

## “Dropping the Amateur”: The International Association of Athletics Federations and the Turn Towards Professionalism

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### **Abstract**

When the International Association of Amateur Athletics (IAAF) changed its name to International Association of Athletics Federations in 2001, it was more than an acknowledgment of the organization’s acceptance of professional athletes. Rather, this change symbolized a shift in thinking about the nature of athletics, what athletics competitions represented, and the commercialization of the sport that had been decades in the making. This article will consider the IAAF’s pursuit to maintain control over global athletics through its transition from an amateur sport federation to a professional sport governing body. Drawing on official documents and personal archives of IAAF officials, we trace the internal views and debates beginning with the IAAF’s fight to maintain amateurism against collective pushback over issues of athlete pay, to the full acceptance of professionalism. Our main focus lies on the transition period in the 1980s and 1990s. We show how dropping the amateur from the name reflected not only the new embrace of professional athletes, but also the organizational turn away from amateur athletics. We will identify the processes that finally forced the breakdown of amateurism and ushered in a new era of professional athletics.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) reported \$5.7 billion in revenue for the period 2013-2016, of which it distributed ninety percent to affiliated organizations including Games Organizing Committees, International Federations, and National Olympic Committees.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of the IOC's revenue (seventy-three percent) came from selling broadcasting rights. However, athletes do not directly share in these profits and many struggle financially to afford the full-time training necessary to compete.<sup>2</sup> This explains why in May 2018, the Athletes' Commission of the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB) sent an open letter to IOC President Thomas Bach asking the IOC to give twenty five percent of its revenue directly to athletes.<sup>3</sup> Such a move by a national athletes' body to the IOC was unprecedented. While the IOC gives substantial funding to other sport-centered organizations, the Athletes' Commission of the DOSB was seeking greater independence for athletes' bodies and repeal of Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter that prevented athletes from advertising during the period of the Olympic Games. Though initially unsuccessful in these pursuits after meeting with Bach in September 2018, the Athletes' Commission was successful at the national level by gaining independence from the DOSB and being allocated start-up funding from the German government.<sup>4</sup> In June 2019, the IOC amended Rule 40 after the German Cartel Office deemed the regulation too far-reaching, easing its advertising restrictions during the Olympic Games.<sup>5</sup> At the root of the athlete group's initiative was one of the most controversial issues within the Olympic Movement: athlete funding. The tension between the commercial success of the Games and the participation of athletes in that success finally seemed to be tipping ever so slightly in the athletes' favor. The growing significance of internal and external bodies representing athletes have contributed to this development.<sup>6</sup>

The commercial interests of Olympic sport have long been at odds with the ideals of amateurism that underpinned the modern Olympics. The Games themselves have a long history of relying on commercial support. Even the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de

Coubertin, who accepted strict amateur rules for the Olympic Games during the inaugural Olympic Congress in 1894 to gain support of British amateur fundamentalists, understood the necessity of commercial partners in order for the Olympics to succeed.<sup>7</sup> However, for ideological reasons sport remained “amateur,” meaning that for much of the twentieth century, international sport federations were bound by—and generally supportive of—rules that effectively kept out any athlete unable to self-fund. Under Rule 26 of the Olympic Charter athletes were not permitted to participate in the Olympic Games if they had worked in virtually any capacity related to any sport, including teaching physical education.<sup>8</sup>

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), called World Athletics since October 2019, is one international sport federation that has for years debated and wrestled with the issue of athlete compensation.<sup>9</sup> The IAAF, formerly known as the International Amateur Athletics Federation, is the international governing body of track and field sports. Due to its perennial popularity at the Olympics, questions of professionalizing the increasingly commercial sport drew much interest from fans, media, and athletes themselves. However, the IAAF itself was deeply invested in the issue and debated it extensively. The federation, governed by a Council and a Congress, struggled over the future and direction of the sport. During the key decades of transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, the organization was led by its President, Italian sports official Primo Nebiolo. Pressed by external changes favoring athlete pay, the risk of losing control over various events and disciplines, and pressure from member federations for reform, Nebiolo’s tenure saw track and field shift to a fully professional and commercialized sport industry, although athletes’ needs were rarely considered in the process.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have considered the end of amateurism in track and field, especially in the United States, and argued that athlete activism or an emerging running market were the primary drivers.<sup>11</sup> Other studies have explored the role of the IOC to maintain amateur regulations while still generating revenue from the professionalization and commercialization of Olympic sport.<sup>12</sup>

However, what has been largely overlooked, is the way the IAAF itself handled these pressures and debated these challenges. The national level changes, such as those that occurred in the United States, were to a large extent contingent on IAAF rules. In its role as gatekeeper to the most prestigious international events—the World Championships and the Olympics—the IAAF’s deliberation and decision-making are central to understanding how and when the end of amateurism came about. This coincided with the IAAF’s financial independence from the IOC. As such, it is important to look beyond the national cases and consider the higher-level institutional changes that eventually led to professionalizing track and field. This article will focus on this shift, and the IAAF’s internal tensions, debates, and power struggles that shaped not only the institution, but also the entire running industry. We will demonstrate how the IAAF leveraged its position as the gatekeeper to the Olympic Games to hold off questions of and activism around athlete compensation, effectively using the shield of amateur values to forestall professionalization for decades. However, we argue that it was organizational self-interest rather than any commitment to amateur ideals that ultimately led the IAAF to fully professionalize.

