

2012 Athletics Facts

ABAC Fact File 11.

Under 17 athletes – Competition and Retention

Introduction. There are widespread opportunities for under 17 year old athletes to compete during the track and field season. Inter school competitions, national school cup and championship events, county and area championships plus Young Athlete (YAL) and Junior Athlete (JAL) Leagues all combine to offer a bewildering choice for the developing athlete.

Despite all these opportunities the drop-out rate for 17 year olds is disturbingly high. UKA Ltd have set up a working party to address this problem and have concluded that over competition is the main cause for declining participation as athletes get older. Their solution is to restrict competition opportunities for under 17 athletes. A discussion document titled "Youth Development League 2013" proposes to limit competition opportunities for younger athletes. The main proposal is to re-structure the YAL and JAL so that athletes cannot compete in both leagues. Not surprisingly clubs are resistant to the new proposals as some teams will see their athlete numbers reduced making many teams unviable.

It has been noted that many luminaries such as Lord Coe (who writes in the forward of the UKA Ltd discussion document) have accepted the premise that change is needed "because of over competition by Under 17 athletes". But this assertion has not been supported by any hard evidence.

There is a conception that once again our sport's NGB is making policy on the hoof without first carrying out proper research.

The Facts on retention. To find out what is really happening ABAC has commissioned leading athletics statistician Rob Whittingham to analyse the facts. For this study the drop-out rate for athletes who were under 15, under 17 and under 20 in 2007 have been calculated by their presence of any performance in 2011. At the same time the number of performances by each athlete in 2007 have been identified so that a correlation between competition activity and subsequent drop-out rates over a four year period could be statistically determined.

Here are the key findings for under15, under17, and under 20 year old athletes

Under 15 athletes.

In 2007 there were 11064 U15 athletes known with at least one recorded performance. Of these only 2053 were still competing in 2011. **An overall retention rate of 18.5%**

The retention rate for athletes competing up to 15 times in 2007 was just 13%, but the retention rate increased the more times an athlete had competed. Those with 30 performances had a retention rate of 66% **while 81% of those with more than 50 performances were still competing four years later.**

Under 17 athletes

In 2007 there were 8385 U17 athletes known with at least one recorded performance. Of these only 1452 were still competing in 2011. **An overall retention rate of 17%.**

The retention rate for athletes competing up to 15 times in 2007 was just 10% .Those with 30 performances had a retention rate of 57% **while 75% of those with more than 50 performances were still competing four years later.**

Under 20 athletes

In 2007 there were 4239 U20 athletes known with at least one recorded performance. Of these only 1207 were still competing in 2011. **An overall retention rate of 28.5%.**

The retention rate for athletes competing up to 15 times in 2007 was just 21%. Those with 30 performances had a retention rate of 68% **while 77% of those with more than 50 performances were still competing four years later.**

Summary

The evidence could not be clearer - the more a young athlete competes the more likely they are to be retained in the sport.

The most prolific competitors are 4 times more likely to stay in the sport than infrequent competitors.

This analysis throws into doubt the UKA's proposals for restricting competition opportunities for under 17 athletes.

Discouraging Under 17 athletes from competing, by removing opportunities, will have a disastrous affect on the sport and will almost certainly lead to irreparable damage.

Footnote

The increasingly high cost of travel combined with a reducing number of officials will inevitably entail a rationalization of all athletic leagues in the UK.

While changes will be required to leagues, these must be in the best interests of all athletes particularly young ones.

Sport England's proposed four year plan for 2013-2017 concentrates on retaining young sports people. There is much discussion yet to come on what role clubs will play in this new plan. At present £400 million is earmarked to go directly to schools with no remit for clubs. More to follow on this.