

World Athletics sets big goals for United States

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Premium

Shawn Medow

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The recent World Athletics Championships at Hayward Field stadium in Oregon. (Photo by ANP via Getty Images)

World Athletics, formerly known as the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), has ambitious goals after completing the first ever World Championships in the United States this past summer in Eugene, Oregon.

Jon Ridgeon, World Athletics' chief executive, believes that those World Championships were a success across the world, and in the host country US as well. Through new technological initiatives and a push for new audiences, World Athletics is hoping to achieve its lofty goals of making athletics a top-five sport in the US by the end of the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

“We wanted this championship to act as not just a World Championships, but an opportunity to help grow the sport in America,” Ridgeon told *SportBusiness*. “That doesn’t happen overnight, but it’s an important starting point on that because the Americans absolutely stepped up with incredible performances.”

The US athletes earned a record-setting 33 medals at the 2022 World Championships, which were broadcast on NBC and its streaming service Peacock in the US. World Athletics worked with USA Track and Field and NBC to create what Ridgeon calls a “magic two hours” in primetime that showcases the biggest events of each day.

That move paid off. NBC recorded 18.7 million viewers across the 10 days of the World Championships, making it the most-watched World Championships on record. In 2020, NBC and World Athletics extended their rights partnership through 2029.

Making the World Championships happen was challenging after the Covid-19 pandemic pushed the event to 2022 from 2021, mirroring the delay that pushed the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games to 2021.

But thanks to those postponed Olympics, World Athletics’ revenue almost doubled and its profits increased ten-fold in 2021.

“It was a real challenge and we did it and we did exactly what we said we would do: a championship within budget, but it wasn’t easy,” says Ridgeon, who won a World Championships silver medal in 1987 for Great Britain. “This was, as a result, one of the harder World Championships that we’ve done, but it was so important to deliver it and we were delighted with the final outcome.”

The delay also allowed additional time to prepare. And World Athletics additionally embraced modern trends at the World Championships in an effort to connect with younger audiences. It hired four track and field-focused Tik Tok creators to create content for Worlds and the US national championships — the qualifying event for the World Championships — for what it called “TrackSide.”

The Tik Tok videos featured behind-the-scenes footage from throughout the state-of-the-art Hayward Field with the ultimate goal of attracting more people to tune into the events.

World Athletics’ content team also made human-interest videos fans could find online to learn about the athletes outside of competition.

Athletes, such as American Olympic and World Champion middle-distance runner Athing Mu, wore stickers with QR codes on themselves that would allow fans to scan them and see World Athletics’ “Going the Distance” series. The series of videos contain interviews with the athletes in which they talk about themselves in a non-athletics capacity.



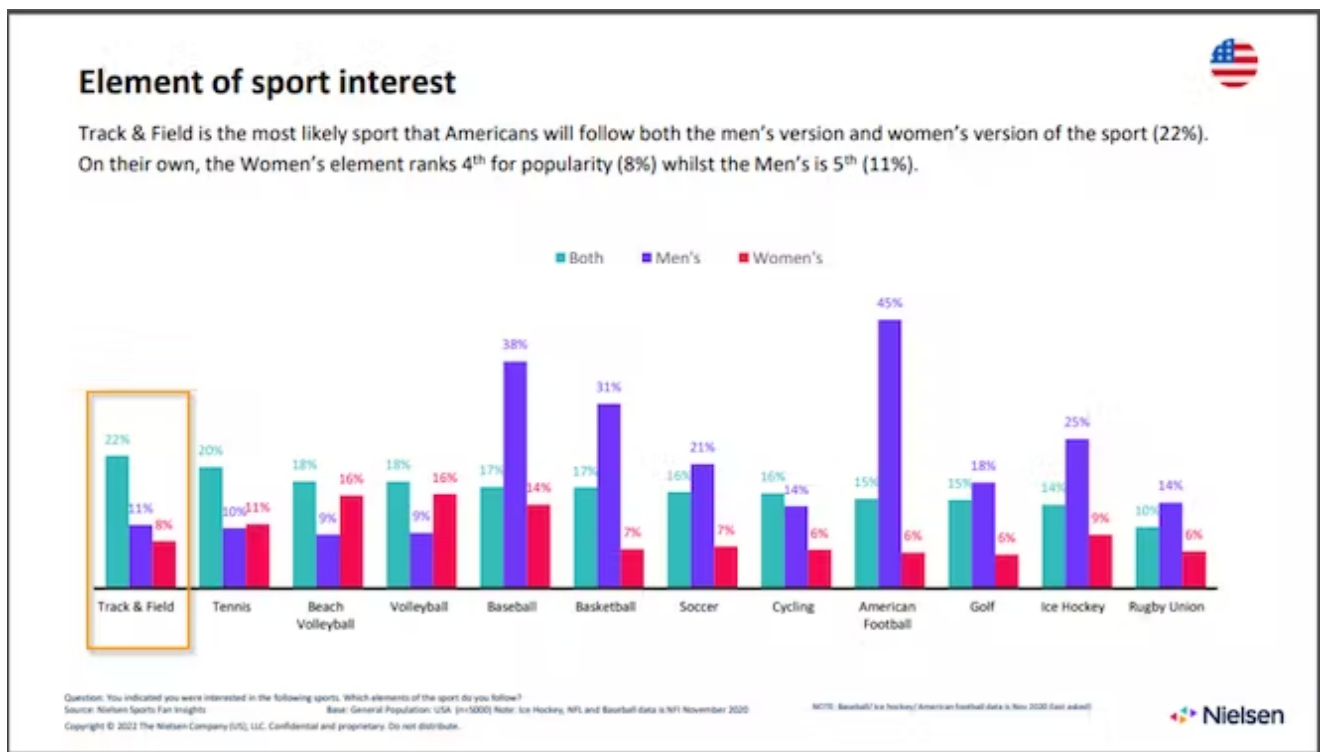
Athing Mu wears a QR code on her leg as she competes at the World Championships in Eugene, Oregon.
(Courtesy World Athletics)