Our core examination period ranges from 1970 to 2000, when the IAAF finally dropped the “amateur” from its name. This study reviews the official minutes of all IAAF Congresses during this period. The individual correspondences of past IAAF presidents are also included in this analysis. Finally, we consulted documents from the IAAF Archive (Monte Carlo, Monaco) and the Carl and Liselott Diem-Archive (Cologne, Germany). Our approach is informed by the available documents. As such, it focuses on internal IAAF processes rather than the Federation’s communication with the external stakeholders concerned. The IAAF’s dealings with amateurism were certainly influenced by external forces, including those decisions made by the IOC, and they are considered. However, our goal is to understand how intra-organizational concerns, debates, and interests impacted on organizational policy. The

ability to consult archival material from two archives allowed for a verification of the documents' authenticity.<sup>13</sup> Verification was important due to the fact that the IAAF controls access to its own archive and the Federation might have pre-selected archive material on the basis of its own interests.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Origins of International Amateur Sport**

Discussions on participation in athletic competitions and on the definition of “amateur” athletes are as old as modern sport.<sup>15</sup> Despite its common usage and seemingly straightforward meaning, tracing the origins and meanings of amateurism has proven difficult for researchers. Yet this ideal guided much of the decision-making regarding athletes and the way sport was to be contested for most of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Historians have argued that amateurism originated in Victorian Britain, borne of the tensions between the working class and the upper and middle classes.<sup>17</sup> In this view, amateurs competed only for the love of the game and without regard for compensation or even fame. However, much about the manner in which the amateur ethos was spread and came to influence sport in many countries around the world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains unclear.<sup>18</sup> Sport historians Matthew Llewellyn and John Gleaves note that amateurism was transmitted globally via the British Empire in the late nineteenth century, but because it was really a product of its particular Victorian cultural context it never really caught on elsewhere in its original form and was interpreted to fit local realities.<sup>19</sup>

Amateurism lay the foundation for the educational aspiration of the Olympic Games introduced by Coubertin. The durability of amateurism likely owed much to Coubertin, who built his vision of a modern Olympics on it despite his own ambivalence towards the notion.<sup>20</sup> Coubertin had accepted amateurism as a first step to regulating participation at the Olympic Games because he required the support of powerful individuals who saw in amateurism a tool

for social class distinction. However, as previous research has shown, Coubertin never thought payments to athletes should automatically be restricted.<sup>21</sup> In fact, he noted in his memoirs:

To me, sport was a religion with its church, dogmas, service ... but above all a religious feeling, and it seemed to me as childish to make all this depend on whether an athlete had received a five franc coin as automatically to consider the parish verger an unbeliever because he receives a salary for looking after the church.<sup>22</sup>

The IAAF, founded in 1912 on the back of disputes about rules in track and field, and following concerns from Coubertin over the need for a governing body to regulate international track and field, also adopted strict amateur regulations. The IAAF did not stage its own world championships, instead recognizing the Olympic Games as the main international competition in track and field. The strict conventionalism of the amateur regulations was an enormous challenge for the international governing bodies of sport. The centrality of track and field to the Olympic Games meant that track and field athletes were at the forefront of amateur controversies. Following the 1912 Olympic Games, U.S. athlete Jim Thorpe, who had won the gold medal in the decathlon and pentathlon, was disqualified because he had competed in semi-professional baseball.<sup>23</sup> Finnish middle and long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi, a nine-time Olympic champion, was denied participation at the 1932 Olympic Games after the IOC and the IAAF questioned his amateur status.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, U.S. athlete Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson lost her amateur status after a car company used her photograph in an advertisement.<sup>25</sup> These three athletes are well-known cases, but numerous other track and field competitors also were sanctioned for breaking amateur rules before the Second World War. They also highlight the IAAF's (and the IOC's) strict interpretation of those regulations.<sup>26</sup>

After WWII, the IOC elected the former President of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), Avery Brundage as its fourth President.<sup>27</sup> Brundage, who represented the AAU in the IAAF from 1928 onwards, defended the amateur principle on many occasions. He was a key player

in the expulsion of Thorpe and Didrikson. Even though recent scholarship has correctly highlighted that Brundage was selective in his enforcement of amateur regulations, he ensured the survival of the principle of amateurism during his leadership.<sup>28</sup> His views were often shared by British sports administrator Lord David Burghley, later 6<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Exeter, and a former Olympic champion in the 400-meter hurdles, who became IAAF President in 1946.<sup>29</sup> Like Brundage, Burghley supported the expulsion of athletes breaching amateur rules, even though he also promoted individual attempts to make international sport more profitable. Thus, both men defended strict participation rules in the Olympic Games and track and field events that did not allow competing against professionals, accepting financial rewards, or participating in training camps longer than a period of twenty-one days.<sup>30</sup> The selectiveness in their approach to treat some “offenders” more seriously than others was also linked to their desire to control participation based on other prejudices, in particular along lines of race, class, and gender.<sup>31</sup> However, this rigid interpretation of the amateur regulations contradicted the post-war reality of high-performance sport. Very few athletes competed for the love of sport only. The consequence was a period of “shamateurism” in which athletes, officials, and countries went to great lengths to disguise the professional status of participants.<sup>32</sup>

