

IAAF softens false-start rules

International news agency Reuters is reporting that the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has softened the rules on false starts ahead of the London Olympics.

The danger of one inadvertent twitch ruining the greatest day of a sprinter's life has been removed after athletics' governing body softened the rules on false starts ahead of the London Olympics. The little-publicised clarification by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) permits athletes to move in the starting blocks without being disqualified so long as their hands do not leave the ground or their feet the blocks. Previously, such twitching or flinching could have resulted in disqualification at the discretion of the starter. "The bottom line is, outside of an athlete removing his hands off the track or his feet leaving the blocks, nothing else is a false start," David Katz, one of 17 members on the rule-making IAAF technical committee, told Reuters by telephone. The need for improved quality and consistency by starters worldwide had prompted the clarification, said Paul Hardy, IAAF competitions director. Usain Bolt's false start at last year's world championships in Daegu, while a clear violation, only added to the discussion. "This allows a safety valve," said international starter Tom McTaggart, who has been sending off athletes for more than 40 years. "It takes a little pressure off the starter in general, the recall crew and the athletes. They (the athletes) know 'I got a second chance here'." Spectators and starters might need to adjust, McTaggart told Reuters. "Fans may say: 'that guy moved, so it's a false start'," the 1996 Olympics starter said. "It will be a little bit of a learning curve." Starters might wind up disqualifying athletes less often, he noted. "Things that they would just whack somebody for a false start before, they are going to think about it," McTaggart said. The preferred method now is to call up athletes and begin the process again if movement is observed. "They (the IAAF) are interested in preventive officiating because the penalty is severe," McTaggart said of the IAAF rule that disqualifies an athlete for his first false start. With the clarification, movement, if it constitutes a major disturbance or delay, can be considered improper conduct instead of a false start. The penalty would be a yellow card, or warning. A second would result in disqualification. "I believe this gives them (IAAF) the wiggle room they were looking for without saying we were wrong (on the one-and-done false start rule)," said Bob Podkaminer, secretary of USA Track & Field's rules committee and an international technical official. U.S. relays coach Jon Drummond, who was involved in one of the most publicised false starts of all time in 2003, said it was time something was done. "Athletes are getting penalised and that is the starter's fault," the sprinter-turned-coach said. Drummond drew major attention at the 2003 Paris world championships when he lay on the track for more than 15 minutes in protest after being disqualified for a false start he said he did not commit. Many today believe Drummond was correct, that he might have been pushing on the blocks early but had settled down before the gun was fired. "I think it is a fair solution," Drummond said of the clarification, though he would prefer that the false start rule reverted to the previous one, when the first infraction was charged against the field and the second eliminated the offending athlete. Sprinter Tyson Gay said he liked the clarification. "I think it will save some people," the world's second fastest man told Reuters. "Because if a person flinches and they don't call it a false start, it can allow another person to flinch and they call it on that person. They (the starting crew) didn't see the first person." Katz has a solution for that - employ video in the starting process that would be immediately available to starters. After all, he said, with television beaming races globally, "the whole world gets to see who is moving except the starters."