

# From talent to elite athlete:

## A study of the performance development of the finalist at the 1999 IAAF World Youth Championships

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*The introduction of the IAAF World Youth Championships (WYC) was preceded by debate about the dangers that young athletes would be led to specialise too early and that highly specific training would be applied, leading to early stagnation in performance and/or injury-induced drop-outs. The aim of this study was to provide empirical data to inform both sides of the discussion and elevate it from an exchange of unsupported statements. A detailed analysis was made of the performance development of the finalists (n= 266) at the first WYC, which took place in 1999. It was found, among other things, that 90% of the group studied continued to improve in the subsequent years and 88% made the world top 100 in their best disciplines. The authors concluded that as 21% of the group qualified for the IAAF World Championships in Athletics and/or the Olympic Games between 2000 and 2004, there is no basis on this point for rejecting international youth championships as a valuable element of the world competition calendar.*

## ABSTRACT

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should be to achieve their peak performances in adulthood rather than adolescence. However, supporters of the WYC believed the event would be a significant stimulus for timely, systematic and goal-oriented training while opponents argued there were dangers that young athletes would be led to specialise too early and that highly specific training means would be applied, leading to early stagnation in performance and/or injury-induced drop-outs before the athletes reached the ideal high-performance age.

Positions in the debate were closely connected with understanding of the concept of "talent". This concept has been defined by numerous authors (CARL, 2003; OCH, 1997; SINGER, 1981). In his definition, JOCH says, among other things, that an especially talented athlete achieves performance results that are above the average performances of

## Introduction

**T**he introduction of the IAAF World Youth Championships (WYC) for athletes under 18 was preceded by intense discussions in the athletics world. It was unquestioned that the goal for athletes

his age group. When asked for talent criteria, several authors mention early conspicuous performances (JOCH, 1997). These statements, however, lack substantiation. This leads to the questions of how and to what extent talented athletes must stand out from the rest in order to have a chance to reach world-class in adulthood. It must also be considered that it is only with increasing age that performances can be used as talent indicators, because then they must get closer and closer to the performances of adult athletes (CARL, 1988; HOHMANN, CARL, 2002; KILLING et al., 2005; SCHNABEL, et al., 1997).

In the dynamic component of JOCH's talent definition, the processes of change are mentioned, by which, of course, performance increases are meant (JOCH, 1997). A high speed of development is demanded (CARL, 2003; JOCH, 1997; KILLING, 2005; KUPPER, 1999). But how great must these performance increases really be in order to get to world-class?

A study based on the biographies of a multitude of international top-level athletes arrived at the result that 70% of the medalists at continental and world championships had already been among the medal winners at junior championships. The study concluded that top-level athletes who were successful at the youth or junior level could also have a long and successful career at senior level. However, it is always possible that athletes can become top stars without having reached the top level in the youth or junior age groups (ZELICHENOK, 2005).

The first quantitative results in this discussion came from a study by OTTE (2002), who examined the careers of the finalists of World Junior Championships (WJC). OTTE followed the athletic development of 835 WJC finalists (male) from 1986-1996 until 2002. 64% of these athletes showed further performance development and 26% reached the finals at the World Championships and/or Olympic Games.

The aim of this study is to extend OTTE's

approach to the youth age group and to support the discussion outlined at the beginning with empirical data so that the debate is elevated from an exchange of statements of unsupported beliefs.

## Subjects of the study

The study focuses on the finalists of the first IAAF World Youth Championships, which took place in Bydgoszcz, Poland in 1999, as examples of early-detected talents in the youth age group (at that time 17 years old or younger). The performance development of these athletes until the year 2004 is described and possible distinctive features are identified. This is done on the basis of the respective best performances and rankings in the annual world lists (AWL). Results at international championships in the junior and adult categories were also considered. We examined how many athletes actually exhibited an increase in performance, how fast that development took place and to what extent this was accompanied by a rise to absolute world-class level, how stable the performance was and how marked were the deficits as compared to world-class athletes. Apart from the general examination, the development in the individual subgroups is also studied. This means that the athletes were examined and compared from a variety of perspectives in order to filter out possible differences between event groups, athletes who switched or did not switch events, ranking groups, continents and sexes.

