


# Athletics in Iceland: Can the “Third Surge” last?

 © by IAAF  
23:1; 41-64, 2008

By Bill Glad and Jonas Egilsson

## ABSTRACT

*Although there has never been as many young, promising and motivated athletes as can be found in Iceland today, there are important issues for the sport to address if its current success is to continue. The authors' aims are to describe athletics in Iceland and provide insight and ideas for others interested in the development of the sport. They do this by presenting a brief history of Icelandic athletics and auditing dimensions of seven key drivers of development: 1) Structure, Management and Administration, 2) Facilities, 3) Competition Opportunities, 4) Coaching, 5) Officiating, 6) Scientific & Medical Support, 7) Athletics Culture. Drawing on interviews with leaders and observers of the sport and official documents for data, they give a detailed description of the present situation and the factors shaping it. They conclude that the leaders of Icelandic athletics have reasonable strategies and there is a case for optimism about the future.*

## Introduction

**A**thletics in Iceland is currently enjoying what some observers have called the “Third Surge”. Bringing to mind two previous golden ages of sustained success in the mid and late twentieth century, it is a period in which the trend in participation has been upwards, the country's athletes have rewritten the national record books,

## AUTHORS

*Bill Glad is the Member Services Manager of European Athletics and a Consultant Editor of New Studies in Athletics.*

*Jonas Egilsson was the president of the Icelandic athletics federation, the Frjal-sithrottasamband Islands (FRI), from 1997 to 2006 and a member of the European Athletics Council from 2003 to 2007. He currently works as a consultant in the areas sport, education and tourism.*

there have been notable achievements on the international level and the national athletic federation has had success in the area of marketing. However, the sport's position remains delicate, poised on a knife-edge between continued growth and decline. Although there has never been as many young, promising and motivated athletes as there are in Iceland today, there are important and sometimes difficult issues for the sport's leadership to address.

In both cases, the earlier surges fizzled out and were followed by times in which Icelandic athletics stagnated and lost much of its popularity and relevance to society. The big question now is: will the pattern of rise and fall continue or will the sport be able to capitalise on the current momentum and develop further?

Although only time will provide the definitive answer, indications can be found in the responses to the interrelated challenges that

are faced by athletics leaders in most countries, including:

- Strengthening the sport's structures so they can adapt to a changing environment and deliver services of the quality that athletes, volunteers, stakeholders and the public expect;
- Competing successfully for new participants with other sports and an ever-growing range of leisure activities in a society that is becoming increasingly urbanised, affluent and influenced by the media;
- Nurturing talented athletes and providing the coaching and competition opportunities they need to develop and deliver world-class performances;
- Delivering high quality events and programmes that attract attention, make the sport "sellable" and bring the recognition required for it to play a significant role in society;
- Building a resource base that is sufficient and sustainable.

Clues to how these challenges might be met in a particular country can be found through analysis of the context in which the sport operates there – its history current circumstances, and its structures, the measures that have been implemented in the past and the strategies for the future.

Our aim in this case study is to present a description of athletics in Iceland and the factors that are shaping the current situation in the hope that it provides insight and ideas for athletic federations and others with an interest in the development of the sport. We have analysed seven areas seen as important to development<sup>1</sup>, identified key dimensions within each area, and found one or more indicators for each dimension. This audit is based mainly on interviews conducted with the national athletic federation's leaders and other observers of the sport in February 2008. It also draws on information from various Icelandic publications and data from official documents produced by the federation and the country's combined national sport confederation/national Olympic committee.

## Iceland Facts

*Area:* 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>

*Population (2006):* 312,000 (3.0 per km<sup>2</sup>)

*Capital:* Reykjavik – pop.: 117,700

*GDP per capita (2007):* US\$ 54,427

*Government:* Republic from 17 June 1944, Independent from 1 December 1918

*Source:* [www.iceland.is](http://www.iceland.is)

## History<sup>2</sup>

### *1907-1958: The early years and the Golden Age*

With evidence of training activities from as early as 1907, the history of athletics in Iceland stretches back at least 100 years. The country's first Olympian, Jon Halldorsson, competed in the 100 metres at the 1912 Games in Stockholm representing Denmark, which controlled the country at the time<sup>3</sup>. Iceland's inaugural national athletics championships were staged in 1927 and for decades afterwards the event was one of the country's main sporting and entertainment fixtures each summer.

Although Iceland was relatively primitive in economic terms when full independence was achieved in 1944, the only real disadvantage its athletes had compared to their international counterparts was the island nation's isolated position in the middle of the north Atlantic, three hours flight time from the nearest neighbouring country. Its grass fields and the cinder track in the national stadium were comparable to the facilities in Europe and as few, if any, countries were providing state support to athletes at the time, it did not matter that such support was undreamt of in Iceland. Importantly, as an individual sport in a small nation (the population at the time was less than 130,000), athletics was better positioned than team games to move beyond being a purely domestic sport and feed Icelandic society's strong feelings of nationalism by providing international success.

## All-time great Vilhjalmur Einarsson



With his second round jump of 16.26m, Einarsson bettered the Olympic record and found himself the surprise leader in triple jump at the 1956 Games in Melbourne. Although defending champion and world record holder Adhemar daSilva (BRA) struck back two rounds later with a winning 16.35m jump, Einarsson ended up with the silver medal, which to this day is Iceland's best-ever performance at world level. He was named Iceland's Sportsman of the Year five times, more than anyone in the 52 years of the award, and his 16.70m mark set in 1960 stands as the oldest national record at senior level. His son, Einar Vilhjalmsson, is the national record holder in the javelin at 86.60m, placed 6th at the 1984 Olympic Games and was himself Sportsman of the Year three times in the 1980s.

The first golden age of Icelandic athletics began with Gunnar Huseby winning the shot put gold medal and five of his countrymen making it to the finals of their events at the 1946 European Championships in Oslo. This put Iceland on the international athletics map for the first time.

In the spring of 1949, future Olympic medallist Emanuel MacDonald Bailey (GBR) trained in Iceland for a few months, during which time he helped instruct the country's young sprinters before equalling the 100m world record at a meeting in Reykjavik<sup>4</sup>. The next year, Olympic decathlon champion Bob Mathias (USA) also helped promote the sport in the country by running a 100m race against the best local athletes during a stopover en route from California to competitions in Europe. Later in 1950, Iceland defeated former rulers Denmark in a national men's team match in Reykjavik, despite having less than one thirtieth the population to draw on. National pride was further boosted with two golds and a silver from the European Championships in Brussels. It

reached a high point in 1951 when the men's team took top honours in a three-way match against Denmark and Norway at the Bislet stadium in Oslo, a victory still considered the greatest in Icelandic athletics history and by some as the greatest of any Icelandic sport team.

However, from an individual performance point of view, the peak of the golden age came five years later when Vilhjamur Einarsson brought home the country's first Olympic medal, a silver, from the 1956 Games in Melbourne (see above).

### *1959-1970*

From the late 1950s through to the 1960s, the focus of Icelandic society turned to building the country's infrastructure and the role of sport diminished. Icelandic athletics fell noticeably behind the rest of Europe in the areas of coaching expertise and facilities and, for financial reasons international competition opportunities were more limited than they had been. There were still some good performances, particularly in the jumping events, but

without a system of financial support most young male athletes were forced to retire before realising their full potential in order to study or take up a professional career.

Under these circumstances, athletics went through an extended period of low profile while football and other sports were gaining popularity. Of particular note was the fact that the national championships were no longer a "must see" event for the county's sports fans.