### **The IAAF’s Fight to Remain Amateur**

While debates on the payment of “expense money” have featured at every IAAF Council and IAAF Congress since the interwar period, intense discussions of the amateur regulations began at the end of the 1960s. There were three reasons for these intensified debates on the topic. First, the IOC was forced to deal with amateurism on a regular basis due to constant rule breaches and calls from IOC members to adapt regulations to the reality of modern sport. These came from representatives of various nations, all of whom had related political motivations. In 1967, Soviet IOC member Constantin Andrianov demanded that the IOC change its “antiquated”

amateur rules.<sup>33</sup> However, the removal of amateurism was not his goal. The Soviets were very much aware that open professionalism would disadvantage their state-sponsored sport system. In fact, the Soviets' stance would shift in the 1970s when they continuously demanded stricter eligibility rules.<sup>34</sup> The discussions following Andrianov's calculated proposal resulted in the removal of the term "amateur" from the Olympic Charter's Rule 26 and a change to "eligibility" in 1971.<sup>35</sup> However, the new rule allowed for an even stricter pursuit and enforcement of the code. Thus, more power was handed to the IOC to decide over potential rule breaches and the nature of the rule remained effectively as restrictive as previous versions until the end of Brundage's presidency in 1972.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the steadily emerging commercialization of sport resulted in a growing flow of money. In track and field, such commercial activities were pushed by race promoters who organized international meetings, mainly in road running.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the strict amateur regulations in the IAAF, the organizers of international meets awarded prize money and requested entry fees for participation. This was a controversial arrangement and was increasingly debated within the IAAF.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the installation of additional competition formats, such as an expanded indoor track and field season, caused challenges for the twenty-eight days extension period for athletes. This rule stated that athletes could only train for twenty-eight days per year and could only go abroad for competition purposes for an additional twenty-eight days each year.

Third, the IAAF officials had to respond to individual developments in various national organizations. In West Germany, the National Olympic Committee established the *Deutsche Sporthilfe* (German Sport Aid) in 1967 in an attempt to limit the disadvantages for athletes facing the "state-amateurs" of the Eastern Bloc.<sup>39</sup> The *Sporthilfe* paid expenses for German athletes, allowing them to focus on training. IAAF President Burghley raised concerns about the scheme in the IAAF Council.<sup>40</sup> However, there were similar arrangements made in his own

country. In the United States, where under-the-table payments had spread widely among the most successful track and field athletes, a number of movements by outside groups arose that increased the pressure on the IAAF.<sup>41</sup> Al Scharrau and Jerry Sherman both independently attempted to install professional track and field circuits at the end of the 1960s. Eventually it was sport entrepreneur Michael O'Hara who brought such a plan to fruition with the establishment of the International Track Association (ITA) after the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.<sup>42</sup>

The first detailed discussions on the manner in which the IAAF might respond to such challenges were held at the 1968 IAAF Congress, where various aspects of eligibility were debated. The majority of the IAAF member federations wanted to prevent professionalism, but they also felt modification of the rules was necessary to address the increasing number of violations. Significantly, it was highlighted in the discussion that compensation for athletes had already been proposed during the IAAF's founding years.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the conservative IAAF Council and its President Burghley, who wanted to follow the IOC's lead and refrain from undertaking its own initiatives, the IAAF Congress members saw the need for independent investigations into the matter and voted for the installation of an "Amateur Status Investigating Sub-Committee" (later, Amateur Status Committee).<sup>44</sup> This new body consisted completely of European members. This likely contributed to the ongoing Eurocentric views of amateurism and sport, as well as pointing toward an overshadowing of other, more global views on amateurism. With the support of the IAAF Council, the Committee recommended to the 1970 Congress that a rule on compensation for athletes' lost earnings from their jobs due to competition should be introduced. It suggested that these payments be made by the national governing bodies.<sup>45</sup> There was a large 167-93 majority vote for such a revolutionary change, but the proposition did not reach the necessary two-thirds majority to pass. The internal discussions show that there was indeed forward thinking among members of the IAAF, but

these proposals lacked enough backing from all member federations and, most importantly, had no clear support from the leading individuals to surpass the required threshold to be adopted. Those long-standing IAAF officials, such as Britain's Harold Abrahams, remained entrenched in the amateur traditions that had shaped their decision making over the past decades, despite—such as was the case of Abrahams who had made a living as a coach—often breaching the rules themselves.

While the Amateur Status Committee worked on amateurism at a more juridical level, the IAAF also concerned itself with the direct impact of commercial forces. The Federation's dealings with attempts by West German shoe manufacturers *Adidas* and *Puma* are evidence of how the IAAF kept sponsors on a short leash to maintain the amateur feel of international track and field events. Both companies entered a frantic bidding war in 1969 for leading international athletes to wear *Adidas* shoes (with three stripes) or *Puma* shoes (with one stripe).<sup>46</sup> The IAAF saw the need to stop such activities for its own sponsorship purposes and introduced a “white shoe” rule in 1970 that required athletes to wear only white shoes in IAAF competitions.<sup>47</sup> In subsequent debates it became evident that the new rule was unmanageable and as a result it was dropped just a year later.<sup>48</sup> But during that year, even though the shoe manufacturers publicly claimed they would cooperate, they continued to hand out free shoes to athletes and paid them to wear their brand.

Similar debates about sponsorships, especially those from shoe companies, also took place during the road running boom of the 1970s. Individual road race event organizers began operating outside of IAAF regulations, as the IAAF was slow to pay attention to the sector, even though the popular demand for more races grew rapidly.<sup>49</sup> Shoe companies like Nike were willing to sponsor races and offer prize money to athletes, which race organizers were often happy to accept as a way to increase participation and profits. This presented a direct challenge to the IAAF's amateurism rules and effectively left them out of a potential revenue stream. It

also forced the organization to make its governance of road running official in order to both control the flow of money into the sport and to benefit from corporate sponsorships.<sup>50</sup> These episodes illustrate how the IAAF attempted to control external influences in an effort to keep the sport “clean” from outside payments, as well as making sure the organization was able to benefit from sponsorship deals. The Federation did not want the athletes to profit financially through external sources it could not control.