## Data collection

The best annual performances and the respective rankings in the AWL come from the statistics pages of JALAVA ([www.tilastopaja.net](http://www.tilastopaja.net), 28.12.2004). Depending on the event, the lists include the 300 and sometimes even more than the 1,000 best performers in each event. If possible, missing data was supplemented from the continental or national lists ([www.iaaf.org/links](http://www.iaaf.org/links), 01.12.2004) and included at the respective place in the AWL. For

hand-timed results we added 0.24 sec for distances up to 200 m and 0.14 sec for all longer distances, values which are generally used in athletics ([www.stlv.at/bestlist/E-BestListe\\_hist.htm](http://www.stlv.at/bestlist/E-BestListe_hist.htm), 23.06.2005). If seasonal bests could not be found, the results of international championships were used in order to make the data collection as complete as possible. The results of the IAAF World Championships in Athletics (WCA) or IAAF World Junior Championships (WJC) were taken from the result lists of the IAAF ([www.iaaf.org](http://www.iaaf.org), 01.12.2004). In the case of the Olympic Games, the results come from the organisers ([www.athens2004.com](http://www.athens2004.com)) or from specialist magazines (Leichtathletik).

If an athlete was listed for several events, only the data of the best event was picked out in order to avoid an immoderate weighting. In such cases, the best event was regarded as the one with the best ranking in the AWL in 2004. In the international championships, too, the best place counted. In some events, when getting to the senior level, the height of the hurdles, running distances or weights change. If in these cases the athletes had already delivered a performance under senior conditions in 1999, this performance was used as the base performance.

At the WYC there were 35 such decisions in individual events (from 281 participants). If an athlete had taken part in several finals, the criteria described above were applied. This led to a reduction of the sample to 266 athletes. Depending on the data available and the respective formulation of the question, this number decreased even further.

## Analysis criteria

The study deals with a number of questions that were asked to elaborate and interpret the development of the athletes:

1. How many athletes were listed in the AWL in the years following the WYC?
2. How often did the athletes place in the AWL/top 100 of the AWL/top 50 of the AWL/top 10 of the AWL?
3. When did the athletes place in the AWL/top 100 of the AWL/top 50 of the AWL/top 10 of the AWL for the first time?
4. When did the athletes achieve their best performance in the following years?
5. How many athletes could improve in the course of the following years?
6. What was the average rank of the athletes on the AWL in the respective following years and how great was the resulting improvement?
7. How great was their average improvement in performance in the individual following years as compared to 1999?
8. How great was the average performance deficit as compared to place 100/place 50/place 10 in the individual following years?
9. How many athletes took part in the major championships (World Junior Championships, World Championships in Athletics, Olympic Games) in the following years and how did they perform?

Under question 1 it will be shown how many athletes continued their performance-sport career at a high level and thus continued trying to reach world-class.

The second question is whether in the following years the athletes were successful in working towards world-class by reaching a place among the top 100 (= extended world-class), top 50 athletes (= world-class) and top 10 (= absolute world-class). This division is also used with questions 3-9. The average duration of stay in the individual performance categories was regarded as the criterion of performance stability.

Question 3 deals with the time taken to reach a certain level of performance as a measure of the speed of development. In this case, only those athletes who were successful in reaching the respective level of performance can be considered as the population to be studied.

Question 4 deals with the time taken to achieve the best performance during the

years following the WYC. The aim is to gain knowledge about the speed of development and hints for potential further possibilities of improvement.

Question 5 tries to find out how many athletes managed to succeed. Firstly, this is done using the AWL rankings, secondly using the best performance of the years following the WYC as related to the basic performance in the year of the WYC. Depending on the data, the number of individuals examined varies.

In the sixth question, the development of the performance level is observed by using the ranking in the AWL. This is also done in question 7 by looking at the performance increase as compared to the basic performance during the respective following years.

Question 8 deals with how far away the athletes are from the performance levels mentioned above in the individual following years. This means that for answering these questions only those athletes who delivered performances in these years could be used for the respective years.

Finally, question 9 shows whether and how the participants in the WYC presented themselves at major championships at the junior and senior level.