### *The Second Surge*

The seeds of the sport's revival were sown in the late 1960s: Orn Eidsson was elected as president of the federation in 1968, a post he held until 1984, and a year earlier the highly regarded coach Gudmundur Thorarinsson returned from living in Sweden, bringing with him new coaching techniques and ideas that influenced many others across the country. Eidsson's policy of creating more international competition opportunities, including an increase in the number of national team matches<sup>5</sup>, provided increased motivation for athletes to stay in the sport and develop their abilities. This was complemented by the spread of up-to-date coaching knowledge initiated by Thorarinsson, whose club in Reykjavik won the National Team Cup competition 17 times in 18 years and produced a long list of national champions and international performers. Importantly, many of his athletes went on to become coaches themselves, as well club leaders and federation officials.

In 1978 the installation of the country's first synthetic track gave the top athletes the opportunity to train and perform in conditions equal to those enjoyed by their competitors abroad.

Although the federation struggled to balance its accounts throughout the 1980s, the general financial conditions for the sport in the country began to improve. The National Olympic Committee was able to support training camps before the Games. Promising

young talents were increasingly being offered opportunities to study abroad (at the end of the decade half the national team was at university in the USA), which helped them develop their abilities even if it had the downside of drawing some of the life out of the domestic athletics scene. And top athletes could occasionally receive appearance fees and earn prize money on the European circuit and thus some could afford longer careers.

The Second Surge can be said to have run from 1977 until the early 1990s. During this period the national teams were probably the best in terms of all-round performances that the country had ever had and the national championships again attracted big crowds. Importantly, coverage of the sport in both the print and broadcast media was consistently strong. In addition to carrying extensive programming from the major international championships and news coverage of international one-day meetings in Europe, the state owned television network, Ríkisutvarpid (RUV), regularly broadcast the national championships and other domestic events, and it even paid the federation for the rights to do so.

The nation's particular strength during the Second Surge was in the throwing events. Amongst the most well known Icelandic athletes on the international circuit during this period were shot putter Hreinn Halldorsson, the 1977 European indoor champion, javelin throwers Einar Vilhjalms-son and Sigurdur Einarsson, four-time Olympic discus thrower Vesteinn Hafsteinsson and two-time Olympic high jumper Thordis Gisladdottir.

### *The 1990s*

In the early 1990s a number of factors worked to weaken public interest in athletics in Iceland: 1) the country was becoming increasingly affluent and, as in all advanced economies, young people were generally less physically active; 2) decades of population shift from the countryside, where

## All-time great Vala Flosadottir



An all-round talent, Flosadottir had a relatively short but extremely successful career in the pole vault. She became a national star as much for her personality and her distinctive hairstyle (copied by hundreds of young girls around the country) as her performances. A product of the national federation’s young athlete support programme in the mid-1990s, she set five world junior and two world indoor records, won the inaugural European indoor championship in 1996 and placed second at the 1999 IAAF World Indoor Championships. But her greatest performance came at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, where she jumped a lifetime best of 4.50m to take the bronze medal. Even after her retirement in 2002, Flosadottir has remained one of the country’s top role models for young people.

athletics had traditionally been strong, to urban areas, where opportunities in many other sports and activities were available, altered both the society and the relative popularity of various activities; 3) the increased importance of football and other sports on television.

These factors coincided with a time when Icelandic athletes were not enjoying a high number of world-class performances, which might have allowed the sport to maintain the profile built up during the Second Surge. By the middle of the decade, RUV had cut its broadcasts of domestic athletic events and greatly reduced news coverage of international one-day meetings. Although no survey data from this period is available, it is logical that public awareness and perception of athletics would have gone down with the decrease in television coverage.

Although the mid-90s can be considered a time of stagnation for the sport, it was also a time when the foundations for the future were being laid. In 1994 the federation initiated a series of programmes that have proved suc-

cessful in retaining and developing talented young athletes, particularly in the combined events (see accompanying article on page 56). These were complemented when new methods were introduced for teaching athletics in primary schools. Around the same time, local authorities began building synthetic tracks: six were installed in the 1990s, a further five have been built since 2000, and in 2005 the first indoor 200m track was opened in Reykjavik’s *Laugardalshöll*.

The positive effects of these initiatives on the domestic athletics scene are still being felt. By the late 1990s there was a reversal of the drop in participation – there is now a long-term trend of increases in the number of young athletes registered with the sport – and clubs with access to the modern facilities have been strengthened.

### *The Third Surge*

In the later part of the 1990s, things also began to pick up on the high-performance level. The central government started to provide financial support for elite athletes, distributed through the newly merged national sport

*Table 1: Highlights of participation by Iceland's senior athletes in major international athletics events 2000-2007 (nh=no height, nq=did not qualify for the final)*

Event	Best Icelandic Performances
Olympic Games	2000: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gudrun Arnardottir – 400mh, 54.63, 7th</li> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.00m, 11th</li> <li>• Vala Flosadottir – PV, 4.50m (NR), bronze medal</li> </ul> 2004: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.55m, 5th</li> </ul>
World Championships	2001: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.55m, 6th</li> </ul> 2003: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, nh (4.35m in qualification)</li> </ul> 2005: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.15m, nq</li> </ul> 2007: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.35m, nq</li> </ul>
World Indoor Championships	2001: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Arnar Magnusson – Hep, 6233 pts, silver medal</li> </ul> 2003: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Arnar Magnusson – Hep, 6185 pts, 4th</li> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.30m, nq</li> </ul> 2004: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Arnar Magnusson – Hep, 5993 pts, 7th</li> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.20m, nq</li> </ul> 2006: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bjorn Margeirsson – 1500m, 3:49.22, nq</li> </ul>
European Championships	2002: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Arnar Magnusson – Dec, 8234 pts, 4th</li> <li>• Thorey Edda Elisdottir – PV, 4.20m, 15th</li> <li>• Vala Flosadottir – PV, 4.00m, nq</li> </ul> 2006: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asdis Hjalmsdottir – JT, 53.33m, nq</li> <li>• Bjorn Margeirsson – 800m, 1:49.91, nq</li> </ul>
European Indoor Championships	2000: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vala Flosadottir – PV, 4.30m, 4th</li> </ul> 2002: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Arnar Magnusson – Hep, 5966 pts, 4th</li> </ul> 2005: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gauti Johannesson, 1500m, 3:50.67, nq</li> </ul> 2007: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bjorn Margeirsson – 1500m, 3:46.25, nq</li> <li>• Kari Steinn Karlsson – 3000m, 8:31.91, nq</li> <li>• Sveinn Elias Eliasson – 400m 49.15, nq</li> <li>• Odinn Thorsteinsson – SP, 17.94, nq</li> </ul>

association and national Olympic committee (ISI), and there were some highly visible international-level results by Jon Arnar Magnusson in the combined events, Gudrun Arnardottir in the 400m hurdles, and Vala Flosadottir and Thorey Edda Elisdottir in the pole vault.

The kick-start to the Third Surge was surely women's pole vault at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney where Flosadottir (see box) took the bronze medal. That competition raised awareness of the sport in Iceland to perhaps its highest point ever. During the final, the

*Table 2: Icelandic national records (all age groups) 2000 – 2007 (Source: FRI)*

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Men Outdoor	16	11	17	26	24	41	27	43	205
Men Indoor	24	10	12	15	29	34	44	60	228
Women Outdoor	19	42	21	22	24	51	20	31	230
Women Indoor	14	22	24	26	23	24	46	37	216
	73	85	74	89	100	150	137	171	879

country practically came to a halt; it is estimated that more than 85% of the population was watching the television broadcast of the event<sup>6</sup>. Both Flosadottir and Arnardottir, who placed 7th in Sydney, retired relatively young but Mangnussón and Elisdottir continued to perform well at the highest level for a number of years (see Table 1).

