

USA Track & Field – Athlete Earnings Study
HOW MUCH MONEY DO TRACK & FIELD ATHLETES ACTUALLY MAKE?
(Jack Wickens, July 2011)

Open up your local newspaper or do a web search and you can easily view the income levels of top professional athletes in baseball, football, basketball, hockey, tennis, golf, etc. Try to find similar data for track & field athletes and you'll pretty much come up empty.

There are many things that cause this lack of public transparency about professional track & field athlete earnings – not the least of which is that the primary source of this income (shoe company sponsors) is negotiated privately with each individual athlete/agent, and the contracts often contain performance trigger points and bonus clauses that add unpredictability to the contract value. Also, sources that are visible, like prize money, are generally too small to generate much public attention.

This “secrecy” may be an inevitable element of our athlete’s “independent contractor” status but in some ways it has not helped advance the sport, has not helped attract young athletes, and has not helped the negotiating leverage of our athletes.

As part of a broader study of our sport’s strengths and weaknesses I took a shot at determining “How much money do T&F athletes actually make?” Some of the data was lifted from the information received by the USATF Foundation from over 250 elite athlete grant applications.....and some of it is based on other soft sources, including interviews with athletes in each event and with sports agents.

The data in the CHARTS below should be viewed as rough estimates, along with recognition that income sources for our athletes fluctuate widely year to year. The inconsistency of the income streams is one of many challenges that are our athletes face. Also, no attempt has been made to factor in the less tangible, but sometimes significant, value associated with training center services, in-kind support (e.g. discounted medical care), and special support programs (e.g. USOC’s health insurance program for top ranked athletes and the USATF Foundation’s free career mentoring and job search assistance programs) that many of our athletes enjoy.

What value can come from transparency about professional track & field athlete income levels?

First, this is a timely topic as the sport debates issues like uniform advertising restrictions. Here are a few possible additional benefits:

> The data could bring clarity to the critical need for our sport to explore business model and branding improvements and/or athlete contractual models that could elevate the sport, “grow the pie”, and enhance income opportunities for our athletes

> The data could inform young athletes and top collegians - and help them make fact-based decisions about their career choices. Today some high potential athletes underestimate the potential of a professional track & field career...and some other athletes futilely pursue professional aspirations that are unrealistic.

> The data could help our athletes approach sponsorship negotiations in a more informed and confident manner

> The data could raise public awareness that:

a) We really are a true professional sport - - many people still perceive Olympic sports as being “amateur”, and

b) Our nation's aspiring Olympians need more support - - we are one of few nations that does not provide government financial support to Olympic sports - - so we are wholly dependent on corporate and private sources

THE ATTACHED CHARTS INCLUDE ESTIMATED RANGES OF “TYPICAL” INCOME LEVELS FOR ATHLETES IN EACH EVENT AND RANKING CATEGORY, AS WELL AS THE SOURCES OF THESE INCOME LEVELS.

Summary of other findings, including “quotes” from some of the athletes/agents I interviewed:

- Our sport has a very steep pyramid of income opportunities. A select few enjoy a very good living...though even they can fall hard in a short period if performance lags or injuries intervene.
- The top variables that affect an athlete’s earnings realization are “world ranking” and “event”. The tables below are organized around these two factors. In addition these variables can effect an athlete’s earnings realization:
 - an athlete’s age and perceived future potential to achieve a lower ranking or win medals;
 - past Olympic or World Championship medals & past USA National titles;
 - the simple but powerful label of ‘Olympian’ for those who have ever achieved this status;
 - charisma/”beauty” & perceived fan engagement skill;
 - agent quality & ability/standing in the industry to solicit offers from multiple shoe sponsors
- There is wide variation across each event and within the highest rankings. **In aggregate though, combining all T&F events:**
 - **Approximately 50% of our athletes who rank in the top 10 in the USA in their event make less than \$15,000 annually from the sport (sponsorship, grants, prize money, etc.) and**
 - **Approximately 20% of our athletes in top 10 in the USA in their event make more than \$50,000 annually.**
 - **Athletes outside of a top 10 USA ranking, other than some sprinters, milers, and distance runners, can expect to face very limited (if any) income support.**

- In general I did not find significant differences between male and female athletes' income amounts at the same ranking levels (but there are exceptions)
- Distance runners generally enjoy the highest earnings opportunities of all T&F events at each USA and World ranking level, due to their endemic sponsors, year-round competitive seasons and due to road racing and it's broad domestic market (and thus the distance events in the TABLES below reflect USA ranking (rather than WORLD ranking). However, the number of athletes who have dedicated themselves to the quest to be a professional distance runner is much greater than for any other event...so the competition for income sources and dilution of earnings opportunities is also greater among distance runners than for any other event grouping.
- "The reductions built into shoe company contracts are steep. The bigger the contract the bigger the reduction. A typical plan is that if an athlete misses a ranking then he/she loses 25% the first year and then 25% or more again the following year if it happens again. There is very little income security aside from top end performances year in and year out. It is not unusual for both Olympic and World Champ finalists in key events to not get re-signed by their company the following year. It is definitely a futures market as everyone pays early on potential, but not on experience. Often a strong new post-collegiate athlete's first contract is the best one they'll get unless they go beyond the expectations of that shoe company."
- "Potential is king"... "it's feast or famine"...there's a narrow pyramid of income opportunity at the top then a sharp drop-off...conundrum about whether to jump at first contract offer or wait 'til performance reaches higher level.
- There's no "minor league" in our sport that provides modest income opportunities and bridges an athlete after college (scholarships, low living expenses) as they strive to make it to the T&F "major league".
- Group Training Centers are critical. The top Centers provide for coaching, training partners, injury support and prevention, and much more. They also facilitate an efficient use of limited sponsor and donated dollars...and are funded today by the USOC, USATF Foundation Distance Project, High Performance Training Center grants, Running USA grant, community and corporate sponsors.
- Talented distance runners today are faced with the tough choice of whether to put primary focus on lower income track & field success (e.g. Olympic and world championship team glory/representation) or higher income road and marathon circuit success.
- USA vs. Foreign Country Athletes? – Some international athletes get support from government-funded programs and stipends. "In some way though, although times are tough for middle class athletes here in the USA, we still remain the envy of the rest of the track world. There is no shoe company sponsor marketplace in the world where a developing athlete gets paid as well as US athletes."