Apart from presenting a general view, the study also divides the athletes into different subgroups, to which the analysis criteria were also applied in order to enable comparisons:

**General development:**  
All finalists

**Event groups:**  
Sprint (short and long sprint), hurdles, running events (middle- and long- distance/steplechase), jumps, throws, walking

**Switching of event:**  
Non-switchers, event-switchers A (because of changes of distance, hurdle heights or throwing weights as compared to the youth area), event-switchers B (real switchers)

**Sex:**  
Male, female

**Continents:**  
Africa, Asia, Australia, Caribbean, South America, North America, Eastern Europe, Western Europe

**Place groups:**  
Medallists, finalists (places 4 to 8)

## Statistical evaluation

The data collected was put through a statistical analysis. Where comparisons between groups were conducted, the limit of significance was set at an error probability of  $p=5\%$ . If there were significant differences between the subgroups, they are indicated in the text.

## Results of the study

The following summary is based on the questions mentioned above and shows the results of the total group. Results of the partial groups are only listed when they deviate from the total trend. All results are included in the thesis by GRUND (2005).

## General development

### 1 Ranking in the AWL in the following years

As can be seen from Figure 1, there was a slow but continuous increase in the number of athletes who made the AWL - from 58.3% in 1999 (the year of the WYC) to 67.7% in 2003. Only in the last year under consideration was there a reduction of the percentage to 62.8%. However, this value is still above the initial values from the year of the WYC. The mean value is also somewhat higher (63.5%). If the number of athletes who could place at least once in the years following the WYC is considered, it turns out that the percentage has significantly increased from 58.3% in 1999 to 88.7%.

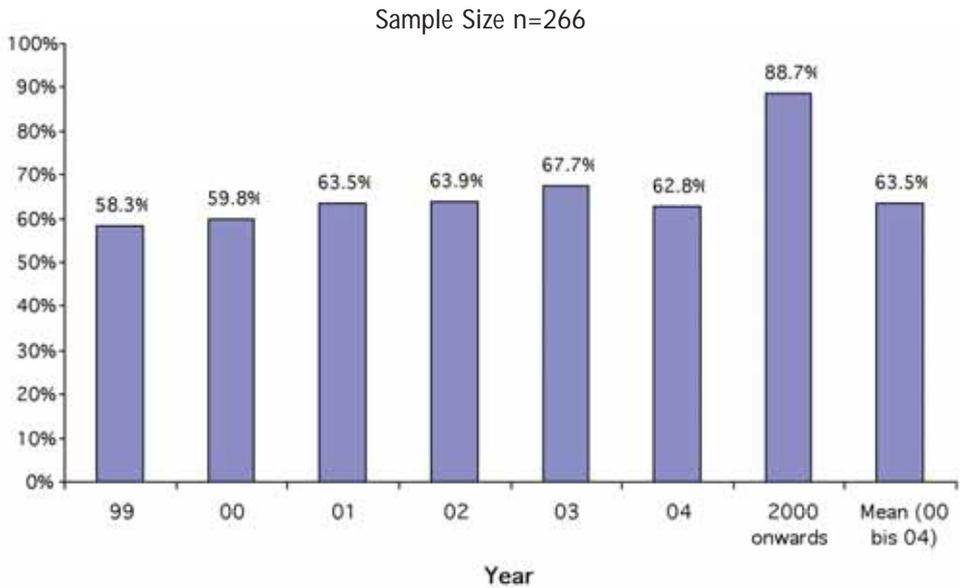


Figure 1: Ranking in the Annual World List (general)

