



**David Marrs**

**Photo Finish Judge**

**Athletics Northern Ireland**

**Do you have an athletics background?**

I have been involved in athletics for about 40 years. First as a sprinter at school and then at club level where I represented Northern Ireland at international meetings. I also played rugby for Ulster in the 1980s.

More recently, my involvement is as a parent, an official and an independent board member of Athletics NI.

I even met my wife, a high-jumper, through athletics at a schools international. There was a gap of about 20 years and then our son and daughter both took up the sport; our son was a high jumper but no longer competes. Our daughter, Megan (Marrs), is still competing in sprint hurdles having recently graduated from Loughborough University and is currently taking a year to concentrate on her athletics.

As I was at meetings anyway with my teenage children, I thought I should give something back and started helping out on the track. I knew a lot of people who were active as coaches and officials and it wasn't long before they had me signed up.

## **Where are you in your officiating journey?**

I have been officiating for about ten years now starting as a track official. At first I helped out with the City of Lisburn club at the Northern Ireland Young Athletes League as it was then known.

The first year or so I was just helping out but then I did my formal level 1 for track officiating. Then I swiftly moved on to take levels 2 and 3 in photo-finish. Frustratingly I have completed all the courses and questions for level 4 but, due to the pandemic, I am awaiting some competitions to get my final out of region reports done.

As a sprinter I was always interested in photo-finish or electronic timing as it was known. Competing some 35 years ago photo-finish was only around for the bigger meets. Many times I was long home before the photo-finish film was developed and the results were published!

Of course it is more-or-less instantaneous now which has its own pressures of expectation.

Being a civil engineer by profession I have a technical mind and am comfortable with the IT involved in photo-finish so it suits me. I also am fortunate to have a great mentor in Liz Glover who is our first Level 4 photo finish official in Northern Ireland.

We are a small team so I do most of the meetings and for most events we aim to have a team of 3 or 4. The term photo-finish is a bit misleading as we are not just placing each athlete but giving them a time. The system produces all the data for the results and we need to ensure all the clocks, scoreboards and wind gauges are set up and working properly.

## **What is your favourite moment as an official?**

I just love seeing personal bests. This is what makes it worthwhile for me. Even in a low-key meeting it is so nice to see someone make a qualifying mark for an age-group champs or just achieve a PB or a performance that qualifies the athlete for the next level. Seeing athletes happy is what I enjoy. We get the odd big meet in Northern Ireland such as the Belfast International and when athletes are achieving Olympic qualifying standards there is a bit of a buzz in the photo finish room.

A great day on photo-finish is one that is non-eventful and nobody knows we are even there. We are constantly worried about the disasters that can happen with the technology and the nightmare is missing something.

### **What do you love most about officiating?**

I love being involved in athletics. I know so many people in the sport and in Northern Ireland we have a close-knit, very experienced team. Northern Ireland has officials operating at the highest level meetings and for me it is a constant learning experience working with them. I have made lots of friends through officiating.

When Covid hit we all missed it so much which shows how much we enjoy it.

Photo-finish teams are not just about the finish line; we are in constant touch with the start team, track officials and announcers; we also load up all the race data and process the results and ensure these are published as quickly as possible. It is a constant challenge as technology develops; now we are aiming for live results to appear on websites and social media. But this is all for the good to improve the athlete and spectator experience.

I enjoy statistics and I love watching the races which helps with my role and, through my long experience with the sport, I have a good idea what all the times mean to the athletes. It is always great to see some of the athletes that competed as under 12s coming through and now watching them competing as adults, at all levels.

### **What are your ambitions in officiating?**

My target is to get to level 4 next year. I would like to travel around a bit more and do some of the higher level events but, for me, it is mainly about having another level 4 in Northern Ireland. My priority is the domestic programme at home and I will do that better if I get experiences elsewhere.

Photo-finish is slightly different to the other disciplines because there is limited opportunity for major championships due to the nature of the

technology. So my priority is to continue to provide good photo-finish in Northern Ireland. But level 4 would make me eligible for British Champs and so on and that is more than enough for me.

**What would you tell others about becoming an official?**

It is very rewarding. I am constantly learning. There is a very hefty rule-book. It scares me to know now what I didn't know when I started! I am sure there is a lot more I don't know yet but that keeps it interesting and great fun. It is brilliant to get to the end of a meeting that has gone well and get feedback on how appreciative the athletes and coaches are.

And I'd say photo-finish certainly has the best seat in the house!

**Using just three words describe what officiating means to you.**

- Friends
- Excitement
- Sense of achievement