

The Evolution of the Combined Events: Is a One-Day Decathlon Possible?

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By Anatoliy Fatieiev

ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult problems of the combined events is that the dynamics of the competition are clear to specialists but not so to the average fan or television broadcasters, are not interested to follow the full competition. This is hardly surprising as in a decathlon held in accordance with the current regulations, each athlete spends eight to nine minutes directly performing during a programme that can run up to 10 hours per day for two days. The aim of this article is to draw specialists and non-specialists into a discussion about the future of the event. After listing examples of innovative formats that have been tried in recent years, the author outlines a model that drastically reduces the time required for the jumping and throwing disciplines and calculates that a decathlon with 15-20 competitors could be completed in 10 hours. After considering the organisational challenges of staging the event in this way, he concludes that a one-day decathlon is possible.

AUTHOR

Anatoliy Fatieiev is currently an Associate Professor in the Institute of Physical Education and Sport at the Luhansk National University in Ukraine. He has coached combined events for more than 35 years, held national coaching positions in Oman, India and Saudi Arabia, and has been recognised as an Honoured Coach of Ukraine. A number of his athletes have participated in the Olympic Games and major championships, including Lev Lobodin, who won a bronze medal at the 1994 European Athletics Championships IAAF High Performance Centre in Havana.

The combined events are among the most prestigious competitions in modern athletics. They represent a very specific challenge with unique features. Although the IAAF set the key competition regulations for the decathlon, including the order of the ten disciplines, at its 1914 Congress, it is well known that since then there have been many alterations to both the men's and women's combined events. Changes include the scoring systems and temporal characteristics of the competitions, while in the case of

the women's event there has been an addition to the number of disciplines. These changes have mainly been aimed at making the competitions more interesting for the athletes and more entertaining for the fans.

But times continue to change. The social situation, the psychologies of both spectators and athletes, and approaches to sport training have all developed. And what is more, other events have become more dynamic.

One of the most difficult problems of the combined events is that the dynamics of the competition are clear to specialists but not so to the average fan. The long duration (two days) requires much attention and cannot be compared with other events, which have opposite temporal and dynamic characteristics. In a decathlon held in accordance with the current regulations, each athlete spends eight to nine minutes directly performing the competitive disciplines during a programme that runs from six to eight, sometimes 10, hours per day. Television broadcasters are not interested in covering the full competition and the bulk of information is televised fragmentarily – only parts of some disciplines and only at the most important meetings.

It is hardly surprising that there are difficulties in arousing the interest of the spectators, mass media audiences, sponsors and advertisers. Some sports journalists have even proposed excluding the combined events from the Olympic Games. Coupled with a general discussion about reducing the Olympic programme, this should be an alarm signal for the IAAF.

It seems that more dynamic approaches are called for in the 21st century. This is not lost on people in sport. For many years, specialists have been discussing the question of the temporal parameters in the combined events and we have seen how other sports, including volleyball, rugby, cricket and even football, have successfully created new models of their events that are both shorter and more attractive for spectators and media.

In this context, I would like to discuss a proposal for change in the combined events. The main aim is to invite specialists and non-specialists to contribute, study and systemise ideas that could give a new impulse to development in this area. The focus of my proposal is on considerably shortening the competition time, which to my mind will positively affect the dynamics of the competitions, require less financial means for conducting the competitions, make the work of the competition officials easier and better arouse the interest of the mass media, television in particular. I have analysed the facts and modelled a variant format, the one-day decathlon, which meets the demands of the current situation.

It should be noted that enthusiasts have been experimenting with different formats of short-time combined events competitions for many years. These have been staged using regulations approved by the organising committees. Athletes from my own training groups have taken part in some such competitions:

- 1) 30 Minutes Pentathlon (1992-1994, Paris, France; Director – Sylvie Le Maux).
- 2) 45 Minutes Pentathlon (1998, Prague, Czech; Director – Jiri Jon).
- 3) 1 Hour Decathlon (1992-1994, Ostrava, Czech; Director – Robert Zmelik).
- 4) 1 Hour Decathlon (1995-1997, Salzburg, Austria; Directors – Karin Juriga + Dietmar Juriga).
- 5) 2 Hours Decathlon (1995, Prague, Czech; Director – Robert Zmelik).
- 6) 1 Hour Women's Decathlon / experiment (1997, Linz, Austria)

The best result recorded for the 1 Hour Decathlon, 7897 points, was by the Robert Zmelik (CZE) just a few weeks after his Olympic win in 1992.

Taking into account the fact that the IAAF has officially recognised the women's decathlon (at the 2001 Congress in Edmonton, Canada) and several countries have already held championships for the event, my proposal concerns both men's and women's decathlon. It should be mentioned that several women athletes have already tried short-time decathlons and the best known result is by Mona Steigauf (GER), who scored 7351 points in a 1 Hour Decathlon in 1997.

My proposal stems from the fact that in the classical decathlon the majority of the programme is taken up by the field events, with a disproportionate time for two jumping events – the high jump and pole vault. Therefore, a fundamental shortening of time is offered in this area, with really significant savings in the two events mentioned.

In my model, every athlete can take a maximum of two attempts in the long jump, shot put, discus throw and javelin throw. In the high jump and pole vault, only one attempt at every next height is offered (or as a variant – three attempts in total, analogous with weight lifting competitions). All running events would be performed as per the current rules.

According to my calculation, the time for holding a decathlon competition with 15 – 20 participants (one group) using this model would be 10 hours, including a three-hour break (after five events) for lunch and rest. This would easily be accommodated in a one-day programme. Perhaps competitions for men and women could be staged together on a single day, minimising the time required from organisers. In the Olympic Games and major championships this could be on the first day of competition, reinforcing the symbolism of decathletes as the knights of the Queen of Sports.

It is obvious that competitions organised using my model would initially present challenges for both the competition officials and organisers, but there is no doubt that the new dynamics of the competition would bring excitement and keen competition between the athletes. Moreover, competitions organised according to such rules would heighten the interest of spectators and television as everything happens during one day: in the morning the participants are introduced before the first event and in the evening everybody sees the winners on the podium.

My analysis of the preparation, organisation and process of such competitions leads to the conclusion that a one-day decathlon is both possible and precisely the variant transformation of the combined events that would be least difficult to achieve and have all the positive effects required.

As I said above, my aim with this article is to draw people into a discussion and stimulate development of the combined events. Any contributions and ideas would be most appreciated and should be sent directly to my e-mail address.

Please send all correspondence to:

Anatoliy Fatieiev

10thlon51@gmail.com.