**USA PROFESSIONAL TRACK & FIELD
INCOME STUDY**

- Typical Agent fees are 15%; \$'s shown are pre-tax
- Dollar amounts below reflect total of sponsorship contracts and bonuses, prize money, grants, and stipends. No estimated value is included for part-time job income, career support, health insurance or injury support services, training center services, or tuition grants.

EVENT	World Leaders Name Recognition Stars	Consistent Top 10 in World	Top 10 to 25 in World	Outside Top 25 in the World
Sprints & 400m	\$400K+	\$75 – 200K+	\$10 - 75K	\$0 – 25K
<i>Typical Income Sources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Appearance money, prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Stipends</i> • <i>Access to Olympic Training Center services</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Int'l Competition Grants, Stipends</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Less than 50% have Shoe Contracts(other than gear)</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Foundation Grants</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most get Performance Pool Funding & free USOC Health Insurance</i> • <i>Part-time work is common</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Occasionally sponsored & some gear-only deals</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Foundation Grants</i> • <i>Part-time work is essential</i>

EVENT		World Leaders Name Recognition Stars	Consistent Top 10 in World	Top 10 to 25 in World	Outside Top 25 in the World
Hurdle events, 800m, Decathlon		\$150K+	\$30 – 100K+	\$10 - 50K	\$0 – 15K
	<i>Typical Income Sources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Appearance money, prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Stipends</i> • <i>Access to Olympic Training Center services</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More than 50% have Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Int'l Competition Grants, Stipends</i> • <i>Access to Olympic Training Center coaching & housing</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>About 30% have Shoe Contracts(other than gear)</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Grants</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most get Performance Pool funding & free USOC Health Insurance</i> • <i>Part-time work is common</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rarely sponsored; possibly gear-only</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Foundation Grants</i> • <i>Part-time work is essential</i>

EVENT	World Leaders Name Recognition Stars	Consistent Top 10 in World	Top 10 to 25 in World	Outside Top 25 in the World
Jumps, Throws, Heptathlon	\$100K+	\$20 – 75K+	\$10 – 35K	\$0 – 10K
<i>Typical Income Sources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Appearance money, prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Stipends</i> • <i>Access to Olympic Training Center services</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>About 50% have Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Key Sources: Prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Int'l Competition Grants, Stipends</i> • <i>Access to Olympic Training Center services</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>30% or less have Shoe Contracts(other than gear)</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Foundation Grants</i> • <i>Most get Performance Pool funding & free USOC Health Insurance</i> • <i>Part-time work is common</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rarely sponsored; possibly gear-only</i> • <i>Key Sources – Prize Money & Foundation Grants</i> • <i>Part-time work is essential</i>

EVENT	Consistent Top 10 in World	Top 10 to 25 in World	Consistent Top 5 in USA	Lower Rank
Race Walking	Minimal prize \$	\$0	\$0	\$0

EVENT	World & USA Leaders Name Recognition Stars	Consistent Top 15 in World	Top 5 USA	Top 5- 20 USA	Top 20 to 50 USA
1500m/Miler, Roads	\$300K+	\$150K+	\$70 – 500K+	\$15 – 30K	\$0 – 15K
5K, 10K, Roads	\$250K+	\$120K+	\$60 – 400K+	\$15 – 30K	\$5 – 15K
Marathon	\$400K+	\$200K+	\$100 – 600K+	\$30 – 75K	\$5 – 25K
Steeplechase, Roads	\$100K+	\$80K+	\$15 – 70K+	\$5 – 15K	\$0 – 5K
<i>Typical Income Sources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Secondary Sources: Appearance money, Track & Road Race prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding</i> • <i>Access to Distance Center services & stipends</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Other Sources: Track and Road Race Prize money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding, Int'l Competition Grants</i> • <i>Access to Distance Center services & stipends</i> • <i>Free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shoe Contracts: Base plus bonuses</i> • <i>Other Sources – Track & Road Race Prize Money, USOC/USATF Performance Pool Funding</i> • <i>Access to Distance Center services & stipends</i> • <i>Some get free USOC Health Insurance</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More than 50% have Shoe Contracts</i> • <i>Key Sources – Road Race Prize Money & Grants</i> • <i>Access to Distance Center services & stipends</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>About 25% have Shoe Contracts</i> • <i>Key Sources – Road Race Prize Money & Grants</i> • <i>Some have access to Distance Center services & stipends</i> • <i>Part time work is common</i>