In an attempt to build on the success of Sydney, the federation moved to strengthen its share of the television market with an innovative deal in 2001 to purchase the rights to the IAAF's Golden League series and sublicense them to RUV in exchange for increased coverage of domestic athletics events. Within four years the project was self-funding and the presence of athletics on television, though still small compared to football, was stabilised and guaranteed<sup>7</sup>.

A notable characteristic of the Third Surge, and a hopeful indicator for the future, has been a constant improvement in the general level of athletic performance, especially by the country's younger athletes. The statisticians have been kept busy over the last eight years recording a total of 879 national records across the range of disciplines in 28 categories: indoors and outdoors, men and women, and seven age groups. In all, 134 individuals and 65 relay teams have set national records since 2000. Twenty-three individuals have set 10 or more records and one athlete, 18-year-old Sveinn Elías Eliasson, has set more than 70 marks in four age groups<sup>8</sup>. The number of records is clear proof that a significant segment of the country's youth is interested in the sport and motivated

*Table 3: Icelandic national records 2000-2007 - percentage by age group (Source: FRI)*

Age Group	% of Records Set
Women 15<	25.4
Women 16>	20.9
Women 23>	6.8
Men 15<	21.0
Men 16>	22.1
Men 23>	3.8
Total	100.0

enough to make the sacrifices necessary to excel. Tables 2 and 3 give breakdowns, year-by-year and by age group, of the national records set.

A second notable characteristic of the Third Surge has been the increasing number of road races around the country, many staged by private organisers, and the growth in the number of unattached runners, especially in the 30 years and over age categories. Between 2005 and 2006 the number of unattached road race participants went from 3,543 to 9,614<sup>9</sup>.

### *Looking to the Future*

Although Iceland's top-level athletes have done their part over the last decade, the general participation levels are up, and the performances of the coming generation of elite performers is encouraging, the environment remains challenging for the sport's leaders who are trying to maintain the momentum of the Third Surge.



The current situation is characterised by athletics' continuing difficulty in holding public attention, particularly among young people not directly involved in the sport. If established stars like Elisdottir and the recently retired Magnusson are not quickly replaced by a new generation capable of success on the international level, it will be hard to maintain the present arrangements with the state broadcaster RUV or the level of coverage for the sport in the media in general. This, in turn, will impact the sport's ability to build awareness among fans and capitalise on the existing foundation of strong youth and school programmes and local facility provision.

It will also be important for the sport to optimise the relationship with the growing running and masters movements. The recent increase in road race participation is certainly welcome but the fact that, like in many other countries, there are more individual road-runners than track and field athletes highlights the question of how the clubs and the formal sports movement can remain relevant and provide services to these groups in the future.

## Structure, Management and Administration

### Overall structure

The sports movement in Iceland is organised under the umbrella of the combined National Sport Association/National Olympic Committee, the ISI. The central government funds sport through the ISI, which is responsible for distributing the money to elite performers and to the national sports federations.

The basic units of the movement are clubs, which are affiliated to one of 27 regional associations and have sections for the different sports, such as athletics or football. There are over 350 clubs in the country and 513 sections. The total number of registered members in 2006 was about 118,000 or 38% of the population<sup>10</sup>.

Athletics, represented by the national athletic federation, the *Frialsithrottasamband*

## National Athletic Federation Facts



*Official Name:*

*Frialsithrottasamband  
Islands*

*Area Group:* Europe

*Foundation:* 1947

*President:* Asdis Halla Bragadottir

*Membership:* 24 regional associations, which represent 104 athletic clubs and athletic sections of multi-sport clubs

*Islands* (FRI), is one of 27 national federations affiliated to the ISI. Although it is one of the main sports in the country and the Olympic movement (the only sport represented in each Olympic Games since 1948), it is not particularly powerful within the ISI as it currently has only five (out of 240) delegates in the ISI congress and no representation on the council.

### Federation structure

The congress of the FRI comprises the 24 regional associations, which represent the clubs. The congress elects a council of five members and five reserve members<sup>11</sup> who carry out specific duties in areas such as technical and medical. The council appoints the following committees:

- Statistical
- Development
- Finance
- Masters
- Technical
- Sports for All
- Team selection

There is also an Athletes Commission, which is elected by the athletes every second year during the national outdoor championships.

### Finance

The FRI, like other federations in Iceland with the exception of football, is financially dependent on the ISI, although it has some independent income and a large degree of



Table 4: 2007 development audit overview - federation management and administration

Dimension	Indicators
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congress: biennial (next in 2010)</li> <li>• Council: 5 members (+ 5 reserve members)</li> <li>• Committees: 7 - 20% of committee members are female (2007 figures)</li> </ul>
Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expenditure (2006): US\$ 420,000</li> <li>• Income (2006): US\$ 428,000 (Sources ISI 55%, sponsors 13%, other 32%)</li> </ul>
Head Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 80m<sup>2</sup> rented from ISI</li> </ul>
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One permanent staff member (General Secretary)</li> <li>• Part-time Youth Team Manager</li> <li>• Other staff is hired on temporarily basis according to needs</li> <li>• Most work done by volunteers</li> </ul>

independence in how it manages the sport. In 2006 it had an expenditure budget of approximately US\$ 420,000 and income of about \$ 428,000, of which 55% came from the ISI. That year it also had four sponsors – international pharmaceutical company *Actavis*, milk producer *Nordurmjolk*, credit card company *VISA* and vegetable company *Islenski Graenmenti* - which provided about 13% of its total income. Other income in 2006 included grants from the IAAF and European Athletics (14%) and fund raising events (3%) with the rest from non-specified sources<sup>12</sup>.

### Staff

The General Secretary is the FRI's only full-time employee. He is based in an office rented from the ISI at Reykjavik's *Laugardalur* Sport Centre, where most of the other sports federations also have their offices. His duties include acting as the National Coach/Performance Director. There is also a part-time Youth Team Manager. Additional personnel can be hired on a temporary or project basis. Specific tasks in other areas, such as fund raising, public relations, staging events, development and education, are carried out by council members or other volunteers<sup>13</sup>.

### Key issues and strategy for development

Finance is perennially a key issue and it impacts most areas of the sport. In the late 1990s, the FRI was on the verge of bankruptcy. It was forced to make drastic cutbacks in its

activities, including cancellation of participation in the 1998 European Cup, and to implement very tight financial controls, which it has maintained until the present. During this period it has tried to protect the resources required for its youth programmes and minimise expenses. Two aspects of this approach were a reduction of the permanent staff and a policy to participate in international competitions with only the minimum number of athletes.

Not surprisingly, the FRI's strategy is to increase its resource base, mainly by increasing the attractiveness of events and programmes to funding partners. Since 2006, it has added investment company *Baugur Group* and gas and petroleum retailer *Atlantsolia*, as main sponsors. It has also created partnerships with a bank *Landsbanki Islands* and the airline *Iceland Express* for youth projects. A key objective is to professionalise the administration of the sport as it becomes possible to hire more staff, including a full-time national coach to help serve the needs of athletes and coaches and a communications director focused on raising the profile of the sport and its events<sup>14</sup>.

### Facilities

#### Synthetic tracks

At present there are 12 synthetic surface tracks in Iceland, with one planned in 2008

Table 5: Outdoor synthetic tracks in Iceland (Source: FRI)

LOCATION/ MUNICIPALITY	400m LANES	HOME-STRAIGHT LANES	YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION
Mosfellsbaer	6	8	1990
Reykjavik	8	8	1992
Kopavogur	6	6	1994
Laugarvatn	4	6	1994
Hafnarfjordur	6	6	1996
Borgarbyggd	6	6	1997
Egilsstadir	6	6	2001
Skagafjordur	6	8	2004
Vik	4	4	2005
Laugar	4	6	2006
Hofn	4	6	2007
Thorlakshofn	4	6	2008

(see Table 5). This gives a current overall provision of about four tracks per 100,000 inhabitants. Note that only the Reykjavik track has the full eight lanes<sup>15</sup>.

