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## COMMENT ON THE CURRENT AMENDMENTS TO THE POLE VAULT RULES

### Résumé

*The latest version of the pole vault rules*

- *makes it impossible to compare present with past performances,*
- *is causing delays in the course of competition,*
- *makes it more difficult to generate competition results as it is less clear whether a competitor has failed or not.*
- *And due to the fact that these rules are not equal and consequently applied in all competitions, they may destroy the athletes' belief in the fairness of the rules.*

*Therefore these rules should be abandoned.*

*Future amendments to the rules should take into consideration athletes' safety, attraction from the spectators' point of view and the potential to produce clear competition results.*

*Any introduction of new rules should be prepared by thorough deliberation with inclusion of all persons involved (e.g. athletes and coaches).*

### THE PRESENT SITUATION

The pole vault rule changes introduced early this year affect mainly three aspects: pegs have been shortened from 75mm to 55mm, the cross-section of the crossbar's end pieces has been changed, and the preparation time for a trial has been limited to 1 minute. Touching the bar with hands has been forbidden since about 1998.

While the reduction of the preparation time has been accepted by most athletes without complaint, the shortening of the pegs and the changed cross-section of the crossbar's end pieces have caused widespread discussion. From the viewpoint of athletes and coaches there is no relation between the considerable costs these changes provoke and the alleged advantages. Contrarily, important disadvantages arose from this.

The reasons given for the above-mentioned rule changes were more or less:

“A trembling bar shows that the athlete has almost failed the height. For the sake of justice such a poor performance shall be identified by a crossbar which tends more easily to fall to the ground. Thus, athletes who are able to clear a bar in a proper way get the appropriate recognition.” (This could be the same reason for the prohibition of the use of hands while clearing the bar.)

This reason, however, does not take into account the discipline's special features and should not be accepted because of the following:

- So far, neither for high jump nor for pole vault, the exact clearing height has been scored, but the height of the cleared bar. This means, that high jumpers and vaulters have always been “cheated out” of the part of their performance that exceeds the height of the bar.
- Athletes and coaches saw it as a just cause that this disadvantage was made up by bars that trembled, but luckily did not fall. No athlete or coach was thinking that this could be a problem as these “lucky trials” were mere incidents. “Experts” in unfair methods of bar clearing have not existed. Sooner or later, each athlete profited from such a lucky trial and spectators liked such performances because of their special thrill.
- On the biomechanical side no athlete is able to clear a bar if his or her body did not reach at least the height of the bar, either before or after passing the bar. Trembling bars were either touched before clearing the bar, which means the athlete reached the maximum height behind the bar. Or the bar was touched when the athlete fell down, which means the maximum height was reached before passing the bar. A perfect interaction of speed on the runway, weather condition, pole stiffness and sporting shape is rather seldom.
- In addition to that, delays in the course of competition become more likely because of the raising number of failures and the more difficult placement of the bar (because of the shortened pegs).

Against this background the current rule changes lose their justification, as they do not lead to a more legitimate competition result but to an increased number of failures on a random basis. In consequence, in particular the maximum heights suffer from this, as we witnessed this winter in men’s competitions. Pole vaulting loses its fascination which cannot be in the interest of meeting organizers, spectators and athletics in general. The immense costs for new bars, the efforts needed to change pegs and the delay in the course of competition cannot be justified by the questionable advantages of this new rule.

Likewise the rule prohibiting the use of hands while clearing the bar was also meant to generate more justice. Instead this rule caused more confusion. Since 1998 I have seen about 100 out of about 30.000 trials at international and national competition where athletes touched the bar with their hands. And not more than five or six were sanctioned. An impressive example was Jean Galfione’s performance at the 1999 World Indoor Championships in Maebashi/Japan. He stabilized the bar at the height of 6.00 Meters with his left hand winning the title and tens of thousands US \$ more than his competitor Jeff Hartwig (5.95 Meters). The trials of these two athletes can be watched on my website [www.stabhoch.com](http://www.stabhoch.com). This proves that only a few judges dare raising the red flag when the audience is celebrating a performance (as they did not see that something was wrong). If a rule is as problematic as this, it should be reconsidered as it is usual practice in law.