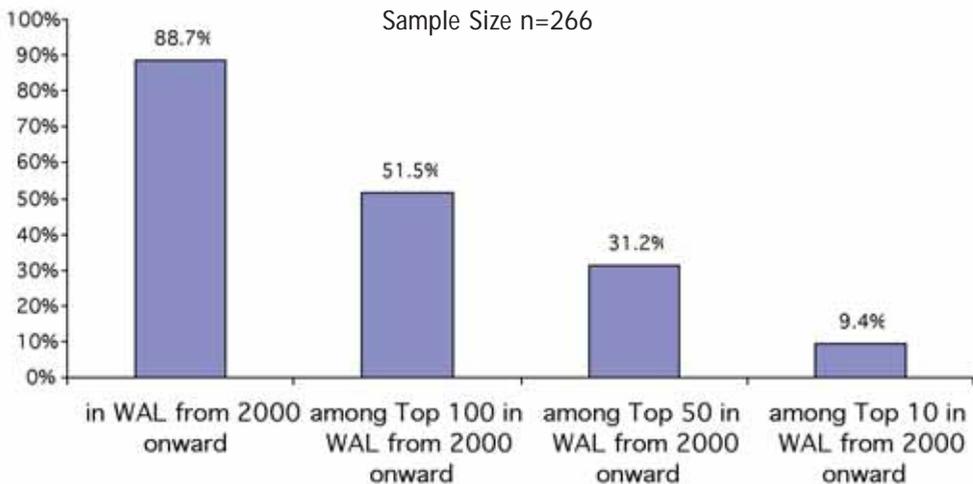


Figure 2: Frequency of rankings in the Annual World List /among the top 100/top 50/top 10 (general)

## 2 Frequency and duration of stay in the AWL (by category)

88.7% of the finalists of the 1999 WYC are also represented in the AWL in the following years. Only at the higher performance level

does it becomes more difficult: Although more than half of the athletes (51.5%) reached a place in the extended world class, not even a third (31.2%) were among the top 50 (world class) and only 9.4% could place themselves among the top 10 (absolute world class).

So far, the athletes succeeded in placing themselves in the AWL within 3.2 years following the WYC. For a period of 1.5 years, they established themselves in the extended world class. The average athlete managed to stay in the top 50 for a period somewhat shorter than one year (0.8 years). For only 0.2 years did he or she belong to the top 10.

### 3 First appearance in the AWL/among the top 100 / top 50 / top 10

On average, the finalists appeared in the AWL relatively fast, i. e. after only 1.6 years following the WYC. This was the case with 236 of the 266 finalists. It took them about one further year (i. e. 2.5 years altogether) to reach the extended world class (n=137). After 2.9 years the first athletes reached the top 50 (n=83). The athletes who reached the top 10 (n=25) managed to do so after 3.5 years on average.

### 4 Mean time taken for achieving a personal best

The 240 athletes who continued to deliver top-level performances after the WYC took 3.4 years on average to achieve their personal best performance after the year of the WYC.

### 5 Changes as compared to 1999

The study of the young athletes shows that a very great percentage could improve as compared to 1999. This applies to both the AWL rankings (n=142) and the performances (n=177). Expressed in percentages, 90.1% of the athletes achieved a better position on the AWL, whereas 89.8% of the athletes improved their performance.

### 6 Average AWL ranking

As can be seen from Table 1, the average ranking improved from year to year. Starting from an average place of 264.2, the WYC finalists reached an average rank of 130.9 in the year 2004, which means an improvement of 50.5%. The increase during the two first years after the WYC was much more marked than in the years following (jumps of about 50 places in each case). The average top ranking is 131.2, which is only insignificantly higher than the value in 2004.

### 7 Mean percentage performance increase

The greatest performance improvement can be seen in the first year after the WYC. Here the performance improved by 2.3%. After this, there were only smaller increases (0.6-1.1%) compared to the initial level. In 2004 the athletes eventually reached their current performance peak, which means an increase of 5.9%. The difference to their previous personal best is at a similar level: 6.0% compared to the values from the year of the WYC.

### 8 Average performance deficit as compared to the AWL categories

As can be seen from Table 2, the average performance deficit related to place 100 of the AWL reduced from year to year. While the difference in the initial year was 4.3%, the seasonal bests of the athletes in 2004 were 0.5% better than the level that was necessary to rank in the extended world class. While during the first three years after the WYC the difference reduced between 1.5% (from the second to the third year after the WYC) and

