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The challenges of athletics in Iran: A delphi study

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the challenges of Athletics in Iran. Athletics is a kind of sport events which is one of the main sports around the world. According to advance of other events, it would advance and it is a factor and in index of public sports. Subjects consisted of 142 experts including athletes, coaches and "A" level instructors of this sport. We used descriptive method in which a questionnaire produced and validity of questions measured by faculties of Physical Education, who were also expert in Athletics (Cronbach's Alpha= 93%). Using descriptive methods, such as Friedman test and Chi Square, the goals and hypothesis of research were analyzed. The findings revealed 9 challenging factors in Athletics of Iran. These challenges according to their importance includes: Lack of budget and financial facilities (Mean: 4.39) it is known as most important factor. low attention of the media to Athletics (Mean: 4.31) lack of facilities and equipment (Mean:4.16)it is been located in the next grade, too Lack of talent identification(Mean:4.12) Lack of proper governance(Mean: 4.11) Low competitive events (Mean: 4.02) lack of qualified coaches and specialists(Mean:3.96) low level Athletics league (Mean: 3.89) it is been located in the next grade, and lack of talented athletes in the sport (Mean: 2.90) it is been located in the last challenge. Finally, development of athletes depended teamwork of all related organization including NOC, physical education organization and athletes federation.

Key words: Athletics, Challenges, Iran, Delphi, experts, coaches.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, sports are developing day by day and our country "Iran" is participating in different international events like the other developing countries. The international arenas are the competitive place, in which the differences of improved countries bearing sport sciences are obvious with other countries. Improving in Athletics as one of the sport disciplines shows the growth of sport sciences in any country [1].

Athletics is known as the fundamental of sports with 24 events in running (100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, 5000m, 10000m, marathon, 110m hurdle, 400m hurdle, 3000m hurdle, 4x100m relay, 4x400m relay, 20km walk and 50km walk); jumping (long jump, triple jump, high jump and jump with javelin); throwing (javelin throw, discus throw, hammer throw and shot put) and decathlon [2].

It is possible to contemplate Athletics as the most important sport discipline with 47 events in Olympic Games (24 events for male and 23 events for female athletes) and the most popular sport, which everyone may experience in daily life [3]. Athletics is generally trained and practiced in different health and fitness clubs in Iran, but the different events of this sport are not familiar for everyone and this is one of the reasons that Athletics had not reached its real place in our country. This is much disappointing, since the statements of many historians such as

Starboun acknowledged the ancient history of Athletics among Iranians, who practiced the fundamentals of this sport during the war times [1].

In the other hand, a scientific survey in Iran showed that media can play an important role in motivating people for taking part in sports up to 42.2 percent [4]. Media are usually interested in professional sports with many fans and spectators in compare with sport for all that mostly pay attention to public health [5]. A comprehensive analysis about the tendency of sport news channels to make report about different sport disciplines in Iran during one month study, affirmed the high percentage of attitudes to Soccer; whilst this tendency for Athletics was only 5.25 percent, which is not comparable to other countries like Canada with allocating 12.09 percent of their news to Athletics in one month [6].

Strelize [7] stated that TV broadcasting plays an important role in attracting sponsors; and when satellite and TV broadcasting demonstrate the national and international sport events, greater numbers of sponsors were interested in investments.

In the world today, the success of modern sport depends on many aspects including the personal talent of athletes. As a matter of fact, talent identification and training eligible athletes in proper times is known as the most important fact in this success [8]. Experts and researchers believed that the role of Schools Educating and Training Organization in talent identification is exclusive and the sportive success of former Russia, East Germany and some other western countries were indebted to the contribution of this organization [9,10].

Researchers had also found out the necessity of determining general and specific indexes for Athletics, which in short terms can be summarized to different indexes including structural, physiological, physical fitness and psycho-social skills. It seemed much important to determine specific and general tests and standard norms for all of these indexes [11, 12]. The results of another research done by Alijani [3], affirmed the lack of systematic method for talent identification in Athletics in Iran.

Recruitment and employing high educated experts, training managers and improving their skills are proper methods for the continuous growth of sport organizations [13]; however only 2% of PE university professors in Iran spend their times in coaching Athletics [1].

Developing, extending and maintenance of sport facilities and equipments are the main objectives of governments and sport organizations, which invest and spend lots of expenses in sports [14].

