**Athletics**

Many people have memories of competing in athletics, or "track and field", in school. Some competed in running events, such as sprints and longer-distance races, or jumping events, such as high jump and long jump, or throwing events, such as discus and shot put. While most people give up athletics after leaving school, a few go on to become professional athletes who compete in top meetings around the world. Many people enjoy watching these highly-skilled, super-fit athletes when they compete in major competitions such as the IAAF World Championships in Athletics and the Olympic Games.

**History**

As long ago as the 8th century B.C., athletics events were being held as part of the original Olympic Games in ancient Greece. Some of the events from that time, such as javelin and discus throwing, are still part of modern athletics. In 19th-century England, athletics competitions were being held in military and public schools such as the Royal Military College in Sandhurst and Exeter College in Oxford. By the time of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, the sport had developed to such an extent that "track and field" events were central to the competition. From then until now, athletics have formed the foundation of major sporting competitions such as the Commonwealth and Asian Games, as well as the Olympics. Since 1983, the World Championships in Athletics have also been boosting interest in the sport. This biennial competition is organized by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), and is now seen as one of the top events in the world of sports, along with the Summer Olympics and the FIFA World Cup football tournament.

**How Athletics Works**

Modern athletics meetings are held at both outdoor and indoor venues. Outdoor meetings are usually held in summer and spring, with track events run on a 400 meter track with 8 lanes while the jumping and throwing events take place on the large open area inside the track. Indoor meetings are held in winter, with running events usually held on a 200 metre track and a limited range of field events held on the area inside the track.

In both indoor and outdoor competitions, men and women compete in their own events. While they usually run the same distances in track events, hurdles are lower for women. In field events, the weights of the shot, discus, javelin and hammer are less for women than for men.

**Track Events**

Track events include a wide range of races for runners. The shorter races are called*sprints* and they include 60 metre (indoors only), 100m, 200m and 400m. Middle-distance races are the 800m, 1500m, the mile, the 3,000m, and the *steeplechase*, in which runners have to jump over barriers and water jumps. Long distance events are the 5,000m and 1,0000m, along with athletics' longest race for runners, the*marathon*. Most of this 42.195 km race is run on public roads, with only the last part being run on an athletics track. Other track events are the *hurdles*, including the 110m high hurdles (100m for women) and 400m hurdles, and the *relay* events, the most common of which are the 4 x 100m relay and the 4 x 400m relay. In the relay races, runners carry a *baton* and pass it to the next runner as they finish their part of the race.

**Field Events**

Field events include jumping events and throwing events. The jumping events are the*high jump*, *long jump*, *triple jump* and *pole-vault*. The throwing events are the *shot put*, in which a heavy metal ball (called the shot) is thrown as far as possible; the*hammer throw*, in which a heavy metal ball attached to a wire and handle is thrown; the *javelin*, in which a spear-like object made of metal or fiberglass is thrown; and the*discus*, in which a heavy disc is thrown.

**Competitions**

There are a number of athletics competitions regularly held around the world for professional athletes. The biggest of these is the World Championships, held every two years by the IAAF. There are also several regional competitions, such as the European Championships, the Pan-American Games, and the Commonwealth Games. In addition, there is the Golden League circuit in which athletes who win their chosen event at all six meetings share a $1,000,000 jackpot. This competition is attracting more and more interest among sports fans, but the high point of interest in athletics still occurs every four years when the track and field events of the Summer Olympics are held. Billions of enthusiastic viewers around the world watch TV broadcasts of these events as they follow the fortunes of their country's top athletes.

**Famous Athletes**

**Paavo Nurmi**

Paavo Nurmi was born in Finland in 1897, and grew up to become one of the world's greatest middle-distance and long-distance runners. He still holds the record for having won the greatest number of Olympic track and field medals, with 12 medals in all. These include 9 gold medals which he won in the 1,500m, 5,000m, 10,000m, cross country, cross country team and the 3,000m team races. Due to this fact he is often regarded as the greatest track and field athlete of all time. Known as the "Flying Finn", he is probably also the only athlete to have had a heavenly body named after him. In 1939, Finnish astronomer Yrjö Väisälä named an asteroid after him, calling it*1740 Paavo Nurmi*.

**Carl Lewis**

Carl Lewis, regarded by many as the greatest competitor of all time in athletics, was named the world male athlete of the 20th Century by the IAAF. Born in 1961 in the U.S.A., he became a champion sprinter and long jumper who, like Paavo Nurmi, won 9 Olympic gold medals. Lewis won the gold medal for the long jump in the 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996 Olympic Games. He also won gold medals in 1984 and 1988 in the 100 metres sprint and a gold medal for the 200 metres in 1984, as well as a silver medal for the same event in 1988. His two other Olympic gold medals were won in 1984 and 1992 in the 4 x 100 metre relay races. British Formula 1 racing driver Lewis Hamilton was named after Carl Lewis because Hamilton's father was a huge fan of the great American athlete. (Carl Lewis, above, is on the right wearing number 1102.)

