

Bring back the

biff

The words of the immortal Reg Regan ring truly in my ears as I thump another passing runner with the stick I've become accustomed to carrying whilst on my daily run around Melbourne's Tan.....

IS it just me, or are the glory days of distance running popularity exactly that? I recall 10,000+ spectators down the back straight at Zatopek in the early 1990's. And I'm sure guys of an older vintage than myself can probably tell of packed stadiums when Landy, Clarke et al were hurtling around the cinders. The question is what has happened to our once popular sport? Why have the crowds, and even the athletes themselves, dwindled? Has distance running, along with the rest of the track and field program, become un-cool? (I can understand race walking falling from the heights of popularity, but I'm not going to get involved in that debate).

I believe the major cause for this decline can be summed up in one word: BIFF! Have a close look at our present day athletes. There just isn't that killer instinct present - or as Australians would say, that 'mongrel'. The win at all costs "I'll rip my competitors' head off to get to the finish line before they do" attitude seems to be frowned upon. Athletes these days are encouraged to be generous in their relationships with fellow competitors. Be good sportsmen and women...what planet are we living on? Planet Hippyville Free Love All?!!

The public doesn't want to see this sort of Nancy behaviour. They want to see blood! Why do you think AFL games are sold out every weekend? And what are the most popular news stories - that's right; anything involving, biff, danger or blood.

Surely sport is all about - 'mano a mano' (or for more politically correct terminology; 'competitoro a competitoro'). It's an evolutionary hang-up we can't run away from - the leader of the herd asserting his domination over his pride until the new buck can take this honour from him. And the public absolutely love this stuff. They enjoy taking sides, and feeling like conquerors - who cares if it's vicariously. It's still a victory!

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If you look back at the heightened days of athletics, and particularly distance running, there is a strong legacy of such animal like rivalries. Competition was fierce and brutal, winners were unmerciful, and crowds were without exception, large.

One only has to recall the mesmerising rivalry between working class, outspoken larikin, Steve Ovett and his countryman; aristocratic, quietly spoken Mr Nice Guy, Sebastian Coe. The public couldn't get enough of the on-field and off-field slanging matches the two routinely enjoyed. Everyone was either an Ovett fan or a Coe fan. There were no fence sitters, and the interest in their 800/1500m duel at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics was enormous.

There have been countless other instances of such gladiatorial behaviour in the seemingly stickman arena of distance running.

Zola Budd thought she had a race so easily won she didn't even bother to wear shoes. Mary Decker Slaney provided a reminder that one should come to the field of combat adequately attired (I've heard Budd's spike scars are on display in the South African Museum of Sport).

In particular, other great spiking incidents include Gebräselersdiessa v Joseph Machuka in the World Junior 10,000m final (punches were thrown at the conclusion of the race), Gebräselersdiessa v Moses Tanui



in the World Championship 10,000m final (shoes were waved around like weapons), and Scott Peterson vs Daniel Hill vs Glen Stojanovich in the U17 National Australian 1,500m final (20 stitches the result for the boxer-short wearing Peterson).

It is a little known fact (quietly spoken rumour around distance running circles), that Robert de Castella and Juma Ikanga's epic Brisbane Commonwealth Games battle involved strong verbal biff. Ikanga said to Deek, "Do those moustaches come in men's?" To which Deek retorted, "If you pulled those socks any higher they'd be trousers!"

Dean Cavuoto vs Brett Cartwright vs Sisay Bezebah has been a more recent phenomenon, as has Lee Troop versus the Rest of the World. I personally praise these guys for keeping the sport angry, alive and unpredictable, with a good strong dose of biff. But sadly, they are the exception to the rule.

Most recently Jana Pittman and Tamsyn Lewis (helped along by Matt Shirvington) have all come in swinging. It's been a relatively small dose of biff with some name calling, but still, look at how much the public have lapped it up. I guarantee tickets to see the women's 400m at the Commonwealth Games will be the first to sell out!

So next time you're out on a run and someone passes you, reach within for that competitive angry spirit, free that primal instinct, and biff on! It's all positive...you'll be doing the sport of distance running a massive favour. Bring back the biff!!!

RAYL

Disclaimer: Not all of the events mentioned within this article may have actually happened!

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