

Jörg Krieger (ed.)

Athletics in the Nordic countries: history and developments

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This collection of essays contains a short introduction and ten chapters, the work of scholars from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, the very countries which the collection as a whole addresses, i.e. the Nordic countries (minus Iceland) and not restricted therefore to Scandinavia. On the subject of terminology, it is also worth noting that the collection is concerned with ‘athletics’ in the sense of track and field disciplines as opposed to the word ‘athletes’ as used for participants in a vast range of sports.

I wish that Jörg Krieger’s introduction had been a little longer not least because half of it is devoted to foregrounding the content of the chapters to follow. Yet, in two and a half pages, the editor succeeds in succinctly explaining the aims of the book and the significance of athletics in the countries to be discussed with leadership, events and athletes being identified as the key foci. This helps to give the book a coherence that so many edited collections lack.

In the introduction, in relation to leadership, Krieger draws the readers’ attention to the hugely significant role played by Sweden’s Sigfrid Edström, president of the International Athletics Federation (IAAF now World Athletics) from its formation in 1912 until 1946. Finnish coach and administrator Lauri Pihkala was also a founding member of the IAAF. Other prominent names in the leadership of international athletics are those of the Dane Emmanuel Rose, the Swede Arne Ljungkvist and the Finn Carl-Olaf Homén. Krieger goes on to name the Nordic cities that have played host to major international athletics meetings. The names of notable venues such as the Bislett Stadium in Oslo and the Olympic stadiums in Stockholm and Helsinki would also have merited a mention. As for the athletes, Krieger name checks the Finns, Hannes Kolehmainen, Paavo Nurmi and Lasse Viren but surprisingly not the Swede Gunder Hägg who set multiple world records in middle-distance races ranging from the 1500 meters to the 5000 meters. Of current athletes, the middle-distance running Ingebrigtsen family from Norway are mentioned as is the American-born Swedish pole-vaulter Armand Duplantis. One could have added, amongst many others, Norway’s Karsten Warholm (400 meters hurdles) and Ingrid Kristiansen (5000 and 10000 meters and marathon), Finnish javelin throwers, Tiina Lillak and Seppo Rätty, Swedish heptathlete Carolina Klüft and Hägg’s rival and compatriot Arne Andersson.

In the opening chapter, Hans Bolling discusses at greater length the role of Sweden in the foundation of the IAAF. The story is complicated by the parallel advance of sport in England and the significance of gymnastics in sev-

ral countries including Denmark and Sweden. However, prior to the Olympic Games in London in 1908, representatives of the Swedish Athletics Association had proposed the establishment of an international organization for athletics, a demand that gathered momentum after Stockholm had been awarded the right to host the 1912 Olympics. A leading role was played not only by the future president Edström but also by Leopold Englund, also from Gothenburg, leading Bolling to observe that the approach to sport in that Swedish city was international whereas Stockholm was at that time more nationalistic in outlook. Edström himself went on to become the International Olympic Committee President from 1946 to 1952. It is clear that Sweden and Swedes were instrumental in creating a global governing body for athletics. Bolling adds, however, that 'In one respect the Swedish leaders did not succeed: to make the other countries accept the principle of Swedish gymnastics – the harmonious physical development as the predominant goal' (p. 26). Instead the IAAF was to promote the ideal of stronger athletes going faster and higher.

The contributors to the collection include many scholars already well known to those of us with an academic interest in one or more of the Nordic countries. In addition to Krieger and Bolling, Hans Bonde has written a chapter on Danish athletics during the German occupation in the Second World War (Chapter 2) and Leena Laine writes about women's athletics in Finland up to the 1950s (Chapter 3).

The next two chapters have amateurism, breaking the rules of which led to both Hägg and Arne Andersson being barred from competition, as a central theme. Jouni Lavikainen's chapter (Chapter 4) addresses the rise and fall of amateurism in Finnish athletics. In between amateurism and fully fledged professionalism was the era of 'shamateurism' in Finland as in many other countries. According to Lavikainen, 'The social control of the amateur enforcers and the resistance of the shamateur athletes provides a fascinating insight into a dynamic of sport that was partially hidden for nearly a century' (p. 96). Matti Goksøyr, another 'weel kent face', as we would say in Scotland, has contributed a chapter, together with the editor, on the prospects from the European Athletics Championships in Oslo in 1946 which involves discussion of gender, amateurism and politics (Chapter 5). They ask, 'was 1946 really the first year of a new era?' (p. 97). That year was thought by many to mark a new beginning for Europe. But what about sport?

