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The Ambivalence of an Innovation: The Creation and Development of the European Cross Country Championships

Abstract

Held for the first time on December 10, 1994, the European Cross Country Championships differ from most of the other international competitions. The context in which they were created, together with the discipline's historiography, make them part of an innovation process. This new championship responded to the need to revitalize cross-country in Europe following European athletes' demotivation for the sport's reference competition, the world championships, largely dominated by East African athletes. Furthermore, the European Cross Country Championships brought to light different forms of ambivalence. On the one hand, they went against the wish of the International Athletic Federation to universalize cross-country by opening it to the rest of the world after it being essentially confined to Europe for over half a century. On the other, their successful appropriation led them to become an objective in their own right for athletes and federations, going beyond the revival project initially intended. Dynamic by nature from the very beginning, the European Cross Country Championships made it ultimately possible to nuance the virtuous perspective often associated with innovation.

Keywords: Innovation – Cross Country – Europe – Athletics – Eviction

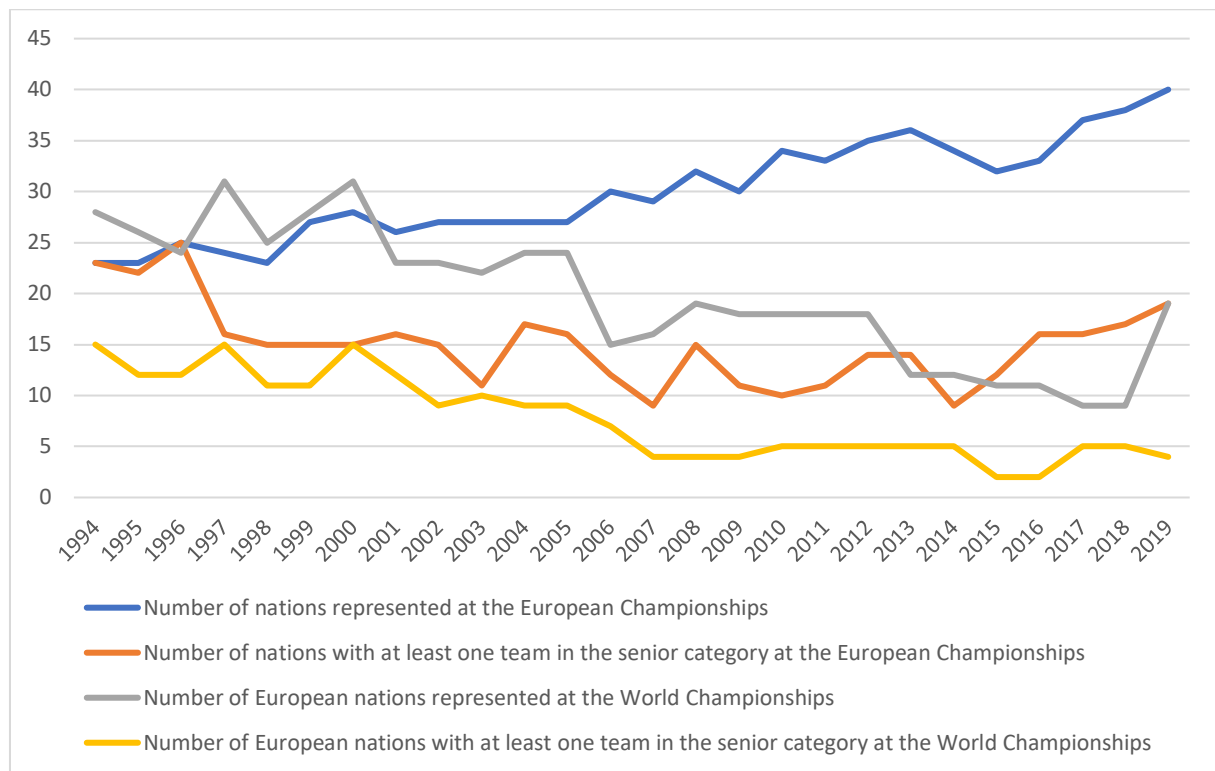
On December 10, 1994, in the shadow of Northumberland's Alnwick Castle in the north-east of England, considered the cradle of the discipline, the Irish Catherina McKiernan and Portuguese Paulo Guerra become the first European cross-country champions.¹ The actors of European athletics promptly acclaimed these new championships (held annually ever since) by gradually veering more towards them than to the sport's benchmark until then, the world championships. East African nations dominated the world championships, which were no longer an opportunity for European athletes to shine in their best light and leading them to lose interest from the 1990s. To tackle this situation and bring the sport back to life on the continent, the European Athletics Association (EAA), supported by several European confederations, created a European cross-country championship 'long requested by a large number of athletes on the continent – most of whom were prominent French runners – all weary of being flooded year after year by an unstoppable black tide at the world encounter'.² The success of the event fitted into a process of innovation, prompted by an emerging need among sports stakeholders and organizations, calling for a creative solution.³ The steady appropriation of this new competition, which was both top-down (started by sports institutions) and bottom-up (spurred by the attitudes of actors in the field), finally transformed the organization of cross-country on a world scale.⁴

At first sight, however, the establishment of a European championship was not a matter of innovation. It was in line with the decades-long event dynamic of most other sports disciplines, aimed at supporting their development and attractiveness. European sports organizations set up most European competitions in the 1950s, even though some of them organized them earlier (as were those for swimming since 1889, and basketball since 1935).⁵ The IAAF European committee, which became the EAA in 1970, established the European track and field championships as early as 1934.⁶ The EAA created the European cross-country championships at a time when many continental events were emerging, operating as

springboards for boosting a particular audience while at the same time participating in the development strategy of sports organizations, such as the European Youth Olympic Festival launched in 1991 by Jacques Rogge.⁷ These events contributed to the shaping of the identity of the European Union (EU), which was in the process of being built, while the reunified continent was in a process of reorganization.⁸ Looking at the concept of innovation from the angle of historical epistemology, the event was therefore less of a total innovation than a reinvention or updating of the past.⁹ Neither was the format of the competition innovative in nature, mirroring the world championships as it did, with one day of races over different distances for each category concerned.

French press archives and institutional reports of French, European and international athletics federations however reveals that the case of the European cross-country championships is unusual, judging by the historiography of the discipline and the context in which they arose.¹⁰ There was, at the time, a certain tension in European and world institutions, related to a pull between the wish to universalize athletics through cross-country and the need to preserve the commitment of overtaken European athletes on a sporting level. Although the intention was to revive cross-country on the old continent, the European cross-country championships soon overtook the world championships (Graph 1). The reflection of a 'creative destruction', they revealed the systemic effects of innovation, excluding non-European actors without necessarily furthering the initially envisaged revival of European cross-country.¹¹ Considering this competition from the angle of innovation thus casts doubt on the strictly positive view often associated with the word, showing its potential downside for both the actors who were excluded and the institutions behind its creation.¹² Such a critical view differs from previous studies, evoking the European cross-country championships and their link with African domination in a more descriptive manner.¹³ At the same time, it contributes to the nuancing of the virtues associated to the notion of innovation.

Graph 1: Participation of European nations in world and European cross-country championships since 1994



From a universalist perspective to a demotivating vulnerability: When cross-country escaped from Europe (1973-1992)

Understanding the ambivalence of the European cross country championships as part of an innovation process requests to look first at the historiography of cross-country, in particular at the stages of its institutionalization. According to Marx’s ‘wheel of history’ concept, such an approach highlights the context in which the EAA created the European cross country championships, as a step backward for the discipline despite the process of internationalization of cross country that had begun.

