

An Historical Study of the Rise and Fall of the  
International Track Association  
1972-1976

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A Thesis

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## Abstract

Richard Bowers, Advisor

The purpose of this study was to examine the history of the rise and fall of the International Track Association, which existed from 1972 to 1976. This period encompasses the ITA's origin and birth, the rise and growth, and ultimately, its failure and demise.

The study used the historical method to document the rise and fall of the ITA. A logical order was followed using data relevant to the life of the ITA tour. The history of the ITA is arranged chronologically with heading and dates pertinent to the key time periods related to the birth, growth and death of the ITA.

The subject pool of the study was delimited to former ITA athletes and staff members, as well as members of the accredited media. The telephone interview process was used to reach a cross-section of former ITA members. The subject pool consisted of 15 individuals was used to gain primary information. Other primary information was obtained from ITA newsletters, correspondence and souvenir programs.

The conclusions of this study are: a) the ITA lacked adequate quality and depth in many of its events; b) the ITA failed to generate sufficient capital backing through advertising and television revenues to survive long-term; and c) the fan support of track and field was too erratic on a city-to-city basis to sustain and support a professional tour.

He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall.

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

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Isaiah 40: 29-31 (KJV)

**This work is dedicated to all entrepreneurs who have  
accepted the challenge of pursuing financial independence,  
and with God's help, the courage to pursue a dream.**

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## Chapter I

### Introduction and Statement of the Problem

A variety of less visible professional sports are thriving today. One professional tour which materialized but was unable to proliferate was the International Track Association (ITA). The ITA came into existence in 1972 and was disbanded by 1976. The question arises: what were the factors or themes that came into play which affected its existence, and, finally, its demise. There is limited literature concerning the annals of professional track and field. This study provides a vehicle for new insights to those studying the continuum of track and field history.

Track and field, as the oldest and most popular sport of the Summer Olympic Games, is the Games' ultimate attraction. Until the formation of the World Track and Field Championships in 1983, there was little to attract the interest of track and field fans between Olympiads in terms of worldwide international competition between the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

In the absence of a professional track and field circuit, it became Michael O'Hara's concept for track and field to offer a new venue for opportunity. The ITA was a team of professional track and field athletes, both male and female, which toured the USA, Canada and overseas from 1973 to 1976. He wanted to take track to a level above and beyond the Olympics, to a so-called "resurrection status" (O'Hara & Steiner, ITA newsletter, September 24, 1976). In the professional track realm, elite-level athletes could compete as well as thrive as a means of gainful employment, while at the same time provide a worthwhile form of entertainment. O'Hara described the ITA as a "traveling Olympics show" (LeBlanc, 1974, p. 21).

Almost 500,000 spectators witnessed ITA competition in its four-year history while over 300 million more fans watched ITA meets on television (O'Hara & Steiner, ITA newsletter, September 24, 1976). But, by 1976, the popularity of the ITA suddenly dropped. Somewhat surprised about the drastic downturn of events, Steiner commented, "We had a good year in 1975. Ben Jipcho was very hot. We needed another year of sponsorship in 1976 that we had in 1975 in order to continue to exist. If it wasn't premature, something ultimately went wrong and we badly failed" (B. Steiner, personal communication, January 30, 1992).

Unlike other professional sports leagues which had the luxury of learning from the mistakes of its predecessors, O'Hara's professional track and field tour was a prototype. Previous efforts to form professional track associations had been filled mostly with bizarre promotions, sordid exploitation of athletes, and an almost perfect record of early failure. The most recent attempts prior to the ITA were the National Track and Field Association (NTFA) and the Professional Track Association (PTA), following the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. The NTFA proposed setting team franchises around the country, but the idea died early because of a lack of financial backing. The PTA was formed by a group of business professionals led by Al Schallau, a Los Angeles attorney. The league was scheduled to get underway in 1970, then rescheduled the tour for 1971, but nothing was heard about the league again (O'Hara, et. al., 1973).

While professional track and field has succeeded in Australia under a somewhat different structure, previous attempts of developing track into a professional sport ranged from impractical to ridiculous (O'Hara, et al., 1973). A primary characteristic of the Australian model was that it involved legalized betting by registered bookmakers. The betting included both dashes and distance events. Its season ran from November to April, with meets taking place in most

states of Australia. There also was a cross country season, which includes events from four miles to the marathon. While there were no field events held in any pro track meets in Australia, some of the larger clubs included professional track bicycle racing on the program (O'Hara, et al., 1973).

