

10y Short Of A Mile

by Hal Higdon

This year's Indiana State Meet provided a perfect example of why the 1600m, as it is now run in high school track, should be discarded.

The finalists positioned themselves on a curved starting line just before turn one. Among the starters were defending champion Eric Smoot of Gary Mann and top contender Albert Munet of Elkhart Memorial.

With the start at that point on the track, it would be two straight steps, then dive left to grab an inside position on the turn.

In such a race, sharp elbows often win over strong legs. The gun sounded; the field collided. Munet got knocked so far into the infield it would have been easier for him to walk over and enter the high jump rather than finish the 1600. He fought back to finish 8th.

Smoot won, mainly off his opening kick. While Munet was being hammered by the pack, Smoot sprinted free. He ran 400 splits of 60, 67, 67 and 59. That's hardly the most efficient way to run a race—unless you're running the Short Mile in the state meet.

"Short mile." That's the politest way to describe the 1600, a mutant event that makes no sense logically or logistically. The sport of track & field within the U.S.

has gone metric to conform with international standards. Yards and miles are out; meters and kilometers are in. The most frequently run road distance in the U.S. is 10 kilometers.

All Olympic events are metric, but nowhere in Olympic track do you find the 1600, which is about 10y short of a mile. The event everyone runs is 1500m.

Nowhere also do you encounter 3200m—the Short 2M. The world standard is 3000m. Only in U.S. high school track do you find events such as the Short Mile and the Short 2M.

It's time to retire these dinosaur distances. Apart from any need for conformity, the 1500 makes more sense competitively. Rather than start on the front curve, the 1500 begins on the back straightaway. Runners have a full 100m to establish position before hitting the first turn.

Had he run 1500m in Indianapolis, Smoot might not have had to sprint to grab the lead. He could have paced himself more efficiently, maybe bettered his time of 4:13. Munet wouldn't have been knocked into the infield on turn one. That turn would have been eliminated.

The 3000 would still begin at the start of a turn on the back straightaway, but sprint starts are less a problem in that longer distance.



History revised: with a 1600 instead of a mile, Gunder Hägg probably ran the first sub-4:00 in his 4:01.4 mile in 1945. No fame for Roger Bannister!

Why don't they run the standard distances in high school track? They do in a few progressive states. One of them is Oregon—which should tell you something! Last year Florida finally abandoned the mile and 2M, but failed to make the logical leap to the standard international distances.

Yet Jack Shepard, *T&FN's* Prep Editor, notes that none of the major post-season high school meets run the 1600 or 3200. At the Golden West, Keebler and Golden South, they still run the mile. For the longer run, Keebler runs 3000 with the others choosing 2M.

In compiling his annual list of high school bests, Shepard dutifully converts 1600 and 3200 times to their imperial equivalents. The time difference for top performances is about 1.4 seconds between the 1600 and the mile, 3.1 between the 3200 and the 2M.

"It's gotten to the point where 95% of the marks are converted," says Shepard, who would prefer shifting entirely to standard events. The colleges already have.

High school coaches, however, have resisted standardization. Several years ago at a meeting of Indiana coaches, someone proposed a shift to the 1500 and 3000. According to Steve Kearney, a coach at Chesterton High, "The vote against was something like 198-2. It was

Track & Field News

Readers Vote For 1500

In our September letters section subscriber Preston Ferrara challenged us to ask the readership, "Should the 1500 be replaced by a 1600?"

Apathy ran rampant, as only 17 people bothered to write, but tradition won out as the 1500 trounced its almost-a-mile cousin 11-6.

Canadian coach Chris Lock posed the question, "Where will the process of making complete-lap races end? This would mean changing the 3000m to 3200m and the 5000m to 5200m. The 3000m steeplechase would be a nightmare, its new distance approximately 2910m or 3310m."

Erin Woodburn of California and John Goegel of New Hampshire called for a return to the mile and 2M by the National Federation. "For those who argue that the 1600 is four laps on the track and 3200 is

eight laps," Goegel asked, "why not make the events 1609m and 3218m? We've thus converted to the 'letter' of the metric system if not the spirit."

Goegel's thought must have some appeal even for 1600 supporters, like Swarthmore coach Joe Stefanowicz, whose sympathies really lie with the mile. "When I see 1500m results," said Stefanowicz, "the first thing I do is add in my head 17-18 seconds."

The most passionate opinion of all, though, came from the pen of 1500 partisan Peter Oviatt:

"Like Ted Turner's 'Colorized Classics,' New Coke and non-alcoholic beer," opined Oviatt, "the 1600 goes into the category of worst of both worlds. Maybe if Ringling Brothers fielded a 1600m racewalk for steroid users, the rest of us could get on with trying to salvage our poor dying sport without any further ludicrous distractions."

me and maybe one other favoring the shift."

As a competitor, I have always favored the 1500 over even the mile. It's the logical way to run the mile metrically. In fact, it's a *better* competitive distance, promising smoother starts. The long backstretch straightaway at the start removes the obligation to sprint foolishly off the line.

As someone recently returned to coaching high school track, I am offended by the illogic of a race where a year's preparation can vanish in the fight for the first turn.

The 1600 and 3200 make no sense. By continuing to sanction these limbo events, high school coaches and officials prove that they too are 10y short of a mile.

[Hal Higdon is a Senior Writer for *Runner's World*. His latest book, *The Masters Running Guide*, is now available from T&FN.]

Agents Alive And Well

In 1989 the International Association of Athletes Representatives (IAAR) was founded, amid some controversy over the track agents' group's call for more open professionalism in the sport.

A year later, the IAAR has grown, and member John Nubani says it has made progress in establishing its credibility as a force on the circuit.

"You can't do everything at once," admits lawyer Nubani, manager of Roger Kingdom. "We saw positive movement both from the meet directors and from the IAAF.

"We're writing a code of ethics. We are trying to police ourselves and the promoters. We have also drafted a standardized contract for athletes and promoters so that every one is working with the same documentation."

Bringing athlete representatives "up to code" is a strong focus. The group hopes to work with the IAAF to make sure that only agents recognized by both bodies—and operating within the code of ethics—will be able to do business.

A good relationship with the IAAF is key, feels Nubani: "It's imperative that we come to terms with the way the sport has changed. We're not out to destroy the IAAF. We both want the sport to flourish. To that end we're both on the same level. Hopefully by working together we can make the sport what we want it to be.

"The more sponsors we have, and the more publicity there is for our sport, the more money is there for athletes to grow. All of that is a positive." □

The Bible Of The Sport

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