**Athletics Vocabulary**

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| Word | Example sentence | Meaning |
| athlete | Paavo Nurmi and Carl Lewis are two of the greatest athletes of all time. | a person who is skilled in track and field events; a sportsperson |
| athletics | Many people compete in athletics meetings while they are in school. | the sport of competing in track and field events |
| baton | The worst mistake a relay runner can make is to drop the baton. | a short stick or tube passed from runner to runner in a relay race |
| bell lap | The bell rang and I knew I only had the 400 metres of the bell lap to go. | the final lap in a distance race, signalled by the ringing of a bell |
| decathlon | A decathlon competition is normally held over two days. | a men's athletic competition combining 10 track and field events |
| discus | The discus throw is one of the oldest events in athletics. | a heavy, thick-centered disk; the sport of throwing the discus |
| false start | She moved forward before the starting gun went off, and a false start was declared. | failed start of a race, usually caused by a runner moving forward before the starting gun is fired |
| field | Some athletes prefer track events while others prefer the field events. | an area of open land; events in athletics that involve throwing, jumping and vaulting |
| foul | If a long jumper's foot goes over the takeoff board, the jump will be called a foul. | an unfair or illegal act, e.g. foul throw, foul jump |
| hammer | Most athletes who compete in the hammer throw are big and very strong. | a 16-pound metal ball attached to a wire for throwing in an athletic contest; the sport of throwing the hammer |
| heptathlon | Women who compete in the heptathlon have to spend a lot of time training for all the different events. | a women's athletic competition combining 7 track and field events |
| high jump | Most athletes who compete in the high jump are very tall and slim. | sport in which competitors jump over a bar that is raised until only one competitor can jump over it |
| hurdles | The hurdles used in women's races are 10 cm lower than those used in the men's events. | upright frames, normally placed in a series, that athletes jump over; a race over such frames |
| javelin | Officials must be sure that javelin throwers have plenty of room in which to compete. | a lightweight, spear-like object; the sport of throwing the javelin |
| lane | Most running tracks have 8 lanes, allowing up to 8 runners to compete in a race. | each of a number of parallel strips marked on a running track for athletes to run along |
| lap | A 400-metre race is one lap of an outdoor track, or two laps of an indoor track. | one circuit of, or one time around, a running track or a racetrack |
| long jump | Carl Lewis was a champion sprinter, but he was also a four-time Olympic champion in the long jump. | an athletic event in which competitors jump as far as possible along the ground in one leap |
| marathon | Not many people become marathon runners because it is such a difficult race. | a long-distance running race of 26 miles and 385 yards (42.195 km) |
| middle-distance | Many of the world's best middle-distance runners come from Northern Africa. | a race distance of between 800 and 5,000 metres |
| pole-vault | The pole-vault is one of the most technically difficult events in athletics, and also one of the most exciting to watch. | an event in which competitors vault over a high bar with the aid of an extremely long, flexible pole used to give extra spring |
| relay | The relay races are some of the few events in athletics which are team sports, not individual sports. | race between teams of runners in which each team member in turn covers part of the total distance |
| record | The main goals for top athletes are Olympic medals, world titles, and world records. | the best performance in a sporting event that has been officially measured and noted |
| shot put | Many of the world's best competitors in shot put come from Northern and Eastern Europe. | an athletic contest in which a very heavy metal ball is thrown as far as possible |
| sprint | One of the sprint races that always creates a lot of interest is the 100 metres. | a short, fast race run over a distance of 400 metres or less |
| starting blocks | Before the race, the sprinters sqatted down and positioned their feet in the starting blocks. | small rigid blocks for bracing a runner's feet at the start of a race |
| steeplechase | When runners in the steeplechase go over the water jump, they're trying not to fall over. | a running race in which competitors must clear hurdles and water jumps |
| track | An athletics track is usually oval in shape, 400 metres long, and it usually has 8 running lanes. | a prepared circuit for athletes to run on; the sport of running on such a track |
| track and field | "Track and field" is the term used in North America, while "athletics" is used in most other places. | athletics events that take place on a running track and on a field often enclosed by the track |
| triple jump | Most people who are good at the triple jump are tall and lean, and most are also good at sprinting. | an event in which competitors leap as far as possible by performing a hop, a step and a jump |