

# CITIUS, ALTIUS, OPULENTIUS

And richer these ex-Olympians—and others—certainly will be if former volleyball All-America and demon promoter Mike O'Hara succeeds in turning his dream of a pro-track circuit into reality *by* JOE JARES



**M**ike O'Hara's athletic specialty used to be leaping high and spiking a volleyball nearly straight down at 100 mph or more, and some of the balls he buried in the California sand 10 years ago still haven't been dug up. He spiked hard enough and often enough to make the U.S. Olympic team in 1964, make All-America seven straight years and get elected to the Volleyball Hall of Fame. Today, 40 years old and still skinny as a javelin, he is the founder and controlling stockholder of the International Track Association (ITA), a new set of initials in the crowded world of professional sports. And in going from volleyball star to track-and-field czar he made some interesting stops along the way.

This latest pro-track venture—none before has cleared even the first hurdle in this country—was revealed last month in New York, although ITA headquarters are in Los Angeles. O'Hara made sure to have some big names on hand, including four world-record holders—Jim Ryun, mile, 880; Lee Evans, 400 meters; Pole Vault Bob Seagren; and Shotputter Randy Matson—plus Richmond Flowers, a former top college hurdler who now plays safety for the New York Giants. Australian Distance Runner Tony Benson also has signed up. Ex-Villanova Miler Marty Liquori, who was a color man for the ABC telecasts from Munich, will be the master of ceremonies at ITA meets while continuing to run as an amateur.

Later ITA announced more converts: Miler Tom Von Ruden, two-miler Gerry Lindgren, Sprinter Warren Edmondson, 1968 Olympic 100-meter champion Jim Hines (who has been cut by three pro football teams), Long Jumper Henry Hines (no relation) and—the ultimate test of Liquori's announcing skills—Sprinter Jean-Louis Ravelomanantsoa from Madagascar. He is the biggest mouthful since UCLA had a high jumper named Nagalingam Ethirveerasingam.

The basic plan is this: ITA will stage from 32 to 48 meets, starting in the U.S. and Canada this spring at the tail end of the amateur indoor circuit and moving to Europe this summer. As now

scheduled, the first pro meets will be March 23 in Albuquerque and March 24 in Los Angeles. One of the last of the season in the U.S. will be at Madison Square Garden on June 6. At each one there will be about 50 athletes competing in 12 events—60-yard dash, 440, 880, mile, two mile, 60-yard hurdles, pole vault, shotput, high jump, long jump and two women's dashes—plus "special events," perhaps a shotputters' dash or a match race between Elke Sommer and Raquel Welch. ITA will pay all travel expenses for its contract competitors and guarantee minimum prize money for each event of \$500 for first, \$250 for second, \$100 for third, \$50 for fourth.

Does a pro-track circuit have a prayer for survival? Villanova Coach Jim Elliott wished it well but was pessimistic. "It has two chances, slim and none," he said. "They are adventurous people trying to do the impossible," said USC's Vern Wolfe, who later talked with O'Hara and became a member of his

advisory board. "We have a difficult time making amateur track go with a relatively low cost factor, so how can professional track pay athletes, the expense of renting a facility, the equipment and the officials?" asked UCLA Coach Jim Bush. Other observers say the same guys will win all the time and bore even the stopwatch-clutching track nuts who eat statistics for breakfast; or that the fans will be tired of indoor track by the time the pros get out of the blocks in March; or that only the top dogs will make money.

O'Hara, who on the surface at least seems perfectly sane, has sunk more than \$100,000 of his own money into ITA and insists he expects to get it back with interest, despite the frightening fact that the average break-even point for a pro meet will be \$40,000.

"We want to make track and field the primary sport in the world; it was there once," he said. "We want to make money for ourselves and for the ath-

*continued*



**CHECKING IN** behind O'Hara are (from left, front row) Jim Hines, Henry Hines, Edmondson; Ravelomanantsoa, Ryun, Seagren; Von Ruden. At right, Seagren and Ryun work out.

letes and do something for the sport, and I'd bet heavily that we'll do that."

O'Hara has good reason to believe in himself and ignore scoffers. In the past six years he has become a specialist in packaging professional sports; not just teams or games or matches or tournaments, mind you, but whole *leagues*. In 1967 he was in on the founding of the American Basketball Association as an initial planner and co-owner of the Kentucky Colonels; he sold his share of the Colonels to become a co-owner and general manager of the Dallas Chaparrals, and finally he bowed out of the league profitably. The ABA is in its sixth season. O'Hara was also a founder of the World Hockey Association. He and a partner paid \$25,000 for the San Francisco franchise, then six months later sold it to a Quebec group for \$215,000.