The motivation for building many of the new tracks is closely linked to the Icelandic Youth

Association's event known as the *Landsmot*, a national multi-sport games staged every three or four years, or its junior version, the *Unglingalandsmot* staged every year, in both of which athletics is a central and popular element. Since 1990, the local authorities of all the hosting towns have installed new tracks



Figure 1: Distribution of synthetic tracks in Iceland (Source: FRI)

Table 6: 2007 development audit overview - facilities

Dimension	Indicators
Synthetic Tracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12, with one planned for 2008</li> <li>• 4 400m tracks per 100,000 population</li> </ul>
Indoor Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One 200m track with a second planned for 2008</li> <li>• Three multi-purpose indoor halls for training</li> </ul>

with support from the central government. This initiative has been very important for athletics, particularly in the rural areas where it has traditionally enjoyed much support, as the legacy of the facilities has strengthened local clubs.

#### *Indoor facilities*

In January 2005, the first indoor 200m athletic track was opened in Reykjavik's *Laugardalshöll*. This has boosted the indoor competition system and proved valuable as a training facility. Its level of use has been beyond official expectations<sup>16</sup> and now the authorities in neighbouring Hafnarfjörður, the home of Iceland's most successful club over the last few years, have decided to build their own indoor four-lane 200m oval and eight 60m lanes. This will be available from the autumn of 2008. Training and competition also takes place during the winter in three multi-purpose indoor halls.

Schools generally do not have outdoor sports facilities other than access to an open field on which some athletics activities could take place. However, the majority have small indoor gyms, designed for handball, which they use during most of the year for PE lessons. Although not ideal for more traditional athletics, these are being used successfully in many places for modified athletics activities such as the Fun in Athletics programme.

#### *Key issues and strategy for development*

The athletics facility situation in Iceland is much improved over the last two decades and can now be said to be a contributing factor to both the high participation level and general strength of the sport. Looking to the future, there are two interrelated

issues that must be managed carefully. The first will be the question of where to place any facilities that might be built in order to support strong clubs and best serve the interests of the sport. The second is the question of how to ensure that once a local authority makes the investment involved in constructing a new track it continues to find the funds to support the programmes and the human resources needed to keep the facility alive with activity.

The FRI plans to continue its lobbying efforts on both these issues as well as its policy of distributing its various national championships so that all towns supporting the sport with facilities have chances to realise an exposure and public relation return on their investment<sup>17</sup>.

### **Competition Opportunities**

#### *International*

The FRI's main aim in the sphere of international competition is to be as competitive as it is possible for a small nation to be. Its first objective is to send athletes who have achieved the qualification standards to the major indoor and outdoor championships at both the senior and junior levels<sup>18</sup>. In the last eight years there have been one or more Icelandic participants in all editions of the Olympic Games, IAAF World Championships in Athletics and European Athletics Championships, and slightly larger teams at the junior championships.

The second objective is to field a team at the annual European Cup. The philosophy behind this is that selection provides many

## The FRI Youth Programme

As the FRI president from 1968 to 1984, Orn Eidsson pressed for more international competition opportunities to give Icelandic athletes greater motivation and opportunities to gain experience. In the 1990s, he began lobbying for a system to support young athletes at home. His aim was to fight the problem of drop out by providing services that would encourage talented youngsters to stay in the sport and realise their potential.

The FRI Youth Programme was initiated a few years later and although there has been a number of projects with different emphasis and names within its scope, such as FRI 2000, The Athens Group, FRI Multi-Event Group 2012, it has been a consistent and successful element of the federation's work for over a decade. Even when the FRI struggled with financial problems in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the youth programme was seen as the top priority for protection from budget cuts.

Athletes taking part in the programme are provided with a list of services and their progress is carefully monitored. They receive regular invitations for them and their club coaches to training camps, which include education measures about training and the sport in general. Other services include nutritional advice, mental training techniques, physical testing, physiotherapy and massage, and specialist medical assistance when required.

National Youth Team Manager Frida Run Thordardottir, a professional nutritionist who has overseen the programme since 2004, explains that one of its main strengths is that "it is highly visible and shows the athletes and their coaches there is someone out there who cares and is willing to provide support."

The programme's basic group normally includes athletes between 15 to 23 years of age. The performance standards for joining

have varied according to the focus of the projects but the numbers involved have grown gradually from about 70 in the early years of the programme to more than 130 in 2006.

Most of the country's top stars, including Olympic pole vault bronze medallist Vala Flosadottir and world indoor champion heptathlon silver medallist Jon Arnar Magnusson, have developed through the programme. And almost all of the current crop of young national record breakers is receiving support through it.

Thordardottir and the FRI have been active in obtaining outside support for the programme, including grants from the European Athletics Support Programme (EASP) from 2004 to 2006 and Olympic Solidarity. The recognition by the EASP also helped the FRI attract additional funding from outside the sports movement. Currently there is a funding application with the ISI and Thordardottir is working closely with the now retired Magnusson, who has shown his continuing interest in the programme by using his contacts to arrange international competitions.

In recent years, the focus of the programme has been on the combined events where progress has been made on the plan to lay the foundation for success in 2012. Thordardottir, who has shared information on the project with leaders of athletics federations from other small nations in Europe, reports that there has been an increase in the participation at the national combined events championships, more combined event athletes meeting the qualification standards for IAAF, European and Nordic championships, and greater interest from within the sport and the media in the combined events.

"I am very confident that the project is to thank for these positive developments," she says.

athletes with international experience as well as a realistic target and motivation, which in turn stimulates domestic competition. It is notable that the country's star international athletes almost always compete for the team in this event. With the exception of 1998, both men's and women's teams have been entered every year. Despite the fact that the FRI can afford to send only a minimum number of competitors, and thus many athletes must do two or more events, the teams usually score a respectable number of points for one of the smallest countries in the competition. In 2004 the Cup's 2nd League Group A match was staged in Reykjavik. With the hosts able to field full teams, the Icelandic men's team placed fifth (out of eight) and the women placed seventh.

Other competitions with a special place are the European Cup Combined Events, the biennial Games of the Small States of Europe and the Nordic Championships. Although the Small States Games are normally held early in the season, and thus are not central to the planning of the very top athletes, they are a priority for the ISI and a chance for younger competitors to gain experience. Iceland has consistently had one of the strongest athletics teams in the event and in the last four editions it has brought home between 14 and 19 medals. Teams of five to fifteen athletes are normally sent to the Nordic Championships for U20 and combined events (every year) and for U23 (every second year). The European Cup Combined Events has also been a focus, at least partially because of the popularity of decathlete Jon Arnar Magnusson. Reykjavik has twice hosted the Second League match.

### *Domestic*

In 2007 there were 114 outdoor and 62 indoor competitions, including age group, masters and road race events. These include the national championships for the various disciplines and age groups – 12 outdoors and six indoors. There are also local "championships" and nearly 100 open or "all comers"

meetings per year staged by the clubs. The annual *Unglingalandsmót* multi-sport youth competition for 11-18 year olds and the *Landsmót* for senior competitors, held every three to four years, also include athletics disciplines. Altogether, there were more than 34,000 entries in the country's athletics events<sup>19</sup>.