Goksøyr and Krieger focus on two areas in which much work still needed to be done – gender and amateurism. While the latter has been resolved in most sports, the former continues to present challenges for international sport in general and track and field in particular. In addition, from then until the present, we still hear the refrain that sports and politics should not mix, although on most occasions when this mantra is invoked, the true meaning is that 'your po-

letics should not mix with sport but mine can and indeed should'. Nevertheless, in athletics, as Goksøyr and Krieger argue, while new antagonisms took over from the old, it was still possible 'to propagate the old school recipe for sports' (p. 120). It is also interesting in the context of the overall subject matter of this collection to note their observation that the Championships themselves 'demonstrated and confirmed differences between the Scandinavian countries' (p. 118).

In light of the persistence of gender issues in athletes, it is good to see the contribution by Gerd von der Lippe, another famous name in the field of sport studies, and Bieke Gils on women in Norwegian athletics in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapter 6). They document the struggles that these women fought in that era especially in seeking to compete in long distance running. They point out that 'without the fight for equal rights in the 1970s and the demands for women's increased inclusion in sport, Norway might not have had a successful long-distance runner like Grete Waitz (1953–2011)' (p.137) or, indeed, Ingrid Kristiansen mentioned above. Although it is always invidious to be overly critical of a publication because of content that is not included instead of focussing almost exclusively on what is present, it would have been useful to learn more about how female athletes in the other Nordic countries addressed the same challenges.

Krieger himself is responsible for Chapter 7 which examines the 1983 Helsinki World Athletics Championships which he describes as 'a unique occasion' (p. 141), not least because it was the first time that separate world athletics championships had taken place outside the Olympics. In addition, in Krieger's words, 'the Finns had to wrestle with processes of modernism in the sport of athletics alongside officials' crumbling conservatism' (p. 162). However, 'political neutrality and unagitated preparations of the event allowed the politically rivaling nations from the Soviet Union, the USA, West- and East Germany as well as the PRC and Taiwan to compete at the event' – an event which can also be considered as 'the point of acceptance of capitalism in international athletics' (p. 163).

John Berg's chapter (Chapter 8) considers the media coverage of an anti-hero on the running track, former Swedish distance runner Sara Wedlund who died in 2021 at the age of 45. Stories about individual athletes can be valuable way of gaining insights into the wider sporting and social world that they inhabited. A columnist wrote at the time of Wedlund's death that she 'came from nowhere and became a national hero' (p. 166). Berg describes her as 'the Greta Garbo of Sports' who first entered the national consciousness in 1995 when she competed at the 1995 World Athletics Championships held in the Ullevi Stadium on Gothenburg where, as a nineteen year old, she set a new Swedish record for the 5000 meters, attracting attention from the media and

public alike. By the end of 1966, according to Berg, ‘the two years of being both Sweden’s best female runner and a media favorite had taken its toll’ (p. 176). Berg writes that she was ‘by far the biggest Swedish success at the 1995 Gothenburg World Championships in Athletics, even though she was not even close to reach any top places’ (p. 179). The media made much of her looks and her positive attitude apparently glossing over her introvert personality. After she retired early from running, she was almost forgotten until her death, her life ‘still shrouded in mystery’ (p. 183). It is a salutary reminder of the perils of acquiring unwanted celebrity status.

Jens Ljunggren discusses the emotionalization of sports for children and young people in Swedish athletics (Chapter 9). He proposes a new concept of sports that integrates ‘the element of competition into a context of personality education’ (p. 208). It is a noble ideal, the potential of which is arguably put into perspective by the final chapter in the collection, Anne Tjønndal and Frida Austma Wågan’s commentary on technological innovation and performance enhancement in Norwegian running (Chapter 10). The authors pay particular attention to Team Ingebrigtsen’s training philosophy – ‘an expression of expert systems in the coaching of elite runners’ (p. 225). Based on interview data, they note the benefits and risks that are associated with performance enhancing technologies and scientification of training. Despite the fact that Team Ingebrigtsen itself appears to have imploded, the general thrust of the argument is relatively favorable towards the approach that propelled the careers of the family members. In light of the approach recommended in the previous chapter, however, one wonders if Jakob Ingebrigtsen might have benefitted from greater personality education. In addition, as a Scot, it is impossible for me to ignore the fact that, for all of the science and technology applied to his development as a runner, he was beaten in successive 1500 metres finals at the World Athletics Championships by two different members of the Edinburgh Athletic Club – Jake Wightman in 2022 and Josh Kerr in 2023.

This is an informative and thought provoking collection of essays which not only tells the story of athletics in the Nordic world from a variety of perspectives but also obliges the reader to think about what this most accessible of sports is and what it could be, for good or ill. To quote The Spencer Davis Group, ‘Keep on runnin’.