Like numerous professional minor sports leagues which exist in the 1990s on the strength of stable advertising and television contracts, the ITA faced financial obstacles in the 1970's. It's basic marketing strategy appeared to be straight-forward: to develop a "stable" of world-class athletes in a variety of events, primarily for the indoor track circuit. Several features were included to keep fan interest peaked.

Meets were streamlined from the format typical of the outdoor collegiate meet in order to stack the competition and load up events, while also keeping the meet time frame within a 2-3 hour range. The concept of a Grand Prix point-system was implemented to bolster incentive for money earnings (Ryun, 1976). Specialty events, particularly in the dashes and relays, were added to provide flair to meets.

Other adaptations included:

1. The events included dashes featuring professional football stars, as well as a male-versus-female 30-meter race featuring male shot putters versus top female sprinters (Ryun, 1976).

2. Technological advances such as pacer lights and electronic starting blocks were introduced (O'Hara, et al., 1973). Although the pacer lights were an ITA staple for its four-year existence, electronic starting blocks were not introduced until after the ITA's demise (M. O'Hara, personal communication, February 3, 1993).

The initiator of this unique format was O'Hara. A 1964 U.S. Olympic volleyball player, O'Hara was a sports promoter and stockholder with a record of

involvement starting professional sports leagues. He had a credible "track record," but may have not have been successful in particular ventures. In 1967, he was one of the founding organizers of the American Basketball Association (ABA) as an initial planner and co-owner of the Kentucky Colonels and later, was a co-owner and general manager of the Dallas Chaparrals. He also was a founder of the World Hockey Association (WHA), which was in existence from 1972 until 1976 (Jares, 1972). O'Hara also had a contributing role as a promoter in helping start the World League of Volleyball. Three-quarters of the World League's 1990 budget of \$4 million underwritten by corporate sponsors and the other \$1 million by TV contracts, unlike the ITA which had limited corporate support and television exposure (Baker, 1990). O'Hara's company, O'Hara Enterprises International (OEI), enjoys the distinction of having pioneered more college, professional and Olympic sporting endeavors than any company in history. OEI helped establish professional sports leagues in basketball, hockey and volleyball and created the professional track concept that produced 50 meets in five countries on three different continents (Congressional Record, 1991).

O'Hara spent two years of planning before announcing the birth of the ITA before a nationally-televised audience on ABC at the closing ceremonies of the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. He carefully avoided Olympic team members until the conclusion of the Munich Games, in order not to jeopardize the athletes' amateur eligibility (O'Hara, et al., 1973). In that two-year planning period (1970-72), he contacted 103 of the largest arenas in Western Europe and North America in an effort to assemble and arrange a circuit. With athletes like Bob Seagren and Jim Ryun scraping for financial survival, O'Hara's announcement of the ITA opportunity was a vehicle for them to continue their careers (Jares, 1972). Jares said what O'Hara lacked in operational skills and experience for Olympic-caliber track and field, he made up for by the talent he recruited to serve

on his ITA advisory board, landing some of the top-name figures in the sport, collegiate and entertainment market.

Reid (1975, p. 58) reported that the ITA concept was recognized by many as viable, but the consensus of track enthusiasts tended "to dismiss the ITA because of the unwritten sports commandment that says no matter how good amateur athletes are, professionals should be better." Despite 34 world "bests" that were broken or tied in 51 meets in its four-year history, O'Hara was forced to cease operations in August 1976 following the Olympic Games in Montreal (ITA newsletter, September 24, 1976). According to O'Hara, the final stumbling block was failing to attract the next generation of Olympic medalists in Montreal. Among those O'Hara sought included distance star John Walker of New Zealand and decathlete Bruce Jenner of the United States, both world record-holding gold medal winners. In addition, an Olympic boycott by African nations also diminished the market value of up-and-coming Third World distance runners. Although the ITA was financially in the "black" when it ceased operation, O'Hara stated the ITA's demise was imminent. The absence of 1976 Olympic gold medalists in its ranks the ITA couldn't survive another season without suffering significant financial losses (M. O'Hara, personal communication, February 3, 1993).

O'Hara's repeated attempts to secure financial backing from advertisers were soured due to several factors: poor attendance, the result of erratic performances and high expectations of the athletes; higher quality performances by athletes on the amateur circuit; poorly-organized local promotional efforts (C. Nelson, personal communication, February 12, 1992). Also, lucrative offers made to Olympic medalists for product endorsements, made retaining one's amateur status more financially attractive (M. O'Hara, personal communication, January

27, 1992). Details of the tour's final two seasons are sketchy. There has not been an in-depth analysis as to why the ITA was not a success.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to chronicle the birth, life, and demise of the ITA. The ultimate question to be answered is: why did it fail? Also, why did it come about? Who participated? What impact does it have for future sports enterprises? The historical method was utilized to examine the professional tour's life span. There has not been a study as to why the ITA was unable to proliferate. It is hypothesized that the ITA failed for the following reasons:

1. The athlete could earn significantly more income retaining his or her "amateur" status and earning "under the table" sponsorship money for appearances and races.

