UKA Guidance and position statement on weighing athletes

UKA Position Statement

Athletes under the age of 18 must not be weighed unless they are on a nationally supported talent or world class pathway, under the guidance of trained and accredited practitioners. Any breach of this policy may amount to misconduct under the UK Athletics Disciplinary Rules and Procedures or the disciplinary rules of the relevant Home Country Athletics Federation (HCAF).

A nationally supported talent or world class pathway (referred to hereafter as **World Class Pathway**) is one that is delivered by UK Athletics or HCAF and enables access to appropriate nutrition, medical and sports science support from accredited professionals.

Athletics is a late specialisation sport and as outlined in the Long-Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD), UKA does not consider there are any significant advantages or information gained from weighing athletes who are under 18, who are not on a national supported programme. As height is the main measurement to address growth rates, this should be the key measurement taken. For those participants who are over 18 or under 18 on a nationally supported talent or world class programme, weighing should only take place if there is a valid reason for doing so and agreed as part of the athlete's Individual Athlete Plan.

Summary

Athletes at all levels of sport deserve to train and compete in a safe, healthy and stimulating environment. Those who run sport are responsible for creating this athlete-focused environment, where the health and wellbeing of young elite athletes are at the forefront of every adult involved in their development.

Sport, by definition, requires a significant level of physical exertion, and pushing the body to continue to improve. However, looking after the young person's physical and emotional health should always remain the priority over any sport goal.

Document purpose

This document aims to:

- Identify and provide information about the risks of weighing athletes
- Outline and provide best practice guidelines for weighing those over 18 and under 18 on world class programmes and national talent programmes
- Highlight Key facts about weight and weighing athletes

Safeguarding the physical and emotional health of all athletes is a priority for UKA and the HCAFs. We recognise that in some situations, where the appropriate policies and procedures are in place in conjunction with an Individual Athlete Plan (IAP) for athletes

on the World Class Pathway, weighing athletes can be a useful tool to contribute to tracking changes in health, growth, aiding performance and progression. However, the need for this position statement is to prevent potential areas of concern due to some of the related psychological distress, which may come from weighing athletes such as disordered eating, anxiety and depression.

With these factors in mind, our position is that athletes under the age of 18 should not be weighed unless they are on a nationally supported World Class Pathway. For clarity, a nationally supported World Class Pathway is one that is delivered by UKA or a HCAF and enables access to appropriate nutrition, medical and sports science support from accredited professionals. Athletics is a late specialisation sport and as outlined in the Long-Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD). There are no significant advantages or information gained from weighing athletes who are under 18, who are not on a World Class Pathway. As height is the main measurement to address growth rates, this should be the key measurement taken. For those participants who are over 18 or under 18 on a World Class Pathway, weighing should only take place if there is a valid reason for doing so (outlined later in this document). We encourage under 18 athletes, along with their parents/guardians and coaches, to learn and understand the benefits of good nutrition*, sleep, rest and lifestyle in their pursuit of optimising their athletics progress.

Potential risks of weighing athletes

Within the UK Sport "Eating Disorders in Sport: A guideline framework for practitioners working with high performance athletes", track & field and cross country running have been identified as "high risk" sports for athletes developing eating disorders. A 2001 study of distance runners in the UK found that of 184 female athletes, 29 (16 %) had an eating disorder. Of these, 3.8 % had anorexia nervosa, 1.1 % had bulimia nervosa and 10 % had a subclinical disorder or EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified). NB Eating disorders and disordered eating can affect anyone, both male and female. Weight is not an indication that a psychological issue related to food psychopathology or body image is present.

There are a number of significant risks related to the weighing of athletes. Whilst making training decisions, coaches should be fully aware of the risk/reward scale when contemplating if weighing athletes has a tangible performance or training benefit. The list below is not exhaustive but highlights areas needed for consideration.

Adolescence and puberty can be complex for the vast majority of young people. The risks of developing an eating disorder/disordered eating (along with other mental health concerns such as self-harm, anxiety and depression) can be exacerbated by sports, and transitional events such as moving to university with associated changes in environment and support networks.

Do not assume that an athlete needs to be 'underweight' to have an eating disorder or disordered eating. In sporting populations, weight monitoring could place undue emphasis on the importance of weight for performance, encourage comparison between peers/teammates, and encourage poor strategies for weight manipulation. Tracking weight may carry more risks than benefits during adolescence, particularly if comparisons

are drawn with other athletes or fully developed senior athletes. Furthermore, poor practices in capturing, interpreting and reporting body weight also presents a risk and for this reason should only be carried out by accredited practitioners.

The best practice guidance, which has been set out below, can reduce the risks of athletes potentially developing an eating disorder/disordered eating, or other mental health concerns. The implementation of the best practice guidance is therefore one of the key strategies to minimise the likelihood of disordered eating and mental health problems developing due to sport.

