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Grass-Root Training: a Challenge for Ethiopian Athletics

Dr. Bezabeh Wolde¹ and Dr. Benoit Gaudin

Abstract
This paper analyses the problem of grass-roots training in Ethiopian athletics, presenting the different institutions involved in athletics and their respective reasons for the lack of interest and involvement in grass-root training activities. The overall picture provided by this description reflects the poor conditions of Ethiopian athletics and the prevalence of a predatory system of selection in lieu of a comprehensive institutional organization for the promotion of sport. The data collected for this research proceed from interviews with officials of athletics federations and sponsors over several years of professional activity of the first author and on the basis of fieldwork observations by the second author.

The limits of Ethiopian athletics

In the global division of athletic labor, long distance races are currently monopolized by East-African runners, mainly Kenyan and Ethiopian. Regional pioneers since the 1960 Olympic Games when Abebe Bikila won the first gold medal for Ethiopia and sub Saharan African, Ethiopian athletics gained momentum in the 1990s with the arrival of its first female athletes of international level and, since the 2000s, with a succession of world records carried by a generation of outstanding runners. Nowadays, sport and more specifically athletics is directly or indirectly interwoven with the life of most Ethiopians and athletics has become part of their identity and pride.²

Yet it now appears that Ethiopian athletics has reached its limits and that it would be difficult for it to progress or grow without undertaking major structural reforms.³ Its areas of expertise are indeed confined to long- and middle-distance and training structures are relatively limited when compared to those of its direct competitor, Kenya, whose runners are much more numerous today on the international market and present in a much broader range of disciplines, for instance steeple chase and throwing events.

In Ethiopia, the focus placed - by all involved institutions - on the top level is now been disputed. Grass roots athletics has not yet received the due attention from officials, despite years and decades of international sporting success. It can be argued that Ethiopian athletics does not really need grass-root training structures in order to win medals in international competitions and to challenge neighboring Kenya in the road-race circuit, but the lack of any formally structured grass-root training is a serious handicap for the local sports authorities in their ambition to diversify the areas of sports excellence beyond solely distance running disciplines.

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The issue of providing training for beginner and intermediate athletes is particularly relevant for federations at the national and regional level, and more specifically for the most important of these regional federations, the Addis Ababa Athletics Federation, which concentrates within its constituency the highest number of the country’s clubs: forty-two.

The national and regional federations have long neglected the work of training, solely focusing on selecting the best athletes during the few annual competitions they organise for this purpose. This ‘predatory’ system neither fits their official duties (the promotion of sport), nor serves their ambitions to increase the potential number of international medals. As long as nobody takes the time to properly train throwers, jumpers and sprinters, the number of Olympic medals likely to be won by any Ethiopian delegation may never exceed the record of eight, all won in long distance, at the Sydney Olympics.

The political authorities in charge of sport have recently affirmed their will to change this situation and to move from a predator management mode (the so-called ‘flag pole system’) to a pyramidal training system, attending to all levels of athletic training from grass-root to elite. The idea that the grass-root level is the key for development and diversification of the Ethiopian athletics seems to make its way, but it is still struggling to impose itself among all stakeholders of the athletic world, for a series of reasons that we are exposing here.

**Ministry of Youth, Sport & Culture (formerly ‘Federal Sport Commission’)**

During the last eight editions (2008-2015) of the general assembly of both the national and Addis Ababa regional federations, the remarks of all officials of the Sports Commission were about the lack of attention from the side of the federations on the development of grass root athletics, both in quality and quantity. As authorities are seeking a sustainable supply of athletes, the ‘pyramid system’ previously adopted by the eastern European countries is said to be the solution that should be promoted, even if it is at the same time noted that this method is expensive in terms of finance.

As Ethiopia is a poor country, sport is not really a priority in the budget of the federal government. Thus, even if athletics is the only medal providing sport, the Ethiopian Athletics Federation is hardly funded by the public sector and depends heavily on private sponsors. As little as it can be, this public support is even poised to be further reduced, as the Federal Sport Commission, through its Sport Policy, stated that sport should be gradually ‘released from government subsidy’.4

**The National and Regional Federations**

In the mission statement of each federation, it is clearly and explicitly stated that they should play an active role in grass-root athletics. Yet none of the athletics federations are taking this seriously. So at all levels they fail to fulfill their mission as they abide to the ‘rule of market’ and cannot go against the choice of their funding sponsors. These sponsors being private companies, their funds are being earmarked for very specific purposes: organizing local competitions or participating in foreign events. As a consequence, all other sectors of activity not oriented

4http://www.mysc.gov.et/sport.html
towards ‘producing medals’ are being neglected or deprived of funding. This is the case of grass-root projects or even of training in throwing and jumping disciplines.

The sponsors

The two main federations of the country, Ethiopian and Addis Ababa, are funded by two major sponsors: Adidas and Pepsi, which are only interested in major competitions. The agreement between these sponsors and the federations restrict the allocation of funds to the organization of domestic competitions and participation of Ethiopian athletes to international competitions. Therefore the request for development of grass-root programs has no place inside these agreements. The market-driven sponsors are interested in competitions to advertise their products so that they can yield more profit. They do not see any particular interest in supporting the formation and training of beginner athletes.

The runners’ agents (locally known as ‘managers’)

Every year, in January or February, a cross-country competition is held in Addis Ababa, a couple of weeks before a similar competition happens in Nairobi, Kenya. These events serve as scouting opportunities for the international runner’s agents, who usually live in Europe or North America and come to East-Africa once a year to select and ‘sign’ the best contestants of these local competitions. Conveniently, the Ethiopian and the Kenyan national athletics federations take the opportunity of the agents’ presence to hold a meeting with them and to discuss all current issues, renew their contracts and settle their accounts.

