



Fortune favors the brave. Tactical behaviors in the middle distance running events at the 2017 IAAF World Championships.

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1 FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE. TACTICAL BEHAVIORS IN THE MIDDLE
2 DISTANCE RUNNING EVENTS AT THE 2017 IAAF WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS.

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4 Running head: *Tactical behaviors in middle distance races*

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20 **Key words:** Athletics, Middle distance, Tactics, Pacing.

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25

26 **Abstract.**

27

28 Purpose: To assess tactical and performance factors associated with progression from
29 qualification rounds in the 800 m and 1500 m running events at the 2017 IAAF World
30 Championships

31 Methods: Official results were used to access final and intermediate positions and times,
32 as well as performance characteristics of competitors. Shared variance between
33 intermediate positions and rank order lap times (ROSPT) with finishing positions were
34 calculated, along with probability of automatic qualification, for athletes in each
35 available race position **at the end of every 400 m lap**. Differences in race positions and
36 lap times relative to season's best (SB) performances were assessed between automatic
37 qualifiers (AQ), fastest losers (FL), and non-qualifiers (NQ).

38 Results: Race positions **at the end of each 400 m lap** remained more stable through 800
39 m races than 1500 m races. Probability of automatic qualification decreased with both
40 race position and ROSPT on each lap, although ROSPT accounted for a higher degree
41 of shared variance than did intermediate position. In the 1500 m event FL ran at a
42 higher percentage of SB speed, and adopted positions closer to the race lead in the early
43 stages. This was not the case in the 800 m.

44 Conclusions: Intermediate positioning and the ability to produce a fast final race
45 segment are strongly related to advancement from qualification rounds in middle
46 distance running events. The adoption of a more 'risky' strategy characterized by higher
47 speeds relative to SB may be associated with increased likelihood of qualification as FL
48 in the 1500 m event.

49 Key words: athletics, middle distance, tactics, pacing.

50 **Introduction**

51

52 Successful participation in competitive endurance events requires regulation of exercise
53 intensity in a manner that maximally utilizes available physiological resources whilst
54 simultaneously avoiding physiological failure, a process that is reliant on continual
55 decision-making processes.¹ Although several studies have investigated pacing
56 strategies in middle-distance (800 m & 1500 m) running events, assessed through
57 distribution of speeds over race segments,^{2,3,4} other work has examined the influence of
58 tactical positioning at intermediate points on finishing position.⁵ Tactical issues are
59 important in major championship races, because 'success' is based on finishing position
60 rather than overall time achieved. This is the case in both qualifying heats (whereby a
61 designated number of athletes progress to the next round of competition) and finals.

62 Regardless of the outcome goals of competition, athletes still need to regulate running
63 speed in order to maximise the likelihood of achieving them. The precise nature of this
64 regulatory process is not fully understood, although both rational and heuristic models
65 have been proposed.¹ Additionally, other work has suggested that characteristics of the
66 continually changing competitive environment influence decision-making, as athletes
67 utilise information as it becomes available.⁶ Experimental work in both the laboratory⁸
68 and in actual competitive environments^{8,9} has indeed suggested that pacing decisions are
69 influenced by the behavior of other competitors.

70 Qualifying rounds at major international championships represent a particularly
71 interesting decision-making environment, because there are two potential routes via
72 which qualification is possible. Automatic qualification (AQ) to the subsequent stage of
73 qualification is achieved through the securing of a high overall finishing position.
74 Precise qualification criteria vary from championship to championship, but typically the

75 first 2-3 finishers in 800 m races, and the first 5-6 finishers in 1500 m races progress.
76 However, there are usually a relatively small number of 'fastest loser' (FL) qualification
77 positions also available. Again, exact numbers vary from championship to
78 championship. The existence of two routes through which qualification is possible,
79 could suggest different athletes may start preliminary races with very different strategies
80 for achieving the goal of qualifying for the next round, and a number of potential
81 scenarios can be imagined. 'Superior' athletes (those with higher absolute performance
82 potential, as indicated by season's best (SB) performances) may well simply aim to
83 qualify in an automatic qualifying position by either setting an initial pace that weaker
84 athletes are unable to sustain, or else to conserve resources for subsequent rounds by
85 qualifying with minimal effort. 'Inferior' athletes, may aim to increase their probability
86 of qualification through either relying on good tactical positioning and a high finishing
87 speed to beat superior athletes, or alternatively may aim to run the fastest time they are
88 capable of, thereby maximising their chances of qualification as a FL. All of these
89 possible decisions may be considered rational as they involve consideration of the
90 probabilities of various competitive outcomes, and athletes may select the strategic
91 approach to competition that maximises the probability of their desired outcome
92 occurring. However, it has been suggested that truly rational decision-making is
93 unlikely within athletic events as they represent 'large world' environments, whereby
94 some relevant information is unknown or estimated.¹ In such environments, individuals
95 may need to make decisions based on heuristic methods that ignore some available
96 information, or else allow their own decision-making to be informed by behaviors
97 displayed by other competitors.^{6,8,10}
98 Although previous work has analysed the role of tactical positioning in influencing the
99 probability of progression from qualification rounds in the middle-distance running

