

Guide G01 - An Introduction to Athletics Risk Assessment (from UK Athletics website 18.3.2009)

An often quoted saying is that 'injury is an occupational hazard' to any athlete. This statement is incorrect, an injury is the result of harm being caused by a potential hazard through the realization of risk. People find the concept of hazard and risk difficult to understand but these are present in our normal everyday lives. We experience them through such activities as crossing the road and driving a car. They are not difficult to comprehend.

Hazard

A hazard is something with the potential to cause harm to an individual. This can be an object, an activity and even a substance. In athletics these would include the following:

Objects

A javelin, discus, shot, hammer, pole vault pole, high jump stands, hurdles, running track etc.

Activity

Running, jumping, throwing, walking etc.

Substance

Water in water jumps and in the form of rain, snow and ice.

Risk

Risk expresses the likelihood that the harm for a potential hazard being realised. Risks are normally categorized as low, medium or high. The principles of risk assessment are:

- Identify the hazard.
- Identify those who might be harmed and how.
- Evaluate the risk (low, medium or high) and decide whether there are existing precautions, if these are adequate or are more required.
- Record the findings.
- Review the assessment (at specified intervals) and revise if necessary.

Some hazards have been identified above. They may be eliminated or reduced through design improvements, the use of safeguards e.g. hammer cages, the use of warning systems such as a horn during throwing events, the use of safe practices such as inspection of implements and adhering to local lane discipline during training. Even warming up exercises are safe practices which if not completed satisfactorily may result in injury to the athlete.

Those who might be harmed are the athlete themselves, fellow athletes awaiting their turn, officials such as judges, starters and marshals, team managers, coaches and spectators.

Some activities entail a higher risk than others i.e. technical events, such as throwing and jumping. These would pose a higher risk to the athlete than running events. Within the technical events throwing would pose a higher risk than the jumping events but within the jumping events, the pole vault poses a higher risk than the high jump.

Clearly the throwing events would pose a higher risk to others than the competing athlete, than the jumping events.

Prioritizing control of risks is by determining the relative importance of risk through deciding on the severity of the hazard and the likelihood of occurrence.

Responsibility

The responsibility of ensuring safety in the development of the sport rests with everyone concerned. Athletes, coaches, officials, facility providers, ground staff, meeting organisers, spectators and the general public all have a duty of care to ensure that their actions do not affect the health, safety and welfare of themselves and others.

Conclusion

Failures of control are assessed through monitoring systems requiring the thorough investigation of any accidents, illness or incidents to identify the underlying causes and implications. Commitment to continuous improvement involves the constant development of policies and approaches towards implementation and risk control procedures.

Risk assessment is only successful if it involves the people who 'own' the activities and responsibilities, therefore there is a need for athletes, coaches and judges to be involved in the risk assessment process. Having people get involved with the process means that they are more likely to adopt the safe practices i.e. own them.

People who are to undertake reviews of facilities and equipment and who are involved in the management of such, also need to be adequately trained in risk assessment in order for them to be adequately carried out and safe practice systems to be brought in where required.