Nowadays, sports sponsorship is an important source for income and revenue making. Sport sponsorship is defined as a fact, in which a person or a company supports one sport discipline, sport event or sport organization to bring profits for both parties [7]. Yong [15] acknowledged that the economical situation of the countries is the most important aspect in attracting the attention of sponsors in sports, and the existence of competitive structure in their economy can motivate sports sponsorship; albeit the number of sponsors for Athletics in Iran is inconsiderable, which subsequently decreased the capitation and financial supports of Athletics from sponsors in this country. In another research made by Yazdanpanah [1] the capitation of each Iranian for practicing Athletics was only 20 Rials. As a matter of fact, the necessity for the presence of sponsors in different events of this sport seems vital.

Coaches are the most important human resources in sports, because they should communicate with athletes directly in learning the motor skills and demonstrating the advanced skills [16]. Our national coaches of Athletics are facing many problems, which obliged them to leave professional coaching and they coach scarcely (in the modern world of sports, coaching is a professional job and occupation). In this situation, unfortunately the responsible persons of Athletics had made no solution for removing these problems to motivate their coaches to continue working or even improving their knowledge [1].

The results of another study by Katz [17] titled "Innovation in sport as functional concept for future", showed that utilizing modern equipment and facilities in sports will motivate our innovation to organize sport events in new ways. This could be more surprising for us, because after passing more than one decade of the existence of Athletics in Iran, our national league is organized with the old championship methods in the worst times of a day, which put us in the danger of cancelation every now and then.

Finally, notwithstanding the improvement of different sciences especially in the field of management, and the appearance of new theories such as contingency, conditional, transactional and transformational leaderships; many organizations are still working under the traditional management systems [18].

Pointing to the importance of this case in my country and the problems of Athletics as one of the most significant sport disciplines in the field of professional and sport for all, an urge was felt to find the challenges encountering this sport. In this respect, we are trying to find out whether facilities and equipments, financial supports, medias, management methods, talent identification, organizing leagues and competitions, coaches and experts and potential of athletes can be the challenges of Athletics in Iran or not? The assessed aspects were determined under the consultation of experts in Athletics with Delphi method.

Eventually, the researcher were looking to find the answer for “what are the challenges and obstacles of Athletics in Iran”?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Because the Delphi technique requires that panelists be experts in the field about which they are being queried [19], it was necessary to identify person who could arguably be considered experts, In order to identify expert, a three-step process was used. In Step 1, panel of three Track and Field faculty with an aggregate of 20 years of experience in the field consensually identified the five “most established and active research experts in the field.” In Step 2, five researchers identified in step 1 were contacted. The purposes of this study were explained, and the researches were asked to name the Track and Field scholars they felt should be included in the Delphi panel. Four of the five responded, yielding a list of 24 potential panelists.

Although the optimal size of the Delphi panel depends on the purposes of the study and the expected heterogeneity of the target population [19]. Therefore, in step 3 the lists of 24 scholars were named. The seventeen whom they agreed were included in the Delphi panel, bringing the panel to a total of 17 expert researchers.

Each of the 17 prospective panel members was then contacted. The purpose of the study was explained, the timetable for the study was presented, and each was asked whether he or she would participate. All agreed to participate. The panel consisted of 16 men and 1 woman, and five region of Iran were represented: nine participants were from the capital of Iran, four were from west, two were from center, one was from east, and one was from the south of Iran. They ranged in age from 26-68 years.

Instruments and Procedure

The Delphi technique consists of iterated rounds of survey questions [19], and each round builds on the preceding round. Finding from each round are fed back to the panelists who then respond. Responses can be both qualitative and quantitative. In successive rounds, panelists are encouraged to explain their responses and to indicate the bases for agreement or disagreement with other panelists. Research indicates that three iterations are typically sufficient to identify points of consensus and systematic points of difference, and that more iteration can bore panelist, thus reducing the validity of findings [20,21]. Thus, three rounds were used in this study.