Due mostly to climatic conditions, the main season for track and field has traditionally been limited to about three months of the year. It starts in late May and ends around the middle of August. The biggest domestic competitions are the national track and field championships for the various age groups, usually held towards the end of July, and the Team Cup competition, which marks the formal end of the main season. However, with the increase in the number of synthetic surface tracks around the country and particularly the new 200m indoor track in Reykjavik, track and field is becoming a more year-around-sport.

Although there are both senior and junior national championships for cross country, road running is far more popular and the road race programme is very strong. Generally, independent organisers stage the road races, often with the assistance of clubs and local authorities. The largest is the Reykjavik Marathon, which incorporates a half-marathon, 10km and 3km. Established in 1984, when it drew 214 entries, it attracted more than 9,400 participants in 2007<sup>20</sup>.

### *Key issues and strategy for development*

With regard to international competition, the availability of funding affects the FRI's ability to send athletes to championships and other meetings for experience. This is a particular challenge because of the high travel costs due to Iceland's remote geographic position. There is also an internal debate as to whether participation in the World Youth and Junior Championships has a positive effect on the development of competitive senior athletes.

*Table 7: 2007 development audit overview - competition opportunities*

Dimension	Indicators
International Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have taken part in all recent Olympic Games, World Championships and European Championships</li> <li>• Strong support for European Cup</li> <li>• Small teams to other international championships and games</li> </ul>
Domestic Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 175 competitions across the range of disciplines</li> <li>• Strong road race programme</li> <li>• Calendar set a conference held in October each year</li> </ul>

Domestically, there are a number of issues related to calendar coordination and the need to ensure that meetings are attractive enough to draw public and media attention. Some issues have long histories and touch on positions that are important to certain parties. For example, many clubs resist proposals to change the date of the Team Cup in order to extend the season because their top athletes, who need to leave for their studies in the USA in mid-August, would not be available. Then there is the issue of working with the independent road race organisers, who sometimes do not see the value of co-operation with the rest of the sport and plan their calendar of events independently.

The FRI has found through experience that there are not many easy solutions. Its only option in most cases is to simply identify the issues and try to work with the various stakeholders to build consensus and find answers.

## Coaching

### *Organisation and structures*

In general, coaching in athletics is a volunteer pursuit in Iceland with little organisation or official support available. There are no full-time professional athletics coaches and only a few coaches are employed on a low-paid, part-time basis, sometimes by more than one club. However, their work is likely to include general administrative tasks for the club(s) as well as work with athletes<sup>21</sup>.

In the past the FRI employed a national coach, but the position was eliminated due to budget cuts in 2002 and has not been reinstated. Since then, the General Secretary has looked after most basic administrative duties of the position. The FRI also had a coaching committee in the past but, due to lack of volunteers willing to serve, no appointments are currently made.

There is an independent coaches association, but it too is largely inactive.

### *Education and updating*

There is no formal system for the education or qualification of athletics coaches in Iceland. Most current coaches were athletes themselves and or have a formal background in physical education, where it is possible to emphasise athletics. It is normal for coaches to be self-taught and self-guided in their updating. When its finances allow, the FRI supports the clubs by subsidising the travel of one or more of their coaches to educational measures abroad, but this support has not been systematic and the FRI has not been in a position to stage any coach education measures of its own within the country.

### *Qualified coaches*

As there is no national system of coach education there is no official register of qualified coaches and the few clubs that employ coaches do not require specific qualifications. Therefore, it is not possible to say with accuracy how many people are actually coaching in athletics or do more than speculate on the services they might require from the sport. It is

Table 8: 2007 development audit overview – coaching

Dimension	Indicators
Organisation & Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No professional coaches</li> <li>The federation's coaching committee is inactive</li> <li>The national coaches association is inactive</li> </ul>
Education & Updating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No national system of education and qualification</li> <li>Most coaches are PE teachers and or former athletes themselves</li> <li>Ad hoc access to foreign seminars and conferences</li> </ul>
Qualified Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No register of coaches</li> <li>Approximately 40 individuals actively coaching</li> </ul>

estimated that currently about 40 individuals are actively coaching one or more athletes<sup>22</sup>.

### *Key issues and strategy for development*

It is clear that the lack of qualified coaches and technical expertise are limiting factors for the future development of both athletes and the sport as a whole. Indeed, with the exception of the hugely talented Jon Arnar Magnusson, it has been a long time since an Icelandic athlete has gained international success without having trained abroad under the guidance of a foreign coach. Moreover, the lack of recognition and opportunities for coaches in Iceland has meant that those with talent in this field tend to move elsewhere. For example, Olympian Vesteinn Hafsteinsson, who was national coach from 1997-2002, is now based in Sweden where he coaches 2007 World Champion Gerd Kanter (EST).

The FRI's strategy is to reinstate the position of national coach or sport director when its finances allow for such a move. In an acknowledgement to demands from the clubs, the brief for the position is likely to include development and delivery of a plan to provide education and other services that will help the volunteer coaches work more effectively with their athletes and gain the recognition they deserve.

## **Officiating**

### *Organisation and structures*

Competition officials in Iceland are all volunteers. There is no formal grading or

deployment system and most officials work with minimal training focusing on their own particular club's events. The clubs have no obligation to supply qualified officials for regional or national competitions, but in 2007 there was a pool of about 350 individuals available for these events and 25% of those in the pool were women<sup>23</sup>.

The FRI council appoints a four-member technical committee to be responsible for all matters related to competition officials. For many years this committee has been led by former International Technical Official Birgir Gudjonsson.

There is no independent officials association.

### *Education and updating*

The FRI does not have a formal structure of courses or for updating for competition officials. Ad hoc courses and workshops are staged at the request of organisers of major events such as the national championships or international competitions.

The FRI translates each new update of the IAAF Handbook into Icelandic and prints copies, which it distributes to the clubs.

### *Registered officials*

A list of those who have participated on competition officials' courses over the last 20 or so years exists and contains information on approximately 700 individuals. However, it is not possible to determine how



Table 9: 2007 development audit overview – officiating

Dimension	Indicators
Organisation & Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No formal grading or deployment system</li> <li>• Federation appoints a Technical Committee</li> <li>• No independent competition officials association</li> </ul>
Education & Updating Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No systematic educational structure</li> <li>• Courses and update courses staged on request, usually prior to major meetings</li> <li>• The IAAF handbook is regularly translated and published</li> </ul>
Registered Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No comprehensive database of active officials, but there is a list of about 350 individuals available for national events</li> </ul>

many of those listed remain active or have attended additional measures<sup>24</sup>.

**Key issues and strategy for development**

Although the clubs and federation have been able to deliver the competition programme up until the present, it is clear that any increased demands from an expanded programme or higher expectations of quality will strain the system, which relies on the availability and good will of a relatively small number of individuals. Indeed, there have already been occasional cases of overload and burnout<sup>25</sup>. A national database of active officials, which includes information on their qualifications and experiences, would be an obvious and valuable tool for better management. In addition, some clubs have developed examples of best practice for supporting and recognising volunteers, and coordinating the sharing of this information would seem to be a task for the federation.

A more formal system of education and grading for competition officials would in principle be desirable and help improve the quality of event presentation. Such a system might also be an attraction for more people to come into officiating and thereby take some of the strain off those currently involved. However, the design of the system should also take into account the fact that many of those who might volunteer to officiate at club level simply want to help out with

one or two disciplines; they are willing to go through basic training but are put off by the need to spend time covering all the events or going into more detail than absolutely necessary.

The FRI is currently considering its options for the future development of officiating<sup>26</sup>.