The Amateur Status Committee did not meet again between the 1970 and 1972 IAAF Congresses even though discussions about the extension of the training period, athletes appearing in advertisements for pay, and loss of earnings continued to appear on the IAAF’s agenda. There was a strong desire among some Council members to adapt the rules to the realities of the sport, which often demanded several hours of training per day.<sup>51</sup> During the 1972 Congress, Norwegian representative Alf Bjercke argued that “the IAAF was ridiculed all over the world for its strict adherence to its amateur rules,” as athletes constantly abused the rules.<sup>52</sup> In particular, there was concern among Congress members that the IAAF was blindly following the IOC rules even though the IAAF dealt with a huge number of track and field athletes who also competed outside the Olympic Games. Ignoring such calls, Burghley referred the task to the IOC, which intended to have discussions on the amateur regulations at its 1973 Congress. However, it had already been made clear that the IOC would not change its basic rule.<sup>53</sup> As in previous cases, the IAAF leadership and its close ties to the IOC—not least that the IOC was a necessary source of income to sustain the IAAF—were the foundation of the Federation’s policy since Burghley decided that the Committee should only be re-appointed after the IOC Congress. This further postponed any IAAF action on the matter.

Two developments in the mid-1970s eventually led to increased action within the IAAF. First, the Federation progressively began to see the ITA as a major threat. O’Hara signed various Olympic medal winners to his professional track circuit for a four-year period between

1973 and 1976, which included a total of fifty-one meets.<sup>54</sup> Internally, the IAAF considered the ITA a serious problem. While it could not prevent the meets from taking place as the stadia were independently and privately owned, the Federation requested officials not officiate at the ITA meets.<sup>55</sup> Paradoxically, many athletes rejected participation in the ITA events because they earned less money as professionals than as amateurs with under-the-table payments.<sup>56</sup> The ITA could not satisfy the athlete needs for full-time employment and mainly contracted them for weekend appearances only. Since those athletes who converted to the ITA lost their amateur status with the IAAF, few high-profile athletes changed sides.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the IAAF considered itself as the umbrella organization for all track and field events and the ITA took some of that control away.

Second, such perceived threats coincided with the IOC's decision following the Varna Congress in 1973 to delegate more authority to the IFs in determining who could participate at the Olympic Games in their respective sports.<sup>58</sup> On the back of this decision, the IAAF reinstated its Amateur Status Committee, this time with a more global membership, including representatives from the U.S. and Sudan. The Committee met in 1974 and produced various new and renovated rules, such as introducing a loss of earnings policy and a new definition of "amateur." However, the IAAF had to postpone any decisions until 1976 as the report could not be circulated in due time ahead of the 1974 Congress. This is further evidence of how administrative issues hindered the organization from adapting to the sporting realities of the participating athletes during a particularly challenging time. Subsequent discussions detail that the arguments by the majority of Congress and Council members remained the same. However, future IAAF President Primo Nebiolo stated in 1975:

It was not possible nowadays to be an international athlete and a good student or worker for example. The best athletes in the world had to train at least twice a day, which was impossible if they had to work for their living.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly, he took a different stance than most IAAF leaders on the question of amateurism and this would later contribute to his election as President.

Finally, it also became clear that the IAAF identified the promoters and sponsors responsible for the high payments to athletes.<sup>60</sup> The IAAF Congress in 1976 decided on this basis that national governing bodies had to pay for lost earnings and provide stipends for a maximum of forty-five days of travelling expenses per year. Significantly, the amateur definition remained linked to its origins reaching back to the spirit of sport: “An amateur is one who competes for the love of sport and as a means of recreation, without any motive of securing any material gain from such competition.”<sup>61</sup> Clearly, this definition maintained the outdated amateur rhetoric of the beginning of the twentieth century. The debate around this change focused solely on a set of abstract values with no discussion of what amateurism meant on a more conceptual level, or even as a lived reality for athletes. In essence, the rule changes in 1976 allowed the IAAF to maintain its amateur rules while attempting to avoid the fact that athletes suffered financially. It was not, however, an adaptation to the realities of international track and field.

Initial discussions on amateurism in the IAAF were not triggered by links to the amateur concept’s values-based origins, rather they were a consequence of the Federation’s desire to maintain control over a sport that was quickly becoming professionalized through alternative avenues. The threat of losing control over any part of the sport was unacceptable to IAAF members, leading them to take up the core issue from within the organization itself.

### **Laying the Foundations for Change**

Following the 1976 IAAF Congress, Adrian Paulen took over the presidency and Primo Nebiolo increasingly became a central figure in the IAAF Council. The influence of the two men, paired with their desire to generate commercial profits, triggered transformative processes in the

Federation that addressed the amateur question in a more reform-minded way.<sup>62</sup> However, cases of famous athletes being banned for accepting money to participate in track and field meetings did not stop. In 1976, the IAAF banned the French Olympic gold medalist in 110-meter hurdles, Guy Drut, for accepting money to participate in international meets.<sup>63</sup> Such incidents highlighted that the IAAF's rules giving more authority to its national member federations did not work—there were too many different interpretations of the IAAF regulations on paying expenses around the world. In 1977, the proposal to introduce two “classes” of track and field competitions—one for amateurs and one for professionals—was discussed for the first time.<sup>64</sup> While the IAAF Council saw some value in this approach, the majority of the members rejected it as they did not want to lose control over any part of track and field.<sup>65</sup> Rather, under the influence of Paulen and Nebiolo, the IAAF Council pushed for an approach that could entail both sides of the sport being governed under one umbrella. Through the implementation of such an umbrella approach, the IAAF now acted independently from the IOC. They were aware that potentially opening the sport to professionalism must be kept confidential in order to avoid endangering any participation at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.<sup>66</sup> The IAAF Council therefore approached the matter cautiously and only made small changes to the rules at the 1978 Congress. Instead, the Council strongly reminded the national federations to control the promoters and ensure they did not exceed the IAAF money regulations.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, the IAAF undertook an initiative to meet with promoters in an attempt to regulate payments.<sup>68</sup> The changes in institutional policy on amateurism became increasingly clear in the internal IAAF discussions between 1976 and 1980. This can be linked to the desire for the organization to become financially independent and the IAAF's initiative to install its own World Championships beginning in 1983.<sup>69</sup> The World Championship event saw the Federation enter the commercial age and triggered the creation of independent financial resources. However, the IAAF Council was not prepared to eradicate the amateur rules just yet.