"We have good momentum," says O'Hara. "This is our chance to benefit from our dues-paying in professional sports. We've had a single and a triple and we hope this one will be a home run." (They should also hope for a few dandy track-and-field analogies so they can stop publicizing baseball.)

O'Hara has been working on the pro-track project secretly for more than two years. He first discussed it with beach-volleyball crony Rink Babka, who sounds more like a Slavic dessert than what he is, a behemoth discus thrower, silver medalist at Rome in 1960 and the first man to skim the discus farther than 200 feet. They tossed ideas back and forth, then O'Hara started his research, which was interrupted by the WHA launching and piles of work at his management-consultant firm in West Los Angeles. On another detour, O'Hara tried to interest Jack Kramer in helping him run a pro-tennis tour a year before Lamar Hunt started World Championship of Tennis, but Kramer was too busy to be interested. All the while O'Hara was quietly poking around in track and field and asking almost everyone he came in touch with to sign a standard business nondisclosure form.

He was so successful that when it came time to approach the athletes, they had never heard of him, his projects or his volleyball exploits. He went after Liquori to run for ITA, but Liquori, doing graduate work in broadcasting at the University of Florida, talked himself into

the announcing job instead. Matson, who admitted not having much motivation since the 1968 Olympics, was impressed with O'Hara's "businesslike approach" and was sold at their first meeting. He will continue to work for the Texas A&M alumni association while putting the shot on weekends.

O'Hara carefully stayed away from the Olympic team members until after their events were finished. Because he was not ready to reveal his project, he could not whip out a complete or even partial list of meets already scheduled. He had, however, been in contact with 103 of the largest arenas in Western Europe and North America, and facts about these, the dates they could be available, promoters who had the experience to act as front men and myriad other data were all recorded in something called the PERT Chart—standing for Programming, Education, Review and Technique. There was a lot more hard business and groundwork than mystery in the chart that O'Hara—half the time sounding like a business-school professor, the other half like a football coach—called his game plan.

O'Hara had one other handy tool, his checkbook, and he was not at all loath to show that to prospective pros. Seagren had been trying to forge an acting career in Hollywood without much success—pole-vaulting appearances kept interrupting—and was sick of being jumped on by the AAU for appearing in ads. Ryun, struggling along with his allergies and frustrations, had only \$200 in his checking account when he left Kansas for the Olympic Trials, and now his wife Ann is expecting their second child soon. "My first thought was, 'Where do I sign?'" says Ryun.

That has been the reaction of almost every U.S. athlete once O'Hara gets past the first part of his sales pitch. One of his few failures was Kipchoge Keino, the outstanding Kenyan runner whom he chased to Nairobi after the Olympics, and even that is not an assured failure. O'Hara arrived back in the U.S. with a tape recording of Keino that said, however vaguely, that he might be joining up early next year.

The enthusiasm carries over to ex-athletes like Babka, 36, who as one of the financial backers of ITA is dragging out his old spikes and fondling them. Since

the discus is strictly an outdoor event, Babka never competed indoors, but the competitive aspects of the tour have him excited anyway.

"I wish it was 1965 or '66 or even '68," he said wistfully. "I'd take up the shot!"

Finding investors was a cinch, said O'Hara, but putting together the management team ("the best group ever assembled to start a sports venture") took all his selling ability, which is considerable. The first man he went after was ex-decathlon champion Rafer Johnson, now a telephone-company executive in Bakersfield, Calif. They met at a sports program for retarded children at UCLA and O'Hara broached his ideas soon after. From there it was "about a four-month tag match before Rafer finally decided the cause was just," says O'Hara.

Johnson is chairman of the advisory committee and now has a financial interest in ITA. Max Muhleman, who negotiated WHA's TV contracts, will head ITA properties. Morris Chalfen, founder of *Holiday on Ice*, knows the ins and outs of every arena on both sides of the Atlantic, according to O'Hara. Perhaps most important, since ITA wants its shows to be well-paced and full of pizzazz, he has enlisted four experts on running meets, Stanford Coach Rayton Jordan, Bert Nelson, publisher of *Track & Field News*, Wolfe of USC and Jim Terrill of Amherst.