100 events at a major athletic championship⁵, there is no published research which also
101 incorporates analysis of split times. Incorporation of this variable may assist in
102 furthering understanding of the decision-making process underpinning athlete behavior,
103 and also generate valuable practical information for coaches and athletes preparing for
104 such an event. This study therefore analyses positional and speed changes in athletes
105 who qualify as **AQ**, qualify as **FL**, or fail to qualify from preliminary rounds at such an
106 event.

107

108 **Methods**

109 **SB** performances, intermediate and finishing positions, and split times for each 400 m
110 lap of athletes **competing** in the qualifying rounds of the men's and women's 800 m and
111 1500 m running events at the 2017 **IAAF** World Championships of Athletics were
112 accessed via results provided by the International Association of Athletics Federations
113 (www.iaaf.org). **In the 800 m, there were six heats held for men and women in the first**
114 **round (total N = 136). The first three finishers in each qualified automatically. Across**
115 **all heats, the six FL also progressed to the semi-finals. These 24 athletes competed in**
116 **three semi-finals, from which the top two finishers were automatic qualifiers (AQ), and**
117 **two more qualified as FL across all semi-finals. Additionally, in the 1500 m, there were**
118 **three heats held for men and women in the first round (total N = 136). The first six**
119 **finishers in each qualified automatically. Across all heats, the six FL also progressed to**
120 **the semi-finals. These 24 athletes competed in two semi-finals, from which the top five**
121 **finishers were AQ, and two more qualified as FL across both semi-finals.** For the 800 m
122 races, individual split times were available for each 400 m lap, whereas for the 1500 m
123 races, split times were available **for the 400 m laps between 400 m and 800 m, 800 m**
124 **and 1200 m, and the final 300 m between 1200 m and 1500 m.**

125 For all athletes, finishing times were calculated relative to seasons best (SB)
126 performances recorded prior to the Championship. Differences in relative level of
127 performance achieved by AQ, FL, and athletes who failed to qualify (NQ) were
128 assessed using one way ANOVA. For each event, mean position at each intermediate
129 point, as well as rank order split time (ROSPT) for each segment were calculated for
130 athletes who finished races in each available position (6–8 finishers in 800 m races and
131 12–15 in 1500 m races). To illustrate how ROSPT was determined, the athlete who
132 recorded the fastest time over each intermediate segment was allocated a ROSPT of 1,
133 the second fastest a ROSPT of 2, and so on, regardless of overall race position at each
134 intermediate point. The percentage of shared variance in finishing position accounted
135 for by race position at each intermediate point, and for ROSPT in each race lap was
136 determined through calculation of r^2 . The probability (P) of automatic qualification was
137 calculated for each available position for each intermediate point and ROSPT.
138 Probability was determined as the number of athletes who eventually qualified as AQ
139 divided by the number of athletes who were in each available position, or who recorded
140 each available ROSPT, at each intermediate point. So if, for example, 24 athletes were
141 in 5th position at the 800 m point of the 1500m races and 18 of them went on to secure
142 an AQ position, the probability of qualification from 5th position at 800 m would be
143 0.75.

144 In order to better understand tactical decision-making that may increase the probability
145 of qualification to the subsequent round of qualification as a FL, segment times in 800
146 m (first and second 400 m) and in 1500 m (first, second, third lap and last 300 m) were
147 calculated relative to SB for each athlete. Two way ANOVA for repeated measures
148 followed by the Tukey post hoc test was used to assess differences between groups
149 (AQ, FL, and NQ) in each segment. Statistical significance was accepted at $P < 0.05$.

