

USATF Still Looking For Superhero CEO

by Sieg Lindstrom

THE SEARCH for a Superman or Wonder Woman to run USATF, under way since the start of the year, has run neither smoothly nor swiftly.

Back in the March T&FN—when '11 was still young—having read the nearly 2000-word job description that USATF had released, we raised the Superman analogy. The superhero requirements

He sprinted for Bradley and coached for many years, including a stint at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo before moving on to K-State.

With the World Champs approaching on the near horizon, Miller shared his thoughts on the search and the state of USATF.

"The one thing I walked away with after this whole process," Miller says, "was that anyone who believes that we're going to make everybody happy is making an enormous mistake."

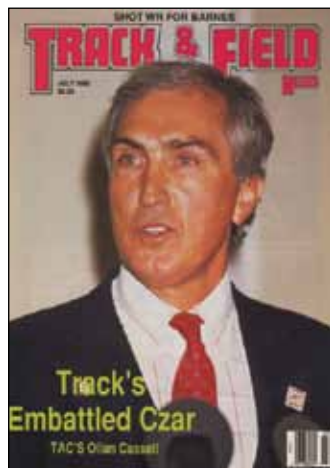
Begin last

that entire process what came out of it was a sense of frustration within the sport represented in a variety of ways and also a sense again, the reaffirmation, that special-interest groups saw this person or persons differently and that coming to a commonality was going to be difficult."

Hence Miller's conviction that even attempting to find a one-hire-pleases-all candidate is doomed to failure.

"Number 2," Miller says, "is I really began to understand much more clearly—although I probably should have understood it from the beginning—that one person is not the answer to our problem. Bringing in a leader is not the answer. You have a leader, but who that leader surrounds him or herself with is really much more of the answer. Because of the diversity of the constituency you must have outstanding people in a variety of places.

"Then you must not only have those people



Ollan Cassell 1978–97



Craig Masback 1997–08

were boggling.

Neither Superman nor Wonder Woman—nor even God—has signed a contract in the interim. So where are we?

It's not just a CEO search, says Steve Miller, the USATF Board member, businessman, former coach and Kansas State AD who has headed the effort to find the next executive leader.

What USATF faces—with a crying need to get it right for the sport rather than merely get it done—Miller believes, is a chance to make changes that will require great courage from the federation's elected leadership and Board.

Miller, 67, is himself a CEO: of Agassi Graf Holdings, the business/charitable ventures of retired tennis stars Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf. He is a past director of Global Sports Marketing for Nike and worked as president and director of the Professional Bowlers Association, 2000–05.

"I'm convinced that if God was actually confirmed as being God and wanted the CEO job, people would say, 'Well, God has done some pretty good things but what does he or she really know about track & field?'"

— disenchanted track fan

December, USATF's search for a new leader in the wake of Doug Logan's dismissal ground on and on and finally in late June slowed to a holding pattern.

The federation's Board switched to a stopgap leadership plan in which interim CEO Mike McNees will remain in that role through London, and only after that will a replacement for Logan be hired.

Depending on whom you ask, Oregon track head Vin Lananna was either formally or more obliquely offered the job.

USATF "talked to me about the position," is how Lananna, who will serve as Team USA's Daegu men's head, chose to characterize the discussion. He offered that description to the *Portland Oregonian* in late May.

Many on the sidelines have called the interim leadership solution a punt, evidence that USATF can't organize a one-man parade down Main Street, and worse.

"At the end of the day," Miller says, "we could not find someone that met all of what we believe to be the obligations and responsibilities, and there were some additional issues that set in: where one lives, salary, and all the surrounding circumstances.

"We couldn't close the deal. But through



Doug Logan 2008–10



??? 2012?...

but you must prioritize where you're going to put your emphasis. Emphasis has to do with personnel and finances and a variety of other things, and that's where it becomes even more painful."

That is where courage will be required in Miller's estimation. In agreeing to stand atop the soapbox T&FN offered for this article, he admits that not every stakeholder shares his views, but he thought it important to speak.

"I'm talking about one person's point of view," he says. "One that has had the luxury of being a coach, and the luxury of being a Board member, and the luxury of being a critic, and the luxury of having been an athlete. I did all those things in athletics and I was the athletic director of a major university where track & field was under me."

After talking about money (see sidebar), he continues, "What I've come to realize—having sat in all those vantage points—is that it becomes really obvious to me that one of our most disabling issues is having such a wide horizontal range of constituent advocates

within USATF.

"That advocacy, while honorable and necessary and wonderful, is also debilitating.

"The solution from my vantage point—I ran the biggest track & field budget in the world by running Nike, I've run a university budget, I've run a high school budget, I've helped run the budget of USATF—is that the only way we ever get to solve these problems is to not attack them horizontally, but attack them vertically.

