

CONCEPT PROPOSAL

New England Track & Field Athletes Town Hall Meeting Series

Premise

Track & Field (*Athletics*) in the United States is a sport most young people engage in, in one form or another from racing friends in the street, to schoolyard contests, through high school and into college, but interest and involvement in Athletics pales in comparison to most other mainstream sports.

Athletics is seen by most people as a fringe sport, mostly as an Olympic sport and something they have difficulty relating to. Football, baseball, basketball and to a slightly lesser extent, soccer and lacrosse are played on both the professional and collegiate levels locally and are covered extensively on television and in local newspapers. On the other hand, Athletics competitions are usually on foreign soil, shown on television on occasion and are rarely if ever covered by the press.

People know their Football, Baseball and Basketball players by name and details of their accomplishments. On-camera interviews and post-game press conferences give fans more opportunity to understand the strategy behind the results and even to listen to explanations of how and why losses occurred and how they are handled by their sports heroes. During the occasional televised coverage of a Track & Field event, the only time an athlete is interviewed is directly after the race and are asked the most mundane questions like if they are happy they won. Fans learn nothing worthwhile like strategy that worked or didn't and casual viewers will find nothing in the 15-30 second interview to make them want to know more about the sport or the athlete.

The Plan / Part 1

Engagement in any sport comes from many levels. People have to feel they can participate in the sport themselves or have done so at some point in their lives.

People need to understand the rules of and the nuances of the sport. Watching a sport with no real understanding of what you're watching is both difficult and not engaging.

People need to relate to their sports heroes. They need to see them, hear them and know more about them. And in the case of Athletics, they need to better comprehend just how amazing the performances are of the elite athletes. There are super-humans living among us and they are most easily found on a track or field.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of people involved in running events are in road races where, for the vast majority, the primary accomplishment is the completion of the race. Even amongst high school track & field athletes, there is such a great disconnect with the elite athletes who compete in the exact same events, that the high school athletes can probably not name more than three current world-class track athletes, their best performances and know nothing about the path they took and how they became, the stars that they currently are.

In order for any one with an interest in Track & Field to follow the sport, the events and the athletes, it requires a great deal of proactive work to find any information. The mainstream media doesn't cover the event at all except during the Olympics, and even then the coverage is poor and sparse. TV coverage of an actual event follows a format that I believe is detrimental to increasing any sort of fan base.

Generally, the announcers concentrate on only those few athletes they believe could win the event. Even in an 8-lane event, there is not much said about the majority of the athletes on the starting line other than their name and the country they represent. Even in a finals.

At the conclusion of the event, an announcer down on the field will immediately rush over to the winner(s) and ask platitudinous questions like "are you happy you won?" Rarely are any questions asked about race strategy, coaching advice, problems encountered or training, for example. Granted, there is a limited amount of time for questions and answers but when questions are so elementary, no one gleans anything at all. True fans of the sport learn nothing new and it provides nothing to compel the non-fan to watch more of the sport or learn more about the athlete.

There are web sites that do get into the details of the sport, the races and the athletes, like FloTrack, Runnerspace and USATF.TV. There is nothing wrong with these sites even if there is some pay-per-view content but not everyone knows they exist and not everyone, even T&F fans, might be willing to pony up for the paid content.

So my plan is to bring current and recently-retired professional T&F athletes directly to public for more than just pep-talk rallies. The usual content of such rallies are athletes telling youth such platitudes as "never give up" or "don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something" or "dream big." Such cliches are heard all the time and don't provide meaningful insight into the sport or the trials and tribulations that the athlete needed to overcome.

The Plan / Part 2

What I envision is inviting an athlete who has to come to the New England Association area and over the course of two or more days, visit area schools and colleges where they will be interviewed by a person or panel and will take questions from the audience. Where many athletes might find giving an inspirational speech difficult to do, answering questions in a more informal atmosphere might be more conducive to providing the answers so many fans would like to know.

We all know how good it is to win a race but considering how few fans in the audience have won on a big stage, or even won at all, they might want to know how the professional athlete handles losing, or handles injury. They might be interested in questions about coaching issues, favorite/least favorite drills, race strategies that worked and the ones that didn't, times when they were DQ'd, why and how they dealt with it, how they handle bad weather, bad starters, relay passing problems, and all similar problems every track athlete has or will face. By doing so, it will make the elite, near super-human athlete more relatable and will give the young athlete reason to both follow the athlete and become a bigger fan of the sport of Athletics.