The majority of the meets will be held indoors, where the spectators can plainly see who elbows whom in the turns and who splintered three hurdles to win that first-place check. The four are working to get rid of the cluttered infield that plagues most track meets, making them sometimes look like the floor of the New York Stock Exchange just before the crash. The San Francisco Examiner Games, for example, are often worked—the term is used loosely—by about 70 officials, many of whom stick around long after their event is over. By using the kind of sophisticated electronic timing and measuring equipment that worked well in Munich, Jordan and Nelson think they can reduce the officials to six, including a starter. And the athletes warming up for upcoming events will be asked whenever possible to do so somewhere else, out of sight. After all, Renata Tebaldi doesn't come out on the Metropolitan Opera stage and

*continued*

warm up her tonsils during one of Joan Sutherland's arias, right?

The old three-ring-circus idea is out. With the possible exception of the two-mile, there will be only one event going on at a time. "We won't be like the Penn Relays with two hours of mile relays," said Liquori.

Jordan, Nelson and the athletes themselves have a load of other innovations in mind. ITA will offer the services of a fashion consultant for uniforms, but if a Dr. Delano Meriwether wants to sprint in bathing suit and suspenders, that's all right, too (though ITA does reserve a veto over costumes, just in case). Hey, why not a light that would whiz around the track in world-record time during a race, similar to greyhound racing's artificial rabbit? Right on. Or a mark to appear on the scoreboard almost the instant the shot lands? Have it, too. Or a decathlon to be run two events per meet for five weekends, or a self-replacing crossbar for the pole vault? Hallelujah, brother! Nelson talks excitedly about a proposed series of traffic lights that will tell the athletes when to stop and go. A yellow light at the pole-vault pit and Seagren will get ready at the top of the runway, then start moving when the green blinks on. Should he attempt a vault at the time the red light appears, he would lose his turn.

If a television contract materializes—and O'Hara has had very few serious talks with the networks so far—the athletes are so anxious to please that they'll try just about anything once. Especially Seagren, who says he once made a series of 16-foot vaults while wearing a battery pack taped around his chest and a sky diver's camera-helmet.

The most important innovation of all, of course, is the money M.C. Liquori will be handing out after each event. O'Hara is confident the ITA will be able to emulate tennis and set up some sort of Grand Prix point system that will bring fat checks at season's end. Sponsors of meets will also boost the prize money. O'Hara says that ITA could find the financial backing to hold out for 10 years if necessary. There are many who believe it will have to, and there are many who fear ITA will irreparably damage amateur clubs and the Olympics.

"I'll be there to see it," says former San Jose State Coach Bud Winter, "but

*continued*

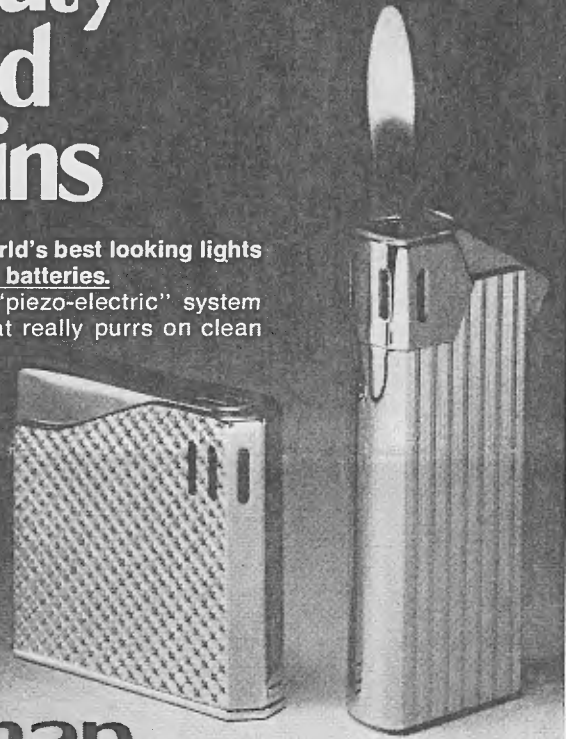
# Beauty and Brains

**That's Maruman. The world's best looking lights with no flints, no wicks, no batteries.**

Maruman's solid state "piezo-electric" system offers faultless ignition that really purrs on clean butane fuel.

Available in two distinctive styles, 19 beautiful designs and finishes. Priced from \$15 to \$35 at fine jewelry, tobacco and department stores.

