

NCAA Cross Country: Are Women Shortchanged by Shorter Courses in Championship Races?

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Abstract

In NCAA Cross Country Regional and Championship races, the women compete over a six-kilometer course, while the men run eight kilometers in Division III and ten kilometers in Divisions I and II. In 2022, the NCAA Division I, II and III Cross Country Committees unanimously rejected a proposal to rectify this discrepancy by equalizing all races at the eight-kilometer distance.

Currently there are two schools of thought regarding whether the women's race should be lengthened. Many elite women runners, including Paula Radcliffe, have pushed back on proposals to equalize race distances, arguing that races do not have to be equal length to be equitable, and claiming the women's races are more interesting to watch (Gretschel, 2018). The proposal that was sent to the NCAA was initiated by Run Equal, supported by a Change.org petition with nearly 5,000 signatures (Peters, 2022). The organization has the support of many of the most accomplished women in distance running history, including Joan Benoit, Lynn Jennings, Molly Huddle and Katherine Switzer. The primary concern of the organization is that having women run shorter courses sends a message that women are not capable of racing over courses of equal length (Huber et al., 2021).

In rejecting the proposal, the NCAA Committee noted differences in other events, such as the weight of the shot put and hurdle height in track and field and expressed concern that adding length to the races could be detrimental to participation numbers (Lewis, 2022). There are also questions regarding athlete health, as they would face an increased training burden, and a belief that the current distance has the benefits of affording middle-distance runners from the track and field team, as well as freshman runners, a greater opportunity to contribute to the cross-country team (Gretschel, 2018). There is also anecdotal evidence that coaches and athletes are comfortable with the 6k distance and there is no push from the most invested parties to change (Sturtz, 2015).

Outside of the NCAA, there has been a recent movement to normalize race distances for both genders, including at the World Athletics Cross Country Championships and the European Championships (Hutchinson, 2016). The governing body of university athletics in Canada, U Sport, recently changed all race distances to eight kilometers, which many felt was a satisfactory compromise, with each gender changing their race distance by two kilometers (Cyr, 2019). USA Track and Field, on the other hand, has heard from a sizable number of athletes

who prefer that their championship races remain at six kilometers for women (Huber et al., 2021).

Absent from the discussion has been an analysis of late-race volatility and whether shorter races provide enough time to have the best teams and individuals rise to the top. It stands to reason that cross-country races should have sufficient length and rigor to have athletes arrive at the finish line relatively spread out and producing results that suggest the best athletes and teams have won. To better understand whether the women's races are long enough to produce fair and reliable results, the researchers created a scorecard to compare the changes of position from the final checkpoint to the finish line in the women's and men's races. This scorecard was applied to twelve large-field races and supported that women's races have a greater degree of movement, or churn, of athletes and teams toward the end of the race.

This presentation will discuss the positions both for and against equalizing the race distances, the results of the application of the scorecard and what the results mean for whether the races are long enough to have the best teams emerge. While there are varied criteria for determining whether disparate race distances allow for equitable experiences, understanding late-race dynamics will add valuable information to this debatable topic.

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