

» Bruce Deacon at the 1999 World Championships, Seville, Spain



HIGH Standards

Four years after Canada's disappointing medal tally at the Athens Games, the debate about Canadian Olympic qualifying standards rages on. Is the Canadian Olympic Committee's quest for podium finishes making us more competitive in the world of distance running, or dashing the dreams of the country's top runners?

Alex Hutchinson investigates.

TO MANY PEOPLE, Bruce Deacon is the poster boy for what went wrong with Canada's Olympic standards in 2004. Draconian new rules imposed by the Canadian Olympic Committee before the Athens Games refused selection to any athletes who hadn't demonstrated their ability to finish among the top 12 in the world, overriding any other considerations. Deacon, a two-time Olympic marathoner who had best finishes of 11th and 16th at the World Championships, was left at home along with more than 50 athletes who had achieved the international qualifying standards in their respective sports, but weren't deemed "top 12" material.

Two additional twists made Deacon's case even more galling. First, his qualifying time for the 2004 Games, a 2:13:18 he ran in Sacramento, was his all-time best – faster than the qualifying time of 2:13:35 he ran before his 11th place finish at the 1995 World Championships, and faster than the international 'A' standard of 2:18:00, but slower than the 2:12:40 demanded by Canadian officials. Second, his occasional training partner on Vancouver Island, the transplanted Brit Jon Brown (who

has since become a Canadian citizen), was selected to the British Olympic team with a slower qualifying time of 2:13:39 – and went on to finish fourth in Athens.

“I missed out on going to Athens by less than a second per kilometre,” says Deacon, 40, who is now a manager of education and community relations programs with the COC. “And there was a recognition afterwards that this approach didn’t work. It actually resulted in fewer medals.”

Four years later, as we approach the July 6 deadline for naming the track and field team for Beijing, some things are different, and others are the same. The disappointing medal tally and the loud public outcry after Athens led to a COC policy change in 2005, granting more leeway to individual sports in team selection, while continuing to use the COC’s funding power to apply pressure for tougher standards. Standards for the track and field team have been adjusted accordingly – most significantly with the introduction of a “Rising Star” category that sets easier standards for promising young athletes who have never competed at an Olympic Games or World Championships before.

But for many events, and especially for the marathon, the qualification procedure remains more restrictive than the rules laid out by the IAAF, the international governing body for track and field, whose standards are used as-is by countries such as the United States. So once again, there will be Canadian athletes who are fully qualified to participate in the eyes of Olympic officials, who will instead be at home watching this summer’s competition on TV – if they can bear to watch at all. It’s a topic that makes emotions run high: When I contacted Jason Warick, the Saskatoon runner who was Canada’s second-ranked marathoner in 2006, to get his thoughts on this year’s standards, he asked me to hold off for a week. “I’m racing Rotterdam on the weekend,” he wrote in an e-mail from Europe, where he was preparing to go for the marathon standard, “and answering these questions will get me all worked up and pissed off.”

Before we start calling for the heads of the standard-setters, though, it’s worth considering where the standards come from. The decisions are made by sports officials responding to directives from funding sources and elected politicians, who are in turn responding (in theory) to what we, the public, demand. When we complain that our athletes don’t win enough medals, one logical response is to stop sending big teams from sports that struggle to win medals (we haven’t won any in track and field since 1996), and emphasize those that do (hello, kayak and diving). When we ask for lower taxes, a logical target is the funding for amateur sports that, to many people, exist only once every four years.

Setting appropriate Olympic standards demands that we think carefully about the role of amateur sport in society. Do we want role models, or just medals? Ultimately, it’s a clash between two visions of what the Olympics represent. To some, they’re a place where only the very best in the world fight for supremacy in their chosen disciplines. To others, they still represent a meeting place for the best from each country, where, in the words of the Olympic Creed, “the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.”

IF YOU WANT TO READ the Beijing selection criteria for track and field for yourself, you can download them from Athletics

Canada’s website, www.athletics.ca. Make sure you block off some uninterrupted reading time, because it’s not an easy read. The goals, however, are clearly stated in the first sentence: setting standards that indicate “an athlete’s capability of finishing in the top 12 at the Olympic Games.” While the COC no longer dictates the precise standards, each sport’s governing body still has to have their selection policy approved by the COC – and “it’s not just a rubber stamp,” notes Scott MacDonald, Athletics Canada’s national teams program director.

The international rules for qualifying are simple. The IAAF issues a list of ‘A’ and ‘B’ standards, and each country can enter up to three athletes per event who hit ‘A’ standard between January 1, 2007 and July 23, 2008. If no athletes hit ‘A’ standard in an event, the country can enter one athlete with ‘B’ standard. This year’s Canadian ‘A’ and ‘B’ standards are, almost without exception, identical to the IAAF standards. Canada also has a set of ‘A+’ standards, which are calculated by averaging the 12th place finish at the last five years of Olympic Games, World Championships and world rankings. For simplicity, we can ignore the ‘A+’ standards: hitting them makes it easier to qualify, but they are not *required* for any event.