Against the background of the preparations for the IOC Congress in Baden-Baden in 1981, at which the IOC under its new President Juan Antonio Samaranch decided to liberalize the amateur regulations and give jurisdiction to decide eligibility to the international sport federations, the IAAF took concrete steps towards the acceptance of income through appearance fees and endorsements. Before the IOC Congress, the IAAF decided in principle on the installation of so-called “Trust Funds,” into which any prize and appearance money was required to be paid.<sup>70</sup> The funds would be controlled by the member federations and any payments via agents should continue to be rejected.<sup>71</sup> Specific ideas for implementation were postponed until after the IOC Congress. However, the introduction of the rule triggered two essential debates on the term “amateur.” First, the IAAF Congress voted to change the definition of an amateur to “an amateur is one who abides by the eligibility rules of the IAAF.”<sup>72</sup> This eradicated the former reference to the spirit of sport and instead bound the definition to the IAAF’s regulations, similar to the IOC’s rule change in 1971. Second, IAAF officials began to debate keeping the word “amateur” in the federation’s official title for the first time. Some members argued that with the deletion of the amateur paragraph, the name had to be changed accordingly. But, the majority of the IAAF Council members voted against the proposal at this stage, not yet prepared to leave behind the Federation’s amateur roots.<sup>73</sup>

The decision to install the Trust Funds enabled the IAAF to act swiftly, following the IOC decision at its 1981 Congress to give more responsibility to the IFs. IOC and IAAF officials quickly held a meeting in December 1981 where the IAAF presented its Trust Fund initiative.<sup>74</sup> The IOC discussed the IAAF concept carefully and critically, and eventually agreed that the proposal could become a blueprint for all IFs. It was highlighted, however, that the Trust Funds only supported athletes but did not (yet) deal with prize or participation money.<sup>75</sup> Rather, the IAAF defined the Trust Funds as a “soft transition” from amateur to professional sport. Significantly, the IAAF Council also invited active athletes for the first time to a Council

meeting to hear their opinions on the Trust Funds. The four athletes voiced discontent with the Trust Funds due to its lack of applicability in different parts of the world and for those athletes who were not amongst the world's leading elite athletes.<sup>76</sup> However, the IAAF Council rejected these concerns, even though several member federations raised similar issues at the 1982 IAAF Congress when the Trust Funds were officially installed. The inclusion of athletes in the discussion must therefore be considered as a strategic inclusion in an effort to forestall potential protests from the athlete community. Yet, the athletes still did not receive any direct payments from the IAAF despite the Federation increasingly generating financial income.

Generally, Western track and field officials supported the new process because they reflected the athletes' needs and the realities of the sport. Representatives of Eastern Bloc member federations were more hesitant and argued that the regulation was against the IOC Olympic Charter rules. Not only was part-commercialization against communist principles, but, like the Soviets, they also feared losing the advantage of their state-sponsored systems when a global financial support system potentially supported Western athletes. In contrast, the strong economies in the West and particularly the American college-based system that effectively allowed athletes to practice their sport full-time even before the official removal of the amateur regulation, allowed for even more commercial possibilities to support Western athletes.<sup>77</sup> Eventually, the IAAF Congress voted overwhelmingly in support of the Trust Funds, 386-24.<sup>78</sup> Without doubt, the IAAF had entered into a new era of commercialized track and field. Soviet member Leonid Khomenkov challenged such developments again in the next IAAF Council meeting, but his concerns failed to move the organization.<sup>79</sup>

Whereas in the IOC the fight against professionalism was essentially a struggle to keep the Olympic Games amateur in nature, the main concern on the part of the IAAF was controlling the international meets and their promoters. At the end of the 1970s, the IFs in general, and the IAAF in particular, had only begun to emerge as powerful stakeholders within the international

sport system.<sup>80</sup> It is also evident that the conservative and IOC-linked IAAF leadership circle that dominated IAAF policies until the late 1970s was a stumbling block in the IAAF's progress towards eradicating amateurism.

### **Professionalizing Track and Field**

The early 1980s saw the IAAF maintaining some of its stance on rules around amateurism, but this gave way to the professionalization of both the sport and the organization by the early 1990s. These trends were driven by the growth of the IAAF in terms of its size, scope, and standing as an international sports federation, as well as by the broader move towards professional competition in other sports. The IAAF was caught between the amateur ethos it had promoted and protected since its earliest days and the growing movement towards paid professional athletes, sponsorship deals, and new sport business practices.

Following its successful staging of the 1983 World Championships, the Competitions Working Group presented its recommendations for new Championship events, including for a World Junior Championships and a high-profile Indoor Athletics event.<sup>81</sup> A main driving force behind these initiatives was Nebiolo, who was eventually elected IAAF President in 1983 and who worked closely with marketing consultants to economically expand the sport of track and field. In 1985, the IAAF signed its first contract with international sports marketing firm International Sport and Leisure (ISL), which was run by *Adidas* chairman Horst Dassler. Dassler had allegedly financially supported Nebiolo's presidential campaign, paving the way for ISL's influence in the IAAF's commercial development.<sup>82</sup> This marks the beginning of a rapidly growing influence of commercial enterprises in track and field, which in turn triggered the rise of dark money deals within IAAF leadership circles.<sup>83</sup> ISL and its commercial clients had great interest in professionalizing track and field in an attempt to optimize financial outcomes.

