



## **The Road to Rhodes**

**Improving Middle Distance Running on the Isle of Man**

**Proposal for a Performance Management Programme**

**Prepared for Isle of Man Athletics Association**

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## **1. Introduction**

This plan is concerned with raising the standard of middle distance running on the Isle of Man. It aims to develop a strategic plan to seek out and nurture young, local talent.

Middle distance performances by Manx athletes have been, on the whole, declining in recent years both in terms of performances (i.e. times) and compared with other islands. This was illustrated in the recent Natwest Island Games. Please see appendix one for a comparison of performance in the late 1980s and early 1990s with 2003.

This decline will not be remedied overnight. We need to start planning and acting now to develop a long-term strategic plan to cover the period up to Rhodes in 2007.

We need to help encourage and support a wider base of runners and encourage athletes to work together. To facilitate this, a Performance Management programme has been agreed with the Isle of Man Athletics Association (IOM AA).

The aim of this document is to provide some background to our present position, an outline of the Performance Management programme with a broad implementation plan.

It should be noted that this plan should be implemented as part of the IOM AA 5 Year Performance Plan.

## **2. Background:**

From the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s was something of a “Golden Period” for middle distance running in the Isle of Man. Records were broken and Island Games medals won as runners achieved significantly higher performances than in any other period.

Performances were set by a small nucleus of runners. Many of these runners have been the mainstays of middle distance running for the past 15-20 years. This is especially true amongst the male athletes. Unfortunately, these runners are now coming to the end of their careers but have not been replaced by younger athletes.

As a result, performances at Island Games level and on a more general level have steadily declined. With a small number of exceptions there is not a large number of athletes waiting to come through from the junior ranks. In addition, there is no clear pathway to bring new talent into the sport and develop it up to and possibly beyond Island Games level.

Women’s middle distance running has also followed a similar trend. A number of promising youngsters have left the sport and the small number of competitors is made up primarily of older (!) women i.e. over 30.

At the 2003 NatWest Island Games, just two local athletes won individual medals in middle distance running events. One is aged 39, the other 43. Whilst these are meritorious performances in the own right, this trend does no augur well for the future.

### **3. The Vision:**

The vision of the plan is to develop an environment in which at least a number of the following prevail:

- A highly motivated group of athletes – male and female - who set high personal goals in middle distance running.
- Athletes who are “hungry” to improve and achieve their goals.
- A group of athletes working together for mutual improvement.
- Regular squad meetings/get-togethers.
- A high level of athlete support – financial, physical (e.g. physiotherapists, nutrition, fitness monitoring) and mental (e.g. psychological).
- A network which identifies young talent and then gives it the necessary conditions and support to help it fulfil its potential.
- The high performing athletes who act as inspirations and Role Models for juniors.
- A network that gives opportunity to progress within the group (i.e. avoidance of elitism where high level performances at the top actually discourage newcomers)
- A local “middle distance scene” where athletes compete against each other over a range of distances and at cross-country.
- Isle of Man is dominant force in middle distance event in Island Games.
- Strong competition for places in middle distance events for Island Games team.
- Senior and Junior Manx Records are broken on a regular basis.
- Athletes are regularly being selected for County and Area competitions as well as English Schools events.
- At least 1 UK Athletics Level 4 coach specialising in Endurance with a number of Level 2 and 3 coaches also in support.
- A network of coaches in locations throughout the island with the ability to motivate and support athletes in planning their training and competition.

#### **4. SWOT Analysis:**

To help understand our current position, I have documented a SWOT Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) of middle distance running below.

##### **Strengths:**

- Local training facilities – track, countryside, grass tracks, sand dunes.
- Regular training nights
- Local coaches/knowledge base – e.g. Maurice Herriott (Olympic silver medallist), Colin Moore (British International for over 15 years)
- Access to high standard league competition e.g. Northern League division 1
- Organised travel to UK events.
- A good coach education programme is already in place

##### **Weaknesses:**

- Small number of young athletes
- No “development” training group
- Female training is not co-ordinated. No established women’s’ training group.
- An ageing squad of athletes.
- Competition is heavily focused on leagues where athletes are expected to compete in several events, often before their main event.
- Lack of co-ordination of activity
- There is a need to travel off-island to any meaningful competition
- Lack of variety of competition – too few athletes
- There is no co-ordination between males and females.
- There is limited access to train with performance athletes in a team and squad environment
- Risk of ‘Big fish’ in a ‘small pond’ athlete’s mentality.
- Young peoples perceptions of athletics, compared to sports like football is that it is not a fashionable sport.
- Lack of formally qualified coaches will restrict ability to work with young athletes.
- Main middle distance coaching focus is centred in the Douglas area. Little coaching appears to be available in Peel or Ramsey areas.