150 Data analysis was performed in Excel and Graphpad Prism 7. Group data is presented as
151 mean \pm s.d., and differences between groups are presented as 95% confidence intervals.

152

153

154 **Results**

155 In first round and semi-final races, mean finishing times were slower than SB times, and
156 the relative level of performance achieved was similar in both events (800 m 98.4% \pm
157 1.5% SB and 1500 m 97.7% \pm 22% SB). In the 800 m, AQ recorded 98.2% \pm 1.4%, FL
158 recorded 98.5% \pm 1.4% and non-qualifiers (NQ) recorded 98.3% \pm 1.6% of SB (all
159 differences NS). The situation was similar in the 1500 m, with AQ recording 97.5% \pm
160 2.0%, FL recording 97.9% \pm 2.2% and NQ recording 97.5% \pm 2.3% of SB (all
161 differences NS)

162 In the 800 m, position at 400 m accounted for 21.1% of the variation in final position,
163 whereas in the 1500 m events, positions at 400 m, 800 m, and 1200 m accounted for
164 0%, 3.6%, and 44.9% of variation in finishing position, respectively. In the 800 m,
165 ROSPT for the first and second laps accounted for 21.1% and 74.0% of the variation in
166 overall finishing positions, respectively. In the 1500 m ROSPT for the first, second, and
167 third 400 m laps and the final 300 m accounted for 0%, 9.0%, 51.8%, and 74.0% of
168 variation in final positions, respectively.

169 In the 800 m races, 58.3% of the competitors who qualified automatically were in a
170 qualifying position at 400 m. In the 1500 m races, the percentage of AQ already in
171 qualifying positions were 32.1%, 42.9% and 65.7% at 400 m, 800 m, and 1200 m.

172 Race positions remained more stable throughout 800 m races (figure 1) than through the
173 1500 m races which visual inspection of data suggests were characterized by a greater

174 degree of positional change (figure 2).

175

176

177 ***FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE***

178

179 Figure 1. Mean intermediate positions of athletes finishing in each available position in
180 800 m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

181

182 ***FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE***

183

184 Figure 2. Mean intermediate positions of athletes finishing in each available position in
185 1500m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

186

187 In the 800 m races, 58.3% and 79.2% of the competitors who finished in automatic
188 qualifying positions recorded ROSPT that placed them in the required position for the
189 first and second 400 m laps, respectively. In the 1500 m races, 32.1%, 55.4%, 73.2%
190 and 87.5% of the competitors who finished in automatic qualifying positions recorded
191 ROSPT that placed them in the required position for the first, second, and third laps,
192 and final 300 m, respectively.

193 In both events, the probability of automatic qualification decreased with position at each
194 intermediate point and ROSPT for each 400 m lap (Tables 1, and 2). In all cases,
195 probability of qualification increased for those already in AQ positions, and decreased
196 for those outside of these positions.

197 Table 1. Probability (P) of automatic qualification for athletes in each position at 400 m
198 point and for athletes recording each ROSPT in the final 400 m of 800 m races.

199

200 ***TABLE 1 NEAR HERE***

201

202 Table 2. Probability (P) of automatic qualification for athletes in each position at 400m,
203 800 m and 1200 m points and for athletes recording each ROSPT in the second, and
204 third 400 m laps and final 300 m of 1500 m races.

205 ***TABLE 2 NEAR HERE***

206

207

208 With regards to those who progressed to the next round of competition through the FL
209 route, then in the 800 m (Figure 3) AQ were in a higher overall position (3.23 ± 2.01) at
210 400 m than both FL (4.56 ± 2.10) ($p=0.0208$, 95% CI -2.503, -0.1641) and NQ ($5.13 \pm$
211 2.18) ($p<0.0001$, 95% CI -2.651,-1.141). In the 1500 m (Figure 4) FL maintained
212 higher positions (4.38 ± 2.49) than AQ (7.88 ± 4.02) ($p=0.0008$, 95 % CI 1.26, 5.75)
213 and NQ (7.38 ± 3.93) ($p=0.0045$, 95% CI -5.24 to -0.78) at the 400 m point, and higher
214 positions (5.5 ± 3.22) than NQ (8.08 ± 3.98) ($p=0.0182$, -2.583; 95% CI -4.81, -0.35) at
215 the 800m point. By 1200m, both AQ (5.02 ± 3.14) ($p<0.0001$, 95% CI -5.79, -2.84) and
216 FL (6.81 ± 3.29) ($p=0.0220$, 95% CI -4.75, -0.29), were in higher overall positions than
217 NQ (9.33 ± 3.65).