Among the newly suggested event formats was an Indoor Grand Prix featuring a series of events. Council members raised concerns about athletes' willingness to compete at multiple events and the ability of the IAAF to maintain control over running events when rival organizers threatened competition.<sup>84</sup> By early 1984 the threat of a rival Grand Prix was imminent. The Council voted to host an annual Grand Prix, sponsored by a U.S. company that provided one million dollars to support the event.<sup>85</sup> The influx of money had to be balanced against maintaining athlete eligibility, further highlighting the tension between the growing need and availability of funding for track and field and the desire to enforce eligibility requirements. A key debate around athlete eligibility took place across the 1985 and 1986 Council meetings, where members weighed having an independent eligibility strategy for track and field versus waiting for guidance from the IOC.<sup>86</sup> Central to these discussions was the status of athletes who earned money from other sports. Previously, athletes who accepted money for coaching or acting as physical education teachers were considered professionals, as were athletes who competed professionally in other sports. These athletes could not participate in any IAAF events. In an effort to modernize, the Council updated the rules in 1986 to allow athletes who were paid to coach or teach physical education to remain eligible and to evaluate eligibility of professionals in other sports on a case-by-case basis.<sup>87</sup>

While the topic of the discussion was ultimately relatively minor, the debate itself revealed the division among the Council members regarding moves towards allowing professional athletes. On one side, some members seemed to see any relaxing of rules around eligibility as a slippery slope to professionalizing track and field. On the other hand, some members appeared more pragmatic about the changing needs of athletes and the need for some reform to retain control of the sport. Nebiolo led the latter group, and he had the support of smaller member federations that increasingly received development money. By 1987, the IAAF had 179 member federations, with smaller national federations steadily gaining power. This led

to a turnover in the IAAF's weighted voting system that had provided the more advanced, traditional nations more votes than others. From 1987 onwards, each member federations had one vote.<sup>88</sup>

Regarding eligibility, little clarity came from the IOC, which was attempting to balance ensuring the best athletes could compete, maintaining that at least the spirit of amateurism continued to be associated with the Olympics, and the economic realities of each sport federation. As such, the IOC's Eligibility Commission decided in 1987 to allow a mix of professional and amateur athletes to compete in the Games.<sup>89</sup> Some sports, such as ice-hockey and football that had a strong commercial and professional history, had to meet age-limits to allow professionals to compete. In tennis, after long and controversial discussions, the IOC bowed to the International Tennis Association's request to allow all tennis professionals to participate. A further development in eligibility at the 1989 IAAF Congress allowed athletes to use agents to negotiate terms of sporting events and sponsorship agreements.<sup>90</sup> Since then, agents have become an integral part of the track and field sporting industry.<sup>91</sup>

An issue that would take on increasing importance in subsequent years emerged in 1986 when the Congress debated advertising allowances for the event hosts, the national federations, and the individual athletes.<sup>92</sup> Companies were anxious to sponsor events, clubs, teams, and athletes, but expected some advertising potential in return. Because sponsorships were a key source of revenue, regulations were required to determine where, when, and how advertising could be effectively managed. Concerns about conflicting advertisements from IAAF and IF sponsors versus athlete sponsors revealed something of the pecking order in the sport, with the IAAF and its member Federations at the top. Given the success of the World Championships and World Junior Championships events, sponsorship money was growing in both volume and importance. As such, Federation and event sponsors were given priority, while little concern was given for athletes' sponsors despite their importance to athletes' livelihoods and their

ability to train and compete.<sup>93</sup> This was underpinned by the lingering view of track and field as primarily amateur, despite the increasingly professional nature of both the IAAF and the athletes. One member even noted that because “athletes had recently had much done for them” around Trust Funds and advertising, that Federations should now focus on cashing in on lucrative sponsorships.<sup>94</sup> These discussions positioned the IAAF and its member Federations in opposition to athletes on financial matters and the question of individual sponsorships, which foreshadowed fights around sponsorship and advertising restrictions that would become more complex later.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, it shows that the Federation’s financial benefits were put ahead of the interests of the athletes.

Along with other international sport federations, the IAAF began making major moves towards becoming a more business-like organization in the late 1980s. A debate over how to handle the large amount of funds acquired from selling television rights for its major events led to the formation of an audit committee in late 1988.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the dual role of the IAAF as a sport governing body and a business required changes to its professional staff and governance structure to include a more business-oriented approach, though both the Council and Congress were reluctant to move too quickly.<sup>97</sup> However, recognition that the organization was becoming a truly professional business was growing among some members who wanted to use professional consultants and ensure they were working in accordance with best business practices. That said, little internal structural changes were implemented so that those in control did not lose any influence.

During the 1991 IAAF Congress, delegates debated a proposal to change the organization name to exclude “amateur” on the basis that the athletes were increasingly competing as professionals. In particular, members recognized that Eastern bloc athletes trained full-time and that athletes competed for prize money via the Trust Fund system.<sup>98</sup> The question of divorcing the organization’s name from its eligibility rules ultimately led to a tabling

of the proposal. This was ten years after the Federation had first discussed a name change in light of the IOC's switch in its policy wording from "amateur" to "eligibility." However, the IAAF kept the "amateur" for the time being.