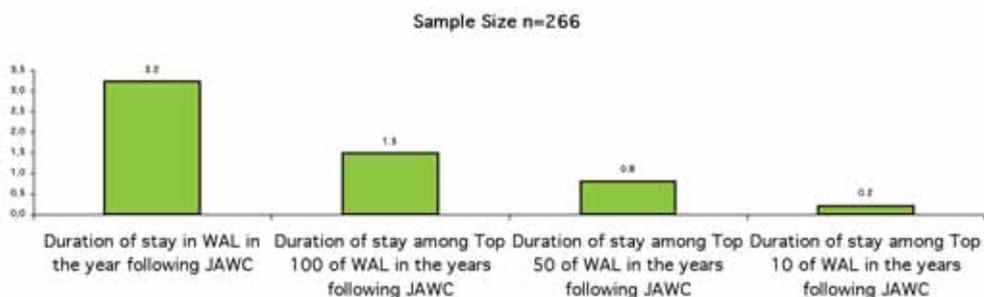


Figure 3: Average duration of stay in the Annual World List/among the top 100/top 50/top 10 (general)

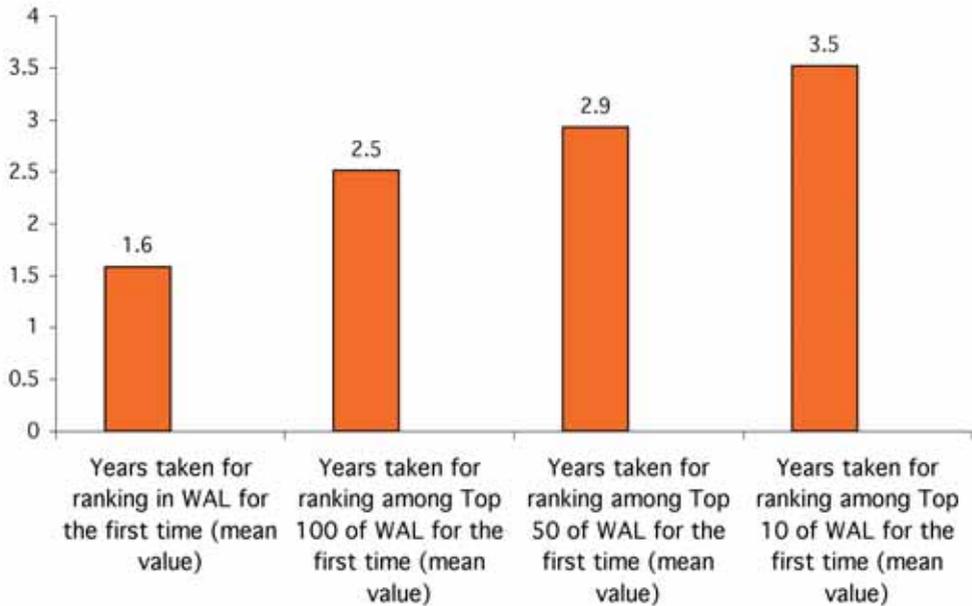


Figure 4: First appearance in the Annual World List/among the top 100/top 50/top 10

0.9%, the performance improvement during the last two years of the observation period was less marked.

There was also a continuous decrease in the performance deficit related to place 50. While at the beginning the difference was still 6.8%, it was only 2.2% at the end of the observation period. The greatest leap in performance compared to the performances of place 50 of the AWL can be seen from the first to the second year after the WYC. Here the deficit decreased

by 1.5%. The smallest improvement as compared to the level of the previous year was achieved in 2003. In that year the deficit only reduced by 0.5%.

The comparison with place 10 of the respective AWL (absolute world class) shows a similar picture. Over the observation period, the deficit decreased from 10.5% to 5.9%. Each year it decreased by 0.9-1.1 percentage points. Only between the third and the fourth year after the WYC was there a small increase of 0.6%.

Table 1: Average ranking in the Annual World List (general)

All finalists	
average ranking in the WAL 99	264.2
average ranking in the WAL 00	217.3
average ranking in the WAL 01	167.8
average ranking in the WAL 02	157.9
average ranking in the WAL 03	145.3
average ranking in the WAL 04	130.9
average top ranking from 2000 on ward	131.2