The Plan / Part 3

We would use the financial resources of USATF-NE to pay for local transportation and perhaps an additional night of lodging of the invited athletes. An alternative is to work with local professional athletes or those already booked for a competition in the Boston area. A volunteer Board Member (and I initially volunteer myself) to work out the logistics of the speaking tour. This would include finding one or more speaking venues and arranging the details at these venues. It would also include contacting all local media for coverage, possibly finding a local or national sponsor for the New England Elite Athlete Town Hall Meeting series and finding one or more knowledgeable people to serve on the panel.

As envisioned, the town hall meeting series would be free to the public, although an RSVP system might be set up. In addition to covering transportation, food and lodging, the professional athlete would be offered an honorarium. The athlete would be met at their hotel on the day(s) of the town hall meeting(s) by a USATF-NE member and would be taken to the venue(s) and would serve as their assistant (or some better description).

The town hall meeting might start with some video presentation of some other the athlete's more memorable races/events and then, after introduction of the athlete and the panel members, the question and answer period would begin. That athlete might be given some general idea of some of the topics that might be covered by the panel so they have the ability to give some thought ahead of time to their answers. Of course, the athlete would also be answering questions from audience members as well. I envision the town hall meeting lasting about two hours or more.

All local press would also be given an opportunity to talk to the athlete after the meeting and possibly do an recorded or live on-air segment. With the athlete in our area for a day or two, I envision doing more than one town hall meeting at different venues, possibly on different days. In addition to the town hall meetings, there might be other ways to get the elite athlete before the public including, but not limited to:

- autograph signing at MSTCA / MIAA track meets (and similar meets in other NE states)
- visiting sports talk radio stations
- visiting local TV stations
- visiting high school or college teams during practice for a meet & greet
- meeting with local or national sponsors

Our sport is in need of a major infusion of visibility and fans and I hope this concept will help bring both to the sport I love - Track & Field.

Considerations:

My first concern is whether an Elite athlete (or his/her agent) would even consider this? Would they participate for free? Would they if they were paid, and if so, is there any sort of going rate?

Since high school and college athletes cannot be paid, the issue is what will an Elite or their coach expect? Based on some input I have already received, it's possible that many professional athletes would be glad to receive somewhere between \$500 to \$1000 for their appearance/participation. The true Elite stars would likely command more but I'm not sure in what range. And depending who our target audience is (an inner-city high school for example) I think some Elite athletes might be willing to participate at no cost. Finally, coaches who travel with their athletes might be honored to participate at no cost because, in general, coaches are usually left out of the athlete conversation.

If the athletes are local or have traveled to the Boston area for a competition, we might be able to offer some special perks such as a car service to provide transportation to/from the venue and a "green room" of sorts in which the speakers can relax with some snacks or beverages before coming onto the stage. Neither should be prohibitively expensive.

I have seen similar presentations/interviews where video footage of one or more races/events are played on a big screen as a way of introducing the athlete. Although the athletes might have footage they could send ahead of time, I was thinking the USATF might be able to provide it or that we could locate it on the Internet. If the venue doesn't have an available screen and projector, I have both.

I'd like to see us try to put one or two Town Hall Meetings on during the upcoming Indoor Season. Based on our experiences, we can then plan more for the Outdoor Season and then set up a much larger number for the following Indoor Season.

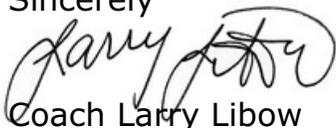
Final Thoughts:

This is a complex and ambitious proposal. If done right it could be used as a prototype for other Associations to use and would not only help the sport itself but raise the stature of the New England Association. And although I am committing myself to the lion's share of the work, I know that I can't do it all without help from others.

So in addition to the cost to the New England Association - perhaps \$2000-\$3000 per Town Hall Meeting, the Board will need to consider whether any members of the Board would be willing to pitch in to make this concept a reality AND a success.

If the Board feels that this plan is too ambitious or too expensive or requires involvement and commitment they personally cannot make, then I will either drop the idea or come back with something different. I'm putting this out now as a concept because I need feedback and suggestions. In advance, thank you for your help.

Sincerely



Coach Larry Libow

Vice President

USATF - New England Association