

# Ato Boldon

The former sprint star turned acclaimed TV analyst offers up his thoughts on the modern speed scene heading into the World Championships

by Sieg Lindstrom

*With the World Championships in Moscow upon us, T&FN checked in for a sprints talk with Ato Boldon, NBC and Universal Sports broadcaster and host of the IAAF's "Inside Athletics" social media feature. Boldon, 39, knows a thing or two about the topic, of course, having won two bronzes in the '96 Olympics, the '97 Worlds 200 title and 100 silver at the '00 Olympics for Trinidad.*

*A 2-time NCAA champion for UCLA, and the 200's No. 1 World Ranker in '98, Boldon rated globally in the deuce 5 times and rated 7 seasons in the 100 (No. 2s in '98, '00 & '01).*

*A true fan and stat nut, Boldon, who also speed-trains football players with NFL aspirations in the winter, follows the sport passionately and is not*

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shy with his analyses.

*As it turned out, we spoke with Boldon just days before news broke of doping positives for Tyson Gay and Asafa Powell. Since Ato, like many fans, most eagerly looked forward to a Bolt-Gay 100 clash in Moscow, after we round-filed the 100 and 200 formcharts, we spoke again with Boldon just before press time for some followup.*

*Some of that conversation appears right up front here in place of that blown up by Gay's bombshell.*

**T&FN:** Well, here we are, talking again because Tyson Gay says he "trusted" somebody else as the gatekeeper to substances going into his system. As new allegations trickle out, Gay's offense appears to involve something more serious than a stimulant in a supplement—although the rumored substance is allowed in Major League Baseball—and he should, as he has said, "take [his] punishment like a man."

*Nonetheless, you've taken the stance in recent days that WADA should reconsider its ban on stimulants of the type Asafa Powell and Sherone Simpson apparently ingested.*

**Boldon:** Yeah, and that is certainly very controversial but I'm trying to tell it like it is; everybody else is trying to tell it the way it should be.

What's making me frustrated is that former athletes who I know used to be supplementing because I know who they bought their supplements from are saying, "Nobody should be taking anything; we should all just be..."

C'mon. Really?! There are a lot of sanctimonious former athletes now. I've just decided I'm done [talking about it] because I at the end of the day I'm not going to be left

out here as the only one [addressing reality]. "Ato's throwing in the towel!"

Hello, guys. Everybody's already doing supplements. They have been for decades.

**T&FN:** I would hate to see an "anything goes" sport. I don't like to watch humanly impossible competition courtesy of steroids and other major PEDs. Honestly, though, I think track needs to think more carefully about public perception and minor offenses.

People want to ban Asafa Powell for life; they're talking about his stimulant positive as if he were Lance Armstrong.

By contrast, how many baseball fans realize or, most importantly, care that if Asafa Powell were a Major Leaguer his punishment for a first offense would be... nothing. Second offense? 10-15 games, I believe. Not even a month.

Our sport's athletes end up looking like Hannibal Lecter for offenses that amount to a "so what?" in other sports.

**Boldon:** What's not getting through is that everything is not steroids. What's also not getting through at all is that a lot of these substances are just ineffective.

You know how periodically there are things on the list and they go through and take this one off the banned list or that one off the banned list? I think now is a time for that, too. There needs to be a reassessment of that list.

The people whom I talk to that don't know anything about sports but understand chemistry look at some substances on the list and say, "Dude, are you serious? They're busting people for that?! That stuff is bullshit."

**T&FN:** Sadly, Gay's fall rips a huge hole in the Moscow men's 100. Earlier you had posited he had a reasonable chance of challenging Bolt.

Do you think Justin Gatlin, after his hamstring injury, can get back to where he was in Rome when he beat Bolt?

**Boldon:** He might but Bolt isn't going to be the Bolt of Rome. Gatlin might well get back there but he beat Bolt in 9.94. It's not like he

beat Bolt running 9.78. He beat a really bad Bolt.

Then to get through the U.S. Champs and run 9.89 Gatlin did well to just qualify. I just don't think that this year Gatlin is going to be able to deal with Bolt if Bolt is healthy and he

**Boldon's sterling career found him dashing in 4 Olympics**



has had this sort of a setback.

Gatlin to me is 2<sup>nd</sup> until I see different.

**T&FN:** Bolt got off to a slow start by his standards this year. He seems to be coming around, though, as he did for London. What kind of Bolt

do you expect to see in Moscow?

**Boldon:** I think that Bolt's days of running fantastic Diamond League times like he did back in '08 and '09 might be behind him (see sidebar) but I still don't think he's going to be as vulnerable as some think come championship time.

I think it's going to take 9.7-low to win in Moscow. Gay might have been able to get there. He ran under 9.7 four years ago and he ran 9.75 this year but he ran it with 2.0 winds.

