

Zarnowski, Frank. *The Decathlon: A Colorful History of Track and Field's Most Challenging Event*. Champaign: Leisure Press, 1989. Pp. xiv, 353. Photos, index, appendices, references. \$24.00.

Authors often establish the theme and sometimes even the quality of a book in the first couple of sentences. Frank Zarnowski opens *The Decathlon: A Colorful History of Track and Field's Most Challenging Event* with these words: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of the Renaissance man had better learn decathlon." (p. 1) What follows that grating passage (lifted from Jacques Barzun's baseball quote) are 353 pages of consistently deadly prose woven among a seemingly endless supply of statistical tables. The result is almost as comprehensible as live decathlon competition itself. Ironically Zarnowski later points out that sports during the Renaissance had no decathlon-like events.

Frank Zarnowski, executive director of the Decathlon Association, has

written extensively about decathlons, mostly in the form of record books, meet organization, and training manuals. Though *The Decathlon* is essentially a history of the event, its style reflects that of a writer of record books.

The book begins by tracing multi-sport events from the Ancient Greeks through 1911 when the modern, two-day, ten-event, decathlon began. Zarnowski devotes the bulk of the book to a decade-by-decade history of the decathlon with biographical sketches and *total* career statistics of the outstanding performers. The last major section contains a narrative summary of each of the Olympic decathlons from 1912 through 1988 with the complete results in table form. The book concludes with an explanation of the decathlon scoring tables followed by various appendices.

Zarnowski's discussion of multi-sport events prior to 1911 rehashes standard information, with emphasis on the Ancient Greek pentathlon—the long jump, discus, stade race, javelin, and wrestling. However, two interesting sidebars add novel information to this section: 1) The ancient Irish Tailteann games (circa 1892 B.C.) had multi-sport events long before the Greeks. 2) When ABC was filming the 1972 recreation of the Greek pentathlon using Bill Toomey and Rafer Johnson, Toomey false started in the foot race and Eric Segal insisted he be whipped as was the Ancient Greek penalty for a false start. The punishment was administered twice because of a bad take, but Toomey refused to be whipped a third time when the sound was bad on take two.

The author credits the Swedes with the invention of the decathlon in 1911 when they established the order of the ten events, divided the competition into two days, and established scoring tables based originally on the 1908 Olympic records. Hence the subsequent summaries of decathlon competition by decade began with 1911 and proceed to the present. Those flatly written summaries and biographical sketches give little insight into the decathlon other than that provided by extensive minutia. Granted the stories of Jim Thorpe's Stockholm triumph and Bob Mathias' road from the high school track at Tulare, California to Olympic gold in 1948 and again in 1952 bear repeating. Zarnowski adds little new information to the biographies of well-known decathlon athletes however, and the information about the lesser-known performers, such as Sweden's Helge Lovland (the oldest Olympic champion), Milt Campbell (1956 gold medalist from the U.S.), and Vasilij Kuznyetsov (who represented Russia in three Olympic games), lacked selectivity. Moreover, fairly similar information appears in the decade summary, the biographical sketch, and again in the Olympic summary.

The highlights of the book were the little bits of trivia found in the sidebars scattered throughout the book. Of special interest were small pieces on Dr. Tom Waddell, a 1968 Olympian and founder of the Gay Olympic Games; General George S. Patton, a modern pentathlon athlete; "Hollywood Decathletes;" and "NFL Olympians."

Zarnowski did present effectively the history of the scoring tables and the organic nature of decathlon scoring. Apparently there have been six different decathlon scoring tables starting with the 1912A version and progressing

through 1985. The point values for times or distances in each of the single events are based on 1,000 points being awarded for a performance equal to the Olympic record with a scale for higher and lower scores. In most places in the book the athlete's winning score at the time is given and the score of that same performance on modern tables is given in parenthesis.

The author attempts to do two things with this book. First, he tries to prove that decathlon performers are the best athletes in the world. He provides no evidence, however, that those athletes as a group are particularly skillful in other sports or that they excel in individual track and field events. Instead Zarnowski inadvertently makes a case for decathlon participants as good generalists rather than as exceptional athletes. His second objective was to translate the "heritage and mystique surrounding the decathlon" to the general reading public. *The Decathlon* represents a tremendous amount of work in compiling information and statistics and is valuable in that sense. However, facts and statistics with little of the why and how are not only hard to comprehend, they fail to convey the color and spirit of this long-honored event.

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