In 1903, nine years before the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) was founded, British nations created the first international cross-country federation (International Cross Country Union – ICCU), simultaneously introducing the international cross-country championships.¹⁴ Consisting of just four nations at the time (England, Scotland, Wales and

Ireland), the influence of the federation, like that of the championships it organized, was restricted to Great Britain.¹⁵ Opened to France in 1907, the competition gathered only members from western Europe for a long time. After becoming independent, Tunisia, then Morocco and Algeria, were the first non-European countries to officially join the closed circle of ICCU members and their international championship. Athletes from the Maghreb, however, participated in French colours. South Africa, the United States, New Zealand and later Canada joined the organization in the 1960s.¹⁶ The brief incursion of cross-country in the Olympic Games from 1912 to 1924, together with the Inter-Allied Games in 1919, allowed athletes not taking part in the ICCU international championship to compete at world level.¹⁷ Thus, Scandinavian runners, particularly prominent thanks to the Finns who then dominated the middle distance, as well as Belgian, Italian, Spanish, American, South African, and Brazilian competitors, took part in the Olympic cross-country events alongside the nations represented by the ICCU.¹⁸ Albeit open to a few nations outside Europe, the ICCU and international cross-country championships remained largely under West European influence. The venues of the championships bear witness to this. Prior to the First World War, the competition took place exclusively in the United Kingdom and France, before then taking place in Belgium and the Irish Republic in the interwar years, and in Spain and Portugal after the Second World War. The ICCU international championships did not leave Europe until 1966, when they were held in Morocco. There was no question at the time of setting up a European championship, given that the ICCU members opposed the proposal of dividing the international championships into various continental competitions.¹⁹

Fired since 1953 by the desire to develop athletics, including cross-country, on a larger scale, the IAAF eventually replaced the ICCU in 1971 as organizer of the world competition from 1973 onwards.²⁰ Although the ICCU disbanded after the IAAF took over cross-country, the IAAF at first maintained its restrictive policy, giving priority to teams (essentially from

former ICCU member countries) rather than individual athletes.²¹ While it reaffirmed its opposition to the establishment of a continental championship, the IAAF's Cross-Country Commission, created in 1960 in conjunction with the ICCU, did not recommend holding a true world cross-country championship.²² The IAAF first renamed the competition Cross Country Team Championships, before gradually opening it up to all its members before making room for individual participation.²³ In 1984, the IAAF officially named the competition the IAAF World Cross Country Championship.²⁴

During the 1970s European influence was, nevertheless, still significant. The International Federation only once held the competition outside the old continent in the decade following its return, namely in Rabat in 1975. Until the early 1980s, western European nations ran an eminently European world cross-country, in both institutional and sports terms.²⁵ Well accustomed to European hegemony, the IAAF Cross Country Commission's report showed no surprise after the 1979 event, held in Glasgow in difficult conditions:

It was therefore no surprise that the Northern European nations fared well, with England clear winners on 119 points. An unprecedented crowd of 20000, largely bolstered by a vociferous contingent of Irishmen, roared the host nation to a remarkable second place (198 points) just ahead the USSR (210 points). No doubt spurred on by his fellow countrymen, John Tracey (Eire) retained his title in fine style, breaking away to a clear victory early in the race.²⁶

The following year, the French Athletics Federation organized the world championships. England held on to its title at the Paris-Longchamp hippodrome, beating an American team headed by Craig Virgin, the first non-European athlete to take the first place individually in the men's competition after a 'thrilling sprint finish'.²⁷ While the United States began challenging European hegemony at the end of the 1970s, with victories such as that of Craig Virgin in 1980 and the American women's team in 1975 and 1979, the entry of Ethiopia and Kenya into the

competition in 1981 quickly and irreversibly put an end to European supremacy in world cross-country.

From its first appearance in 1981, Ethiopia won first place in the men's long-run team event organized by the IAAF. It missed victory in the individual event, no doubt due to a tactical error in counting the laps (six Ethiopian runners leading the race accelerated too early). Craig Virgin eventually won the race, sprinting past the Ethiopian Mohamed Kedir.²⁸ The following year, Ethiopia consolidated its dominance in the male events, winning the individual and team events in both junior and senior categories until 1985. From 1986, Kenya started to make its mark on the competition, sharing most titles and medals with Ethiopia and holding first place in the men's long-run team event for 18 consecutive seasons. Kenya's superiority reached such a point that, at the Budapest events in 1994, Kenyan athletes brought home seven of the overall eight titles (both individual and team, junior and senior).²⁹

In 1987, Gabriel Erckelbout, treasurer of the French Athletics Federation (FFA) and member of the IAAF Congress, seemed resigned to 'the invincible Africans from Kenya and Ethiopia', despite Annette Sergent becoming world champion and Paul Arpin clinching third place in the same year.³⁰ Notwithstanding the East African pre-eminence in the discipline, France still managed to hold its head high in the world cross-country championships in the late 1980s, regularly securing a spot on the podium. Member of the FFA's Steering Committee, Monique Marmion was pleased, following the 1989 world events in Auckland, that 'for over four years, French cross-country has garnered 11 medals in the world championships, a remarkable achievement'.³¹ Reports of the IAAF's Cross Country and Road-Running Commission, published in the FFA journal, nevertheless regularly referred to 'African superiority'.³² In the wake of the 1990 World Championships, held in Aix-les-Bains in France, the French runners sank into a sense of inferiority. Indeed, the 'blatant underperformance of the French team' tainted the Aix-les-Bains championships, which the IAAF deemed 'excellent' on

the organizational plan.³³ Just as with England, this disappointment was for both the women's and the men's teams, who were far from gaining the expected positions on the podium. The next year, after the world championships in Anvers, Jacques Chanéac lamented how the French team had been unable to climb back after 'its poor performance at the 1990 world event'.³⁴ This 'poor performance' contrasted with Kenya's success: 'Eighteen out of twenty-four medals won, four out of four titles for team events (all snapped up by Kenya) as well as seven out of the eight individual titles. The African continent has clearly once again thrashed its competitors at the 1991 Cross Country World Championships. Anvers has fully confirmed Aix'.³⁵ In spite of 'the admirable silver medal' earned by the men's French team 'behind untouchable Kenya' at the Boston world contest two years earlier, the journalist's comments were once again fatalistic after the East Africans' domination at the 1994 World Championships in Budapest.³⁶ Francis Magois, also a journalist for *Athlétisme* magazine, finally revealed 'the gulf that had opened between the Kenyan and European senior runners' to illustrate a difference in the sporting level that he believes will hardly be bridged.³⁷