The key year in the shift from amateur to professional was 1993, when the Congress made two significant decisions that accelerated reform in the organization. The first was changing the Athlete Trust Fund rules to entrust more authority for athlete pay to the individual national Federations, reflecting the continuing growth of professional competitions and athletes.<sup>99</sup> Once this was done, athletes had greater access to their earnings, though they still lacked full control over their deposited funds. But this allowed some flexibility on the part of national federations by allowing them to take an individual athlete's training and livelihood needs into consideration when distributing funds. It also enabled athletes to access funds more readily, letting many focus on training and competition as professionals rather than part-time quasi-amateurs.

This was followed by the decision to move the organizational headquarters to Monaco.<sup>100</sup> Though the question of moving the headquarters had been raised before, the move to Monaco was seen as beneficial in terms of the physical office space on offer and the juridical and tax-free statuses it would enjoy.<sup>101</sup> Also, president Nebiolo thought that a more prestigious setup would be a better reflection of its "standing in the world."<sup>102</sup> The move to Monaco followed the establishment of the International Athletic Foundation (IAF) in 1986. The IAF contributed to the IAAF's increasing financial potential and its location in Monaco helped convince the IAAF Congress to move the organization's headquarters. Moreover, the IAF's hosting of the IAAF Galas from 1987 on added yet another dimension of entertainment and commerce to the sport of track and field.<sup>103</sup> Finally, the move symbolized what the name change would later make clear: the IAAF was now a fully professional industry leader.

## **Commercializing Track and Field**

Following the successful move to Monaco, the IAAF embarked on a new decade of change. While the 1980s and early 1990s saw track and field take a decidedly professional turn, the early 1990s into the new millennium was marked by a focus on commercializing the sport. However, the old tension between the amateur roots of the sport and the push for track and field to become a fully professionalized and commercialized entity remained. This decade also saw the end of Nebiolo's presidency of the organization as a result of his death in 1999.

The 1995 Congress illustrated the new focus on commercializing track and field from within. Lamine Diack led a group responsible for putting together a report on the future of the IAAF and the aims for the sport.<sup>104</sup> The marketing section of the report—prepared in partnership with ISL—focused on the media and sponsorship opportunities for the sport.<sup>105</sup> Track and field had proven to be popular television, as the viewing audience for major events and championships continued to grow. According to the report, people in 201 countries tuned in to the 1993 World Championships in Stuttgart, Germany, which was more than any other sporting event including the 1992 Summer Olympics and the 1994 Football World Cup.<sup>106</sup> Sponsors were pleased with the high quality of events and the opportunities for promotion and hospitality. The report also noted that the organization had done well to manage challenges, such as ambush marketing from non-sponsor companies, scandals within the sport, and the quality of competition. Taken together, the committee was confident that television programming and new sponsorship packages would draw new sponsors and further increase the television audience and fan base.<sup>107</sup>

For all the focus on commercialization, the IAAF was still clearly committed to maintaining exclusive control over track and field globally. The main priority laid out in the Working Group 2000 report was the need to maintain control of events, competition calendars, and National Governing Bodies, to ensure that the sport and its commercial potential remained

centralized in Monaco.<sup>108</sup> Commanding these aspects of the sport had been a guiding concern for decades. Maintaining Federation control of events and scheduling ensured events were spaced in ways that encouraged athletes to participate, which would then drive commercial interest. This prevented rival event organizers, as well as national track and field bodies, from drawing potential revenue or high-level athletes away from the IAAF and its events. Members reiterated his point at the next two Congress meetings, held in 1997 and 1999. At the 1997 Congress, the joint report from the IAAF and ISL presented to the Congress included growing television coverage, maintaining and attracting sponsorships, and corporate branding as central strategies to pursue. These were an effort to keep the IAAF central to the sport of track and field.<sup>109</sup>

Maintaining control seemed even more urgent at the 1999 Congress, as the proposal for a new Golden League featuring two hours of professional track and field laid out in President Nebiolo's remarks were immediately followed by a warning that "firm control of the sport was required in order to prevent commercially-motivated forces from trying to invade Athletics."<sup>110</sup> The lingering tension over the amateur roots of the IAAF and its commercial future was underscored by the vote to maintain the "Amateur" in the organization's name. Nebiolo was against the amendment proposed by the U.S. members to change the name to the "International Association of Athletics Federations." Despite the heavy focus on commercialization by the previous three Congresses, the group followed his lead and voted against the name change.

The 1999 Congress was the final Congress over which Nebiolo presided. Following his death in November that year, Lamine Diack was appointed interim President. At his first Congress as President in 2001 Diack oversaw the approval of the amendment to change the organization's name.<sup>111</sup> Dropping the "amateur" from the Federation's name—a full twenty years after it was first discussed—completed the shift from amateur organization to international business organization. While there were still some reservations about the change,

including those worried that focusing on professionals would stall amateur track and field participation in developing countries, Diack saw it differently. In his view, the IAAF was not an organization with athletes as its mission. Rather, the IAAF “is a Federation of Federations or Associations, not of athletes.”<sup>112</sup> In October 2019, the IAAF eventually broke away from its former name completely, and is now called “World Athletics.” This change is part of an overall reform initiated following a wide-ranging manipulation scandal in the organization.