"The place where this leadership situation becomes most difficult is the ability to prioritize what one needs to solve in order to solve the horizontal issues. We can't be everything to everybody and act horizontally when we have to get certain things done vertically in order to affect the horizontal aspect of our business.

"Coming in and trying to appease everyone and meet everyone's goals and objectives is not only impractical, it's really, frankly, foolish."

Miller's observation is not new. He admits that the same inefficiencies wrought by the big-tent array of interest groups within USATF—associations, clubs, elites, Masters, youths, long-distance running, cross country and the various event areas within the core sport practiced on tracks and infields—have always been there.

Little has changed, Miller further admits, since he used his Nike position to organize an ambitious "Meeting of the Minds" get-together in an attempt to tackle our sport's problems almost 20 years ago (*From The Editor*, April '92).

"Those conversations were the same conversations we're having right now," he says. "As part of that we said, 'What would you like to see the sport be in 10 years?' And the responses to that were appointment television [regularly scheduled broadcasts], better competitive environment; the same conversation over and over again.

The Budget Is A Problem

Given Steve Miller's strong management background, we had to ask him for comparison of the USATF situation with the K-State track budget in the mid-'80s when Miller oversaw it.

"Our budget, which was the smallest in the Big 8, was a few million bucks," he says. "It might have been \$2.3, 2.4 million dollars, and our budget for all of USA Track & Field is only 10 times that.

"So you're not comparing apples to apples or numbers to people. I'm talking about 60 people [involved with K-State track] and I'm talking about a major portion of that budget going to scholarships, so in terms of making a comparison, it's like fighting a war emptyhanded with the budget USATF has."

"But—this is heresy—because we have the blue-blazer brigade, people that want to go on international trips, people that are owed favors, etc., etc., we've never been able to

that need to be engaged first and foremost," Miller explained, "the elite athlete and the pre-high school athlete. Period.

"The high schools and colleges in our country save us, and we're great in spite of ourselves. We're not great because of ourselves, in general. Certainly, some people have made people great but you know what I mean.

"What do you do about it? You can either change governance, which is less likely to happen or you can make the hard prioritization/expenditure decision, which is more likely to happen.

"That is whatever moneys you have, given that you might not be able to change the legislative landscape—but I would work on a legislative landscape change—I would take the money, every penny we have, and invest it in top-flight competition and sales and representing the athletes appropriately at the professional level. I would hope to create inspiration and aspiration via that vehicle that promotes the grassroots level, and then I would slowly but surely engage in the other entities.

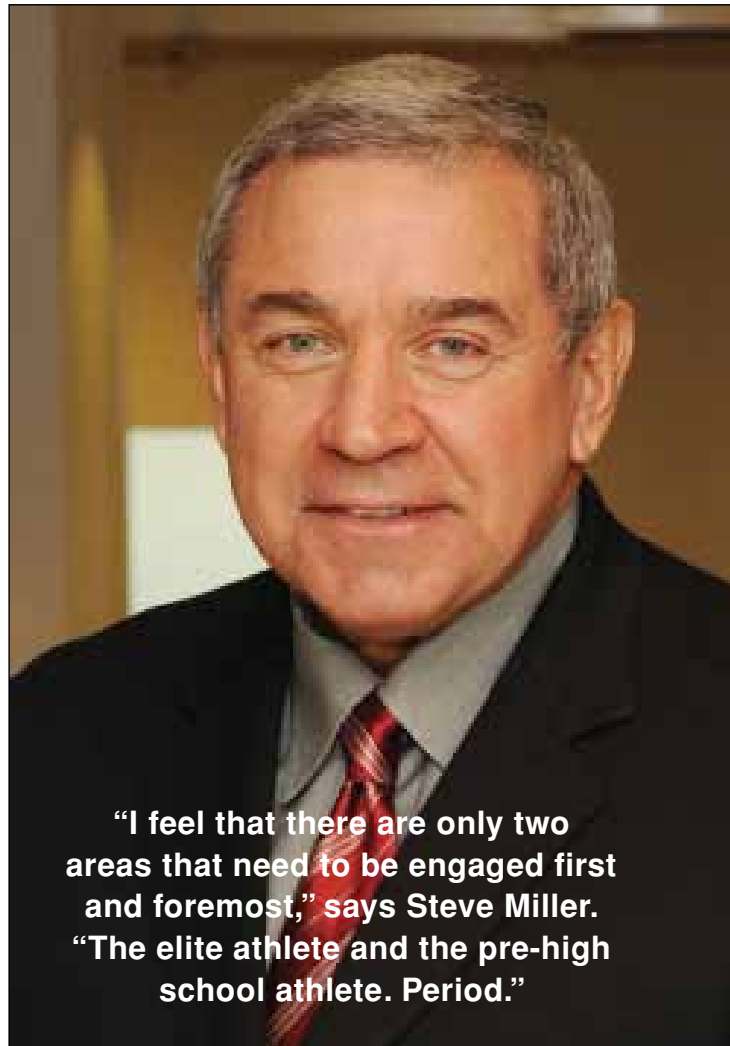
"Every penny that we spend on areas other than

those areas to improve the vertical entity that we think will ultimately raise all ships to me is a wasted effort.

