

Introduction



Everything you do as an organiser, official, helper or teacher at an athletics meeting is for one purpose and one purpose only: the athletes. Everything else is secondary. The athletes are there to have fun and your role is to ensure that they do.

Fun for young athletes has many aspects – for some it is winning, but for others it is taking part, accomplishing an event, improving on previous efforts, being with friends, showing off skills, any number of things. But in the end, every action, every decision taken by officials should relate back to the athletes. And of course this includes the important matters of fair play and safety - kids don't have fun when they're hurt. They don't have fun when someone gains an unfair advantage either.

Nor do they have fun when organisers put expediency ahead of the athletes or stick to unnecessary rules that take away the fun.

Two examples that come from experience. In a secondary school regional championship the organiser did not allow the use of starting blocks as it may have caused the meeting to run over time. Fine, but when you consider athletes practise starting and consider it part of the event, not having blocks disadvantaged the runners who worked hard on their starts and took away some of the sense of achievement. It also created a sense of frustration that reduced enjoyment. Would a little more effort in the planning have avoided the time problem? More than likely.

Another example. In a high jump competition a piece of paper stated the starting height. Only problem was most of the kids could not make that height. The official refused to bend. Result: a large number of disappointed young athletes. By being flexible the official could have given those kids a sense of achievement. If time was a worry the better jumpers could have been told to pass at the lower heights.

So, when you are called to make a decision or judgement ask yourself, is this best for the athletes?

Officials should not approach their job with the attitude that they are there to "catch the competitor out". Instead, the aim must be to ensure fair competition, with no competition gaining an advantage or suffering a disadvantage. In other words, apart from their own physical abilities, all competitors are equal, whether they are internationals or ordinary club athletes.

If the judge has to make a subjective judgement on any situation, he must ask himself: "What decision would be fair to all competitors?" That is the true test.

- from the IAAF Practical Guide to Athletics Officiating (5th edition, 1996).