So what’s the fuss? First, Canada won’t take anyone who only

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has ‘B’ standard, other than under the “Rising Star” criteria mentioned above. Second, simply hitting the ‘A’ standard once isn’t enough either: the Athletics Canada rules include a daunting spreadsheet listing options for precisely how many ‘A’ standards are needed, when they have to be produced, and even at what competitions they are permitted to occur. For 1500m runners, for example, this can require hitting standards as many as three times, two of which must be set in the six-week period leading up to the Olympic Trials.

The goal of these additional hurdles is to ensure that athletes are fit at the right time (as opposed to making standard six months before the Games, getting injured for several months, and then showing up out of shape), and capable of producing their best performance when it counts. This emphasis on ensuring competitive readiness has support from some surprising places – including Bruce Deacon. “The year I came 11th at Worlds, as part of the selection process, I had to write a letter to Athletics Canada explaining how I was going to come top 16,” he recalls. He outlined a plan that included going to England for a five-week training camp before the championships, away from the distractions of his job, and detailed his pacing strategy for the race itself. “It was great,” he says. “It set some very clear expectations, and made it clear that I was not being brought along as a tourist.”

THERE IS ONE SIGNIFICANT EXCEPTION where Canadian and international standards diverge: the road running events. For the marathon, as well as the 20K and 50K racewalk events, the Canadian ‘A’ and ‘B’ standards are much tougher than the IAAF

equivalents. In the women's marathon, the Canadian 'B' standard of 2:31:00 is a full 11 minutes faster than the IAAF 'B' standard; in fact, it's even six minutes faster than the IAAF 'A' standard of 2:37:00. For Toronto marathoner Nicole Stevenson, this conjures up an unpleasant feeling of déjà vu.

In 2004, Stevenson twice met the international standards, running 2:33:37 – but no Canadians were selected to run on the historic Athens marathon course. “From my 2004 experience, I learned that Canadians want to see Canadians at the Olympics,” she says, recalling the hundreds of e-mails she received from complete strangers after her plight became known. “Brian Williams (on CBC) even mentioned me by name during the opening ceremonies and during the women's marathon, relaying his disapproval of the selection standards.”

The marathon is, undeniably, a different beast. In many ways,

of success,” he says. “The real difference in opinion is what the definition of success is.” For any athlete who has achieved one of the IAAF standards, he argues, there is a reasonable chance of, say, a top-20 finish. “I think that any Canadian would agree that a top-20 finish in the Olympic Marathon would be deemed a success,” he says, “and most, who have any knowledge of the extreme depth of athletics, would broaden that definition.”

Olympic marathons are notoriously unpredictable, with the favourites rarely emerging triumphant – the result of difficult courses, challenging weather conditions, and the inherent fickleness of the event itself. At last year's scorching World Championships in Japan, for instance, only the winner managed to run under 2:17 in the men's race. Canada's top runner during the qualifying period, Steve Osaduik, had run 2:16:47 at the Royal Victoria Marathon, better than the IAAF 'B' standard of

2008 Olympic Marathon Standards

	A+	A	B
Men's International	N/A	2:15:00	2:18:00
Men's Canadian	2:11:31	2:12:38	2:14:00
Women's International	N/A	2:37:00	2:42:00
Women's Canadian	2:27:35	2:29:08	2:31:00

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it's the marquee event of the Olympics. Streets throughout the entire city are closed for hours, and fans line up several deep along the course to cheer. And unlike the track, where there are just eight lanes available, there's plenty of room. “The IAAF wants more people in the marathon,” Athletics Canada's MacDonald says, “because it looks pretty funny if there are just 20 people running through the streets.” The international standards are driven by the marketing needs of each event, explains MacDonald's colleague Martin Goulet, Athletics Canada's chief high performance officer. They want 64 to 72 people in the room, because having four rounds maximizes the build-up of tension. They only want three rounds of the 800m, so the standards in that event are tougher. Still, the standards in all track and field events are within a “reasonable range,” Goulet says – with the obvious exception of the road events.

“There is no doubt that the marathon standards are softer,” admits Matt McInnes, the Ottawa resident who won the Canadian marathon championships in 2004 and 2007. “But you have to compare apples to apples.” Like MacDonald and Goulet, McInnes understands that the marathon standards are driven by the IAAF's desire to turn the marathon into a major public spectacle that fills the streets – but he doesn't see why this is a bad thing. Why would Canadian officials not want their athletes to be part of a huge, popular event that will garner more attention than all but a handful of the other track and field events put together?

The answer – that standards need to be roughly equivalent across all events and consistent with the goal of a top-12 finish – doesn't convince McInnes. “I would never advocate sending an unprepared athlete to an event where they have no chance

2:18, leading many observers to wonder how he would have fared if he had been allowed to go to Osaka.