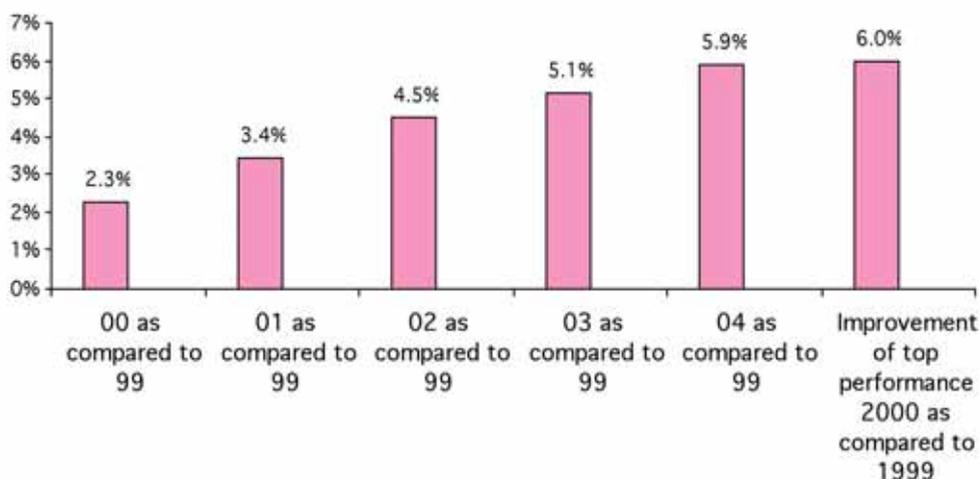


Figure 5: Average performance improvement (= PI) as compared to 1999 (general)

Table 2: Average performance deficits (= PD) as compared to the AWL categories

	PD as related to place 100	PD as related to place 50	PD as related to place 10
1999	4.3%	6.8%	10.5%
2000	3.0%	5.8%	9.6%
2001	1.5%	4.3%	8.5%
2002	0.6%	3.4%	7.4%
2003	0.1%	2.9%	6.8%
2004	-0.5%	2.2%	5.9%

## 9 Success in major championships

As can be seen from Table 3, almost half of all the finalists at the 1999 WYC (49.2%) went on to take part in one or more World Junior Championships. More than a quarter (26.7%) of these athletes qualified for the final. The percentage of athletes who won a medal was 15.4%. This means that only 11.3% made the final but did not win a medal.

The World Championships do not provide such a satisfying picture. Here only 15.8% succeeded in qualifying. 4.9% reached the final, of whom almost half (2.3%) won a medal. The rest (2.6%) had to be satisfied with lower places.

It can also be seen that the former WYC finalists did somewhat better at the Olympic Games than at the World Championships in Athletics. A total of 21.1% took part, 6.4% reached the finals. More than half of these athletes (3.4% of the total) won a medal.

### Distinctive features of the different subgroups

The different event groups hardly differ from the general development. Only the jumping events stand out positively with regard to several analysis criteria. For example, in these events a significantly greater percentage of athletes managed to place in the AWL and thus continued to perform at the highest level (with significant differences

Table 3: Success in the World Junior Championships/World Championships in Athletics/Olympic Games (general)

	Junior WC	WC	Olympics
At least participatism	49.2%	15.8%	21.1%
At least participatism in the finals	26.7%	4.9%	6.4%
Participatism in the finals	11.3%	2.6%	3.0%
Medal winner	15.4%	2.3%	3.4%

between the initial and mean values as well as between the percentages in the years 2000, 2001, and 2003). However, in the individual years there was hardly any increase as compared to the initial value. The jumpers were also more successful in advancing further in the direction of the absolute world class, in establishing themselves there for a longer period (with significant differences in the case of placements among the top 100 and top 50). Thus, they reached the best average rankings in the AWL with significant differences in 2000, 2002, 2003 and, in the case of the top ranking, from the year 2000 onwards. Correspondingly, the jumping events show the smallest performance deficits as compared to the different categories of world class, in some cases with a significant difference as related to the total development, which had also an effect on the success balance at major championships. The greatest performance increases with significant differences as compared to the total development can be found in the throwing/jumping events across all years.

The event-switchers A (who switched events because of the change of running distances, hurdle heights, and weights in the adult category) took significantly longer than the non-switchers to place in the AWL and the extended world class for the first time. Even for the higher performance level the results of this study show that there are deficits. The values achieved by the event-switchers C give evidence of a delayed development, too. Correspondingly, the best performances of the athletes of the groups of switchers were achieved later and the duration of their stay at the different performance

levels was shorter. At the end of the observation period, the event-switchers B showed the least marked performance deficits as compared to the absolute world-class.