Round 1. The purpose of the first round was to elicit respondents’ views about the current challenges of Track and Field in Iran, and the necessary means to obtain the best future for Track and Field. In order to formulate the Delphi questions, one of the authors and one expert in Track and Field met to discuss the necessary content and probes. The 3-hour discussion was undertaken in two phases. In the first phase, the focus and intent of questions was determined. In the second phase, the appropriate sequence for questions was identified. This yielded an instrument consisting of nine open-ended questions. In order to check the appropriateness of the questions for Track and Field, the questions were then submitted to the persons who had participated in Steps 1 and 3 of the selection of Delphi panelists. They endorsed the questions.

Round 2. In the second round, the thematic areas identified for each question were used to formulate items [22]. Likert-type scales were used in Rounds 2 and 3 in order for Delphi Panel members to refine their responses. For Questions, panelists were asked to rate the important of each theme on a nine point scale ranging from importance to critical importance. They were then asked to rate the level of challenges of Track and Field had attained in addressing each theme. They then specified their estimate of the probability that the ideal quality represented by the theme would occur.

Round 3. The questionnaire in the final round consisted of the same items that had been asked in Round 2. In addition, panelists were shown the distribution of ratings from Round 2, including modes and frequencies. All qualitative comments and explanations that panelists had given to each theme under each question in Round 2 were provided as well. Panelists were also reminded of their own rating for each item. They were asked to rate each item again, and to respond to panelists’ comments from round 2.

Subjects consisted of 142 experts including athletes, coaches and "A" level instructors of this sport. We used descriptive method in which a questionnaire produced and validity of questions measured by faculties of Physical Education, who were also expert in track and field (Cronbach's Alpha= 93%). Using descriptive methods, such as Friedman test and Chi Square, the goals and hypothesis of research were analyzed.

RESULTS

After analyzing the collected data from the questionnaires, 9 variables were appointed as the most important challenges of Athletics in Iran. These variables were ordered due to their importance and effectiveness for being a problem in the improvement of athletics in Iran and their preferences was determined by Friedman test as below:

1. Inadequate allocation of financial supports, inadequate salary for coaches and athletes, having deficiencies in the number of sponsors for Athletics in the country ($\chi = 4.39$ of 5)
2. Diminution of media in paying enough attention to Athletics ($\chi = 4.31$ of 5)
3. To have shortage in facilities and equipments, including standard tracks, fields and necessary equipments for different events of Athletics ($\chi = 4.16$ of 5)
4. Lack of standard and fundamental methods for talent identification, and also deficit contribution between the National Athletics Federation of Iran and responsible organization for sports in schools to attract the talented children ($\chi = 4.12$ of 5)
5. Managerial disabilities in the National Athletics Federation and lack of concentration to Athletics from the Physical Education Ministry and the NOC of Iran ($\chi = 4.11$ of 5)
6. Shortage in organizing internal competitions and little participation in international events, and also deficiency in hosting international events ($\chi = 4.02$ of 5)
7. Inadequate number of native coaches and experts in Iran, and also diminution of using international and foreign professional coaches ($\chi = 3.96$ of 5)
8. Lack of having a systematic and well organized league of Athletics in Iran ($\chi = 3.89$ of 5)
9. To have shortage in the number of potential and intrinsic talented sportsman of Athletics in Iran ($\chi = 2.90$ of 5)

Table 1. Percentile distribution in completing the questionnaire

How important are the below barriers for developing Athletics in Iran?		Very High	High	Med	Low	Very Low
1	Diminution of public media in introducing Athletics	75	16	5	2	2
2	Media's failure in attracting sponsors for this sport	64	23	6	4	2
3	Inattention of sport journals to Athletics and reporting its news	57	28	9	4	2
4	Deficiency in the number of standard fields and tracks in Iran	57	29	9	3	2
5	Deficiency in facilities and equipments for Athletics	40	28	25	4	3
6	Lack of proper methods for talent identification in Athletics in Iran	48	39	9	4	0
7	Deficiency in the allocated budget to National Athletics Federation	54	24	13	6	3
8	Insufficient investments from sport sponsors in Athletics	68	18	7	4	2
9	The low average of salary for coaches and athletes	65	19	10	4	2
10	Shortage in the number of expert and professional Athletics coaches	35	35	25	2	3
11	Diminution in recruiting international and foreign coaches for training	34	28	27	9	2
12	Lack of a systematic and well organized league of Athletics in Iran	33	27	30	8	2
13	Managerial disabilities in National Fed. of Athletics and its branches	40	31	21	6	2
14	Lack of concentration to Athletics from the Physical Education Ministry and the NOC of Iran	53	25	16	4	2
15	Having shortage in the number of potential and intrinsic talented sportsman of Athletics in Iran	15	17	29	22	17

According to the table 1, some aspects such as diminution of public media in introducing Athletics and their failure in attracting sponsors for this sport, the low average of salary for coaches and athletes, and lack of enough concentration to Athletics from the Physical Education Ministry and the NOC of Iran are known as the most important barriers for developing in Iran.