218

219 ***FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE***

220

221 Figure 3. Mean race position at 400 m and 800 m points for AQ, FL, and NQ in 800 m
222 races. $P < 0.05$ *between AQ and FL, and AQ and NQ (error bars omitted for clarity)

223

224

225

226 ***FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE***

227

228 Figure 4. Mean race position at 400 m, 800 m, 1200 m, and 1500 m points for AQ, FL,
229 and NQ in 1500 m races. $P < 0.05$ *between FL and AQ, and FL and NQ [§]between FL
230 and NQ, ⁺between AQ and NQ, and FL and NQ (error bars omitted for clarity)

231

232 With regards to individual lap times relative to SB in AQ, FL, and NQ, then no
233 differences were found between any groups in the first or second 400 m laps of the 800
234 m races (figure 5). However, in the 1500 m FL ran relatively more quickly ($98.14 \pm$
235 3.01% SB) than AQ ($94.29 \pm 3.30\%$ SB) ($p = 0.0022$, 95% CI -6.522 to -1.178) and NQ
236 ($95.39 \pm 3.90\%$ SB) ($p = 0.0405$, 95% CI 0.09 to 5.42) in the first 400 m lap. FL ($96.22 \pm$
237 2.99% SB) also ran relatively more quickly than AQ ($92.87 \pm 4.06\%$ SB) in the second
238 400 m lap ($p = 0.0095$, 95% CI -6.02 to -0.68). In the final 300 m AQ ($105.7 \pm 2.85\%$
239 SB) ran relatively faster than NQ ($101.7 \pm 6.36\%$ SB). ($p < 0.0001$, 95% CI 2.704 to
240 6.147) (figure 6).

241

242

243 ***FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE***

244

245 Figure 5. Lap times relative to SB in NQ, FL, and AQ in 800 m races

246

247 ***FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE***

248

249 Figure 6. Lap times relative to SB in NQ, FL, and AQ. in 1500 m races. * $P < 0.05$
250 between groups

251

252 Discussion

253

254 The data presented in this paper demonstrates the importance of tactical positioning at
255 intermediate points of middle distance races in determining the probability of
256 advancement from qualifying rounds. As has been demonstrated previously,⁵ no
257 differences were found between qualifiers and non-qualifiers in terms of overall
258 performance achieved relative to seasons best times, thereby emphasising that pacing
259 and tactical factors alone do not determine whether or not qualification is achieved. The
260 finding that probability of qualification increased if higher positions were maintained at
261 intermediate points is also in line with previous analyses⁵ Unlike previous analyses, a
262 novel feature of the present study is that it also investigated the relationship between lap
263 times and finishing position. We found that relationships between times taken for
264 intermediate laps and finishing position were stronger than relationships between
265 intermediate and final positions. In particular, the ability to produce a fast final race
266 segment (400 m in the 800 m event and 300 m in the 1500 m event) seems to be
267 important, a finding that is in agreement with previous observations that medal winning
268 athletes in major championships display a greater increase in speed in the closing
269 stages, and therefore a greater segment-to-segment pace variability.⁴

270 As has been recently demonstrated¹¹, the first lap in the 800 m is an important

271 determinant of race outcome, and in our analysis the probability of automatic
272 qualification for athletes outside the first 3 positions was already below 30% after 400
273 m. However, it was also below 34% for those outside the 3 fastest ROSPT over the final
274 400 m. In the case of 1500 m, the importance of ROSPT in the final 300 m is
275 remarkable. The probability of automatic qualification for athletes inside the fastest 5
276 ROSPT over the final 300 m was not less than 80%, whereas the probability for athletes
277 who were in the leading 5 positions at the 1200 m point was not less than 50%. Indeed,
278 ROSPT over the final 300 m accounted for a greater degree of variability in finishing
279 position than did race position at the 1200 m point. The finding that there were no
280 differences in relative performance achieved (%SB) between qualifiers and non-
281 qualifiers in either event suggests. This may therefore imply that they were able to
282 generate higher final segment speeds through greater maintenance of physiological
283 reserve capacity¹² in the earlier stages of the race.