Faced with the 'Kenyan steamroller', French runners, like those in other European federations, seemed to lose interest in the world championships, gradually participating less in the competition.³⁸ As Yves Pinaud observed, 'European countries, apart from Spain, Portugal, Italy, the United Kingdom, France and the Benelux group, now show hardly any interest in cross-country'.³⁹ Thierry Pantel, leader of the French team that became the world runners-up in Boston, gave his honest opinion about the dominance of the Kenyan athletes: 'Well, it's true that seeing these guys so far ahead of us is a pain in the ass. And a ninth or a seventeenth rank, or an unofficial European podium, doesn't change anything. Only connoisseurs know what they mean, the others just laugh'.⁴⁰ Thierry Pantel pointed out a lack of recognition even more damaging given that the status of athletes has become more professional. Athletes are now caught up in ever growing commercial concerns. This is a consequence of the process of

professionalization that the IAAF began in the late 1960s and accelerated in the 1980s under the presidency of Primo Nebiolo. The Italian leader intended to ensure the autonomy and sovereignty of the IAAF by responding to external constraints (introduction of financial flows through external promoters, reform of the Olympic movement, emergence of competing institutions) while increasing the revenue generated for his federation.⁴¹ This economical context forced athletes, now dependent on partners who would bring in revenue, to sustain their visibility. This issue carried much more weight while companies supported numerous competitions brought under the umbrella of the IAAF, like the IAAF/*Mobile* meeting circuit launched in 1985.⁴² With European athletes withdrawing from the world cross country championships, European companies were more reticent to provide support for a competition from which they could no longer benefit given the dominance of African athletes.⁴³

The internationalization process of cross-country, supported by its recuperation by the IAAF, disrupted the actors and institutions in European athletics. As the EAA saw its actors leaving the competitions in the face of seemingly unsurmountable adversity, a situation of vulnerability became evident.⁴⁴ The precariousness inherent in the situation of European cross-country runners, associated with expanding commercial concerns, spurred the European institution to adapt so that its own sportspeople would remain active. The establishment of the European cross-country championships thus integrated a process of innovation responding to the economic and sports vulnerability that had taken shape.

A new competition to reboot cross-country in Europe (1992-2008)

Faced with the European demobilization at the world championships, the EAA decided to launch the European cross country championships in 1992, in order to generate a renewed interest in cross-country running among European athletes. European actors eventually welcomed this new competition, sometimes after some reluctance. This acceptance

supported a successful appropriation process. However, the European cross country championships did not allow European athletes to play leading roles in the world championships again, as initially envisaged. This contributes to nuancing the scope of the innovation presented.

The reports of the EAA councils and IAAF congresses speak little of the grounds for the decision to set up European cross-country championships, voted in 1992 at the EAA Special Congress in Prague.⁴⁵ The main mention is the reference to ‘the importance of this future event for the development of European distance running’.⁴⁶ However, the magazines documenting the words of federal managers are more explicit.⁴⁷ Pierre Dasriaux, President of the FFA’s Bylaws and Regulations Committee and Treasurer of the EAA (after being its secretary general for nearly twenty years) gave this explanation for creating a continental championship:

The idea of a European championship arose from a certain resentment among European teams following their results in the world championships due to the dominance of athletes from other continents. Judging by the athletes’ comments, there seemed to be a need to find a competition where European runners could compete against each other.⁴⁸

Against this background, the EAA’s inauguration of the European Cross Country Championship on December 10, 1994, may be interpreted as a way to keep East African adversity, deemed too competitive, at a distance, thus allowing Europeans to compete among themselves for the first places and, *in fine*, remain active and motivated. Proof that innovation is sometimes born of imitation and eviction, this form of organizational resilience taken in its contextual dimension is reminiscent of the creation of the white world boxing championship introduced in the USA in the early twentieth century.⁴⁹ This championship enabled white boxers to fight each other for a world title, at the time considered inaccessible due to black athletes’ domination in the discipline.⁵⁰ Just as the international authorities in charge of boxing at the

beginning of the 1900s, the EAA resorted to a strategy of retreat underpinned by racial prejudice regarding East African athletes. Although skin colour was not openly mentioned, the managers of European athletics idealized East African athletes, endowing them with a natural advantage considered unfair, at the root of a gaping chasm that was impossible to cross and prompted them to take such a decision.⁵¹ East Africa's stranglehold on world cross-country threatened the European roots of the discipline, leading nations of the old continent to beat a retreat. Cross-country once again enclosed itself within Europe, just over 20 years after the IAAF replaced the ICCU to open it up to the world.

While certain athletes and sports managers saw this new competition as an opportunity to revive European cross-country, or simply more medals and the revenue associated with them, implementing it met with some resistance. By breaking away from the dynamics of the universalization of cross-country fostered since the 1970s and interfering with a competition calendar revolving around the world championships, the European championships, like any new beginning, played havoc with the established order.⁵² Among others, the FFA's magazine highlighted this after the second edition:

Rarely has a competition been so challenged at its outset than the European cross-country championships. They are still weighed down by two handicaps: firstly, their scheduling at the start of the season and, secondly, their image as ersatz event of the world championships and the "chance to win a prize" for Europeans not good enough to beat the Africans.⁵³

Although various actors of French athletics debated on the second 'handicap', holding the continental event in December, which incurred an injunction from the IAAF in an attempt to avoid the competition clashing with the championships it held in March, was a cause for concern for FFA managers.⁵⁴ Moreover, the increase in the number of international competitions does not only pose a problem of scheduling. At the same moment, the European

Handball Federation launched the European handball championships, which generated similar tensions, with some French managers concerned that an increasingly busy calendar could be harmful to the sporting discipline.⁵⁵

Despite this resistance, the new European competition went down well with most French cross-country runners. One of these, Thierry Pantel, was however reticent one year before the first edition, lamenting a situation which ‘does not let anyone make progress’.⁵⁶ This runner-up in the world team event in 1992 nonetheless conceded to the federation journal, a few months before the inauguration of the European competition, that ‘the European cross-country championships open up new perspectives’.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the then young hope of French middle-distance running, Mustapha Essaïd, announced in 1995 that ‘This season, my aim is to win the European cross-country championships. For the moment, the Ethiopians and Kenyans are unbeatable but we shouldn’t be discouraged – we should do our very best to improve’.⁵⁸ Without giving up all prospects on a world scale, the European competition was, in this respect, a more accessible goal for French athletes. Its success lay in the fact that athletes and their federations appropriated it and gave it meaning, granting it the status of innovation in both sports and economic terms.⁵⁹ A ‘pivotal moment’ in the innovation process, such an appropriation phase leads to consumers’ awareness of using something new.⁶⁰ Frequently associated with innovation before sociology took hold of the concept in the mid-1900s, invention, similarly to imitation, thus becomes a step in a more complex innovation process, taking on board the individual and collective effects of something new.⁶¹ The athletes’ initially negative perception of the creation of a European cross-country championship shifted as institutions put aside their vague universalist intentions. The journal *Athlétisme* showed interest in this new competition, as did that of the FFA by virtue of its status as federation journal. It gave over its *Une* feature space, as well as several pages, to the first European cross-country championships, where the French won two team medals, along with Portugal, Spain, and

Romania. Although only European countries took part, the spectre of Kenyan runners hovered over the journal's reports, which mentioned for example that 'the Portuguese ran a Kenyan-style race to win the two men's titles at Alnwick'.⁶² Such a comment discloses both the difficulty of totally dismissing the world reference nation, and the desire to give credibility to the performance of European champions.

