

T&FN INTERVIEW

Asafa Powell

by Jon Hendershott

Asafa Powell's track club in Jamaica goes by the tag "MVP." That stands for Maximizing Velocity and Power, explains founder/head coach Stephen Francis. Yet, the initials could just as well signify "Most Valuable Powell."

After all, the 24-year-old is the fastest 100-meter sprinter in history, having sped a World Record 9.77 in '05 and then tied it twice more last year as the high points of his Athlete Of The Year season.

Powell has remained in Jamaica to live and train (see sidebar), rather than head to the U.S. like older brother Donovan.

Powell Facts

•**Personal:** born St. Catherine's, Jamaica, November 11, 1982; 6-2 $\frac{3}{4}$ /194 (1.90/88)

•**School:** Sports medicine student at Kingston University of Technology

•**PRs:** 100—9.77 WR once in '05, twice in '06; 200—19.90 '06; 400—47.17 '07

•**Coach:** Stephen Francis

•**Major Meets:** 100—1) Pan-Am Jr '01; dq-qf) WC '03; 5) OG '04; 1) CommG, 1) WAF '06. 200—1) WAF '04.

•**World Rankings:** 100: '04—1; '05—2; '06—1 (AOY)

And unlike so many sprinters, who can put on a loud, brash public face, Powell is a soft-spoken man who really does want his running to speak for him.

He shared his thoughts with T&FN the night before the Mt. SAC Relays, where he chose not to run in a 4 x 100 after the flare-up of tendinitis behind his right knee:

T&FN: You literally are the World's Fastest Human. What do you think of that title?

Powell: Well, it is a very unique honor to be the fastest man in the world; it's very huge. But sometimes, I myself don't really know how big it is. People come up to me and they are the ones who bring it up and let me see how big it really is. I do appreciate it and it is an honor to be the fastest man in the world.

T&FN: How, in fact, did you begin running?

Powell: There were six boys in our family; I am the last, the youngest. My oldest brother, Donovan, was a sprinter. I used to watch him and admire him but it wasn't until high school that I started to run myself.

I didn't know what I might be capable of doing, but I had the talent and I knew it would be good for me to try.

In my last year of high school, I started to practice and I ran 10.60. Then coach Francis found me and started coaching me and that was when I started to do things. After a month with him, I ran 10.50.

T&FN: You false-started twice at your high school nationals, yet Francis came to you to coach. Why did he pick you?

Powell: I was an unknown; no one knew who I was. I won my semifinal at the high school nationals and then everyone started to look at me and wonder who was this guy? I guess Stephen saw that I had real potential, even though I did false start.

T&FN: Stephen says he likes to build athletes from the ground up. So was there a moment when you really got a sense of how far you could take sprinting?

Powell: Well, at the beginning, I definitely didn't think that. [Laughs] Early on, I was improving every year. My first year on the circuit in '02 I ran 10.12. The second year I ran 10.02. In '04, I went 9.91 and then 9.87.

After seeing all those improvements, and after I first went below 10 seconds, I began to think, "You might be capable of running something really fast."

When you run under 10-flat, that makes you real in a lot of people's minds. I kept improving, but I really didn't know I could run a record time until I ran the first 9.77 in '05. That year I was running very well; a 9.84 before the record. I felt like I was challenging myself to keep running faster.

T&FN: You were tremendously consistent in '06 with 12 of your 16 races under 10-flat. World-class sprinting sometimes can be streaky. What factors enabled you to have that high level of consistency?

Powell: I believe it was due to the coaching from Stephen and also the work of my manager Paul Doyle. I had only one race a week, so there wasn't too much pressure put on my body. Running one race a week gave my body plenty of time to recover.

T&FN: You are very well known now, around the world and especially in Jamaica. You can be surrounded by autograph seekers when you go shopping at home. How do you cope with high expectations,





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to always win, to run fast times?

Powell: Well, I see it as just a mind thing from other people. They come up to me and say things like, “You have to beat this guy,” or “You have to break the World Record.”

