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When you are passionate about track and field, you want to enjoy it and protect it when the opportunity presents itself. After attending State Championship meets in both West Virginia and Ohio, this writer continues to be reminded of what a special sport that we are involved in. At the same time, track faces challenges that could have adverse effects thus causing severe damage. The following six issues are some of those challenges:

1) The changing landscape of intercollegiate athletics. No one can say for sure what is going to happen, but it is certain, that Division I sports are going to change in the near future, in the way that participants are compensated. Proposals, ranging from paying athletes salaries, to the formation of unions, to covering the total cost of an education, are being discussed. The latter could include paying for travel back to the athlete's home, during vacation, or compensating parents for transportation to watch their sons or daughters compete. Among other ideas, paying for full medical insurance is also being seriously considered. These are just a few of the proposals. The question is, where would the money come from to pay for these changes, considering that only 10-12% of Division I athletic programs operate in the black? Increasing student fees to cover the cost is not the answer. A solution that WOULD be used, is to drop sports, and we are aware of the programs that have fallen victim to this "solution." Men's track and wrestling are the two that come to mind immediately.

2) The insistence of college coaches to avoid scoring track meets, failure to consistently enter their top athletes, split their teams (sending them to several meets on the same date,) failure to host home meets, and avoiding competition in dual meets. We need the average fan to follow our sport and the approach previously described does not accomplish this, thus giving administrators a reason to discontinue support. Name one other sport that approaches competition in the same way that collegiate track does. The answer to that question is: NONE.

{ad}3) The increasing number of sports offered to students on the high school level. The following spring sports are offered for boys at many high schools in the spring: rugby, volleyball, baseball, tennis, lacrosse, and track and field. Several of these have multiple levels, are not recognized by the OHSAA, but are still financially supported by athletic departments. The athletes participating are given varsity letter and other rewards that are offered in varsity sports.

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There are a limited number of students who choose to compete in athletics in any high school, regardless of its size; therefore, when finding people to field teams, the circle of athletes available is divided, not expanded. Many times, this results in a weakened athletic program.

4) The money and hype that is being put into the emerging sports such as soccer, lacrosse, and rugby. This is very evident in the tremendous, well-orchestrated coverage, given this year's World Cup soccer. Those involved in track and field could learn some lessons by the way that has been done. It is obvious that those involved in the marketing of soccer understand that there is a high potential to make money, if they can force Americans to adopt it as passionately as those in other countries around the world have.

5) Some high school coaches are copying the collegiate model where the only meets that are emphasized are the final championship contests. This is a dangerous trend that totally alienates fans. Several years ago, the results of a major invitational were determined by the winner of the 4 x 400 meter relay. The team that we were tied with did not run their best team. We put our best on the track and won the race. When I asked the opposing coach why he had made this decision, he stated that the meet meant nothing, that only the State Meet made any difference. In order to understand why this is a problem, ask yourself what coaches of other sports take this approach. Yes, the State Championship is the most important meet of the season, but on the day of the invitational, it is the most important meet. As the psychologist in the great baseball movie, The Natural, states when addressing star Robert Redford's team, "Winning is contagious, but so is losing."

6) The growing trend of year-round practice in football, basketball, and soccer. In the case of football, the idea of allowing spring practice to be held has been proposed several times in Ohio. In several southern states, spring ball is allowed; however, in many instances, this is done after state championships are held, thus not taking athletes away from track. For example, in Florida, spring ball begins May 1. The State Track Championship is held May 2 and 3.

Ohio has now implemented a rule that will allow coaches to work with not more than four athletes at a time on a year-round basis. This new ruling, combined with "voluntary" open gym, is making it more difficult to attract many athletes who will make major contributions to our sport.

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I will go into more depth on several of these points in future issues of RUNOHIO, but I hope that the thoughts expressed this month will alert those involved to act and prevent catastrophic damage to our wonderful sport.

Yours in track,

Rod O'Donnell

Read more of Rod O'Donnell's Keeping Track articles:

Marketing Track & Field - <http://runohio.com/index.php/features/774-keeping-track>

Student Athlete's Questions - <http://runohio.com/index.php/features/750-keeping-track-student-athletes-questions>

The Need to Speak Up - <http://runohio.com/index.php/features/714-keeping-track->

A new book by John McDonnell - <http://runohio.com/index.php/features/701-keeping-track>

KEEPING TRACK - From September-October 2013 print RUNOHIO - <http://runohio.com/index.php/features/659-keeping-track-from-september-october-print-runohio>

Random Thoughts - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/536-keeping-track>

Another Division I institution has dropped its men's track program - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/498-keeping-track>

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Ohio University Athletic Department's Worst Decision - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/497-keeping-track-ohio-university-athletic-departments-worst-decision>

Life Lessons from Cross Country - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/140-life-lessons-from-cross-country>

Ten Pledges for Cross Country Coaches - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/108-ten-pledges-for-cross-country-coaches>

London Olympics - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/news/419-keeping-track>

Improving as a Coach – <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/322-keeping-track-1>

You Only Go Around Once - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/3-keeping-track>

Dear Jesse Owens – <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/news/215-keeping-track>

West Virginia State Cross Country Championship – <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/472-keeping-track>

SPIRE Institute - <http://www.runohio.com/index.php/features/160-keeping-track>

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