According to Chart 1, which shows the average scores of variables as one of the possible challenges for developing athletics in Iran, it is clear that deficiency of budget and after that diminution of medias are the most important reason; whilst the shortage of potential and talented athletes in this sport is known as the less important factor as a challenge (The maximum value of each item was five).

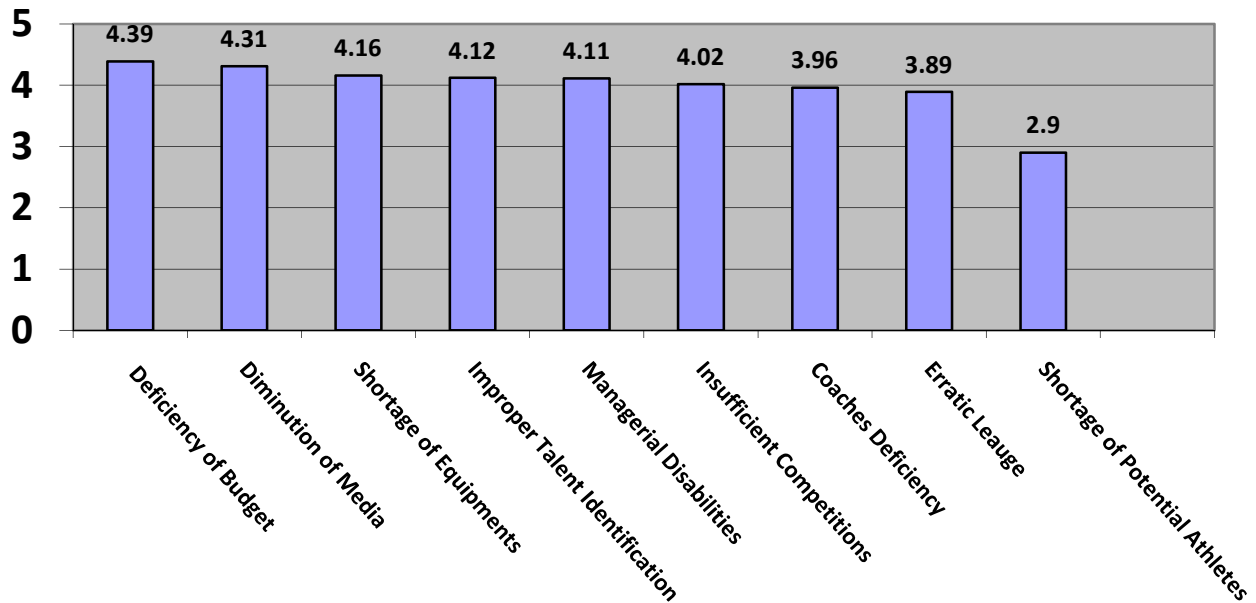


Chart 1. Challenges of Athletics in Iran due to the average score of variables

Table 2. Results of statistical analysis

	Hypothesis	χ^2	DF	p	Result	
					accept	decline
1	Deficiency in the allocated budget to Athletics in Iran	16.955	4	0.002	■	
2	Diminution of medias in paying enough attention to Athletics	50.718	7	0.001	■	
3	Shortage of standard facilities and equipments for Athletics	33.740	4	0.001	■	
4	Improper methods for talent identification among Iranian athletes	20.294	5	0.001	■	
5	Managerial disabilities in the National Athletics Federation of Iran and its branches	15.706	4	0.003	■	
6	Deficiency in the number of national Athletic competitions in Iran	93.996	5	0.001	■	
7	Shortage in the number of experts and professional coaches	21.355	5	0.001	■	
8	Lack of having a systematic and well organized league of Athletics in Iran	51.139	5	0.001	■	
9	Having shortage in the number of potential and intrinsic talented sportsman of Athletics	17.176	2	0.001	■	

According to table 2, most of the hypotheses are located in the significance level of 0.001 and after analyzing the data with χ^2 test; it was shown that all the nine mentioned factors can be the challenges for improving and developing athletics in Iran. Even in the significance of 0.003, we are not able to accept the managerial weaknesses and disabilities in the National Athletics Federation of Iran and its branches (15.706) for not being a barrier in this development. As we can obtain from the table, budget and media are the most important factor in development of athletics.