**Scientific and Medical Support**

*Universities and institutes*

The two largest of Iceland’s eight universities, Reykjavik University and the recently merged University of Iceland-Iceland University of Education, both have sports science and physical education programmes. Although neither has a department specifically dedicated to research or teaching in athletics, a number of the professors and top lecturers have athletics backgrounds and a continuing interest in the sport. This interest has led to some projects in areas such as the physiology of endurance running, where the Department of Physiology at the University of Iceland has periodically conducted tests on cardiovascular function and anaerobic threshold with elite athletes<sup>27</sup>. There have also been studies on the economic impact of sport, including athletics and the Reykjavik Marathon, but until recently there has been no formal mechanism for sharing the findings with the FRI or others in athletics.

Table 10: 2007 development audit overview - scientific and medical support

Dimension	Indicators
Universities & Institutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ad hoc cooperation between FRI and two universities</li> <li>Plans to create joint research centre</li> </ul>
Athlete Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services available for elite athletes through ISI</li> <li>Service package offered to top young athletes by FRI</li> </ul>
Anti-doping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doping control test and anti-doping education delivered by ISI</li> <li>No FRI anti-doping education measures</li> </ul>

### *Athlete support*

The ISI offers physiotherapy, medical support and testing services to elite athletes on its funding programmes<sup>28</sup>. For cost reasons, functional testing is only conducted on the request of the coach or athlete and so far systematic monitoring has not been a feature in training programmes. Some Icelandic athletes training in the USA or other places have had access to these services.

Athletes participating in the FRI Youth Programme are offered a list of services including physiotherapy, analysis of gait, stability and flexibility, nutritional counselling and mental training techniques<sup>29</sup>.

### *Doping control*

The ISI is also Iceland's national anti-doping agency and as such it is responsible for conducting doping control tests, enforcement procedures and anti-doping education measures in all sports<sup>30</sup>. Its anti-doping activities are funded by the central government.

Doping control tests are conducted at domestic athletics competitions, both random and at the request of the FRI when a national senior record is broken. Random out-of-competition tests are also conducted. There is no WADA accredited laboratory in Iceland so samples must be sent abroad for analysis.

The ISI's anti-doping education measures include an information webpage for ath-

letes, lectures and sending information directly to athletes. The FRI does not currently have any anti-doping education measures of its own.

### *Key issues and strategy for development*

The FRI is working to improve its access to research results and the services that can be provided by scientific and educational institutions. To this end there has been dialogue with both Reykjavik University and the University of Iceland-Iceland University of Education.

Reykjavik University is developing its sports studies department and it will open a research centre to serve the sports movement some time in 2008. Current plans are for the centre to be located at or near the indoor athletics facility at *Laugardalshöll*. The FRI strategy includes building closer links with the university and developing a package of services for athletes. When this is in place it intends to apply to the IAAF for recognition as an Accredited Training Centre<sup>31</sup>.

## **Athletics Culture**

### *Participation*

Athletics usually ranks about eighth among all sports in Iceland in the annual participation statistics compiled by the ISI. The database for 2006, the most recent year for which complete figures are available, shows 5,317 registered athletes. This number grew by about 3% per year in the period 2004-2006<sup>32</sup>. It is

## Head Coach Interview with Egill Eidsson



Egill Eidsson

As the only full-time employee of the Icelandic athletics federation, the *Frjalsithrotasamband Islands* (FRI), Egill Eidsson's position as General Secretary incorporates the role of Sport Director, which makes him effectively the country's head coach.

Eidsson, 46, worked as the FRI's National Youth Team Manager from 1996-1999. During this period, he managed the FRI Youth Programme and was a club coach in his spare time. As an athlete he recorded a best time of 52.32 in the 400m hurdles, third fastest in Icelandic history, won 15 national championships and was a member of the national team from 1982-1993. After his competitive career he studied coaching at the German Sport University in Cologne.

Although his background as an athlete,

coach and administrator gives him a good set of experiences for the double-role job he has had since 2004, he is the first to say that the situation is not ideal and that finding the means to reinstate a separate position of Sport Director, eliminated in 2002 for financial reasons, is one of the FRI's top priorities.

**NSA** What are the main aims for your position? In other words, what are the key expectations for your role in the sport?

**Eidsson:** The top priority for me is to serve as the General Secretary and manage the operations of the federation. From the coaching point of view this is not the best situation and my involvement there is minimal. Looking after the athletes, organising the national teams and supporting the club and personal coaches should be a full time job in itself. I see myself as keeping the Head Coach's seat warm and I hope that in the near future we will be able to deal with this aspect of the sport in a professional way.

**NSA** What are the main limiting factors in Iceland for the development of successful international-level performers?

**Eidsson :** First, the mere size of the country. Our total population is only about 312,000 and thus the talent pool is relatively small. Second, our weather is not helpful, espe-

estimated that about 10% of those registered train on a regular basis and can be called "serious athletes"<sup>33</sup>.

However, if runners not on the ISI's register but shown on the FRI's database to have officially entered one or more road races during 2006 were included, the total would be more

than 15,000, or 4.9% of the total population<sup>34</sup>. This puts the number of athletes who actually compete in a year on a par with those playing football, officially the county's biggest participant sport.

Of the athletes registered in 2006, 50.1% were female, 84% were under 20 years old

cially in the winter. Third, our coaching situation needs to be developed. Most club coaches have full-time job responsibilities outside the sport and hence cannot give the necessary support for talented athletes to reach their best. Up until now, most of our real talents have had to spend at least some time training abroad.

**NSA** Can you describe the environment you think is necessary for developing top athletes in Iceland?

**Edisson:** Facilities, coaching, competition structure, general support, each is important. If you have the resources you can create the environment. We have started to do this with our FRI Youth Programme and there have been some good results.

**NSA** Are there any other positive trends in this area that you can point to in Iceland?

**Edisson :** The construction of a 200m indoor track in Reykjavik revolutionised the situation. Now elite athletes have the facilities to train, compete and develop their skills all year round, despite our unfavourable climate. There are also quite a few new outdoor facilities being built around the country. I think the improved infrastructure situation has been the key to the increased performance level we have seen in the younger age groups in recent years.

**NSA** Are there any issues associated with management of the relation-

ship between individual coaches and the national structure?

**Edsson :** We don't have a strong structure to support coaches at present. We have not been able to provide basic or advanced coaches education efficiently, so those who do want up-to-date information have to work doubly hard for it.

**NSA** What are the performance targets for Icelandic athletes in the coming five years?

**Edsson :** The main goal is to have more athletes reach international standard at junior and youth levels and eventually be more competitive at the European and World Championships and the Olympic Games. We try to send as many individuals as possible to European and Nordic competitions so they can get the necessary experience. The aim for the 2012 Olympics is to improve on what was achieved at the 2000 Sydney Games, to have 5-8 athletes qualify and 2-3 be competitive with fair chances of reaching medal positions.

**NSA** What do you think will be the critical factor as to whether these targets are achieved?

**Edsson :** The key achievement for the federation will be to have the finances for a full time Sport Director or national coach. Athletes simply need more professional support than their club coaches are able to give them. If we can support the talent we will be better able to attract it.

and 7% were 35 years old or over. The largest group in the sport is female athletes under 16 years old, who constitute 34% of the registered athletes. But, similar to many other countries, there is a significant drop out rate for this group: only 16% of the registered athletes are females over the age of 16. The drop out rate on the male side is

slightly less: 31% of the total of registered athletes are boys under 16 and 19% are men over that age.

Interestingly, only about one third of the registered athletes are from the greater Reykjavik area, where about 65% of the country's total population lives. This shows that the sport is

proportionately more popular in the rural areas. However, all of the national records set in the last eight years have been by members of clubs near Reykjavik, indications perhaps of the effects of greater concentration of athletes and better facilities.

