



IS THERE A LIMIT TO WORLD RECORDS IN SPORT?

by XIE YA LONG *

World records in sport, which reflect the best results obtained to date in particular events, increasingly capture the attention of the public. Over the past few years, the beating of world records has required the mobilisation of more human material and financial resources than ever, and the determining factors have increased manifold. In the face of such a phenomenon, it is important that we learn soon, whether the world records of today have reached their limits, if indeed there are limits.

Taking as a basis the records obtained up to now and considering the limits imposed by physical necessities, certain specialists defend the theory that there is a limit to records. Others think that sports performances, like human capacities in general, can be improved ad infinitum and that as long as athletes have the will to succeed, world records will not reach any limit.

World records are the products of a very complex system. Various elements : social, biological, psychological, material and relational (between coaches and athletes, competitors and judges), interreact within the system. With man's rapid progress, new elements have come into play ; current studies in biotechnology, in particular genetic engineering, will play a deciding role in the selection of candidates and in training. The system will thus undergo a transformation, keeping pace with progress in society as a whole.

When an athlete — or a group of athletes — beats a world record, it is of great importance to know his origins, his hereditary 'aptitudes, the conditions of his athletic training and the level of his coach. Other factors such as the place, the time, the meteorological conditions, the stadium,

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the judges and the public also play a role which should not be underestimated. All these different elements together form a whole at the moment when a new record is set up, so that in effect this record is the product of a combination of circumstances.

In theory, there are two possible ways of improving on a world record. It may be done either by raising the level of the elements which constitute the record, or by creating a better coordination between these elements so as to achieve optimum results. However, world records are the products of conditions specific to each of our societies, and the determining factors for the creation of a record in training or competition are influenced and limited by the degree of development of the societies in question ; moreover, these factors do not remain static. Theoretically speaking, there may be limits to world records linked with the progress of races and civilisations.

The constitutive elements of world records are numerous and the correlation between them is neither predictable nor controllable. That is why, even if, theoretically, it is thinkable that an optimum limit for a more effective coordination of these factors could be obtained, in reality, the situation is very different. In reality, there is always an objective to be achieved, the best performance and the elements which play a part in it remain imponderables. The means employed to raise technical levels and achieve better coordination between the various factors are absolutely inexhaustible. That is why improvement in performance and the possibilities of obtaining better results are, effectively, unlimited.

Like all manifestations of human activity, world records are conditioned by levels of biological and social development. The human race today has a long history behind it which began with the biological evolution of the planet three thousand million years ago. Naturally, the evolution of man is itself conditioned and limited in time and space and by its environment. However, as long as he exists, man will continue to adapt and to evolve.

As far as training is concerned, human, material and financial resources for the preparation of athletes depend also on the economic, cultural and scientific level of the society in question. Training is carried out in accordance with the prevailing conditions of the time. That is why

it is limited by the level of development of the society under consideration.

World records are recognised subject to rigorous criteria as regards venue conditions and strict and binding regulations. All these conditions must be fulfilled before a world record is officially acknowledged. As societies progress, the principles governing the protocol for the recognition of records may be rationally modified as need arises, so as to show the capacity of athletes to better advantage.

In conclusion, if the idea of a limit to world records is theoretically seductive, in practice, the beating of a world record is the product of so many imponderables that, effectively, the possibility of improving on performances remains unlimited.

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