But it’s up to me not to let comments like that put pressure on me. I know what I can do and what I want to do—and those might not be the things that other people want me to do. So, it is a matter of me satisfying myself.

People have to accept what I want to do for myself and not that I have to satisfy anyone else out in the world.

T&FN: *Are you the type of athlete who really tries to take it one race at a time?*

Powell: Yes, I am. I don’t think about races far ahead, just the very next one I’m going to run. I just work to prepare myself for that race. It is just one step at a time.

T&FN: *You weren’t aiming for a record in Gateshead. Yet you tied it [a second time].*

Powell: I went out just to win and maybe go sub-10. I just ran very relaxed. When I saw the timing board with 9.77 on it, I just couldn’t believe it. There can be times when no one expects it, even you. But I felt relaxed and calm in that race. It was just like a Sunday morning stroll.

T&FN: *At the major championships, you haven’t had the best outcomes yet: disqualified from your quarterfinal at the ‘03 Worlds, 5th at the Athens Olympics, then injured in ‘05 so you couldn’t run in Helsinki. So are Worlds and Olympics victories very important for you to win?*

Powell: The World Championships and the Olympics are the titles that everyone wants to win. Those are the best of the best. I would like to have all three: the World Record, the World Championship and the Olympic gold medal.

I’m happy with the Commonwealth title last year, but those three are like the triple crown of sprinting.

T&FN: *You have been an outspoken critic of doping and have said you want to be remembered as a sprinter who achieved your honors clean. So what were your feelings when Justin Gatlin tested positive?*

Of course, you missed a potentially huge payday, but how did you

feel about having the chance taken away to meet your prime rival and settle things on the track?

Powell: I was very, very upset at the time. Everyone was really looking forward to the matchup, especially me. I was waiting for that “perfect day” when me and Justin would meet.

Powell Stayed At Home

Asafa Powell has developed into the 100’s WR holder by training in his Jamaican homeland. Why didn’t he move abroad?

“My family and friends are there,” he says. “I’m very comfortable there. I will say there also is a bit of fear because I would guess that maybe 80% of the athletes who leave Jamaica, regardless of where they go, just disappear. I didn’t want to be in the situation where I went to the States for college but that’s it. I wanted to do track & field as a career.

“My coach and I have a good relationship, too. I told myself I would try staying in Jamaica for two years. Then if it didn’t work out, I would go to the U.S. But it worked from the first year, so there is no reason to leave.”

Older brother Donovan, a 10.07 performer went to college and ran at TCU, taking 2nd in the ‘95 NCAA.

“Donovan shared experiences with me and he even wanted me to come up to TCU at one time when he was there,” says Powell, but I had already decided I would stay at home.”

It seemed like a boxing match to me, him running his 9.77 in Doha and then me in Gateshead. So I was very excited for us to race and so many directors wanted us to meet up at their meet.

So when his positive test came up, I was very angry and very disappointed. I also feel it brought a lot of added pressure on me because I think people wondered if I could keep running fast. “Can he do it without having Justin around?”

T&FN: *Did you feel that you wanted to run as fast as you did consistently to prove the doubters absolutely wrong?*

Powell: Yes, but that’s not why I wanted to keep running fast. I ran the World Record twice last year and no one had ever done that before. I’m not trying my best just to prove myself to people. A lot will still have doubts, but that is their problem and not mine.

T&FN: *In terms of your overall career, have you every thought about just how fast you would ultimately like to run? Or do you even want to put any limit on it?*

Powell: Well, how fast I would ultimately like to run... I don’t think it’s humanly possible. [Laughs] But how fast I *think* I can run... having been in the 9.77 races, I feel I can think about a 9.74. And I would love to go below 9.7. It probably will be best if the day isn’t at a big championship. You always want to win those races first; then if a record just happens, it’s extra.

T&FN: *You haven’t run the 200 that much; your best is only—“only”—19.90. So you really are a 100-meter guy, first and foremost.*

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Powell: Yes. The couple of times I ran the 200, I got hurt so that put a little fear into my mind. I wondered if every time I ran the 200, would I get hurt? Running the turn hard puts a lot of pressure on my legs. That's why I'm fearful of the 200: I'm afraid I'll get hurt.