The rising success of the European cross-country championships spurred progress on both the economic and organizational front. While the first two editions were held at Alnwick in England, the only candidate venue, the following competitions saw greater enthusiasm, prompting the EAA Council to assess several candidatures.⁶³ A partnership with the Council of Northumberland, where the event was held, essentially funded the first two editions broadcasted on the BBC.⁶⁴ From the third edition, held in Charleroi, the EAA's partners, headed by the SPAR supermarket chain whose name is still part of the competition's official designation, became partners of *SPAR European Cross Country Championships*.⁶⁵ Likewise, the EAA asked the *European Broadcasting Union*, its partner for the televised broadcasting of the European competitions, to cover the European cross-country championships.⁶⁶ This also illustrates the aforementioned privatization at work in athletics. From the end of the 1970s, taking into account the revenue generated by TV rights and partners thus became a central issue in the organization of the IAAF's new competitions.⁶⁷ At the same time (from the end of the 1960s onwards), the EAA became independent of the IAAF, based on the revenue generated by the continental events it organized, before becoming professional in its turn at the end of the 1980s.⁶⁸ The political context in Europe in the 1990s enhanced this process of professionalization: the EAA had to reorganize itself following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the USSR, increasing its membership from 35 to 48, while at the same time dealing with the institutionalization of sport initiated by the EU.⁶⁹ The success of the various events it organized during the 1990s, in particular the European cross-country championships, enabled the EAA to

achieve a sound financial basis 'thanks to TV and marketing agreements'.⁷⁰ These sources of income enabled the European federation to overcome the economic repercussions of the financial difficulties of most of its members, which are suffering from competition from other sports on television, and especially from the new national federations in Eastern Europe.⁷¹ The *European Broadcasting Union*, main source of revenue for the EAA, therefore revealed pivotal for setting the date of the European cross-country championships.⁷² From the fourth edition of the European cross-country championships, held in Oeiras (Portugal), the EAA included men's and women's races for the under-20s, followed by races for the under-23s as of 2006, thus fostering a steady growth in the number of participants.

Although the European championships were an opportunity for European athletes to compete against each other, the distance from the world championships, which remained 'the absolute reference', still weighed heavily.⁷³ Francis Magois ruefully commented that 'the two team places on the podium won by the French at Alnwick last season, while ratifying the value of French cross-country, did not carry much clout compared to the world championship'.⁷⁴ These mixed emotions pervaded the FFA from the very creation of the European championships. On one hand, the institution congratulated itself on the good results of the French at European level yet, on the other, it was well aware of the huge gap separating it from the East African athletes in world cross-country events. As early as 1992, the coach of the Kenyan national team, Mike Kosgei, criticized the plan to create European cross-country championships, and the reduction in the number of Kenyan runners participating in European cross-country races: 'Running in Europe allows us to improve for international competitions. For the Europeans, I don't see much point in running with lesser runners to say: I am the best if there is no one against me'.⁷⁵ The consequences of this creation proved therefore to be ambiguous. In any event, the innovation was far from redeeming the sport and being unanimously welcomed for its virtues.

Since the first edition at the end of 1994, the organization of the European cross country championships improved on the economic and participation levels, thus establishing the event on the European athletic calendar. Faced with persistent difficulties at the world cross country championships, this appropriation phase evolved. While the aim was initially to give a new boost to European athletes in world cross-country, the European championships gradually became an end in themselves.

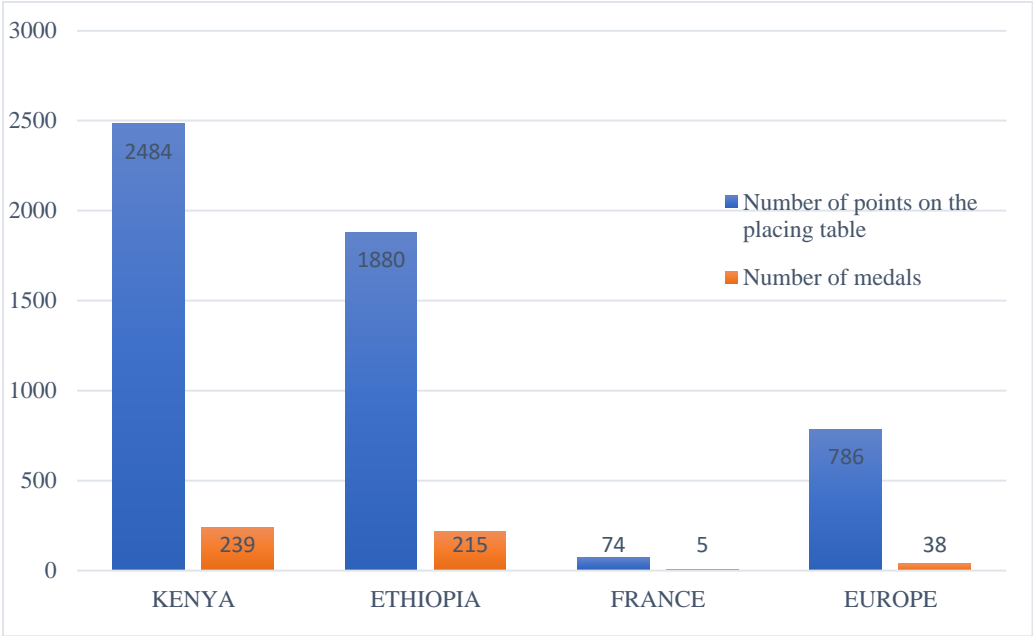
The continuation of the appropriation process: A readjustment of the original aim (2008-2021)

Failing to achieve success at world level, the European federations concentrated on the continental level, continuing to leave the World Cross Country Championships behind. The lower participation of European nations in the world championships led the IAAF to modify the athletic calendar by reducing the impact of the world cross-country championships, and cross-country running in general. The process of innovation in which the European cross-country championships take place is thus leading to the alteration of the benchmark international cross-country competition.

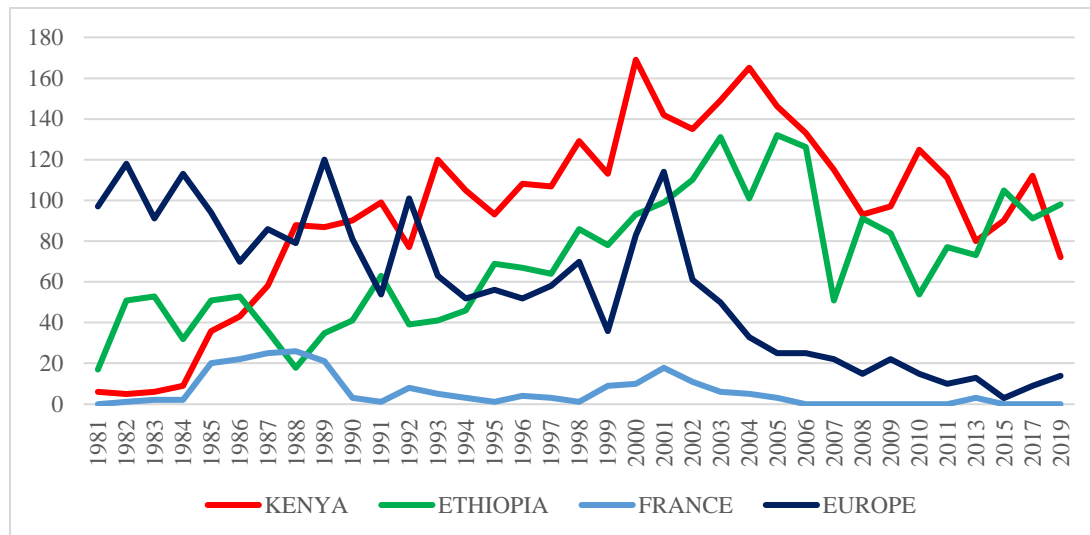
Created to respond to the waning interest of European athletes in the world championships, the European cross-country championships achieved their goal from the EAA's point of view, namely that of reviving cross-country on the old continent. The European Athletics Association congratulated itself in 2003, affirming that 'the introduction of the SPAR European Cross Country Championships in 1994 has no doubt helped to develop European long-distance and cross-country races, and several European successes in the IAAF world championships over the past few years are clear indicators that this was the right decision'.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, while France and its neighbours managed to distinguish themselves in this new competition, its existence did not necessarily mean the progress of European cross-

country given that East African athletes held on to their hegemony at the world championships (Graph 2). What was worse, European federations distinguished themselves less and less at such events⁷⁷ (Graph 3). Arising from an institutional response that could be seen as one of resignation, the European championships were, in reality, only a step towards a wider process of avoiding East African nations.