Maruman. The perfect combination of elegance and reliability. Beauty and brains means you're truly gifted.



## Maruman

Consolidated Cigar Corporation  
1 Gulf + Western Plaza, New York, N. Y. 10023

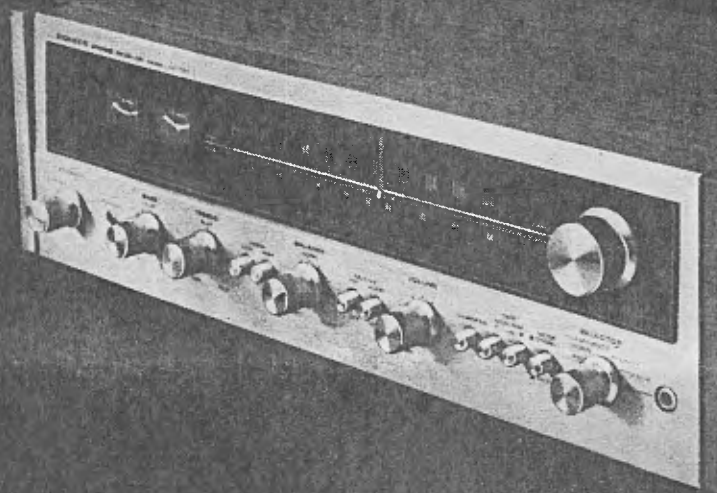
# It takes two fresh packs to play two-fisted cards.



Bicycle cards play better. Give a crisper shuffle. Easier deals. So, buy two new packs of Bicycle Playing Cards—the world's leading brand. And be ready for a two-fisted game.

A QUALITY PRODUCT OF THE UNITED STATES PLAYING CARD COMPANY  
Subsidiary of Diamond International Corporation

# Our new SX-727. So much for so little.



If you think high value is an exaggeration, you'll change your mind when you see and hear the new Pioneer SX-727 AM-FM stereo receiver. Comparison proves it has greater power, performance, precision, features and versatility than any similar priced receiver.

Looking behind its power rating — 195 watts IHF, 40 + 40 watts RMS at 8 ohms, both channels driven — you find a direct-coupled amplifier and dual power supplies. The result is consistent power throughout the 20-20,000 Hz bandwidth for improved transient, damping and frequency responses, with low, low distortion.

You're in complete command of the FM dial, even in congested areas. New and advanced FET/IC circuitry has substantially improved sensitivity and selectivity. Reception is crystal clear and free of interference.

There's a wide range of connections for turntables, tape decks, headphones, microphones, and even 4-channel. You can connect three

speakers, which are protected against damage by an exclusive, new Pioneer safeguard system. Additional features include: loudness contour, high & low filters, FM and audio muting, click-stop tone controls, ultra wide FM tuning dial, dual tuning meters, mode lights and an oiled walnut cabinet.

Sensibly priced at \$349.95, the SX-727 is one of Pioneer's new line of four 'margin of extra value' receivers. The others are SX-828, SX-626 and SX-525, designed for both more luxurious and more modest budgets.

Hear them all at your Pioneer dealer today.

U.S. Pioneer Electronics Corp.,  
178 Commerce Road,  
Carlstadt, New Jersey 07072  
West: 13300 S. Estrella Ave.,  
Los Angeles, Calif. 90248  
Midwest: 1500 Greenleaf Ave.,  
Elk Grove Village, Ill. 60007.  
Canada: S. H. Parker Co., Ontario

**PIONEER**<sup>®</sup>  
when you want something better



## OPULENTIUS *continued*

it will be a sad night for those of us who still believe in amateur sports."

Kansas Coach Bob Timmons, long-time friend and mentor of Jim Ryun, disagrees. "It's strange how you hear so many people say they are disturbed about the idea of pro track but think nothing of professionalism in other sports. This probably can be traced to the Olympic idea of amateurism and the fact that track more than any other sport has come to be associated with the Olympics. But I can see nothing wrong at all with pro track. The track man should have his chance for equal rewards."

Surprisingly, before stepping down as AAU president Jack Kelly was not frothing at the mouth over the impending loss of Olympic-caliber track stars.

"I would hope that if they showed financial stability, nothing would happen to compare with what happened between the United States Lawn Tennis Association and Lamar Hunt's group," said Kelly. "They've really been at it. I feel tennis has become a big-time sport because of the pro players. Therefore, the response and participation on an amateur level has increased tremendously.

