

Why not end tenth-of-a-second timing in Athletics?

from R. VILLARA (*from the Bulletin of the Roumanian Olympic Committee*)

Sport has always kept pace with technique. Zatopek, Kuts, Hary, Iolanda Balas, Brumel, Johnson are certainly a product of the modern era; they couldn't have appeared earlier. Similarly, their performances may one day appear second-rate to the great athletes of the future. We know life doesn't stand still! It is therefore not surprising that, in times when man conquers outer

space, top athletes run the 100 metres in 10 seconds and the 400 metres in less than 45 seconds and that the power of gravity is overcome not only by rockets but also by man, when he succeeds in jumping nearly half a metre higher than his own height. But it is not at all natural that in these days of electronic brains which perform operations of astounding precision, athletic performances should be recorded in the same way as at the first modern Olympics.

It is unquestionable that the manual timing still in use at all the big international competitions, including the Olympic Games, has been long obsolescent. With present standards of performance, when sport training has become an extensive science, the old timing method is no longer adequate to differentiate between very closely matched runners. It fails in recording both the performances of the competitors and the order of finish.

At the Rome Olympics there was a Titanic struggle in the final of the 400 metres. Otis Davis was in the lead almost throughout. In the last few metres Karl Kaufmann, in a tremendous finishing burst, drew level with him and both men, in a state of complete exhaustion, crossed the finishing line together. The judges' opinions were divided; only a photograph of the finish showed that the American negro had won. His time of 44.9 seconds was an exceptionally fine new world record. Kaufmann, however, was given the same time and thus became joint world record-holder.

Even a superficial analysis shows that the chosen solution is illogical. If Davis had beaten Kaufmann, he alone deserved the honour of holding the world record. He finished ahead of Kaufmann, admittedly by a very narrow margin, but nevertheless ahead of him. Recognition of the West German runner as joint world record-holder implies non-recognition of his defeat.

Such were the facts. They show beyond doubt that manual timing to one-tenth of a second was unable to separate the two runners in the language of figures.

In present-day competition, a very close finish among sprinters is no rare occurrence, making things very difficult for the judges. In the final of the 100 metres at Helsinki, as you surely remember, four runners all returned the same time of 10.4 seconds. In reality, however, they didn't all return that time; in fact they couldn't. There were

slight differences between them, imperceptible to the eye and unrecorded by the stop-watches, but proven by the photograph. Similarly, it is hard to believe that Hary and Jerome both ran the 100 metres in exactly 10 seconds dead. Such examples could be multiplied.

To our mind, but one conclusion may be drawn: timing to one-tenth of a second no longer 'fills the bill'. Modern athletics imperiously calls for electric timing to one hundredth of a second — for the present, at

any rate, at big international meetings. And in events where results are assessed by tape-measure, we must use millimetres.

In the high jump and the pole vault, millimetres have begun to appear — admittedly only in converting Anglo-Saxon measures to the metric system. But why not use them regularly in measuring results in all the jumping and throwing events? We shall be told that it would be more complicated. Yes, but it would be accurate.