## Kvennahlaup

Iceland's "Women's Run" or *Kvennahlaup* has become a social tradition that helps promote both physical fitness and sport. The event, which is organised by the ISI, comprises runs between two and eight kilometres without timing that take place on a specified day in the spring each year. In 2007, these runs took place in 90 locations around the country and attracted as many as 16,000 participants. *Kvennahlaup* were also organised by Icelandic expatriates in 18 locations abroad<sup>35</sup>.

### Club system

The multi-sport club system in Iceland was established in the 19th century and, as about 40% of the population belongs to a club, it remains an important part of the society. There are about 104 athletics sections or stand-alone athletics clubs<sup>36</sup>. Almost all are run on a shoestring budget and must rely on a small number of volunteers and or part-time coach-administrators to operate. Although the system is robust, only about 10% of clubs could be said to be active and strong. These participate with senior men's and women's teams in the annual Team Cup competition, organise local open meetings and road races, and are the most consistent producers of athletes who take part in the national championships. The number of strong clubs has diminished in recent years, largely as a result of one or a combination of three reasons: 1) migration towards the Reykjavik area has reduced the membership of rural clubs, 2) clubs with good facilities attract members away from other clubs, 3) clubs decline or collapse when key volunteers are no longer available<sup>37</sup>.

A determining factor in club strength is the support of the local authorities. Recognising the services and the general promotion value a club can deliver for their towns, most authorities provide facilities and some provide funding for club activities. They are particularly interested in supporting regular training and other activities for children and young people. The FRI has lobbied local authorities to convince them to support the stronger clubs and has a policy of distributing its various national championships so that all towns with facilities have chances to realise an exposure and public relation return on their investment.

### Athletics in schools

According to the national curriculum, every student from age 6 to 15 years old is required to attend three 40-minute physical education classes per week, one of which must be swimming<sup>38</sup>. It is estimated that, on average, 15% of PE lesson time over the course of a year is dedicated to athletics related activities in primary schools and 10% in secondary schools. However, although students are required to demonstrate some endurance, sprinting, jumping and throwing abilities, the requirements for teaching athletics or testing for athletic skills are both vague and open to individual interpretation. Throwing balls, for example, has been accepted to fulfil the throwing requirement.

As there are national outdoor and indoor championships involving children in the club system from 11 years old and up, there are no national schools championships. Interschool competitions are limited to the context of specific programmes such as Fun in Athletics (see page 65).

Success attracting the youngest age groups is one of athletics' most pronounced strengths at present, and the work of schools is clearly an important contributing factor. The FRI strengthened its link with schools athletics in 2007 by reintroducing the FRI Triathlon (120m, 2kg-shot put, high jump) in conjunction with the airline *Iceland Express*.

## A New Approach to Teaching Athletics in Schools

Until 1998, the training in athletics received by future PE teachers in Iceland focused on the traditional forms of athletics, competition and the rules of the sport. Because of the small size of primary school gyms, lack of equipment and lack of time available for the sport within the curriculum, it was decided to try a new approach, the Fun in Athletics programme imported from Britain, in order to make the sport more accessible.

According to Kari Jonsson<sup>39</sup>, a lecturer at the Iceland University of Education, the new approach has "been received with a positive attitude" by the new teachers who are "much more likely to introduce athletic activities in this way than teachers trained in the

traditional method of teaching the sport." Since the introduction of the programme, it has proven popular with both teachers and children. Competitions between school teams, both onsite and on the internet, have taken place and four major school districts have staged multi-school events.

A survey of young athletes revealed cases where teachers had recognised the talent of some students who had taken part in the competitions and encouraged them to take up the sport. However, Mr Jonsson points out that there is not yet any data establishing a link between the programme and increased interest or participation in traditional athletics by kids.

A reincarnation of a programme that attracted more than 5,700 kids in the mid-1970s, last year's event involved 1,200 children aged 11-12 in competitions staged at 40 schools and a 64-athlete final. The FRI also works with sponsor *Landsbanki Islands* to stage the *Landsbankahlaup* road races for children aged 10-13, which in 2007 attracted more than 2,000 participants at locations around the country.

### Media presence

Analysis of Iceland's print media in 2006 shows that football (53.3%) and handball (27.3%) grabbed the lion's share of the total sports coverage in newspapers and magazines. Athletics received just 1.1%, below both basketball and golf<sup>40</sup>. This reflects a decade-long trend of athletics losing ground to other sports despite being popular as a participant sport and having a reasonable amount of international success.

On television, football and handball also dominate in a market that includes both private sport channels, which tend not to carry athletics events, and the state broadcasting company RUV. RUV has not systematically

kept details on the number of viewers for the IAAF World Championships in Athletics<sup>41</sup>. However, it is known that athletics' general position has improved in the last decade, thanks to the FRI's deal to sub-license the IAAF Golden League series to RUV. Individual broadcasts of Golden League meetings regularly attract between 5 and 8% of the population, which compares well with individual programmes in the two biggest sports. Interestingly, a delayed package broadcast of the national indoor championships in 2007 attracted an audience of a similar size<sup>42</sup>.

The FRI has a presence in the market through a website that is updated almost daily with news from the sport, competition results, statistics and other relevant information. No data on visits or hits was available for this study but it is believed that participants and others already engaged in the sport are the main users of the site. It is also known that the main newspapers use the site for their information, The FRI also reaches out to the general public with its own magazine in print format, which is distributed twice a year together with the country's largest daily subscription newspaper, *Morgunbladid*.

Table 11: 2007 development audit overview - athletics culture

Dimension	Indicators
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Registered athletes: 5,656 (49.9% male, 50.1% female)</li> <li>Registered athletes are 1.7% of the national population</li> <li>Non-registered runners (est): 9600</li> </ul>
Club System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>104 clubs or sections of multi-sport clubs</li> <li>10% of clubs considered "strong and active"</li> <li>Running/jogging clubs exist but are not affiliated to the official sports movement</li> </ul>
Athletics in Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Athletics included in the national curriculum</li> <li>No schools championships</li> <li>Some schools using non-traditional and/or federation backed programmes</li> <li>No participation in World Athletics Day (2007)</li> </ul>
Media Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1% of annual sport coverage in print media dedicated to athletics (2006)</li> <li>TV viewer figures for IAAF World Championships in Athletics are unavailable</li> <li>Federation website visitor data unavailable</li> <li>Federation magazine published biannually</li> </ul>
Awareness and Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No national data available</li> <li>General feeling that the sports image with young people is not strong</li> </ul>

### General awareness and perception

Although athletics in Iceland has a history of popularity and is currently enjoying strong participation, the general awareness and perception of the sport within the population are precarious. One observer has said that currently athletics is the "best kept secret" in Icelandic sport<sup>43</sup>. An important factor, particularly with young people, is athletics' small share of the ever-increasing media output – a situation that is common for the sport in many countries. This is particularly acute when there is no high-profile star performing well on the international scene, as has been the case in the last two to three years, as little athletics news is considered strong enough to take time or space away from football's coverage.

Regarding the perception of athletics in different target groups, no national survey data was available to draw on for definitive conclusions for this study. However, a small sample survey of athletes in the FRI Youth Programme indicated that their friends who are not in the sport tend not to understand athletics and do not see it as attractive or "cool", thus putting young ath-

letes in a position of having to justify their participation to their peers. Again, the role of the media is important, as is that of high-profile role models. The role of perception and other causes of drop out are still being explored but it has been suggested that athletics projects a sense of elitism and that young athletes sometimes get discouraged and leave when they find they are not the very best in their club or locality<sup>44</sup>.