The fact that pole vault rules have been changed too often and that they are not consequently applied make it difficult to compare present with past performances or competitions in different areas of the world. This, however, has been athletics’ strength in comparison with other sports where scoring criteria suffer from subjective sensations of the judges (gymnastics, ski jump, figure skating) or local conditions (motor racing, skiing).

## **GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE AMENDMENTS TO RULES**

It goes without saying that there will always be reasons to change the rules of athletics. However, as to future decisions I would like to give the following recommendations:

### **Athletes' safety**

Last year, not less than three lethal accidents in the USA draw the public's attention to High Schools and Colleges. The current rules should be reconsidered whether they do really comply with the best possible safety provisions for athletes. The following aspects should be looked into by involvement of athletes and coaches:

#### *Uprights*

At present the uprights may be not more than 40 cm in the direction of the runway and not more than 80 cm to the landing area from the prolongation of the inside edge of the top of the box. A change to 20 cm and 100 cm respectively has been requested.

In my opinion, moving the uprights in the direction of the runway should never be allowed as this is much too dangerous (at US High Schools this has already been changed). Extending the distance to 100 cm does not seem to be reasonable either, as a special type of athlete would benefit from this. In addition to this, due to the higher horizontal speed related thereto, landing areas ought to be longer, too.

#### *The Pole Vault Box*

The current form of the box was fixed 30 years ago. In the meantime the grip height of the poles has changed and in consequence the bending of the pole. The rubbing of the poles at the stop boards of the box may lead to broken poles and possibly injuries.

The box is too narrow, the angle between sides and stop board should be increased by 5° to 125° and the angle formed between the base and the stop board should also be increased by 5° to 110°.

#### *The Landing Area*

The minimum recommendation of the IAAF rules is quite often interpreted as if there would be no need for larger landing areas.

The size should be increased to at least 6m x 6m plus 3 m for the front pieces, measured from the back edge of the box.

#### *Clearing the bar*

Prohibiting the hand on the bar made of pole vault another discipline that is marked by questionable decisions of judges. What is decisive now, is not the jump height, but the way how the bar has been cleared. It may be interpreted as an offence against the rules.

Each pole vaulter runs a potential accidental risk at each trial. Any rule that prevents the athlete from pursuing natural movements (for example to protect the face when the bar is bouncing) can be deemed as threatening the safety of athletes.

## **Attractiveness for spectators**

*Rules stating that a bar that stays up does not necessarily mean a valid trial should be avoided.*

The natural fascination of pole vault should remain the aspect that the decision of valid or not is bindingly related to whether the bar falls down or not. A device should be obligatory which prevents the bar from falling down into the opposite direction of the jump (this is implied in the rules already, as the bar should fall down in the jumping direction) or on another part of the standards than the pegs. A turning bar that stays on the pegs should not be considered a foul jump.

*Increasing attractiveness of competition through new qualification methods*

Like it was successfully done for ski jump, new competition forms should be tested, for example KO rounds that could extend the present competition forms without replacing them. Another means would be team scoring by creating duos or other teams as this has already been practised in some competitions (e. g. Sindelfingen).

*Increasing attractiveness of Track & Field through competitions out of the stadium*

For these competitions, runway constructions just as in indoor competitions should be allowed (Rule 219). Results and records should be treated the same as in competitions in stadiums.

## **Exact results**

Irregular performances are possible through pegs which are not sufficiently fixed to the uprights. They are responsible for crossbars which do not fall down even if they were touched, because the pegs could swing back and forth. The rules should include a provision which requests *sufficiently fixed pegs*.

*Laser measurements of the real height*

On a long-term basis it should be aimed at measuring jumping heights by laser as it is done for long jump or throwing events. This has already been done as an experiment at a high jump meeting in Wuppertal.

Such results could become a new result and record dimension for athletes competing at laser-equipped sites, besides the “normal” records.