### **Protecting the Monopoly**

Professionalization was one of the central challenges with which the IAAF and national track and field governing bodies had to contend from the late 1960s. Internal tensions between those seeking to retain amateurism as a tool for social class distinction and those seeking to liberalize the sport by allowing athletes to earn money through prize purses, sponsorships, and endorsement deals surfaced repeatedly during subsequent decades. This also highlights the clash between the commercial success of track and field, which almost exclusively benefitted the IAAF and its member organizations, and the desire to maintain an amateur ethos. Indeed, the entire running industry changed drastically during the decades the IAAF’s policies were slowly evolving towards full professionalization of track and field. The global jogging and road running movements during the 1970s and 1980s brought a surge in interest and participation that the IAAF struggled to understand and control.<sup>113</sup> This spike in participation was accompanied by the proliferation of new mass events that drew runners in droves, including events offering cash prizes and appearance fees for high profile athletes. Sponsors, especially apparel and shoe companies, sought to profit as well by associating their brands with the best athletes in the world. These new stakeholders became increasingly important as the IAAF sought to maintain its commercial success, adding weight to their desire for more opportunities for athlete endorsements and advertising opportunities on the biggest track and field stages.

The eventual shift from strict amateurism to fully professional sport was only possible through shifts in institutional policy over the course of three decades. While these reforms may have benefitted athletes by loosening—and eventually doing away with—restrictions on earning money through track and field, the main impetus seems to have been one of institutional self-preservation. The IAAF sought to retain control at first over all aspects and disciplines of track and field mainly by maintaining its amateur and eligibility rules. Pressure from national governing bodies, rival upstart organizing bodies, sponsors, and even other sport federations that were allowing professional athletes to compete meant the only way to effectively remain in command of the sport was to reconsider their amateur eligibility rules. By that point those rules no longer reflected the concept of amateurism based on eschewing fame and earnings for love of the sport. Rather, they reflected organizational priorities and fears that the IAAF would only be able to keep control of the sport by maintaining a vestige of amateurism. Faced with growing external pressure, the IAAF was forced to reconsider and realized it would only be able to keep control by turning towards professionalism and dropping the amateur rules. The ability to earn prize money at events and support themselves through endorsement and sponsorship contracts made competing at IAAF meant athletes would not need to look to rival organizations for paid racing opportunities. This ensured the IAAF's events remained the most prestigious and important in the sport. This, in turn, allowed the IAAF to continue to capitalize on the high level of competition that came through having the world's best athletes competing. In this way, the IAAF was able to protect its brand and maintain its monopoly over international athletics competitions, which it continues to hold to this day.

The Athletes' Commission of the German Olympic Sports Confederation's recent successes are the latest in the ongoing struggle between athletes and governing bodies. While the arguments may echo those of track and field athletes from the late 1960s onward, the context in which these recent negotiations are ongoing is starkly different. Now a fully professionalized

sport, paying track and field athletes is no longer a question. Rather, it is questions of who should pay athletes, how much, and if or how athletes should share in the commercial success of their sport that remain central challenges for national and international sport bodies. The way the next chapter for many sports will go may hinge on how national and international sport governing bodies respond to these questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Butler, “Bach Invites German Athletes to Lausanne to Explain Funding Model,” *insidethegames*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1065428/bach-invites-german-athletes-to-lausanne-to-explain-funding-model> (accessed April 18, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Pavitt, “German Group Vow to Continue Working Towards Increasing Benefits of Athletes After Meeting with IOC,” September 24, 2018, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1070323/german-group-vow-to-continue-working-towards-increasing-benefits-of-athletes-after-meeting-with-ioc> (accessed April 18, 2019). Also see: Nick Butler, “Funding for German Athletes Group Independent from DOSB Approved by Government,” June 29, 2018, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1066806/funding-for-german-athletes-group-independent-from-dosb-approved-by-government> (accessed April 18, 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Tomlinson, “The Commercialization of the Olympics: Cities, Corporations and the Olympic Commodity,” in *Global Olympics: Historical and Sociological Studies of the Modern Games*, ed. Kevin Young and Kevin Wamsley (London: JAI Press, 2005), 179.

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- <sup>8</sup> Nigel Crowther, "The State of the Modern Olympics: Citius, Altius, Fortius?" *European Review* 12, no. 3 (2004): 445-460.
- <sup>9</sup> We will refer to the organization as IAAF throughout the paper. Our investigation falls into the time period when it was still the IAAF and in all our consulted documents, the organization is referred to as IAAF.
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- <sup>22</sup> Cited in Ritchie, "Pierre de Coubertin," 826.
- <sup>23</sup> Allen Guttmann, *The Olympics. A History of the Modern Games* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 34.

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- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
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- <sup>51</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the Meeting of the IAAF Council, Munich, August 28-29, 1972, IAAF Archive, 8.
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- <sup>56</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the Meeting of the IAAF Council, Rouen, October 10-12, 1975, IAAF Archive, 11.
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- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>74</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the Meeting of the IAAF Council, Rome, December 12-13, 1981, CuLDA, Appendix B.
- <sup>75</sup> IAAF, Communiqué on Joint Meeting between IAAF and IOC, Rome, December 14, 1981, CuLDA.
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- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>103</sup> IAAF, *An Evaluation of the Accomplishments of the International Athletics Foundation Over the Past 25 Years and Recommendations for Future Emphases* (Monaco: IAAF, 2012).
- <sup>104</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the 40<sup>th</sup> IAAF Congress, Gothenburg, August 1-3, 1995, IAAF Archive, 132.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.
- <sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-169.
- <sup>109</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the 41<sup>st</sup> IAAF Congress, Gothenburg, July 29-30, 1997, IAAF Archive, 53-54.
- <sup>110</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the 42<sup>nd</sup> IAAF Congress, Seville, August 17-19, 1999, IAAF Archive, 18.

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<sup>111</sup> IAAF, Minutes of the 43<sup>rd</sup> IAAF Congress, Edmonton, July 31 - August 2, 2001, IAAF Archive, 3.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>113</sup> Krieger and Henning, "Who Governs a Movement?"