### Key issues and strategy for development

The current challenges related to participation include reducing the drop out rate, particularly among girls between 13 and 16, engaging the growing road running movement more closely with the rest of the sport and strengthening the club system. The FRI Youth Programme has become a valuable tool for retaining the most talented individuals, but improvements in coaching and club programmes are also necessary to keep more grass roots athletes involved into their late teens and twenties. In the last five years, between 54% and 62% of the programme participants have been female<sup>45</sup>. With regard to the road runners, the FRI is currently looking for ways that



it might provide value to this group in the future. It is also looking for ways to convince local authorities that have invested in facilities to now give greater support to club activities and the volunteers who run them.

As in most countries, the long-term success of Icelandic athletics will be strongly influenced by the sport's success in retaining and increasing its share of media coverage. The FRI is continuing with its 2001 initiative of securing the national broadcast rights for the IAAF Golden League meetings and subleasing these to the state broadcaster RUV in return for guaranteed regular exposure of both elite and domestic athletics. The FRI's current focus is on being able to afford to employ a communications manager to develop and implement a media strategy to counter the strength of football and find ways to convert strong participation to more general popularity<sup>6</sup>.

## Summary

Athletics in Iceland has a long history in which it has been significant to the country's society. The sport has emphasised its domestic programme, which is underpinned by a strong club system, but it has also looked outwards and had some success internationally, even with the obvious handicap of the country's remote geographic location. It is currently enjoying a period of strength charac-

terised by increasing participation, particularly among children and early teenagers, and improving standards of performance.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the present status of athletics in Iceland. The list of these must include support from central government, the national sport structure and local authorities. Also important are the policies and programmes initiated by the federation's leaders, both in recent years and in the last century. Finally, the part played by those in the sport – the athletes with their performances and the volunteers with their time – cannot be overlooked.

There are, of course, issues and major challenges related to each of the seven areas examined in this study and some of these have been outlined. While the purpose of this study is to describe the present situation and the factors at work rather than predict how Icelandic athletics will develop in the coming years, it can be said that in many cases the sport's leaders have reasonable strategies for addressing the challenges and, provided they continue to develop and implement them, there is a case to be optimistic about the future.

*Please send all correspondence to:*

*Jonas Egilsson  
jonase@centrum.is*

## NOTES

1 See: Wangemann, B. & Glad, B. (1991). IAAF Development Cooperation: A Situation Analysis and a Strategy for the World-wide Development of Athletics. London: International Amateur Athletic Federation.

2 Much of the history section of this study is based on information from articles published in O. Eidsson & M. Jakobsson (eds.), *Frialsithrottasamband Íslands 50 ára*. This magazine was published in 1997 by the Icelandic Athletic Federation to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its foundation. Authors of the articles include: Bjorn Vilmondarson, Ingolfur Steinsson, Johann Bernhard, Orn Eidsson, Magnus Jakobsson, Sigurdur Helgason, Olafur Sveinsson.

3 Halldorsson, G. (2005) Icelandic Participation at the Olympic Games – The first 100 Years. Reykjavik: Tomasarhagi 31.

4 Bailey's mark was not submitted to the IAAF for official recognition.

5 Eidsson pushed particularly hard for strong Icelandic participation in the Kalottokampen, a match for men and with teams from northern Norway, Finland and Sweden with two competitors from each team per event. Qualification for the team became an important goal and encouragement for many athletes, particularly women, to stay in the sport. Iceland sent teams to the Kalottokampen from 1972 to 1983.

6 Source: Samuel Orn Erlingsson, former Chief of the Sports Department at the state broadcaster Ríkisutvarpið (RUV), interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

7 The FRI's initiative to purchase the Golden League rights and then offer them together with sponsors in a sub-

license arrangement to the state broadcaster Ríkisutvarpið (RUV) is thought to be the first deal of its kind in athletics. RUV receives quality programming with the risk involved in finding sponsors eliminated. The FRI also provides an athletics specialist to assist the RUV commentators during broadcasts. For its part, the sport receives general promotion from the broadcast of the international meetings and specific promotion from the guaranteed broadcasts of domestic events. In addition, the FRI was able to give added value to its sponsors.

8 Source: Fridrik Thor Oskarsson, Chairman of the FRI Statistics Committee, interviewed by the authors in February 2008. The age groups for which records are kept are: under 12, 13-14, 15-16, 17-18, 19-20, 21-22, senior.

9 Oskarsson (see note 8) has compiled a database of all athletic events, track and field and certified road races, in Iceland from 1999. Each entrant is identified in the database by his/her unique social security number. In February 2008 the database contained the names of 50,891 Icelanders who had recorded at least one official result in an athletics event; about 16% of the total population in the country! The total database of just over 70,000 names includes athletes from more than 100 countries.

10 Source: "FELIX", the National Sport Database.

11 Source: FRI Constitution. Reserve members of the council are elected by the congress and take part in council meetings but do not vote in council decisions unless one or more of the full council members is absent.

12 Source: FRI Annual Accounts 2006.

13 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

14 Ibid.

15 Source: Thorsteinn Thorsteinsson, member of the FRI Technical Committee, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

16 Source: Dr. Sigfus Jonsson, former Chairman of the Laugardalshöll Arena Company, interviewed by the authors in February 2008. The arena was originally intended to be a multi-sport facility but the high use by athletics has led to a change in the plan.

17 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

18 Ibid.

19 Source: Fridrik Thor Oskarsson, Chairman of the FRI Statistics Committee, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

20 Ibid.

21 Source: Thrainn Hafsteinsson, Chief Coach of the IR Athletic Club and former FRI Youth Programme Director, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

22 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Source: Oskar Thorarensen, coach and former FRI Vice President, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

26 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

27 Source: Dr. Torarinn Sveinsson, Associate Professor, Department of Physiology, University of Iceland, interviewed by the authors in March 2008.

28 Source: <http://www.olympic.is/>. Note: information is in Icelandic only.

29 Source: Frida Run Thordardottir, FRI Youth Team Manager, internal reports to the FRI council 2005, 2006, 2007.

30 Source: <http://www.olympic.is/>. Note: information is in Icelandic only.

31 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

32 Source: "FELIX", the National Sport Database.

33 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

34 Source: Fridrik Thor Oskarsson, Chairman of the FRI Statistics Committee, interviewed by the authors in February 2008. See note 9.

35 See: <http://www.sjova.is/>. Note: information is in Icelandic only.

36 The official figure varies slightly from year to year as not all clubs meet the deadline for returning their annual report to the ISI and thus may not be counted.

37 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

38 Source: Ministry of Education. Physical Education Curriculum for Compulsory Schools in Iceland, 1999.

39 Interviewed by the authors in December 2007.

40 Source: Anna Gudrun Steindorsdottir, A Study of Print Media Coverage in 2006, presented at ISI Sport Centre, September 28, 2007.

41 Source: Valgeir Vilhjálmsson, Marketing Department at the state broadcaster Ríkisutvarpið (RUV), interviewed by the authors in March 2008. In 2007 viewer surveys were only conducted for selected periods, which did not include the time of the IAAF World Championships in Athletics.

42 Source: RUV Hrafnkell Kristjánsson, Chief of the Sports Department at the state broadcaster Ríkisutvarpið (RUV), interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

43 Source: Samuel Orn Erlingsson, former Chief of the Sports Department at the state broadcaster Ríkisutvarpið (RUV), interviewed by the authors in February 2008.

44 Source: Jonas Egilsson, Survey of FRI Youth Programme Participants, 2005.

45 Source: Frida Run Thordardottir, FRI Youth Team Manager, internal reports to the FRI council 2005, 2006, 2007.

46 Source: Egill Eidsson, FRI General Secretary, interviewed by the authors in February 2008.