

Understanding Track & Field

In the United States, we tend to use the term "Track & Field" to not only refer specifically to the events on the track and field, but also to more broadly include the other disciplines of cross-country, road racing, and race walking. In Europe and Asia, the term "Athletics" broadly includes all of these.

Sources of Income For Professional Track & Field Athletes

-- Track Meet [or road race] Appearance Fees

A stipend paid to athletes for showing up and competing at a meet.

-- Prize Money

A stipend paid to athletes based on place of finish in their race or field event.

-- Sponsorships

A contract with athletes by a business entity that sponsors athletes, requires the athletes to wear uniform bearing the company trademark logo, and/or wear a product made by the company [ie running shoes].

-- Endorsements

A contract with athletes by a business entity that purchases from the athletes, their individual publicity rights [ie. use of the athlete's name, photographic image, voice, etc] for use in print internet ads, or radio, and TV commercials].

-- Performance Bonuses

A stipend paid to athletes by the world governing body of the sport [IAAF] and/or a track meet director, based on performance [ie world record, meet record] in their race or field event.

-- Athlete Support Stipends

A stipend paid to athletes by a governing body of the sport [ie. USA Track & Field, IAAF, U.S.Olympic Committee] based on end of year ranking in one's event or other performance criteria.

-- Event Appearance Fees

A stipend paid to athletes by hosts of various events [ie. road race expo, kids track camp, adult running camp, etc]

Types of Track & Field Meets

In the United States, there are 3 main categories of track & field meets. These are separated based on the nature of the events offered, and the degree to which there is an elitist selection of athletes to compete.

-- Relay Meets

These are very large, very long meets that are primarily comprised of relay events. Due to the relays requiring 4 athletes each, and the fact that quite a few teams are allowed to compete, these meets tend to have thousands of athletes competing across a 2 to 3 day period. They offer a few of the individual events listed above, but the main draw are the relays. These meets are usually held fairly early in the Spring. Some of the more popular meets are the Penn Relays, Texas Relays, Drake Relays, and Mt. Sac Relays.

-- Invitational Meets

These are slightly smaller than relay meets. Their focus is on the traditional event line-up. These meets are still large enough to take up 8 - 12 hours across a 1 to 2 day period.

-- By Invitation Only Meets

These are very small meets in terms of the number of athletes allowed to compete. Many of the athletes competing will receive appearance fees and/or prize money. Many if not most of the athletes competing will be professional athletes. The meets are usually completed within 2 - 6 hours on a single day.

The Events At Track & Field Meets

Looking only at the events on the track or the field, the easy way to get one's brain around the sport is to grasp the broad concepts upon which the sport is founded. Things are separated into two areas: field events, and running events. The field events are based simply on throwing stuff, jumping over stuff vertically, and jumping horizontally. The running events are comprised of sprints, hurdles, middle distance, long distance, and relays.

The Field Events

The field events can be categorized as throws, vertical jumps, and horizontal jumps. There are 4 things that can get thrown, a shot put, discus, javelin, and hammer.

The vertical jumps require one to jump over a bar and onto a padded mat. There are two vertical jump events, the pole vault and high jump.

The horizontal jumps require one to jump for distance, into a sand pit. There are two horizontal jump events, the long jump and triple jump.

Thus, for the field events, we have.....

The Throws

- shot put
- discus
- javelin

The Vertical jumps

- pole vault
- high jump

The horizontal jumps

- long jump
- triple jump

The Sprint Events

For the running events, understanding what distances are run in the sport is helped by realizing that the sprint events are based on running some portion or some fraction of 1 lap around the track.

For example, an event where you run 1/4 of a lap = the 100 meter dash event.

Running 1/2 a lap = the 200 meter dash event.

Running 1 lap = the 400 meter dash event.

Thus, we have the.....

- 100m
- 200m
- 400m

The 100 is generally referred to as a short sprint. The 200m and 400m are referred to as the "long sprints".

There are 2 sprint relay events as well, each designed for a 4 person team.

--- 400m relay [1 lap, with 4 people each running 100m]

This race is usually referred to as the "4 x 100m relay"

--- 1600m relay [4 laps, with 4 people each running 400m]

This race is usually referred to as the "4 x 400m relay"

The Distance Events

The final event based on some aspect of 1 lap is the 800 meter run. Running 2 laps = the 800 meter run event.

The longer races are not based on the lap of a track, but are instead based on European road distances that revolve around the kilometer.

For example, an event where you run 1 1/2 kilometers = the 1500 meter run event.

Running 5 kilometers = the 5000 meter run event.

Running 10 kilometers = the 10,000 meter run event.

Running 42 kilometers = the marathon event.

Thus, we have the.....

- 800m
- 1500m
- 5000m
- 10,000m.
- Marathon

The 800m 1500m, and 5000m events are generally referred to as the "middle distance" events. The 10,000m and Marathon are referred to as the "long distance" events.

The Hurdle Events

The hurdle events can be best conceptualized broadly by grouping them in to sprint hurdles, long hurdles, and the Steeple Chase. There is only 1 sprint hurdle event. For men its 110 meters in length, for women its 100 meters. The height of the hurdles is higher for this event than for the longer race. The long hurdles event is 1 lap around the track, 400 meter hurdles. The Steeple Chase event is 3 kilometers. In this event, one of the 5 hurdles per lap is set directly in front of a pit of water.

Thus, we have the.....

- 100m hurdles [women]
- 110m hurdles [men]
- 400m hurdles
- 3000m Steeple Chase

The Multi-events, And The Walking Events

The two groups of events that are some combination of track events and field events are the multi-events [ie decathlon, and heptathlon], and the walking events, more popularly referred to as the Race Walk.

The Decathlon [for men] consists of 10 events....

- 110m hurdles
- 100m dash
- 400m dash
- 1500m run
- long jump
- pole vault
- high jump
- shot put
- discus
- javelin

The Heptathlon [for women] consists of 7 events.....

- 100m hurdles
- 200m dash
- 800m run
- long jump
- high jump
- shot put
- javelin

The walking events will vary in distance depending on the track meet, but at the championship meets [national, world], there will be a 20 kilometer and 50 kilometer walk for men, and for women a 10 kilometer walk.