Hardly any differences can be found between the female and male athletes. However, most of the men took a bit longer to advance towards the absolute world-class than the women. In some cases, there are significant differences, as is also the case with reaching the previous best performance. Moreover, the women had less difficulty in being successful at major championships, especially at the World Junior Championships (where a significant difference can be found). However, the men were able to increase their performance level to such an extent that they got closer to the women and even surpassed them in some criteria.

When dividing the WYC finalists according to continents, it is conspicuous that about half of them came from Eastern or Western Europe. Athletes from Africa demonstrated a particularly fast performance development. Australia is the continent with the fewest athletes being able to improve their performances. Moreover, as with the Asian athletes, the performance increases of the Australian athletes were too small to enable them to establish themselves at world-class level. On the other hand, at a later point many young talents from the Caribbean are among the top rankers in the AWL. Athletes from Eastern and Western Europe are characterised by continuous performance development. However, remarkably, the West European athletes frequently managed to qualify for the World Junior Championships.

A further finding is that the medallists of the WYC started from an considerably higher performance level than the athletes placed behind them and they maintained this significant advantage until the end of the observation period. The results of this included, for example, that they stayed longer in the AWL categories, that their performance deficits were smaller, that their placements in the AWL were better (almost all differences being significant) and that they were more successful at major championships (with some of the differences also being significant).

For a more differentiated description of the development of the respective subgroups with exact values as well as with additional conspicuous details see the original study by GRUND (2005).

## Summary and conclusions

90% of the finalists of the first WYC in 1999 exhibited a further development of performance. Therefore, the general statement that international youth championships lead to a too early specialisation with a premature stagnation of performance does not seem to be justified. The general development shows that almost all finalists tried to continue with their athletic activity in the years after the WYC at a high level for at least a certain time. A proof of this is that 88.7% of these athletes subsequently appeared on the AWL.

However, in indication of how difficult it is even for a young talent to get to world class can be seen from the fact that only half of these athletes could place themselves among the top 100. So far, only 9.4% have reached absolute world class. The duration of stay at the top, too, gives evidence of a lack of stability. For example, so far the athletes have placed in the AWL for 3.4 years. However, they have only been able to stay in the extended world-class for 1.4 years, while in the absolute world-class the duration of stay has only been 0.2 years.

That it is nevertheless worthwhile to work consistently and, what is even more impor-

tant, patiently at one's performance development becomes clear when one looks at the first appearance in the different categories of the AWL. Athletes being successful in reaching the absolute world class managed to do so in the course of 3.5 years after the WYC. Even for advancing on average to the top 50 the athletes took 2.9 years. That it took the athletes 3.4 years on average to reach their personal best performance so far underlines this statement and shows that the athletes' have not by far reached the end of their development. When looking at the average AWL ranking or the deficits as compared to the different world class categories, a thorough improvement can be seen. This is a further sign that increases can still be expected. During the observation period these increases were relatively constant, only in the jumping events was the increase in performance greater as related to the performance during the first year after the WYC. However, this can probably be explained by an over-proportion increase of those athletes who at youth age took part in competitions under adult conditions although, for example, different hurdle heights would have been required for them in the youth category. A small slowing down of the improvement rate can be detected in the year 2003, which, however, was compensated for by an increase due to the motivation for the 2004 Olympics.

21% of the athletes managed to qualify for the World Championships in Athletics and/or the Olympic Games. If one compares these values with the results of the juniors studied by OTTE (26% qualified for the WCA and/or the Olympics), the percentage is surprisingly high. The justification of the Junior World Championships is beyond any discussion. If, however, the same percentage of athletes who take part in the WYC continue to make their way to the big international events, there is no basis for rejecting international youth championships either.

The results achieved by the athletes studied at the Olympic Games were better than those at the World Championships in Athletics. The last Olympic Games took place in

Athens at the end of the observation period and coincided with the greatest increases in performance as related to the initial level as well as with the smallest performance deficits. This means that 21.1% of the athletes qualified for the Olympics although only 15.8% managed to do so for the WCA. While at the WCA the best result of 2.6% of the athletes were between places four and eight and 2.3% took home a medal, at the Olympic Games even 3.0%, respectively 3.4%, succeeded in doing so.