"So all those wonderful, wonderful, fantastic volunteers and people that have vested efforts in a lot of things—who still believe in fairness of competition, who still believe that there's equity in all this—need to understand that we must make the hard decisions at a particular level in order to get to the place that makes the most sense so that we can create a platform that ultimately provides a springboard into all of the other invested entities."

He adds, "The people who dropped the ball on [the current search], the people who didn't do their job, was our Board Of Directors, of which I'm a member. I think there was a lack on our part of a firm conviction of what we really needed and our capacity to make that hard decision before going into finding this person. Our characterization of this person was too mythical and it needed to be more specific."

Can Miller's view prevail on a board of which he is just one member? Does he think the Board should organize an intra-federation



break through.

"So when we talk about bringing in a person to lead this organization, we need to talk about a person who can come in and get shit done. Get the sport on television with sponsors, make the tough decisions, coalesce the top-level athletes.

Because everything else will take care of that if you get that done."

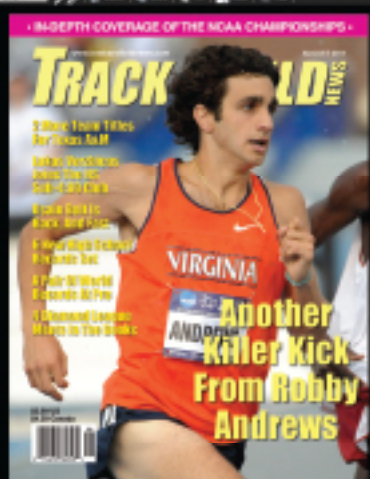
USATF's mandate was legislated by Congress through the Amateur Sports Act of 1978 (and a revision to the Act effected in '98). That legislation, while a step forward in its time, in Miller's view belongs to another era.

He would lobby for its amendment and freerange for USATF to streamline, restructure and perhaps even break itself up into smaller constituent chunks. That's not happening any time soon, though.

In the interim, while Miller's prescription won't please everyone, he doesn't care. He thinks it's the only way up.

"I feel that there are only two areas

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CEO Search

"Meeting of the Minds II" to make the case?

"I think the one thing we have not done and have not done effectively is get all the people in the room at the right time," Miller says.

"I've been on the Board 3 years and I've not had a direct conversation with the Athletics Advisory group; I've been on the Board 3 years and I've never had a direct conversation with the grassroots people, other than one time that [Youth Athletics Executive Committee chair] Lionel Leach and the grassroots people came into a meeting to make a presentation.

"So I think that over this [pre-London] period of time, we should begin to concentrate

"We're going to have a great Olympic Games without great leadership, which is going to prove yet again that we can do this in spite of ourselves. Imagine what we could do if we really engaged in the process effectively."

— Steve Miller

on what are our problems, how do we need to correct them, what are the verticalities that we need to address, and how do we open up the lines of communication so at least we have all the issues on the table.

"And then recognize that you can't solve all these issues simultaneously.

"If anybody should come in and give a speech about that it should be President Obama, who has found out very quickly that trying to be everything to everybody is a losing proposition.

"In order to get things done, you've got to rise above it. The decisions that relate to next steps must be courageous in nature.

"I don't think people are generally that way because they're always thinking about the next election or whether they're doing the right thing, etc., etc. We let too many outside variables dictate what we believe or what we may believe is best. We become a society of obstructionists instead of a society of people that are looking to solve problems. We're not looking to become proactive, we're looking to become reactive.

"So can it all be saved? You know, at the end of the day it may require being blown up entirely.

"All I know is that unless we can make some of these substantive changes, somebody that's 30 years younger than [this writer] will interview somebody who's going to be 60 years younger than me and they're going to have this same conversation in 20 years."

If that happens, if history continues to repeat itself, the U.S. sport in 20 years will likely still be riding on its greatest strength.

As Miller puts it, "The great thing about this is that we're going to have a great Olympic Games without great leadership, which is going to prove yet again that we can do this in spite of ourselves. Imagine what we could do if we really engaged in the process effectively." □