If you suspect an individual may have an eating disorder or other mental health concerns, seek support and guidance (e.g. via your Club Welfare Officer, The UK Athletics Safeguarding Team, the athlete's GP or Eating Disorder charities) – don't assume someone else will notice or deal with it.

Best practice guidelines for weighing athletes over 18 or those under 18 on a nationally (NGB) supported World Class pathway.

There are many positive development strategies which Coach–Athlete partnerships utilise for athlete development, with these determined by athlete profiling. Only in circumstances where weight and body composition are identified as of significant benefit to athlete development and ratified by NGB specialist teams comprising of medics, sports scientist, nutritionist and sports psychologist would weighing be part of an athlete IAP. In these circumstances, this would be carried out by accredited personnel trained in Body Composition and interpretation of that data by relevant variables such as event requirements.

Key facts about weighing athletes

Body weight can change day to day.

The body is made up of several components that contribute to the total body weight of the athlete. Body weight changes day to day, morning to night and over the course of a training session. This could be due to a number of reasons such as changes in hydration, body water stores, muscle glycogen stores, food intake, gut weight and the menstrual cycle. Daily fluctuation can be as much as 3kg depending on the size of the athlete. If their body weight increases, this is not a confirmation of an increase in body fat. Weighing an athlete more than once a month to measure changes will not give an accurate reading due to the daily variation.

Body weight and body composition will change during adolescence

An athlete will have changes in their body composition as they grow. This is particularly noticeable during the adolescent period when growth rate is at a maximum. As we grow, we also increase in weight and this is a normal part of development. Our size and shape changes and this can affect performance, confidence and self-esteem during this period. We may become clumsier and our coordination not as good. Therefore, weighing during this period is not a good indicator of and could in fact be detrimental. The LTAD Model provides indicators of what a coaching plan for a developing adolescent athlete should include. This, designed with SMART process goals, a motivational and positive learning

environment and differentiated training activities in mind will go a long way to supporting athletes through this often challenging phase in their development.

Weight is not an indicator of performance

Everyone's body is different. This is the same for athletes competing in differing events. A sprinter may have a higher body weight than an endurance runner or high jumper. However, this is due to one of many factors such as muscle mass, type of training and height. People of different weights and body type win Olympic medals and therefore weight it is not an indicator of performance on its own. A non-elite athlete's weight should not be used as a performance indicator.

Possible reasons for weighing an athlete

It is recognised that weighing athletes can be beneficial in some limited circumstances. However, the weighing of an athlete needs careful consideration and communication to ensure athletes and parent(s)/guardians(s) understand the process.

Below is a list of some of the reasons why weighing of an athlete may be undertaken but only if over 18 or on a nationally supported World Class Pathway if under 18.

1. Taking weight and height measurements can be a useful way of monitoring growth and development of an athlete, particularly to be able to determine when the athlete is going through a growth spurt. During a growth spurt, athletes will be more susceptible to injury so changes to training may be required. If used in this way, it should always be alongside height measurements and only done once per month as a maximum.

2. It may be used for monitoring hydration status. Body weight is taken pre and post training and a measurement or estimation of fluid intake and loss (e.g. urine losses) is made. Fluid balance can then be calculated and a plan is put in place to rehydrate their fluid loss. A nutritionist must undertake this testing as they are able to advise on fluid intake and produce a plan of action.

3. For performance purposes, weight is taken alongside a measurement of power (e.g. countermovement jump or jump height) to calculate the power-to-weight ratio. This should be done by a qualified strength and conditioning coach and should only be done for senior athletes (over 18s) or those under 18 on a nationally supported talent or worldclass pathway.

4. For senior athletes (over 18) or those on a senior performance pathway, the performance nutritionist may monitor weight in order to adjust nutritional plans. Using weighing for this purpose must only be done by a qualified nutritionist as they can implement any changes to diet in order to achieve the desired effect. Any information should be completely confidential and must not be released to anyone without prior consent. The exception to this is those on World Class Programmes where this may be done with under 18s with the full support of a performance nutritionist and after careful consideration of the benefits of doing so.

5. Real-time heart rate monitoring systems and lactate testing often require height and weight to be input in order to get the most accurate results. This does not necessitate the

athlete monitoring weight at the training venue, instead this can be done at home with the athlete inputting their measurements themselves without the need for the coach/staff to see or be involved in the weighing process.

6. Skinfolds or other systems of body composition assessment should only be done on athletes over 18 and with a qualified nutritionist's input. The person undertaking any skinfold measurements must be ISAK Level 1 trained. The exception to this is those athletes on World Class Pathway where under 18s may be monitored by a performance nutritionist if this is deemed appropriate.

7. When weighing athletes, it must be established 'why' you are weighing in relation to the above bullet points, how this will be carried out and what will happen with the results. This must be discussed and agreed before any weighing takes place.

*Good Nutrition

Coaches are encourage to work with athletes and their parents / carers to promote a healthy relationship with food. For those athletes, who do not have access to a nutritionist as part of a NGB talent or worldclass programme the NHS Live well / eat well information pages have access to useful and verified advice.