During the meeting held in 2015, the agents’ attitude towards working on grass roots athletics was very gloomy. From their point of view, managing an athlete at that level is impossible, as runners are likely to switch from one agent to another. Any early investment is seen as too risky for them as it may not yield any return at all. They also argue that the rules and regulations of the management of runners by both national and international associations (IAAF) do not support them as the contracts are signed for one year and the infringers, shifting from one agent to another, are not sued nor punished. The agents’ interest seems to be in hunting the elite athletes once per year from national or international competitions only. Some of them, among the most well established such as Global Sport Communication, have established training groups, which are locally called ‘projects’, but not at the grass-root level.

The First Division Clubs

The ‘first division’ of Ethiopian athletics is composed by the six best clubs of the moment. In 2015 they were: Defense (also known as ‘Mekelakeya’ or ‘20th Mechanised’), Federal Police (‘Omedla’), EEPCO (Ethiopian Electric & Power Corporation, aka ‘Electric’), Ethiopian Commercial Bank (or ‘Negd Bank’), Federal Prisons (‘Maremia’) and Government House Agency (‘Betoch’). In Addis Ababa, all other registered clubs are called ‘second division’. The first division is an open and competitive group: only the clubs with the highest number of points can integrate the first division. Points are gained through regional and national competition, both individually and by team. Inside the First Division group, Mekelakeya stands one head above the
others clubs, both by the number of points collected each year and by its long-lasting presence over the last decades inside this elite group.

Because they are funded by powerful parastatals, the first division clubs can afford to grant some facilities to their athletes: a good standard of coaching, transportation to the various places of training by minibus, food and accommodation, shoes and sport clothes, contacts and contracts with private sponsors, official recognition and social prestige, and even some pocket money or the possibility to get a military career. Evil tongues balance this list of advantages by adding that athletes get brainwashed.

None of the first division clubs have, nor ever have had, a training center for beginners. They simply do not want to invest their time, resources and money in athletes who might leave them at the end of their training time, fleeing to other clubs or to another sport such as football.

The other clubs

While the ‘First Division’ label is widely known and used, the ‘Second Division’ label is less popular and only used in Addis Ababa. Outside the capital city, no other town can claim to have enough athletics clubs to establish any divisions among them.

The common point between all these non-First-Division clubs is that they provide their best athletes to the ‘First Division’ clubs. These second division clubs appear and disappear at any time of the season for unknown reasons. During the 2015 season, the list of second-division clubs that we could document included the following names: Adama club, Addis Ababa University Athletic Club, Africa athletics club, Addis Hiwot Athletics Club, Assela Athletics Sport Club, Bokoji Athletics academy center, Cosmo Engineering Athletics Club, Geta Zeru, Haisha, Karamara Athletics Club, Lucy Club, Mandela Sport Club, Mashambani Athletics Club, Negash SC, Nekemte Athletics Club, Oni Niskanen, Oromiya Athletics Club, Oromiya Road Constraction, Saint George, Saint Yared, Sidama Bunna Athletics Club, Tirunesh Dibaba Training Center, Walia andYaya Athletics club.

The “projects”

There are several differences between what are referred to in Ethiopia as ‘Clubs’ and ‘Projects’. First, an age difference: clubs are for senior athletes, whereas Projects are usually for under 17. Second, an administrative difference: Clubs are nongovernmental, whereas Projects are governmental or run by the ministry in charge of Sport or by one of the athletics federations, be they regional or national. Thirdly, there is a legal difference between clubs and projects: the former are granted autonomy and are ruled by status, whereas the later are run as part of their administration of origin. Finally, the selection of athletes by regional federations for domestic competitions can only be made from projects, and not from clubs, otherwise the regional Addis Ababa Athletics Federation would be too advantaged.

For all these reasons, ‘projects’ can be seen as the obvious level for the organization of grassroot training. Yet it is not the case, mainly because of the cruel lack of funding which makes any attempt of organize something impossible. The interview with two senior national coaches revealed that they witnessed the appearance and the disappearance of many projects without
achieving their objectives. In a rule of thumb, projects are deprived of any coaching staff, transportation vehicles, sport facilities and even support for athletes (food, accommodation, shoes, clothes, etc.). And from the personal observation of the first researcher of this paper on some project sites, the role of the local community in supporting these ‘projects’ seems close to none.

**Potential paths to unlock the situation and other recommendations.**

As the core issue of grass-roots training regards its funding, possible solutions include either a change of policy from the public sector towards its involvement and support in federations, clubs and ‘projects’ or the diversification of the sources of funding, ranging from local, community-based level private companies to international sport institutions or enterprises. Other recommendations include:

1. The local community should be involved in the development process, directly or indirectly, starting from the woreda level (the lowest administrative level in Ethiopia).
2. From the experiences of other countries, where ‘projects’ usually belong to higher clubs, eg-football, we recommend that athletics ‘projects’ belong to clubs at the national or federal or city Administrations levels.
3. Project sites should be equipped at least with indoor activities to help the recovery process.
4. The rights and responsibilities of athletes, clubs and agents need to have a legal basis.
5. The government should request that federations invest in other disciplines, bringing coaches from outside the country and giving scholarships for local coaches to go and study abroad.
6. Athletes should be given a basic education, for instance in family-life, health, the international commercial circuit and career management.
7. Positive entrepreneurs supporting their own clubs should receive better official recognition and be allowed higher participation in the sector.

**Sources**

- Ethiopian and Addis Ababa Athletics federations general assembly documents (2008-15)
- Ethiopian sport policy (April 1998)
- Speeches of sport commissions officials (2008-15)

**Interviews**

Melaku Deresse – long term National coach interview (August 2014)
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