Such comparisons are seldom realistic, given the effects of weather, tactics, and the unimaginable distractions that intrude at major championships, says Deacon. Though he himself was a victim of the tough 2004 standards, Deacon argues for a middle ground that drops the rigid top-12 rules, but doesn't necessarily include a faint-hope clause to send an athlete who has run 2:17:59. “There's this idea that ‘you never know what will happen,’” he says, “but you kind of do know what's going to happen.”

The data, for the most part, bear out Deacon's point. Of the 94 men's marathoners in Osaka, only eight of them had best times slower than Osaduik's – including the lone representatives of French Polynesia, Liechtenstein, Cape Verde and Mongolia. (Countries like France, Australia and the Netherlands, which like Canada have instituted their own tougher standards, had no representatives.) Of those eight athletes, four did not finish the race, and two more came last and third-last. On the other hand, Chia-Che Chang of Taiwan, who entered the race with a best of 2:17:19, managed a 28th place finish in 2:26:22. Perhaps Osaduik could have accomplished something similar.

ULTIMATELY, IF THE GOAL OF SENDING an athlete to the Olympics is defined solely in terms of the probability that they'll return with a medal or a top-12 finish, it's hard to argue against Canada's tougher standards. But there are other ways to frame the debate.

Government funding for amateur sport is often defended because it encourages the general public to get involved in



Photo: Sean Burges

» Nicole Stevenson at the TransCanada National 10K Championships, Ottawa



» Jason Warick at the 2007 Aramco Houston Half Marathon, Texas

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physical activity, which has profound societal benefits and could ultimately even lower health-care costs. There's no better example of this than running, a mass-participation sport that can be enjoyed by virtually anybody, regardless of age or fitness level. The marathon, for instance, "has touched the lives of tens of thousands of Canadians," Deacon says. "So the impact of having someone in the Olympic race goes deeper than just one person."

But the sport's accessibility is a double-edged sword when it comes to medal hopes. While few countries can afford the infrastructure needed to develop successful swimming or fencing

programs, let alone synchronized diving or equestrian teams, a good chunk of the planet's population has sprinted room at some point in their lives. A near-record 200 countries participated in last year's world track and field championships, so placing top 12 in the 100m dash or the marathon is a fundamentally different challenge than it is in, say, trampolining.

There's also the question of why, while international standards have become tougher, Canadian marathoners have gotten slower. Osaduk's time of 2:16:47 would have placed him more than two minutes behind the third place finisher in the 1984 Canadian Olympic Trials. While demographic and societal forces (or, if you prefer, video games and TV) have clearly played a role, McInnes also questions whether short-sighted decisions like raising standards out of reach – not only for the Olympics, but also for competitions like the Commonwealth and Pan American Games that would otherwise serve as stepping stones to the Olympics – have hurt the sport's development. "Athletics Canada has no justification in raising the bar, when it is doing nothing to aid Canadian athletes to reach that higher bar," he says.


These complaints haven't fallen on deaf ears. In February, Athletics Canada made a surprise announcement: They promised to send a full team of up to five men and five women to compete in the marathon at the 2009 World Championships in Berlin, provided that the runners meet minimum standards of 2:18 for the men and 2:43 for the women. Additional funding for the team was provided by the ING Ottawa Marathon and the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon, both of which were granted special status in the selection of the team. It's a bold break with previous policy – and the results will be monitored closely.

"The post-Olympic year – the first year of a new Olympic cycle – is an appropriate time to introduce what I would describe at this point in time as a 'pilot project,'" says Goulet of Athletics Canada. "Once Berlin is over, we will make an analysis, discuss with our partners and our technical experts, and determine if a similar project is appropriate beyond 2009." In other words, this is an opportunity for Canadian athletes to show that they belong on the world stage – and to show that the opportunity to compete there will help them to reach higher levels of achievement.

Barring a major breakthrough at the Ottawa Marathon, our top

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marathoners will once again be watching the Olympic marathon on TV this summer. But they'll also be thinking ahead to next year, knowing that a good performance in Berlin could encourage Athletics Canada to set its standards differently when the next Olympics come around in 2012. It's enough to keep the 33-year-old McInnes in the game for another year. Stevenson, too, will take up the challenge, hoping to help future athletes avoid the frustration that she experienced. "Now," she says, "it's up to the athletes and coaches to make the qualifying races and the World Championships their top goals for 2009." ■



Anything is possible – or is it?

Championship marathons are famously hard to handicap, with long shots often emerging to take top places. But how fast are the runners who are considered “long shots”? Toronto runner and stats hound Ian Reid looked back at the 192 runners who have finished in the top 12 in men’s Olympic and World Championship marathons since 1984, and tried to determine their best times going into the race. With two exceptions, none of the runners entered with a time of 2:16:00 or slower; one runner entered with a 2:15, and two more runners had best times of 2:14. The other 98 per cent of top-12 finishers had run 2:13:59 or better prior to their big race.

The two exceptions? Irishman John Treacy, a two-time World Cross Country champion who was making his marathon debut when he won a silver medal at the Los Angeles Olympics; and Tahar Mansouri, a Tunisian ninth-place finisher at the 1993 World Championships, for whom Reid was unable to find any prior marathon results.