284 Although both events are considered 'middle distance' events, our findings highlight
285 key tactical differences. Of particular interest is the **apparent** stability of race positions
286 **in** the 800 m (figure 1) **compared to** the 1500 m (figure 2). Although the reasons for this
287 difference are unclear **and we acknowledge that the relatively lower frequency of**
288 **available intermediate positional data in the 800 m may to some extent limit the ability**
289 **to fully understand positional change**, we speculate that it may be partially related to the
290 energetic effects of drafting. In analysis of bicycle pelotons, Trenchard¹³ described a
291 three phase model whereby the degree of positional change depended on both the
292 differential in maximal power outputs between cyclists and the drafting benefit. At low
293 speeds frequent positional changes are apparent as individuals share the energetically
294 costly leading positions, but as the speed increases, 'weaker' individuals are able to
295 maintain contact with 'stronger' individuals only by adopting following positions.

296 Eventually, as speeds increase further, a ‘decoupling threshold’ is reached and the group
297 **breaks** up. It may have been the case that in the 800 m races, individuals of lower
298 absolute ability were able to maintain contact with superior athletes through taking
299 advantage of drafting benefits. However, overtaking these superior athletes in the final
300 stages would have required unachievable increases in running speed, which would have
301 been further **exacerbated by the increased distance requirements of running around each**
302 **bend in an outside lane position.** In the 1500 m races, the lower absolute speeds would
303 mean energetic savings of drafting were lower and permitted more frequent positional
304 changes. **As stated previously though, we acknowledge that higher frequency data**
305 **would allow better understanding of athlete interactions during races, and in particular**
306 **distances between athletes and the precise points at which groups of athletes decouple.**

307 Of particular interest is the **novel** finding that athletes who qualified as FL in the 1500
308 m event maintained higher speeds relative to their SB, and higher race positions than
309 other competitors at both the 400 m and 800 m points. This may suggest that these
310 athletes adopted a more aggressive, ‘high risk’ strategy that resulted in the ‘reward’ of
311 progression to the next round, even though they did not secure automatic qualification
312 based on finishing position. We have no data relating to the goal setting utilized by
313 individual athletes prior to races, but this observed behavior could plausibly be the
314 result of a rational strategy intended to maximize the probability of qualification. This
315 difference in behavior between FL and other athletes in the 1500 m event was not
316 observed in the 800 m, where groups ran at similar relative speeds in each lap and
317 positions remained more stable. **However, based on the data available we are unable to**
318 **explain this difference between the two events.**

319

320 **Practical applications**

321 The findings of this study have several important practical applications for middle
322 distance runners and their coaches preparing for major championships. The ability to
323 run a fast final race segment is a key determinant of the ability to progress through
324 qualifying rounds and should be developed through appropriate preparation. In the
325 800m races in particular, it is important to be in a high overall position throughout the
326 event. Although positional change is more frequent in the 1500 m, the probability of
327 automatic qualification is still below 50% for those outside of a qualification position at
328 the 1200 m point. Adoption of a more aggressive early strategy in the 1500 m races may
329 increase the likelihood of progression as a **FL**, even if automatic qualification is not
330 secured. **Quite how aggressive is optimal is unclear, although, in this analysis at least,**
331 **FL were still running at slower than SB pace in the early stages of races, indicating even**
332 **higher starting speeds may also confer some additional benefit.**

333 **Conclusions**

334 In summary, we found that advancement from qualification rounds in the middle
335 distance running events at a major championship is related to intermediate positioning
336 and in particular, the ability to record a fast final race segment relative to other
337 competitors. These findings illustrate the need for middle distance runners to maximize
338 physiological capabilities in order to maintain a physiological reserve capacity into the
339 final stages. The two middle distance races are very different from a tactical
340 perspective, with the 800 m characterized by relatively stable race positions throughout,
341 and the 1500 m by a high degree of positional change. In the 1500 m event, the adoption
342 of a 'high risk' strategy characterized by higher relative speeds and absolute positions in
343 the early stages of the race may increase the likelihood of progression through the

344 competition as a FL, even if automatic qualification is not achieved. Future research
345 may utilize higher frequency data collection in an attempt to quantify the degree of
346 positional change in races completed at differing absolute speeds.