Graph 2: Number of points on the placing table and of medals won by Kenya, Ethiopia, France, and Europe at the world cross-country championships between 1995 and 2019 (source: calculation of points based on world championship results)



Graph 3: Trends in the number of points on the placing table for Kenya, Ethiopia, France and Europe at world cross-country championships from 1981 to 2019 (source: calculation of points based on world championship results)



The FFA overwhelmingly supported the European cross-country championships which had produced good results for the French teams. In the years following its creation, they have won at least one medal a year. The Federation even congratulated itself after the 2008 European championships: ‘France is a leading nation in this discipline and our athletes’ results bode well for an extremely encouraging future’.⁷⁸ The performances achieved at European level, however, did not suffice to forget the difficulties encountered by the French teams at world level. Despite occasional top performances by French teams in the world championships, the managing bodies of the FFA still regularly highlight difficulties for competing against African athletes. Four years after the creation of the event, Gilles Van Kote reported in the Magazine *Athletisme* the ideas of Richard Descoux (French National Technical Director, DTN in French), who seemed to lose sight of the aim of shining on the world stage, preferring to settle for a European title deemed sufficiently prestigious:

More and more European countries are reaching the same conclusion as we are, in other words that Africa has a stranglehold on the world championships and that Europe needs to withdraw to its starting blocks and find the confidence to set off again [...] When you see the high number of teams present in Italy you

can only be glad: the European title is becoming more firmly rooted every year and has now achieved a true value in sport.⁷⁹

The following month, for the first time in its history, France did not present a senior team for the long cross-country races at the world championships in Belfast, consolidating the DTN's view.

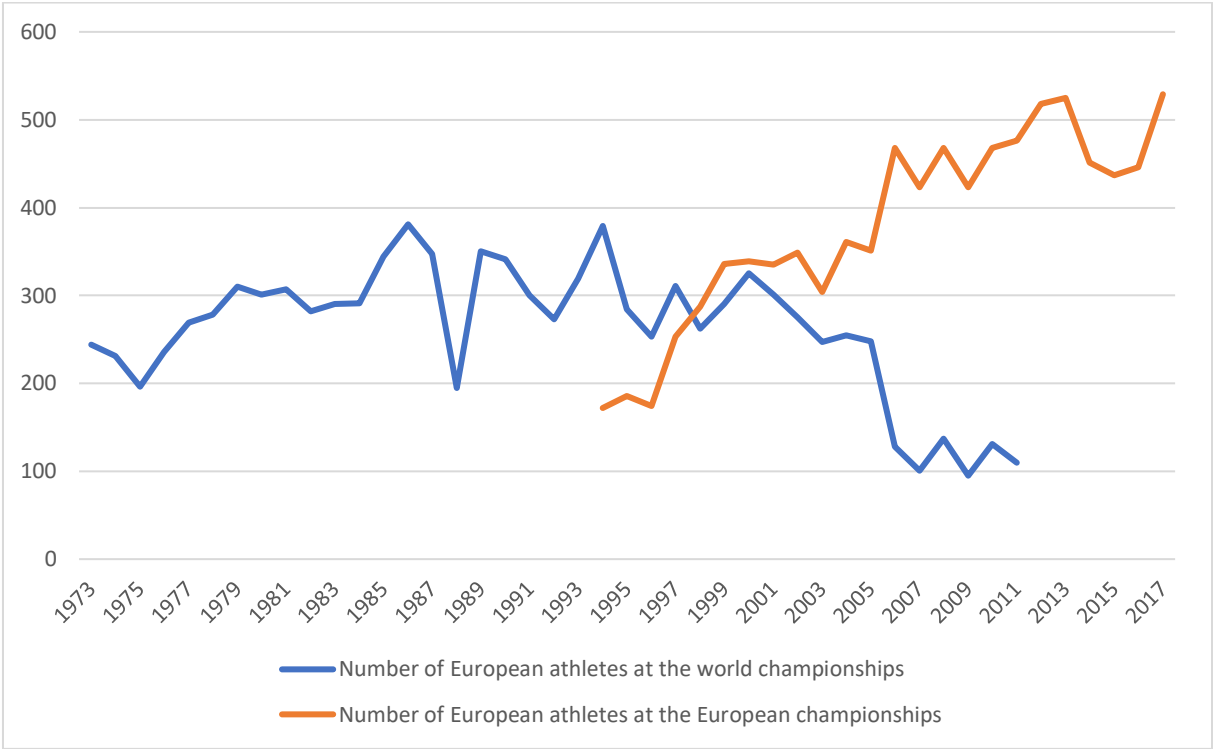
This trend of prioritizing the European competition became more marked in the following years. After the 2003 world events in Lausanne, the FFA observed that 'the twelve gold medals once again went to Ethiopia and Kenya, and this has a demoralizing side'.⁸⁰ At the same time, a vice-president of the FFA, Pierre-Yvon Lenoir, remonstrated: 'With the dominance of the African countries, which will doubtless continue, these world cross-country championships were a sorry spectacle'.⁸¹ In view of these reservations, DNT Robert Poirier was aware that 'the problem of world cross-country should be examined, and proposals made to the IAAF' amid a clearly felt need for change.⁸² The same year, FFA Treasurer, Christian Rogemans, put forward the idea of adding value to the European cross-country championships by including bonuses for French athletes participating in them.⁸³ Once again, the institutional will to promote the European competition at the expense of the world event was plain to see. A confirmation occurred three years later, when the FFA President, Bernard Amsalem, reported that 'the World Championships in Fukuoka (Japan) were, as always, of a high level. Finishing in the top thirty could be considered a feat. Although the FFA recorded individual successes, there was cause for disappointment in the team results. It is increasingly evident that there is no collective strategy. We should only enter individuals in these world championships'.⁸⁴ Similarly felt by other nations from the old continent, this new lack of interest in the world competition was apparent in the reports of the EAA and the IAAF's Cross Country Committee, which pointed out 'the glaring absence of some great European federations' from the world cross-country championships.⁸⁵ These sentiments sounded like a logical outcome of the

European federations' retreat to the European cross-country championships. While it had injected new life into European cross-country, this geographically restricted event did not enable athletes from the old continent to put new wind in their sails and progress to the world championships, just as Mustapha Essaïd had anticipated 10 years earlier. The inability to explain the performance of the Kenyan athletes, even the refusal to be inspired by them, finally led European federations to give up any ambition for the progress of their athletes, although an inherent quality of competitive sport, as they took refuge in the European championships.