"Maybe pro track can do the same thing for track that Lamar Hunt's group is doing for tennis. If they do show such success, I for one would like to work with them instead of fighting them."

As badly as he wants ITA to succeed, O'Hara has decided, for the time being at least, to avoid as much as possible competing with the amateurs, although he admits ITA will be a "minor irritant at first." This is the reason he scheduled his meets to begin after the amateur circuit: why he announced that ITA will not sign athletes away from colleges; and why he did not approach Ryun, Seagren and others until after their Olympic events.

Still, the hint of bitterness to come popped up in Munich. O'Hara, aided by Liquori, was outlining his plans at a luncheon sponsored by *Track & Field News*. At that time he already had signed Seagren and Matson. A man in the audience yelled out, "Let's keep track and field pure and forget about turning the sport into another Roller Derby!"

"You may think Roller Derby is a joke," shot back the new czar, "but a lot of people attend their competitions and many of those skaters make a lot of money."

*continued*

"This is an idea whose time has come," said Bert Nelson, acting as peacemaker. "I think we should give it a chance."

If it is to have a chance, O'Hara will have to be a strong leader in his position of owner/czar. He needs some superlative miles from his biggest drawing card, Ryun, and, given Ryun's history of self-doubt, allergies and bad luck in the last couple of years, that might not be easy. Ex-Kansas mile star Wes Santee remembers well the kind of race ITA can't afford to have.

There was a barely promoted exhibition race in Lawrence, Kans. in August as a kind of tune-up for Ryun. He was running against George Young and Canada's Grant McLaren in a two-mile. The twilight race drew about 3,500 people at \$1 apiece.

"If Ryun had put out," said Santee, "if he hadn't fooled around and quit competing after a couple of laps, he and the other two could have toured around the country and drawn crowds everywhere. . . . To succeed, professional track will have to have the big names, but it will also have to have competition in every race."

Just in case the pot of gold at the end of the races is not enough incentive for Ryun and the others, or an athlete disappoints for any reason, O'Hara has retained the right to replace anybody who does not run, jump, throw or behave up to "ITA standards," whatever they turn out to be. Underneath his winning salesman's manner, he seems tough enough to wield the ax.

O'Hara is a tenacious competitor who hates to lose in business even more than in paddle tennis at his beach club. Recently he was chatting with some of the current volleyball stars when the subject of a beach tournament came up. It seems that on a Sunday evening when it was getting dark, cold and foggy at Santa Cruz and the finalists were exhausted from a long weekend of diving and leaping in the sand, they agreed to flip a coin to decide the winner and then go home. O'Hara listened and became visibly disgusted. He obviously despised the idea that athletes would not keep playing until they cramped up into human beach balls. He walked away, saying, "That's a bad story. Please don't ever tell it again."

END

# Holiday originals.



**The original Holiday gifts.**

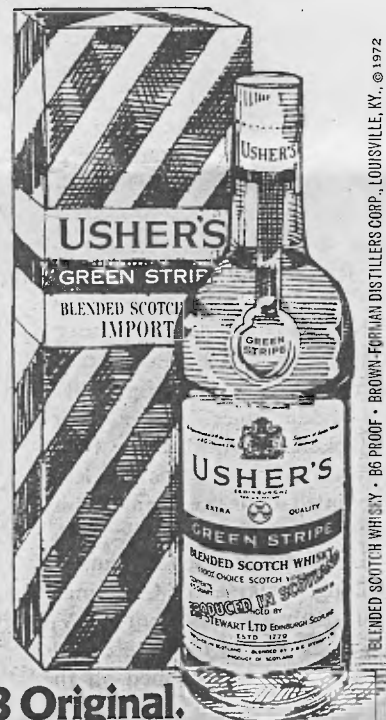
Fine togas, ripe grapes, and olive branch crowns. Gift giving is generally believed to have been handed down from the early Romans' season of merry-making called Saturnalia.

## The original light Scotch.

Usher's Green Stripe. The Holiday original since 1853. Now also available in a very original gallon barrel. Ask your favorite retailer to show you. And give something original.

**Usher's Green Stripe. The 1853 Original.**

Product of Scotland



BLLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY • 60 PROOF • BROWN-FORMAN DISTILLERS CORP., LOUISVILLE, KY. © 1972