

*Paul F. DeMeester
Attorney at Law
1766A – 18th Street
San Francisco, California 94107
U.S.A.
+1.415.305.7280 (mobile)
E-mail: paulfdemeester@msn.com*

April 10, 2017

Dear Lord Coe,

Re: *Preserving the 50 km Race Walk Event*

Parents are overjoyed when their newborn takes its first steps. Short of an unfortunate disability, we all do it: walk. Some of us stroll, others walk at a good clip. Seeing who could walk faster gained popularity in modern culture going back to the 19th century.

We do not walk, however, to catch the bus that's rolling up to the bus stop when we're fifty meters away. We run. We sprint. But if we have to cover quite some distance and no other means of transport are available, walking is the obvious mode of getting from point A to point B. Hence, long-distance walking makes sense. It is logical then to conduct it in its sporting form over a longer distance than the longest running event, the marathon.

Yet, after having been featured 19 times at the Olympics since 1932, the 50 km race walk event is on the chopping block, courtesy of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Three reasons have been proffered to justify cutting the 50 km from Olympic and World Championship competitions: a decreased interest in events of long duration to a targeted younger audience; recent doping issues; and the need for gender equality. None of these reasons compel the proposed deletion of the 50 km race.

Sixty-three athletes representing 35 nations contested the 50 km in Rio as well as in London four years prior. Such turn-out is comparable to the participation in the men's 800 meter race, which drew 58 runners from 39 countries to Rio. Fifteen of the 27 members of the IAAF Council had compatriots in the Rio 50 km race. That race saw numerous lead changes and a spirited contest for the gold down to the last kilometer. The courage and perseverance of French competitor and world record holder Yohann Diniz – who relinquished the lead when physical problems befell him – was applauded world-wide.

On a recent practice walk on the trails around the San Francisco Bay, a bicyclist slowed to ride next to me. He proceeded to tell me how he had been a volunteer in Rio. He'd been assigned to all the race walking events, something he'd never been exposed to before. He ended up in awe of the walkers and became an instant fan of the sport.

The doping issue is not unique to race walking. The 100 meter event did not disappear from the Olympics because of Ben Johnson or Marion Jones. The Russian doping troubles were not confined to its race walkers. Doping in any sport is overcome with a stringent testing and accountability regime, not by abolishing events.

Gender inequality has been the norm at the Olympics throughout history and does not emanate from the race walking community. The IAAF is to be commended for its inclusion of women walkers at last year's Rome World Race Walking Team Championships and for permitting women to compete this year at the London Worlds (albeit it without a time difference from the men's qualifying standard).

Women athletes have had to wait an inordinately long time to be included in the various Olympic athletics events. Prior to 1928, women were excluded altogether. The longest distance in which women were allowed to compete remained at 800 meters until 1972, when the 1,500 meters was added. Women 200 meter runners had to wait until 1948. Female marathon runners had to cool their heels until 1984, as did the female 400 meter hurdlers. The straight-line women hurdlers were limited to 80 meters from 1932 onward, lengthened to 100 meters in 1972, still a decameter shy of the men's race distance. Multi-event specialist women athletes were only allowed to compete over five events in 1964, which was expanded to eight events two decades later; still two events short of the men's decathlon. Women walkers made their Olympic debut in 1992 but only at 10 km; it became 20 km in 2000. Their pole vault colleagues had to wait for the millenium before they could vault for gold. Steeple runners had another eight-year wait after that.

Prior to 2000, it would have been unthinkable to abolish the men's Olympic pole vault because women did not contest the event; yet, that is precisely what is being argued with respect to the 50 km race.

Women walkers have been eager to compete at 50 km. China and the United States have conducted national championships for women and this year's Dudince 50 km meet included women. Ines Henriques of Portugal recently set the world standard with a 4:08:26 time. Yet, her amazing performance still falls short of the 4:06:00 standard women have to meet for inclusion in the August London World Championship race. In the 20 km event, the men's qualifying standard is 12 minutes lower than that for women. Extrapolated to 50 km, the difference in standards should be 30 minutes. Besides Henriques, Hang Ying (China), Katie Burnett (USA), Shaqing Yang (China), Erin Taylor-Talcott (USA) and Jiang Shanshan (China) have already walked below the 4:36:00 mark this year. This demonstrates that when women's 50 km races are held, more female athletes will participate and amaze us with some fine performances. Equality means that women are allowed to contest the 50 km, not that the men's 50 km event is banished.

The beauty of the 50 km endurance event is that success is not limited to younger athletes. Jesus Angel Garcia, the 47-year old walker from Spain, took part in his seventh Olympic 50 km race in Rio, the most Olympic appearances by a male track and field athlete.

The proposed half-marathon substitute is no substitute at all. We don't do away with the marathon because there's the 10,000 meters. We don't cut the 1,500 meters because there's already an 800 meters. We don't abolish the 800 meters because we have the 400 meters.

Moreover, the half-marathon belongs to the world of running, not walking. The distance is somewhat artificial as the early Olympics saw the marathon distance vary until the current distance was formally adopted in 1924. Using the half-marathon distance makes it difficult to design circuits consisting of distances that are easy to measure for purposes of the athletes' split times.

IAAF 50 km Race Walk
April 10, 2017
Page 3 of 3

Another proposal to introduce shorter distance race walk relay events is inappropriate. Running lends itself to the shorter distances, not race walking. It would turn the sport into a bit of “Games Without Frontiers” show. Also, relays tend to favor the few nations with lots of depth. The 50 km, by contrast, has seen Olympic medalists from many different countries, not just the usual powerhouses. Athletes from Latvia, Switzerland, Sweden, Hungary, New Zealand, the United States, Mexico, Poland, Ireland and Slovakia have stood on the 50 km podium.

The 50 km has global reach. Athletes from every area contested the distance at Rio. The event has great depth in China, Japan, Canada, Australia, Russia and Central America.

The last time the 50 km was under threat, when the IOC removed it from the 1976 Montreal Games, the IAAF valiantly fought back by organizing the 50 km world championship that year. It proved to be the impetus for the IAAF World Championships, now held biennially. Four years after Montreal, the 50 km made its return to the Moscow Olympics.

The IAAF is needed again to stand up for the 50 km. Men as well as women should compete in the event at both the Olympics and the World Championships.

I am available to discuss this matter further during this week's IAAF London meeting. I can be reached on my mobile phone at +1.415.305.7280 or by ringing my room at the Marriott Hotel.

Thank you for your consideration.

With best regards,

Paul F. DeMeester
London
April 10, 2017