Resigned on the sports front, European and international federations chose to adapt institutionally, challenging the sports success of the African countries with the Western hegemony on world sports organizations inherited from colonial times.⁸⁶ European federations then coupled the appropriation of the European championships with a form of alliance with the international federation. This extension of the network aimed to restrict the scope of the world championships. The actors of European athletics transformed the original innovation which became dynamic, less rigid than the diffusionist paradigm of innovation would suggest and more representative of successful innovations.⁸⁷ A procedural approach makes it possible to move away from the initial project, to grasp the whole scope of the innovation through the progression of the appropriations made by the networks of actors who take it up.⁸⁸ Following the 'great domination of the East African countries' at the Brussels World Cross Country Championships in 2008 (22 out of 24 possible medals), the FFA Steering Committee highlighted again the demotivation of European athletes, including the French.⁸⁹ Franck Chevallier, the National Technical Director, stressed that 'a limited delegation was sent due to the particular setting of this competition compounded by the incoherence of the international competition calendar for the Europeans'.⁹⁰ The minutes of the main decision-making body of the French Federation stated that 'the IAAF is meeting to discuss the problem of cross-country in Europe since, like France, other European countries are entering fewer and fewer athletes in

these championships’. The participation of the European nations in the world cross-country events had effectively become far less frequent than in the European championships (Graph 4). At the 2008 World Cross Country Championships, albeit held in Europe (Edinburgh), just 14 European nations were represented, only six of which presented a full team for one of the four events in the programme. In the same year, 34 nations, including 22 full teams, took part in the European Cross Country Championships in Brussels.⁹¹

Graph 4: Number of European athletes participating in world and European cross-country championships



This situation led the International Athletics Federation and its large majority of European representatives, in turn, to place the East African athletes at a distance.⁹² After setting up a working group on the cross-country issue, the IAAF Cross Country Commission observed a few months later: ‘Despite the fact that the IAAF Cross Country Championships are still one of the most exciting distance running events in the world, cross-country in general has to face stagnation or little development in several areas in the world’.⁹³ On the basis of this report, the IAAF Congress unanimously voted to hold the world cross country championships, until then

an annual event, every other year.⁹⁴ This contrasted sharply with the perception of cross-country as a ‘flourishing branch of athletics’, as the International Federation put it in the early 1980s.⁹⁵ The IAAF Congress justified this change by establishing alternate years with the continental championships, which were to be held in the years without world championships. This pragmatic argument at heart seemed to dissimulate an institutional wish to limit the impact of East African nations, as witnessed by the current competition calendar. In fact, while the IAAF, following its decision, organized world cross country championships every other year since 2011, alternating with the half-marathon championships, the EAA still held the European championships annually. This inconsistency with the initial decision of the IAAF reflects the choice of the European federations to turn inward, giving priority to the European competition while omitting the African nations. The struggle of international sports organizations to preserve European hegemony at the institutional or sporting level against African nations is not a new phenomenon. It affects other sports, such as football. However, while European federations strive to preserve their influence over the FIFA World Cup, the innovation presented here is characterized by a retreat to the continental level leading to the sacrifice of international competitions of reference.⁹⁶

Although it injected new life into European athletes, the approach taken went against the essentially positive image associated with innovation in sport.⁹⁷ While such innovation sometimes has inclusive virtues, or revitalizing ones as in the case studied, it can also prove exclusive and divisive. Similarly to the situation in other non-European areas, the East African federations had little to gain from the IAAF’s decision; African competitions had difficulty attracting the best athletes of the continent to gain greater recognition.⁹⁸ Moreover, the international institution has not taken a decision to solve the problem of the lack of interest of European federations in the world event. In 2010, the FFA once again questioned the relevance of entering French teams in the world cross-country championships, while the IAAF’s Cross

Country Committee bemoaned a participation of European nations ‘still greatly inferior to the participation in the European championships’.⁹⁹ Bernard Amsalem, FFA President, again observed that ‘Europe has difficulty competing against East African athletes and this is particularly true for French athletes. Against this background, the Technical Director (DTN) must ponder the presence of French teams at the world cross-country championships’.¹⁰⁰ For the first time in its history, the FFA did not field a full team in the various races of the World Cross Country Championships in Punta Umbria, Spain, the following year.

Enjoying a certain success among European athletes, and despite its lack of resonance at world level, the process acquired legitimacy, allowing it to continue and spread to other long-distance running disciplines. In 2004, following the world half-marathon championships, whose Africans dominate the men’s race since its creation in 1992, National Technical Director Robert Poirier remarked that ‘refocusing on continental competitions seems desirable’, adding ‘it is, however, necessary to think about the future of our participation at world level due to African dominance’.¹⁰¹ Bernard Amsalem replied that ‘the AEA has become aware of this problem. Currently there are no European half-marathon championships. That discussion is to come’.¹⁰² While the continental half-marathon competition would not take place until the 2016 European Championships in Amsterdam, the IAAF imposed a change of frequency which also hit the world road-race. Since 2009, the IAAF organized the world half-marathon championships, previously organized every year, every other year, alternating with world cross country. The various institutions once again chose avoidance in response for East African dominance. Placed in a vulnerable situation, these institutions chose to limit the encounters with their competitors. They chose hostile solutions, mutilating the ideals to which they usually adhere, reacting frantically to the East African pre-eminence. European Federations, as well as the IAAF, have largely avoided this sovereignty instead of accepting it and using it as a potential fulcrum for improving sports performance. The account of the seminar on the cross-country

race held in Belgrade in 2013, following the persistent difficulties in attracting athletes to the competition, begins, however, by addressing the matter of East African dominance:

The success of East African nations can be explained by their lifestyle and their intense training, according to the trainers present. Experts have said the same thing, explaining that there is no evidence to support the theory of the genetic and physiological advantages of East Africans.¹⁰³

While the first phrase suggests a distancing from the widespread determinist discourse on the ideology of the gift, often used to explain the performance of the African athletes, the second, on the other hand, attests to its vitality, as IAAF officials promptly turned to this hypothesis to understand the East African success and solve the difficulties faced by world cross-country.¹⁰⁴

In connection with the beliefs concerning the ideology of the gift, started by the press and regularly echoed by federation managers, the measures establishing the institutional framework of cross-country taken since the mid-1990s confirm that ‘in sport, popular beliefs about race and racism have had a major impact on the way in which sport is organized, conceived and understood’.¹⁰⁵ The European federations finally responded to the sports dominance imposed upon them by resorting to institutional dominance, using their decision-making power to lift them out of the ‘small’ status implacably attributed to them. Thus, the description of this innovation process must reflect the ambivalence it has generated by going against the values defended by the Olympic movement.

The importance of looking at both sides of innovation

Created to revitalize European cross-country, which had been made vulnerable by what European athletics players considered insurmountable East African competition, implying an obviously unbearable sporting relegation, the European cross-country championships could be seen as an innovation by eviction. While some authors founded innovation through

withdrawal on detachment from elements considered to have no use, sometimes including human ones, the notion of eviction is more appropriate in the case of the European cross-country championships.¹⁰⁶ Adding itself to an already busy calendar, this competition was not so much based on retreat as on the reconfiguration of a group *inter se*, leaving out most of the world's elite distance runners. Such a positioning from European Federations and the IAAF entailed several ambivalences allowing to nuance the virtuous perspective of innovation.