Half of the athletes took part in a World Junior Championships although, because of their age, most of the athletes could only take part once, which is in contrast with the WCA and Olympics. Their results at the World Junior Championships were also much better: Again, a quarter of the athletes reached the final and 15.4% won a medal.

That the percentages were not even higher probably has to do with the fact that very great increases in performance are necessary to allow excellent youth athletes to reach the top ranks even at junior level (or indeed at senior level). For example, in the men's 1500m at the WJC, a performance which was 8.7% away from a place 100 of the AWL was sufficient to qualify for the final. That is why some of the youth athletes are probably too far away from the world-class level as far as their performance capabilities are concerned to have a real chance to compensate for such a performance deficit.

If, however, it is considered that in each age group there are at least as many talents with a similar potential who for different reasons were not present at the WYC, the development and success tendencies appear in a significantly more positive light. Because of late developers, athletes coming from other sports and athletes who did not take part in international championships for younger athletes, one can even assume that there is a greater number per year of birth. This mass of athletes represents a great pool of competitors, particularly if one considers that the athletes who have established them-

selves at the absolute top level can maintain such a high level for a decade or even longer.

The positive results in the jumping events can be explained by the fact that there were only a few competitors, which increased the chance to be successful and even win a medal. In the case of the pole vault, the great attractiveness of the event must also be taken into account. In the jumping events the best performances earliest may be caused by the very fast development of the speed strength and the technical and coordinative abilities, which can be trained particularly well at a young age (GROSSER/STARISCHKA, 1998; SCHNABEL et al, 1997). This may also be the reason for the fact that these events are dominated by young athletes who later have the greatest chances to advance to absolute world-class. The great performance increases in the throwing events are caused by the difficult and lengthy connection of strength and technical components, which is responsible for the fact that in these events considerable improvements are still possible at a later stage. This is all the more plausible because the strength abilities develop to the full only at a later age (GROSSER/ STARISCHKA,1998).

Event switchers have more difficulties and take longer to advance in the direction of the absolute world class. Particularly the event-switchers A have problems to cope with the change of running distances, hurdle heights and implement weights when transferring to the senior level. That, however, a purposeful switching of the event may be worthwhile can be seen with the event-switchers B who at the end of the observation period exhibited the smallest performance deficits as compared to absolute world-class athletes.

Hardly any differences in performance development can be found between the female and male athletes. The female athletes develop a bit earlier (HOLLMANN/ HETTINGER, 2000), which also explains the shorter stays of the male athletes at the different AWL categories. However, the men in our study increased their performance level to such an extent that they managed to catch up with

the women. Moreover, the female athletes had more difficulties in advancing to the extended world-class or to be successful at major championships, especially at Junior World Championships. The reason for this may be that there is simply not as much competition (because in some countries women's sport is either less popular or forbidden).

In the youth age group, the Europeans prove to be particularly strong. The causes of this can be a target-oriented promotion of the young talents in training, good framework conditions and scientific support. All this is of course only possible if the corresponding financial prerequisites are fulfilled, which in itself has positive effects on the continuous development of performance.

In the case of the finalists from Africa, the marked social differences can be responsible for the fact that during the years following the WYC fewer of these athletes than of the other athletes could be found in the AWL. In general, one can say that either the African athletes are successful in advancing rapidly into world-class and then in staying there longer than other athletes, which means that they can either earn their living from athletics or they are forced to give up their career (too?) early.

Australia is the continent with the fewest athletes who could improve. Here, as with the

Asian athletes, the performance increases were too poor to enable the athletes to establish themselves at the top international level.

On the other hand, many Caribbean talents can be seen at the top of the AWL. This is because of their particular strength in a small number of events, especially in the sprints. It seems to be an advantage when a youth athlete is already as close as possible to the top because then he or she has a better chance to become a mature world class athlete at a later age.

In general, it can be assumed that performances will develop faster and faster, not least because competitive pressure will become greater, particularly in the case of the women, as more countries manage track and field (and talent promotion) in a professional way. This assumption is backed up by the cases of many young African runners. An example of this was a participant in the 1999 WYC, Kenenisa Bekele (ETH), who was able to reach world-class very early and seven years later is one of the brightest stars in the sport.

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Ashia Hansen/Photo: © Getty Images

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