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353 **References**

354

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For Peer Review

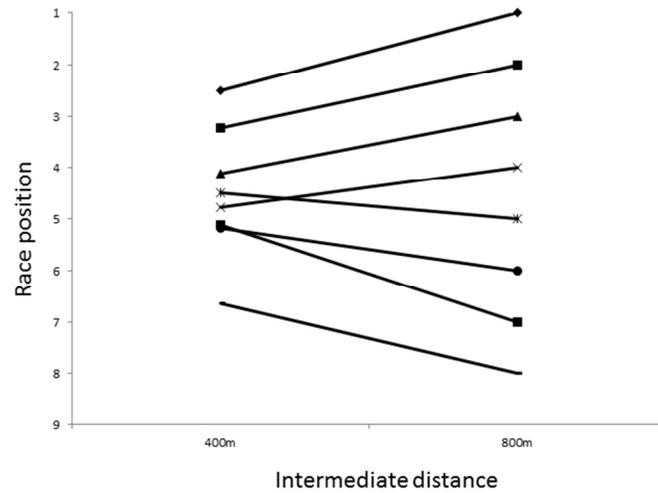


Figure 1. Mean intermediate positions of athletes finishing in each available position in 800m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

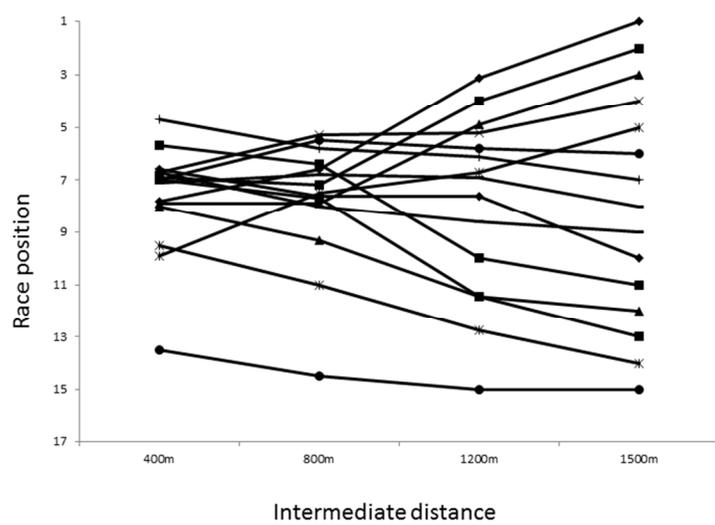


Figure 2. Mean intermediate positions of athletes finishing in each available position in 1500m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

view

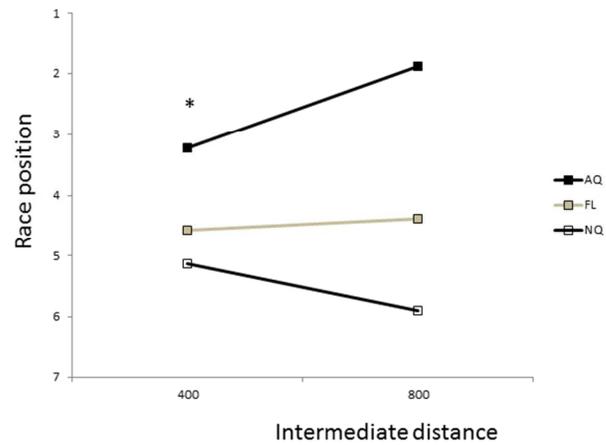


Figure 3. Mean race position at 400m and 800m points for AQ, FL and NQ in 800m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

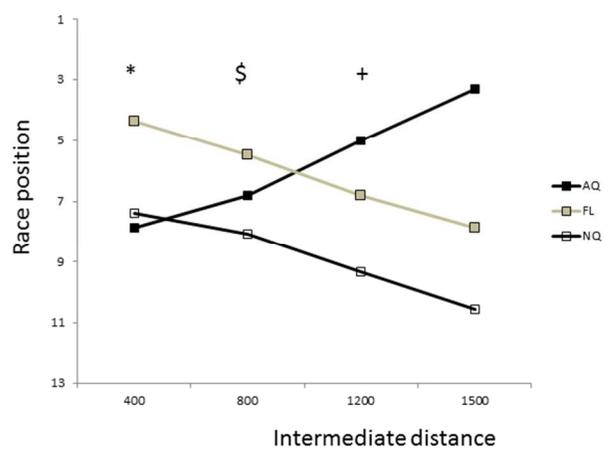


Figure 4. Mean race position at 400m, 800m, 1200m and 1500m points for AQ, FL and NQ in 1500m races (error bars omitted for clarity)