##### **Opportunities:**

- Emergence of a National level runner will encourage others.
- Co-ordinated coaching structure.
- Creation of young athletes “Development Squad”
- “Lapsed” runners could be encouraged back to running.
- “Joggers” not currently involved in competitive athletics or without any structured training.
- Several talented young athletes operating on “fringe” of the sport.
- Several women UK Role Model athletes e.g. Paula Radcliffe, Kelly Holmes.
- Merseyside Schools events – heavily subsidised and provide access to English Schools finals.

- British Milers Clubs events – access to “paced” races for fast times.
- Use of UK league competition to develop racing skills, tactics, etc.
- Local “Middle Distance Challenge” races with pace-makers (male runners could pace-make in female races)
- Use of former international athletes to mentor athletes and coaches.
- Utilise the services/support of AAA Regional Athletic Co-ordinator (currently Jeremy Harries )
- Utilise services/support of Manx Sport and Recreation (MSR) - the Sport Development Unit
- Coach mentoring - Level 3 + 4 coaches (on or off island) working alongside Level 1 + 2 coaches.
- Young athletes have a realistic opportunity to gain National recognition due to the current low level of middle distance running in the UK.

**Threats:**

- Other sports e.g. football
- Training is deemed “hard” and young talent may find other sports easier for greater or similar rewards.
- Changes in social and cultural trends. Young people live a more sedately lifestyle and are not exposed to regular exercise.

## **5. Looking Forward:**

The reasons for the decline in standards are numerous. However, this paper would like to look forward to explore a more structured and planned approach that would raise the standards on the Isle of Man once again. I am convinced that our current position has not emerged through lack of talent. We need to be better at identifying and nurturing what talent we have.

The current situation will not be remedied overnight. From our current position we need to look long term with progressive and measurable objectives to 2007 and beyond.

The 2007 Island Games will be held in the holiday island of Rhodes. This will prove an attractive proposition to prospective competitive athletes. This will give us a four year period to put plans in place, modify these and allow talent to fully develop. After all, someone aged 16 now will still only be 20 in 2007 – well short of a “peak age”

We can use the Games of 2005 as a staging post to assess our progress.

We need to bear in mind that the Island Games are not the sole measure of success. Other championships can be used as well as the measure of times themselves.

## **6. Performance Management programme:**

The proposed Performance Management programme should have a number of roles/objectives:

- Identify and encourage prospective middle distance talent – male and female. It is envisaged that this would be done mainly through establishing contacts with local schools, specifically PE Departments. This would be supported by visits to cross-country events and schools sports. In particular, teachers and pupils would be made aware of the squad and club athletics activities in general.
- Act as a support network to established coaches.
- Act as a conduit to local competition e.g. approach local clubs to organise a “Middle Distance Challenge”, or one-off events where a runner may need a qualifying standard or be seeking a fast time.
- Help educate runners in the history of their events to help raise their interest and enthusiasm.
- Help runners and coaches to identify suitable mainland competition and, if needed, help obtain invitations into such competitions.
- Where necessary “point young talent in the right direction”.
- Advise Isle of Man selectors for Island Games and other competitions.
- Encourage athletes and coaches to work together to achieve a common goal.
- Offer athletes accessible support mechanisms i.e. physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritional advisors and specific conditioning coaches.

## **7. Proposal:**

Establish the development of a “squad” of athletes – Isle of Man Endurance Squad. This would be targeted at athletes from about the age of 14 years. At the outset, no standards would be set. All those interested or with potential would be invited into the squad. In due course, standards would be set. Failure to obtain these would, ultimately result in athletes leaving the group. This would be particularly true if this was attributed to any lack of effort or poor attitude on the part of the athlete. However, there would continue to be scope to allow those deemed to have “potential” into the squad at any time.

With a view to 2007, the squad would consist mainly of athletes aged under 30. Older athletes would be permitted into the squad, but unless they demonstrated potential/capability to be part of the 2007 effort, only limited resources would be directed towards them. They would, however, be useful in building up the initial squad and encouraging the younger athletes.

Note that it is not the intention to break up existing training groups. This scheme is intended to work alongside those groups and it is to be hoped that much of the new talent can be filtered into those groups.

Included within the squad would also be middle distance coaches who would make themselves available to coach and assist athletes within the squad.

It is also intended to develop a set of “Guiding Principles” that the squad would follow. These would be centred mainly on ethical issues. For example, performance enhancing drugs, child protection issues and “poaching” of athletes between clubs and coaches. It would also include some commitment towards self-improvement, attendance at squad events, etc.

All athletes and coaches would be expected to “sign-up” to these.