I think Bolt will show up not in London shape, but I think in just slightly worse shape. That, to me, would put him in 9.7 shape.

**T&FN:** How do you expect the Moscow 200 to play out?

**Boldon:** I just feel like Bolt's better race is the 200 and I don't expect any upsets based on what I've seen thus far.

**T&FN:** Who else are you looking for in the 100?

**Boldon:** I think that's the race. Bolt and Gatlin on the outside. With no Asafa and no Blake, I don't think any of the Jamaicans are ready to step up and beat a healthy Gatlin just yet.

**T&FN:** Might the 200 tip the U.S./Jamaica sprint war towards the Islanders?

**Boldon:** I wouldn't be surprised to see

## The 2 Versions Of Usain Bolt

"This is the first year I've been in Europe this much since I've been a broadcaster and being on the circuit has given me a chance to kind of shadow Bolt and get a sense of just what the demands on his time are.

"I think I understand last year even though last year I sort of figured it out by guess. I figured last year that everybody was writing him off too soon. He's such a good championships performer and he always figures it out.

"Being over here and being able to see it now, I realize why he's able to figure it out when the championships come around. What happens is when Bolt is going through his so-called regular season, his training is, I think, somewhat erratic because he has to make these appearances and he has these commitments to sponsors and various people who have demands on his time. It's a given that he's got to do this and, yeah, he'll travel and, yeah, he'll train and, yeah, he'll travel.

"The reason why a different Bolt shows up to a champs is because leading up to a championships, on a calendar they block time out and for the first time all season Bolt gets to have continuity in his training. I think that's why Bolt can look so different between championships versus a Diamond League race."

## Most of the principles in the Olympic 100 final won't be around for the Moscow climax

GIANCARLO COLOMBO/PHOTO RUN



Jamaica take all three medals.

The 200 doesn't hold a whole lot of intrigue for me. I just feel that in the end Bolt's too gifted in that event for anybody to really bother him—especially if he goes in there in decent form with rounds.

I think maybe the 400 and the LaShawn Merritt/Kirani James battle is a lot more interesting (see p. 47).

**T&FN:** On the women's side, can anyone touch Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce in the 100?

**Boldon:** Blessing Okagbare. I think that's the athlete I am most intrigued by this year. I think she'll leave Moscow with three medals if she decides to do all three.

And I think the long jump medal is probably the most assured because I don't think there are three people who are going to outjump her.

In the 100, if you've been watching her, she almost had a 10.75 PR but the wind was just over at Pre. She lost to Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce by a hundredth of a second the last time they raced.

I think that people may be overlooking her. Maybe some aren't but I'm very high on Blessing.

I had her 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Olympic final last year

and she sort of self-destructed. But three other athletes I had high hopes for last year were one year away from really emerging. Brianna

## About The 100 Hurdles...

Ato Boldon says he's about as excited for the women's short hurdle race as any other in Moscow. Why?

"I spoke to Sally Pearson in Europe and she was very honest in an interview we did for *Inside Athletics*. She said, 'Look, I'm glad I already have my World and Olympic titles because I don't know if I'm going to be ready, given my injuries this year, to deal with Brianna Rollins.'

"I was looking to see what Rollins' team was going to do post-U.S. Nationals and I said to everybody, 'If she goes to Europe and tries to run every single race it's going to ruin her for Worlds, but if she goes home, recuperates, trains a little bit, takes some time off, I don't see how that World Record survives.

"Assuming she doesn't run into crazy headwinds in Moscow and it's not 50 degrees, so far I think she has done the right things. She has stayed home.

"When Sally Pearson is running 12.7 just 30 days before the World Championships, it's very possible she doesn't medal. The U.S. hurdlers are not over-raced. Queen Harrison stayed home, Nia Ali has stayed home. Dawn Harper is doing her usual—that is running herself into championship form, as is the norm with Bobby Kersee athletes.

"The U.S. could sweep that event very, very easily."

## Boldon — continued

Rollins I had making the Olympic team in 3<sup>rd</sup>, English Gardner I had making the Olympic team last year, and Kimberlyn Duncan.

I was one year off on all three of them; I am anticipating that I was one year off on Blessing as well.

Her [list positions] at 100, 200 and long jump

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have gone a little bit unnoticed. The reality is that that combination has not been done in a very, very long time.

**T&FN:** Carmelita Jeter is back after tearing her quad in Shanghai in May. Do you think the defending world champion can contend?

**Boldon:** I don’t know. It’s hard to bet on an over-30 sprinter having to deal with the likes of Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and Okagbare, and every now and then someone else. Look at Murielle Ahouré, who just ran 10.91—sort of eye-raising.