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

view

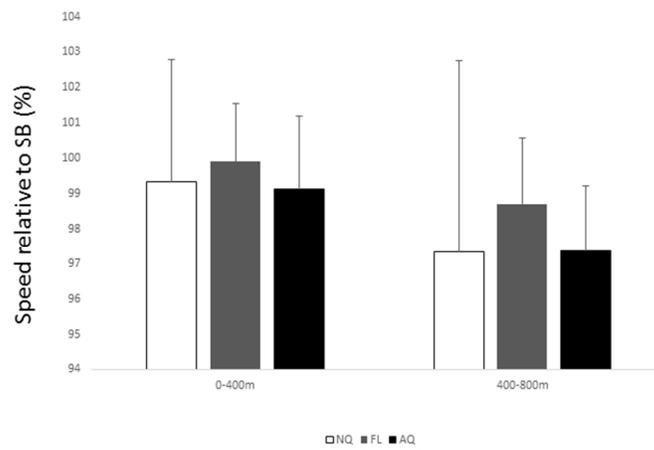


Figure 5. Lap times relative to SB in NQ, FL and AQ in 800m races.

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

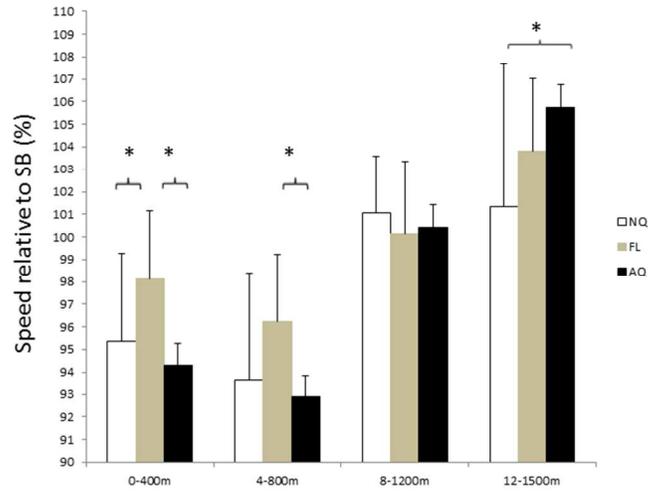


Figure 6. Lap times relative to SB in NQ, FL and AQ in 1500m races

254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Table 1. Probability (P) of automatic qualification for athletes in each position at 400 m point and for athletes recording each ROSPT in the final 400 m of 800 m races.

Intermediate position and ROSPT	400 m Position	ROSPT 400 m – 800 m
1st	0.56	0.78
2nd	0.61	0.78
3rd	0.61	0.61
4th	0.28	0.33
5th	0.17	0.06
6th	0.17	0.06
7th	0.06	0
8th	0.11	0

Table 2. Probability (P) of automatic qualification for athletes in each position at 400 m, 800 m and 1200 m points and for athletes recording each ROSPT in the second, and third 400 m laps and final 300 m of 1500 m races.

Intermediate positions and ROSPT	Position at 400 m	Position at 800 m	Position at 1200 m	ROSPT 400 m – 800 m	ROSPT 800 m – 1200 m	ROSPT 1200 m – 1500 m
1st	0.40	0.50	0.80	0.70	0.90	0.90
2nd	0.20	0.40	0.50	0.60	0.60	1.0
3rd	0.50	0.60	0.80	0.60	0.80	0.80
4th	0.40	0.50	0.70	0.70	0.70	0.90
5th	0.30	0.20	0.50	0.20	0.60	0.80
6th	0.40	0.40	0.80	0.50	0.60	0.60
7th	0.40	0.80	0.30	0.40	0.20	0.20
8th	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.30	0.20	0.30
9th	0.30	0.20	0.10	0.60	0.30	0.30
10th	0.40	0.30	0.20	0.40	0.20	0
11th	0.40	0.10	0.10	0.20	0.40	0
12th	0.60	0.50	0.20	0.10	0	0
13th	0.30	0.40	0.10	0.10	0.10	0
14th	0.30	0.10	0	0.10	0	0
15th	0.10	0.10	0	0	0	0