“We need personality that people can talk about,” Ridgeon says. “The three Ps: Personality, Performance, Promotion that have all got to work. We need these athletes to be around, to keep performing year in and year out. That’s why track and field is such a tough sport.”

Outside of the World Championships and Olympic Games, the sport historically has struggled to capture the American audience’s attention. World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said before the World Championships that he was concerned about waning interest of American fans in athletics, but hoped that the championships would help turn that around.

Data from Nielsen shows that track and field is the eighth most popular sport for Americans, but also the sport that garners the most attention across both men’s and women’s versions.

At 22 per cent, the next closest sport for both genders is tennis, with 20 per cent of Americans saying they have interest in both the men’s and women’s game. The sport’s governing body wants to use that breadth of interest to market the athletes, similarly to its content-driven work during the World Championships and US nationals.



Nielsen data of sport interest in the United States. (Courtesy: Nielsen/World Athletics)

World Athletics is also going to make the plunge that many fringe sports in the US have taken: making a docuseries.

Following the strong success of Netflix's Formula 1 Drive to Survive, others sports looking to find new audiences have similarly turned to developing behind-the-scenes documentary series. Ridgeon says that World Athletics now has the funding in place to make it happen.

"[Docuseries are] one of those vehicles where I think we can connect our elite stars with the fans more effectively," he says.

An issue when it comes to American fans is getting behind teams. While there are national teams and medal counts at World Championships and Olympics, the remainder of the track and field calendar does not work in the same way.

The Diamond League, World Athletics' elite global track and field series, is entirely individualized. Each meet features different events and different athletes who are competing as themselves, for themselves. Without teams, and with a global series across a plethora of time zones, the Diamond League is generally only watched by die-hard fans.

The US has one meet, the Prefontaine Classic at Hayward Field, which will host the 2023 Diamond League Final.

"We can't rely on people following the team," Ridgeon says. "That's why it's so important you have athletes who consistently win and hopefully they can consistently win over a number of years."

In the US, there is still a large and fertile market that Ridgeon feels is commercially untapped: casual runners. Getting these Americans interested in following the elite level of the sport as fans is what could help World Athletics accomplish its objectives.

"The latest stats I saw was about 50 million people in America keep fit through recreational running. Many of those don't see themselves as having any connection, or very little connection to track and field and the wider sport of athletics," Ridgeon says. "We've got to work much harder to increase that 50 million but also get more of those 50 million thinking, 'yeah, I'm a runner and I'm also a fan of running and track and field at the elite level.'"

Along with the Diamond League Final coming to the US, World Athletics is hosting the 2026 World Cross Country Championships in Tallahassee, Florida. By the time of the LA Olympics in 2028, it is possible that track and field could have risen up the ranks of popularity in the US. But the work remains.

"We're a sport that's 150 years old and that's wonderful," Ridgeon says. "We celebrate that heritage, but we also understand that if we want to grow and move on we can't just sit there. We have to innovate and keep moving forward."