Certain features of social innovation characterize these European championships, by responding to a need for socio-economic recognition.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, they enabled athletes to continue to commit to cross-country running and allowed federations to preserve this discipline on the old continent. Their appropriation has widened the innovation process, progressing from an initially European scale to a worldwide one, with repercussions not only on the world cross-country championships, but also the half-marathon, through the IAAF. Faced with the outstanding performance of East African – in particular Kenyan – athletes, the various institutions in charge of the governance of athletics at different levels (FFA, EAA and IAAF) opted for a strategy of avoidance as weak resilience. In fact, the federations have undertaken changes in the calendar of international competitions with the aim of either excluding (in the case of the European cross-country championships) or reducing (by holding the world cross country championships every two years) the impact of East African nations for the benefit of western ones. However, putting oneself in the shoes of the non-European nations, especially the African ones, is enough to see the limits of the social scope of this innovation. Despite a process of reappropriation by the stakeholders and sports organizations, who gave meaning to the new innovation leading to the revival of European cross-country, the innovation was out of line with the inclusive and humanistic dimensions usually associated with social innovation.¹⁰⁸ The choices made tended towards simply omitting African athletes rather than endeavouring to understand the reasons for their exceptional performance and being inspired by them.

The situation became even more peculiar when certain European federations benefitted from being bolstered, sometimes significantly, by African athletes, allowing them to shine on the continental scale. Several countries won medals in the European cross-country championships with the support of athletes of African origin.¹⁰⁹ Turkey is a particularly good example of this, bringing home four individual medals and two team ones in the 2016 elite races thanks to naturalized athletes of Kenyan origin, as part of a dynamic of naturalization of talent from a diplomatic perspective.¹¹⁰ The ‘marketization of citizenship’ in Turkish sports policy breaks with the dominant trend of nationality swapping, suggesting a link (birth, marriage or residence) between the athlete and the host country.¹¹¹ Sometimes compared to a form of ‘talent theft’, the naturalization of African athletes went totally against the original innovation, as countries benefitted from the support of these athletes in a championship originally designed to exclude them.¹¹² This situation marked a new development in the appropriation process. Certain European federations envisaged a reconnection between the European and world networks so they could shine on the continental scale, losing sight of the initial aspiration to inject new energy into European athletics. Like the UEFA football area, the European athletic area – not to say the athletic area as conceived by European leaders from a Eurocentric perspective – thus appears to be an ‘imagined community’.¹¹³ These borders fluctuate according to the interests of the member federations, whether it is a question of integrating non-European nations in a development perspective or of putting African athletes more or less at a distance.

The innovation process studied furthermore reveals the ambivalence of the Olympic Movement which cherishes the ‘respect for universal fundamental ethical principles’.¹¹⁴ IAAF President, Lamine Diack, opened the Berlin IAAF Congress, during which the biannual organization of the world cross-country championships was voted in, by stating enthusiastically that ‘it is largely through athletics that the Olympic Games became universal – athletics not only affords them their worldwide impact but also instils a sense of magic in the human heart

and soul, making the Olympics a unique and dynamic social phenomenon'.¹¹⁵ Yet, in being attached to these universalist principles often recalled during the IAAF's various congresses and leading to the creation of true world championships in cross country, the managers of the international federation found themselves between a rock and a hard place: torn between the values they associated with sport and the need to preserve the elite of the old continent, or more widely 'the West'. This ambivalence was even more convoluted as the IAAF cross-country administration had initially taken steps to internationalize the discipline. By refocusing cross-country on the European continent, the European cross-country championships and the decisions that followed at world level endorsed a U-turn. The innovation was even less wholesome since it did not fully allow for a revival of European cross-country. While the European championships are a success in terms of participation, the results of the European athletes in the world championships, along with their participation in these events, have not ceased to wane.

The process described ultimately reminds that an innovation is rarely beneficial or redeeming for all the parties involved, and that several may find themselves negatively affected.¹¹⁶ In the case in hand, the East African runners have paid the price of the introduction of races reserved for Europeans. However it is also true, to some extent, that European runners, while continuing to pick up European titles, have seen their performance deteriorate at international level. Thus every innovation, even ones with a social end, have a 'hidden side' which is rarely researched in depth as novelty is so prominently revered.¹¹⁷ Working on an innovation, nonetheless, implies taking the undesirable effects seriously, not only to help reveal them but also to gain a more balanced conception of the innovation.¹¹⁸ In particular, there are legitimate expectations in terms of the relevance, transparency, acceptability, sustainability and social desirability of innovations.¹¹⁹

In the end, it is difficult to assess the true benefit of the innovation examined in this paper. Team champions of the last European cross-country championships in the women's and men's elite categories, Great Britain and France, who have dominated the medals tables since the creation of the competition, are among the European countries most faithful to the world championships. However, when the world event was held in Kampala in 2017, on the land of Ugandan athletes with increasingly better performances in the competition, neither of these two federations entered a men's elite team, with France not entering a female team either. Challenging the Neo-Schumpeterian concept of innovation as a process of creative destruction, Soete proposes that the creative capacity of innovation does not systematically compensate for its destructive capacity (damage may be of various types: economic, social, environmental, etc.).¹²⁰ If the establishment of the European cross-country championships is a matter of 'innovate or die', as the saying goes, seeing innovation as a virtuous circle, then understanding this competition from a historical standpoint leads one to take a more balanced view of its wish to save European cross-country.¹²¹

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³⁰ Gabriel Erckelbout, 'De l'or, de l'argent, du bronze et des applaudissements pour la France à Varsovie' [Gold, silver, bronze and applause for France in Warsaw], *Athlétisme*, April 1987, 28.

³¹ Monique Marmion, 'John N'Gugi (Kenya), Annette Sergent (France) Roi et Reine de Stavanger' [John N'Gugi (Kenya), Annette Sergent (France) King and Queen of Stavanger], *Athlétisme*, April 1989, 21.

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³⁷ Francis Magois, 'Le cross à l'heure européenne' [Cross-country at European time], *Athlétisme*, May 1994, 38.

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⁴⁰ Jacques Chanéac, 'Thierry Pantel : le temps qui reste' [Thierry Pantel: the time remaining], *Athlétisme*, July 1993, 34. Thierry Pantel was French cross-country champion in 1990, ninth in individual and second in team events at the Boston World Championships in 1992.

⁴¹ April Henning and Jörg Krieger, "'Dropping the amateur": The International Association of Athletics Federations and the Turn Towards the Professionalism', *Sport History Review* 51, no. 1 (2020): 64-83.

⁴² The commercial sector's entry into athletics could be seen in the names of international competitions: IAAF/Snickers World Cross Country Championships between 1992 and 1995, IAAF/Old Mutual World Cross Country Championships in 1996 then IAAF/Pirelli in 1997. In the same way, the Coca-Cola brand was included in the name of the world junior championships, *Coke* in that of the world half-marathon championships since their creation in 1992, before being replaced by *Ricoh*. *Reebok* was included in the name of the hiking world championship in 1993.⁴³ Yves Pinaud interview by Cyril Thomas, September 17, 2020.