### **8. Performance Manager:**

The IOM AA should appoint an Honorary Performance Manager to oversee this scheme. As stated it is not the Performance Manager's job to coach all athletes. Whilst they may perform some coaching, they will mainly be a facilitator and focal point. If successful, this position could be a template for similar positions in other disciplines e.g. sprints, jumps.

Following discussions with the IOM AA, Chris Quine has offered to perform this role with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> September. Chris is competed in all previous Island Games and currently holds Manx Records in 1500m and one mile. He held the Manx record for 800m from 1989 to 2001.

In addition, Maurice Herriott, Olympic and Commonwealth silver medallist as well as 8 times AAA champion in 3000m steeplechase, has kindly agreed to be the patron of the programme.

### **9. First steps:**

- Draw up a list of all current active prospective squad members.
- Draw up a list of all active endurance running coaches including current qualifications.
- Visit clubs on the island to explain the program, provide reassurance to any concerns and obtain “buy-in” for future co-operation.
- Establish contacts with all secondary schools.
- Attend inter schools cross-country.
- Active “rounding up” of potential members through media promotion and direct contact.
- Organise a training day/get together for all prospective squad members autumn 2003.
- Encourage participation in the Manx Gas Cross Country League
- Establish a library or exchange scheme of appropriate athletic literature e.g. training guides, biographies of great athletes.
- Review progress of the scheme itself after six months.

Follow up stages might include the following:

- Establishment of a regular fitness monitoring program.
- Preferential access and/or reduced cost access to physio support.
- Access to advice on diet and nutrition.
- Select a series of, say, four squad get-togethers during the day.
- A trip to a British Milers Club meeting

Longer term aims:

- Isle of Man to dominate middle distance events at the Island Games
- Help an athlete to Commonwealth Games level
- English Schools finalists
- Setting of new Manx Records
- Provide access to good quality coaching

**10. Scope:**

The term Middle Distance is used to describe:

- Track running 800m to 10,000m including steeplechase
- Cross country

It does not include:

- Road running over 10k
- Fell running

**11. Funding:**

I do not believe that this scheme needs massive amounts of funding to establish itself. However, some support would give it a helping hand.

However, through IOM Sports Council funding, monies are available to bring over additional coaching expertise and if justified this should be utilised. This imported knowledge could supplement existing local knowledge and help improve the knowledge of local coaches.

Manx Sports and Recreation have also been approached and indicated informally that support could be given to help with, for example, the costs of hiring a sports hall for a training day.

Funding could be used to finance the establishment of a small reference library. It may also be worth buying squad tee-shirts to help improve identity of those affiliated to the group and develop a sense of belonging.

Over time it may be considered worthwhile to fund a small number of athletes to attend a BMC meeting or training weekend and funding would be needed for this.

Once the squad is established it may be possible to introduce a commercial sponsor of the squad. IOM Swimming has a similar arrangement with the Cherry Orchard Hotel.

**12. Other key points to note:**

The programme is primarily for athletes. However, it is also there to assist coaches and prospective coaches.

Looking towards 2007, the main focus will be on younger athletes. However, athletes of ages will be welcome to join in the activities of the squad.

The programme is not affiliated to any one club. It will operate as part of the IOM AA 5 Year Performance Plan. It will be focused on athletes not clubs.

**13. Measuring success:**

Measuring success is very difficult, as identifying what success is directly attributable to this initiative is impossible. Many of the success may have been achieved anyway. Equally, one very successful athlete could distort the figures.

With this in mind, it is still worthwhile having some targets to strive for as a group. The following are suggested as being reasonable, based upon our earlier experiences.

	<b>2005</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>Gold</b>	1	4
<b>Silver</b>	2	4
<b>Bronze</b>	3	6

Appendix 1 – table to show medals won by IOM athletes in middle distance events in Island Games comparing performance in late 1980s/early 1990s with 2003.

**Men:**

<b>Event</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2003</b>
<b>800m</b>	Silver Bronze	No medals	Bronze	No medals
<b>1500m</b>	Bronze	Silver	Silver	No medals
<b>5000m</b>	Gold Bronze	Gold Bronze	Bronze	No medals
<b>10000m</b>	Gold Silver	Gold Silver	No medals	No medals
<b>3000m steeplechase</b>	Not held	Not held	Bronze	Bronze
<b>Number of medal winning athletes</b>	Five	Four	Three	One

**Women:**

<b>Event</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2003</b>
<b>800m</b>	Gold		Bronze	
<b>1500m</b>	Bronze	Gold	Silver	
<b>3000m/5000m</b>	Gold Bronze	Gold Bronze	Gold	Gold
<b>10000m</b>	Not held	Gold Silver	Not held	Bronze
<b>Number of medal winning athletes</b>	Three	Two	Two	One