

Tournaments – some thoughts on Doha

The tournament type of competition demands one major thing – to deliver a personal best when it matters. Moving further along the leniency pathway I guess a season's best performance will also be acceptable, but nothing compares to a personal best. For some, the competition might be a straight final (Marathon, Walks, etc). For others, there may be a single qualifying round (Jumps, Throws, 10k, etc.). For other events, there could be up to three rounds including the final. Some athletes can progress through the rounds without having to deliver their personal or season's best but will still have to deliver a breakthrough performance in the final. 'When it matters' is the last time you compete. You can fail to proceed to the next round because the opposition was better but failing to progress because you could not assemble your best ever performance is a challenge for both coach and athlete. In recent years the IAAF has started to streamline the program which places an even greater emphasis on being ready 'on the-day'. In some events (short sprints in particular) there used to be 4 rounds including the final. Nowadays there are fewer rounds with a smaller number of automatic qualifiers going through alongside a small number who are advanced by the time they deliver.

Congratulations to the 12 Australian athletes who set a PB or SB in the arena in Doha at the recent World Athletics Championships. Statistically this means that 23% of the team (51 athletes in individual events) arrived at Doha in appropriate emotional and physical shape. Even more congratulations for those (3 athletes – 5.8%) who did their personal or season's best performance in the final. Well done to all those who progressed to their final (6 athletes – 11.7%) but huge congratulations to the one gold medallist in the women's Javelin.

The 'out-of-stadium' events in Doha need a little more detail regarding some of the Australian athlete's performances. The weather conditions were dire for the Marathon and Walks events and took a toll on all the fields. For example, in the Marathon event, the top 10 were, on average, 2.1% slower than their seasons best. Australia's representative was within 3% of his season-best which is worthy of mention. In the women's 20KmWalk the top 10 all suffered by about 7% from their season's best. One Australian representative was within 6% which, again, is worthy of mention. While few, there were still athletes who set season's best performances in these endurance events so there is still much to learn about how to prepare for unique / difficult environments. British marathon runner Callum Hawkins suffered greatly in the 2018 Commonwealth Games marathon in Australia and was determined to be better prepared for the conditions in Doha. By creating and using a heat chamber he prepared for the dire conditions to be experienced in Doha and finished a very respectable 4th, just 1.8% off his season's best performance.

What can be learned from these statistics about Australia's High-Performance strategy? Whatever your interpretation, there can be no doubt that every coach / athlete unit requires support and mentoring towards repeatable excellence. It is also likely that any improvement to the current strategy must be seen in the light of the total athlete pathway and not just the high-performance element. What has gone before determines what is yet to come so the entire athlete / coach development pathway must be put under scrutiny. Sport receives public funding and so much scrutiny must prevail.

For some athletes, the required performance progress through to an Olympic Games or World Championships or Commonwealth Games demands an emphasis on being physically prepared. For others, it is more about being mentally (arena skills) prepared. For most, it is a combination of both. No matter what the challenge, the tournament championships demand a distinct and unique preparation. In essence, it means that we need to develop coaches and athletes who are adaptable to both domestic and international stressors as experienced in the 'one-off' competition or the 'circuit-type' timeline or the tournament competition structure.

The physical demands are quite different to the usual inter-Club meets seen at home. In most of these domestic competitions there is seldom more than one round to navigate on the track. In field events the competition is usually done on a single day with no previous qualification round. In tournaments some track athletes will need to set up to three consecutive personal bests to reach the

final – probably in the space of 24 to 72 hours. At Doha the women's 100m Hurdles saw the semi-final taking place just 1-hour 45min before the final – a unique timeline physically and emotionally. In field events, it is likely that a season's best or personal best will be required to reach the final. It is also wise to prepare for multiple attempts in some of the qualifying jumps and throws. There are plenty of examples where an athlete has had to take all 3 qualifying attempts in field events just to make the final and then 24 hours later have to do the same again. Being in the qualifying competition for a long period of time is very draining physically and emotionally and must be prepared for.

In field events at the micro-level of competition it is also a requirement that the athlete has the physical and emotional resilience to 'build' and react progressively in the competition. A personal best might have to be followed by another and another as the pressure builds throughout the rounds.

Other arena skills need to be catered for. In a foul attempt in jumps and throws the athlete must be emotionally resilient enough to self-assess and self-organise to be able to make any required adjustments. After a false start on the track the same focus management must prevail. A great example of this emotional resilience was illustrated in Doha in the women's pole vault. Swedish competitor Angelica Bengtsson attempted a National record at 4.80m and her pole shattered at take-off. She was lucky not to sustain a bad injury. She got up, shook herself off, borrowed a pole from a fellow competitor and broke her national record. That is emotional resilience.

How to prepare for such physical and emotional things is an individual matter but they must be prepared for. Some form of variety and variability in the training environment can add to this required adaptability. Changing the time of the daily training session could be a help. Breaking the usual rhythm of the training session, day or week could be helpful. Anything that allows the athlete to learn to adapt to change is part of the process.

On April 16th, 2019 the exact Track and Field timetable for the Tokyo Olympic Games was published giving all NGB's, athletes and coaches 15months notice – enough time to make a difference.

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