2. The ITA could not financially support itself adequately via gate receipts, as well through sufficient advertising, sponsorship and television revenues.

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Other themes evolving from this time period include: signing bonuses, amateur payoffs, product endorsements, black/white relationships, leadership style, contracts, sponsorship, personalities of athletes, and the 1978 Amateur Athletic Act.

Credibility was also an obstacle. World records by the professional track tour were not recognized by any amateur organizations. Although many world "bests" were established by the ITA, the athletes' overall performances were lacking in comparison with the top amateur athletes.

### Definitions

The following definitions are presented for common-use terminology as related to this study. The focus was to develop working or operating definitions for the specific terms:

**International Track Association (ITA):** A team of professional track and field athletes, both male and female, which toured the USA, Canada and overseas from 1973 to 1976.

**ITA track and field meet:** A track competition format utilized by the ITA. The meet format consisted of a combination of 12-15 track and field events. The majority traditional of indoor and outdoor track competition, but specialty events were also included. The exact average number of participants per meet is not known, but its believed to be between 30-40.

**Primary sources:** "Those documents in which the individual describing the event was present when it occurred" (Borg and Gall, 1989, p. 814).

**Professional track athlete:** A track athlete who competes for prize money and/or a salary.

**Secondary sources:** "Documents in which the individual describing the event was not present but obtained a description from someone else, who may or may not have directly observed the event" (Borg and Gall, 1989, p. 814).

### Delimitations

The subjects of this study were delimited to former officials and athletes of the ITA, as well as to members of the accredited media. The ITA members and media sources were chosen because of several factors. Officials were chosen because of their leadership roles in the organization. Athletes and the media were chosen primarily based on profile, but also availability. Tour members with a prominent record of success resulting in Olympic gold and silver medals were considered foremost, but those distinguished as a "world record-holder" were also considered. A less-prominent member, distance runner Jerome Howe, was selected because of his graduate-level research involving the study of personality traits of ITA male athletes. The media was selected base on availability and exposure to the tour.

### Limitations

For the purpose of this paper, the following limitations existed:

1. This was an historical study, and was therefore based and limited to telephone interviews, newspaper, magazine articles, news releases and souvenir programs.

2. The ITA existed for four years, and hence, the amount of correspondence still available was limited and not always in complete chronological order, untraceable, or discarded by tour officials.

3. The varied level of cooperation by the various individuals contacted for interviewing purposes was inconsistent.

### Assumptions

Assumptions of this study were:

1. The subjects interviewed for the study would provide accurate, factual information.

2. The resources acquired represent the most accurate depiction of the events surrounding the ITA.

By examining the factors involved in the birth, existence and death of this professional track and field tour, the study will serve as a "window to the past," benefiting those who are interested in track's transitional phases.

## Chapter II

### Procedures

The purpose of this study was to document the history of the ITA between 1972 and 1976. The historical method was used to arrange and discuss chronologically the ITA's. The history of the ITA's tour inception in 1972 until its demise in 1976.

#### Historical method

Borg and Gall (1989) describe the historical method of the research as "the systematic search for facts relating to questions about the past, and the interpretation of these facts" (p. 806). British historian Edward Carr said history "is a continuing process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and past" (Borg and Gall, 1989, p. 806).

Throughout the literature on historical research, sound judgment and common sense are considered the most valuable traits that a historical researcher should possess (Hostetler, 1988). Garraghan (1973) discusses honesty as the key to the historical method: "All important facts and circumstances, good or bad, creditable or otherwise, regarding a person, an institution, an event [must] be recorded" (p.43). The subject of objectivity is discussed. But, in fact, the historical method does not require impartiality or a detached neutral attitude. Objectivity does require self-discipline to avoid clouding of judgment and self-control of feelings of sympathy (Garraghan, 1973).

"The basic aim of science is the achievement of understanding. In the final analysis, scientifically speaking, knowledge is the equivalent of confirmed theories" (D. H. Clark & H. H. Clark, 1984, p. 24). Research disseminates information "as to why and how certain things affect other things and explains how it works, what are its properties, and so on. Facts, as such, do not represent