⁴⁴ Vulnerability is part of a dynamic process supposing a potential threat which, in the case studied here, can be seen at organizational and individual level. From the EAA's point of view and that of Europe's national federations, vulnerability indicates a stage of imperfection between an observed anomaly (that of the relegation then the defection of European athletes vis-à-vis the world cross-country championships) and a withdrawal that may be assimilated to an irremediable stage of fragility. Vulnerability is thus somewhere between "the already and the not yet" and presupposes an awareness of the set-up allowing it to act. Christophe Roux-Dufort, 'La vulnérabilité organisationnelle à la loupe : entre fragilité et ignorance' [Organisational vulnerability under the magnifying glass: between fragility and ignorance'], *Revue Télescope* 16, no. 2 (2010): 1-21. At individual level, it is a threat appearing in a particular context (the globalization and professionalization of athletics) for a number of actors (athletes, federation executives, Olympic Movement members, private companies) who nonetheless retain, in the same way as sports organizations, the ability to act and remove themselves from the threat. These

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⁴⁶ EAA, Minutes of the 67th EAA Council, August 30 –May 1, 1993, 15, European Athletics Association Archive, Lausanne, Switzerland (hereafter EAA).

⁴⁷ The value of cross-checking official sources with data from the press or interviews becomes particularly clear here.

⁴⁸ Francis Magois, 'Le cross à l'heure européenne' [Cross-country at European time], *Athlétisme*, May 1994, 38.

⁴⁹ The contextual dimension of organizational resilience refers to an organization's ability to use a high level of social capital (internal and external) to ensure a wide network of resources guaranteeing its operational autonomy. Cynthia A. Lengnick-Hall, Tammy E. Beck, and Mark L. Lengnick-Hall, 'Developing a capacity for organizational resilience through strategic human resource management', *Human resource management review* 21, no. 3 (2011): 243-255.

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⁵⁵ Lise Cardin, 'Introduction et diffusion du handball en France : des origines étrangères à l'affirmation nationale française (1922-2004)' [Introduction and propagation of handball in France: from foreign origins to the french national emancipation (1922-2004)] (PhD diss. Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sport Activities, University of Strasbourg, 2019), 908-914.

⁵⁶ Gilles Bertrand, 'La chasse est ouverte' [The hunt is on], *VO² magazine*, January 1994, 21-22.

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- ⁷² EAA, Minutes of the 71st EAA Council, June 25, 1994, Birmingham, Great Britain, 7, EAA; EAA, Minutes of the 77th EAA Council, October 14-15, 1995, Paris, France, 5, EAA.
- ⁷³ Francis Magois, ‘Le cross : une discipline à part entière’ [Cross-country: a discipline in its own right], *Athlétisme*, October-November 1995, 11.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ Odile Baudrier, ‘Le déclin de l’équipe’ [The team’s trigger], *VO² Magazine*, avril 1992, 35, 52-56.
- ⁷⁶ IAAF, Report of the EAA, Minutes of the 44th IAAF Congress, August 19-21, 2003, Paris, France, 121, IAAF.
- ⁷⁷ The global drop in number of points on the Placing Table from 2006 corresponds to the removal of the men’s and women’s short cross-country races from the world championship programme.
- ⁷⁸ FFA, PV n°11, Bureau fédéral, December 17, 2009, Paris, France, 3, Fédération Française d’Athlétisme official website (hereafter FFA), <https://www.athle.fr/fichiers/a3/2009/BF20091217.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2019).
- ⁷⁹ Gilles Van Kote, ‘De l’audace, toujours de l’audace’ [Boldness, always boldness], *Athlétisme*, February 1999, 5.
- ⁸⁰ FFA, PV n°3, Bureau fédéral, April 2, 2003, Paris, France, 2, FFA, <https://www.athle.fr/fichiers/a3/Bf20030402.PDF> (accessed November 4, 2019).
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- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁸³ FFA, PV n°13, Bureau fédéral, December 17, 2003, Paris, France, 8, FFA, <https://www.athle.fr/fichiers/a3/Bf20031217.PDF> (accessed November 4, 2019).
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- ⁸⁶ Henning Heichberg, ‘Olympic sport, neo-colonization and alternatives’, *International review for the sociology of sport* 19, no. 1 (1984): 97-106.
- ⁸⁷ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of innovation* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962); Timothy J. L. Chandler, ‘Games at Oxbridge and the public schools, 1830-80: the diffusion of an innovation’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 8, no. 2 (1991): 171-204.
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- ⁸⁹ IAAF, IAAF Cross Country Committee Report, Minutes of the 47th IAAF Congress, August 11-13, 2009, Berlin, Germany, 176, IAAF.
- ⁹⁰ FFA, PV n°2, comité directeur, April 4 -5, 2008, Châtenay-Malabry, France, 2, FFA, <https://www.athle.fr/fichiers/a3/2008/cd20080404.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2019).
- ⁹¹ The six events include the women’s elite cross-country, men’s elite, women’s under-23s, men’s under-23s, women’s and men’s under-20s.
- ⁹² The European Athletics’ report for the 2003 IAAF Congress was therefore pleased that ‘albeit with only 23% of the votes at the IAAF Congress, thanks to a mutually-shared point of view, Europe has maintained its position on the IAAF Council and European federations have won 40% of the seats on numerous committees; this is most certainly a recognition of the experience of European executives’. IAAF, Report of the EAA, Minutes of the 44th IAAF Congress, August 19-21, 2003, Paris, France, 114, IAAF.
- ⁹³ IAAF, IAAF Cross Country Committee Report, Minutes of the 46th IAAF Congress, August 21 – 23, 2007, Osaka, Japan, 268, IAAF; IAAF, IAAF Cross Country Committee Report, Minutes of the 47th IAAF Congress, August 11-13, 2009, Berlin, Germany, 177, IAAF.

⁹⁴ The cross-country committee report likewise suggests limiting teams to six runners (with the first four allowing team classification) as opposed to nine previously (with six runners for team classification). IAAF, Minutes of the 47th IAAF Congress, August 11-13, 2009, Berlin, Germany, 21, IAAF.

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⁹⁷ Tjønnedal, 'Sport innovation', 300.

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¹⁰⁵ Cyril Thomas, 'Un processus postcolonial : la genèse de la domination kényane dans les courses de fond vue par la presse spécialisée française' [A postcolonial process: The genesis of Kenyan preeminence in long-distance running, as seen by the French sports press], *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo*, 10, no. 2, (2021): 138-151; Cyril Thomas, Pascal Charroin and Bastien Soulé, 'De la curiosité à l'évitement : l'adaptation des instances françaises de l'athlétisme face à la domination du Kenya en course de fond' [From curiosity to avoidance: the adaptation of French athletics authorities in the face of Kenya's domination in long-distance running], *Sciences sociales et sport*, no.17 (2021): 87-112; Daryle Rigney, 'Sport, Indigenous Australians and invader Dreaming: a critique', in *Sport and postcolonialism*, ed. John Bale and Mike Cronin (New York: Berg, 2003), 45-56.

¹⁰⁶ Frédéric Goulet, Dominique Vinck and Peter Hamilton, 'Innovation through Withdrawal Contribution to a Sociology of Detachment', *Revue française de sociologie (English Edition)* 53, no. 2 (2012): 117-146; Cécile Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Eric Boutroy, 'Manless Rope Team: A Socio-Technical History of a Social Innovation', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 37, no. 9 (2020): 791-812.

¹⁰⁷ Tjønnedal, 'Sport innovation'.

¹⁰⁸ Nadine Richez-Battesti, Francesca Betrella and Delphine Vallade, 'L'innovation sociale, une notion aux usages pluriels : quels enjeux et défis pour l'analyse ?' [Social innovation, a concept with multiple uses: what issues and challenges for analysis?], *Innovations* no. 2 (2012): 15-36; Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Boutroy, 'Manless Rope Team'; Tjønnedal, 'Innovation for social inclusion in sport'.

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