DISCUSSION

According to the results, the research group and experts of Athletics represented 9 variables as the most important challenges for the improvement of this sport in Iran. Due to the results, it is also clear that deficiency of allocated budget to Athletics, coaches and athletes in this field is the most important barrier. Other researches from Yazdanpanah (2003) and reports of Iran's National Athletics Federation confirm the results of this study. Yong (2004) reminisces to the economical situation of different countries as an important factor in attracting sport sponsors and recognizes the competitive structure in the economy to be a motivator for increasing the investment in sports [15].

Due to this study, the second important factor is the diminution of public media in introducing and broadcasting Athletics and also their failure in attracting sponsors for this sport. It is obvious that when media pay less attention to Athletics, fewer sponsors will invest in this sport. Another study of Ghafouri (2003) showed that Medias are advertisers of Football and they pay little attention to other sports, like Athletics[6]. Jackson [23] emphasized on the role of public media in increasing people's knowledge in physical activities up to 87% and also the effectiveness of Medias in encouraging people to do physical activities and sports was 30%[23]. The third important challenge of Athletics in Iran was the shortage in sport equipments and facilities, in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The number of standard fields in Iran is disappointing and according to the reports of Iran's National Athletics

Federation we still have some provinces in the country without any standard Tartan field. The fourth challenge of Athletics is the improper and wrong methods for talent identification in Iran, and due to this study, 48% of the sample reported the sensation of this factor very high and 39% reported it in the high level. In another research by Alijani [3], it was presented that unfortunately there is no proper method or pattern for talent identification in Athletics in Iran[3]. Another variable known as an important challenge for the improvement of Athletics in Iran, was the managerial weaknesses and disabilities in which 40% of the sample reported the sensation of this factor very high, 31% reported it in the high level and only 8% assessed the importance of this factor low. Snyder [18] stated that although the science and theories of management are improving day by day, but still many organizations are suffering from traditional management methods[18]. Deficiency in the number of coaches and experts in different levels and also their expired knowledge are other challenges facing athletics in Iran. Domon (2004) expressed that an efficient coach should have extended knowledge and great skills to train eligible athletes[24]. Shortage in organizing internal competitions and little participation in international events, and also lack of having a systematic and well organized league of Athletics, and finally inadequate number of potential and intrinsic talented athletes are the less important challenges in the improvement of Athletics in Iran.

Eventually and pointing to this research, when we contemplate Athletics as the most important and popular sport discipline which everyone may experience in daily life, and its influence in sport for all and professional sports are obvious for everyone, it seems necessary for the related organizations to this discipline such as Physical Education Ministry, NOC of Iran and the National Athletics Federation to change their strategies, concentrate on long-term planning, and also collaborate with Medias and other ministries related to sports in schools to remove these problems from the developmental path of Athletics in Iran. On the other hand, paying enough attention to talent identification, training expert human resources, providing greater financial supports from sponsors, standardizing the facilities and equipments in the country, organizing systematic national leagues and competitions, and also improving the abilities of managers in Athletics are the other aspects that help us to overcome the challenges against the development of Athletics in Iran.

Applications in Sport

Athletic sport is progressing very fast in Iran. Many managers, coaches and even athletes don't aware of facilities, barriers of the problems of sport and in this case, Track and field. We have many people who have worked many years in athletics and they have unique ideas about this fundamental sport. This research work aimed to discover the challenges of athletics in Iran. These challenges play as threats of sport in general and Track and field in particular. We can claim that in some cases these problems are global. Therefore the result of this paper can be helpful for whoever works as a manager, coach, trainer and athlete in track and field. May be the most important characteristic of present research is its subjects. The subjects are experts who have been worked for many years in the field. The results of the research now are given to Athletics federation of Iran. Since the panel (subjects) is familiar with national and international priorities of this sport, we are sure that it will be applied soon in the federation.

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