I think Jeter is a threat for the podium; I just don’t think she’s a threat for the top of the podium.

**T&FN:** Do you think English Gardner’s ankle injury will be a challenge for the new U.S. champion?

**Boldon:** I’ve talked to her on a regular basis. The ankle is a non-issue as long as she’s not going around a turn. What’s more of an issue is cleaning up her form a little bit and getting back to some training because she’s had a very long collegiate season.

I certainly know that in that situation you have to go back and do work that you feel like you’ve gone over already in terms of getting your sharpness back and getting your strength back leading up to a championships.

So it’s not going to be easy work for her but she understands and certainly John Smith understands how to do it. She’s already gone to John [as her new pro coach].

### The James/Merritt 400 Clash

Ato Boldon is fired up about the men’s 400, with Kirani James and LaShawn Merritt continuing their rivalry. Who’s his pick in a series that James currently leads 5-2?

“I like Kirani. Put it this way: I feel like LaShawn could run almost a perfect race and still lose if Kirani runs a near-perfect race.

“I feel that Kirani has a slightly better finish right now and they’re so even that the person with the better final 100 will win. So far Kirani hasn’t shown me that if he comes off the turn ahead anybody is able to pass him. He simply does not give up leads.

“When he lost the one meeting between them that he did this year at Pre, he let LaShawn get away

That’s going to be a nice training group: Jeter, Gardner and Blessing Okagbare. I think those three will benefit from training next to each other.

**T&FN:** Assuming they all get along. That has to be a challenge in training groups loaded with stars.

**Boldon:** Well, they may not get along but just think of the things that they bring to the table. You have Blessing who has maybe the best finish in the business, I think.

You have Jeter who is as powerful a sprinter as there is, and you have English, who is sort of this waify character on the track who is the new upstart. I’d love to watch those three practice.

**T&FN:** I wouldn’t expect Gardner to be intimidated. She just exudes “I’m getting to that finish line first.”

**Boldon:** English is not afraid of anything and I think that’s why I like her. Think of it: most sprinters run from the 400. English, she likes running the 4x4. That’s rare.

**T&FN:** Finally, the women’s 200. After getting her Olympic gold Allyson Felix started slowly this year. Do you think she’ll round into form or could she be upset?

**Boldon:** Going into London I felt that Allyson was the safest bet in any sprint event. I was one of the few who knew Veronica Campbell-Brown wasn’t getting a medal in the 200. I also thought she wasn’t getting a medal in the 100 either and she got a bronze [laughs].

But, no, Allyson is not the lock that she was last year. I think Kimberlyn Duncan has a shot against Allyson. Blessing Okagbare has a shot against Allyson, and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce could win the whole thing.

I spoke to Shelly-Ann earlier this year and that silver in London has changed her whole outlook. She used to hate the 200; now she’s sort of embracing it. She told me that she actually thought she could be better at 200m than she is at 100.

That coming from a past world champion

a little bit and he wasn’t able to reel him back in. So I make Kirani a slight favorite but I think that’s one of the best matchups.

“I love the fact that, unlike in other events, those guys line up it seems like every Diamond League meet.

“I have no doubt that LaShawn’s going to run faster but I also think Kirani will too. I think both of them are ready to run something in the mid-43s, which would certainly be personal bests for both of them.

“One of *T&FN*’s lists that I love is the Best-Ever Marks-For-Place. It’s going to one of those where somebody may run the all-time best for 2<sup>nd</sup> place [currently Butch Reynolds’ 43.91 from the ‘96 Olympic Trials].”

**Boldon with a mike is now a familiar sight**



KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

and two-time Olympic champion at 100 sort of piqued my interest.

**T&FN:** Do the Gay and Powell doping positives and Yohan Blake’s injury absence leave the U.S. and Jamaica men’s 4x1 teams evenly matched or is it just a matter for Jamaica of putting Bolt on anchor and “no problem, mon”?

**Boldon:** Without Blake and Asafa I think the Jamaican team comes a little bit closer back down to earth but the U.S. team with no Gay and with a Gatlin who I don’t think is going to be back to where he was last year—I think Jamaica’s still pretty comfortably ahead.

And like you said, if Bolt anchors forget about it.

Nesta Carter just ran 9.87. A relay team with Nesta Carter and Usain Bolt and any two other Jamaicans isn’t beatable at Worlds unless they make a fatal mistake.

**T&FN:** You favored the U.S. women’s 4x1 even before Simpson’s removal from the picture. Nothing has changed, has it?

**Boldon:** No, and Jeter looks like she’s back so that’s kind of bad news for everybody else.

I imagine the U.S. will run Gardner, Allyson, Jeter—and I’m not sure who else will get the call this year. It might be Octavious Freeman.

That U.S. team is too strong. □