T&FN: Now for you to run faster than that, improvement will come in smaller and smaller increments. What do you feel you have to do, technically or any other way, to keep improving?

Powell: I know I'm at a point where it is going to be hard to improve. Running 9.77 is the top level. I'm not really sure what I can improve on to run faster—Stephen has some ideas, I'm sure. It may also be me just being in the right circumstances in every way. Of course, it would be wonderful to run a record in Jamaica.

T&FN: Sometimes it appears that you ease up in the final meters of a 100. In fact, do you? If so, is that something you want to try to correct, or is that just your "style"?

Powell: Sometimes I do tell myself to run through the line. But in many races, there isn't anyone beside me to run me to the line. So I did develop the habit of easing up in the final meters. Oh yes, I'm well aware of it, but there really isn't anything to do in training to remedy it. It's just for me to change.

T&FN: Your parents, the Revs. William and Cisllyn Powell, are both ministers. What has been their reaction to your successes?

Powell: They are very overwhelmed and excited. They don't want even a bug to land on me—they don't want anything to bother me. They just love me and are over-protective of me. But they didn't expect that their last child would become such a well-known person.

T&FN: All you have done for them, your brothers, yourself, for Jamaica has been very positive. Jamaica as a nation must be very pleased that you have stayed at home.

Powell: Yes, the people are very happy. At first, many people didn't understand why I chose to stay. But now they are very appreciative and respect the decision I made.

T&FN: Looking ahead to the two coming championships seasons, both those years will extend quite far into September. What have you done specifically in your training to prepare for seasons that will be so long?

Powell: That is a question for Stephen. The coach knows everything. [Laughs] He is the one who knows how and when to peak. One thing I can say is that we will take it one step at a time, in terms both of each race and each season. When the World Championships comes, we will concentrate on that. Then after that we can look at the rest of the Golden

League. Then next year we can think about the Olympics. There is plenty before that.

T&FN: Sadly, you lost two of your brothers. Do you ever dedicate races to them and try to win in their memories?

Powell: Yes. Most of my races I say I'm winning for my brothers. If they were alive, they would be so excited. No one could sit in the stands next to them because they would get so overexcited about everything.

T&FN: So they would have loved your records. When you have received athlete of the year awards

Coach Francis's Take

Stephen Francis has coached Asafa Powell for six years, since he was 18, and has good insights into his star pupil:

•What qualities did you see in Powell?

"The primary thing was, at the time it was almost unheard of for a top high school athlete to elect to stay in Jamaica to train after high school. I felt that a guy nobody seemed to know much about is who I wanted because no one paid much attention to him.

I didn't know at the time that he was related to Donovan Powell; I didn't learn that until later. It turned out to be a good choice."

•What makes him unique now?

"He is unique now in that he is probably the only 'big' sprinter who has a great start. I think that's what makes him hard to beat and gives him the potential to be better than anybody else."

•What about his tendency to ease up at the end of some races?

"We don't really see it as a big problem. Sprinters often care about how they look. So when they are in races where they don't perceive a challenge, they have a tendency to see how fast they can run while looking as easy as possible.

"But when Asafa nails his start, I don't think it matters how close or far away people are. The key thing for him is to get his start. He's not the type of runner who is going to make up a huge gap easily from behind.

•What does he have to do to keep improving?

"Pretty much, to keep improving he has to be more consistent with his training. He improves each year, yes, but he isn't where you would expect. You often hear that the best people in any sport are the hardest workers. I'm waiting for him to appreciate that and when he does that—and if it happens before too long—we will see far more improvement from him."

and your other honors, do you ever pinch yourself and wonder, "Is this really happening to me?"

Powell: All the time. [Smiles] It's just incredible to remember where I came from and where I am now. I just never imagined going through all I have. Even now, I sometimes ask myself, "Why am I doing this, showing myself to the world this way?"

When I think back, I never dreamed of running so fast, of going to so many places, getting Athlete Of The Year awards. It's all just incredible but I'm loving it. □