

Justin Gatlin

by Sieg Lindstrom

Justin Gatlin at 31, 12 years into his pro career, has toured the peaks—an Olympic 100 title in '04 and a winning sprint double at the World Championships of '05—and the valleys of world class sprinting.

He spent four years sidelined from the sport after a doping suspension in '06 and this summer climbed back to the leadership spot in U.S. efforts to fend off the Usain Bolt-led Jamaican wave.

In '05 Gatlin led U.S. teammates in an historic 1-2-3-4 sweep of the World Championships 200 in Helsinki. Bolt hobbled in last in that race.

This year, resurrected even further than last when he took London Olympic 100 bronze, in Moscow Gatlin dashed to silver in a century final featuring four swift Jamaican foes.

Gatlin is steering full-speed ahead for Rio in '16—coached the past two seasons by Dennis Mitchell as part of former elite dashman Mitchell's Florida training group.

When T&FN reached Gatlin for this interview, we found him on his fall break ordering catfish and oysters at a Cajun restaurant near his parents' home in Pensacola.

Gatlin had to pause a few times to pose for photos with fans, but he was happy to chat about his ongoing journey in the sport.

T&FN: Congratulations on a great season. What's your frame of mind coming off this summer?

Gatlin: It's all good. I think there were some areas that I could have improved on in the beginning of the year, and also me having an injury was a setback going into the rest of the year but I think overall it was a successful year.

There were a lot of ups and downs going on in track & field but I think I was able to maintain, stay focused, and come through with a good season.

T&FN: Would you say that you're a different athlete from the Justin Gatlin of '04 and '05?

Gatlin: I think that I'm wiser now. I think that I'm more of an adult. I was still a young athlete in 2005, a young kid who was just out there. I know I was very talented and I was able to win. I had a lot of heart, and now I'm able to think more and know what I need to

do to get it done.

T&FN: After the 100 in Moscow you seemed genuinely pleased. You didn't win but you gave Bolt a run for his money and you'd beaten him once earlier in the summer in Rome, and you really made that World Championships final a race. I wonder if you would have been able to be as happy with that outcome in '05?

Gatlin: One thing I definitely would say is that I want to be able to leave the sport happy, and I think that these last couple years I've learned to appreciate it and enjoy the camaraderie of athletics—being out there running, having a good time, just enjoying myself and not getting too over-pressured with, "I have to go out here and run very fast and very hard."

That all comes with the territory. We're all out there doing that. But I'm also looking at that I don't want to be one of those retired athletes with a chip on his shoulder wishing that I had fun when I was doing it.

I want to be able to go out with a bang and be able to look back at it when I'm 50 years old and say, "Hey, you know what? I just had coffee with Bolt or I had a drink with Mike Rodgers," and have a good time and laugh about those times before.

T&FN: Your injury came as a surprise to many when you showed up at USATF with your leg wrapped.

Gatlin: Two weeks before Nationals, I was out practicing; I'd just got back from Rabat, Morocco, and I was out in typical Florida weather. It was very hot but there was also a cool breeze and I was kind of sweaty. I just had short tights on. I was practicing and doing a couple block starts with Jeff Demps. He got out on me and got away from me; I tried to go for him and I felt a twinge.

I actually had a microtear in my lower hamstring so I instantly stopped working then, got treatment on it, worked on rehabbing it within two weeks and letting it rest. I actually had to change the mechanics of my start even for Nationals. I was literally day by day.

T&FN: You must have been very happy

Gatlin In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Justin Alexander Gatlin was born February 10, 1982, in Brooklyn, New York; 6-¾/183 (1.85/83)

•**PRs:** 60—6.45 ('03) (=5, x W; =4, x A); 100—9.79 ('12) (=6, x W; =3, =6 A); 200—20.00 ('05); 110H—13.78 ('01)

•**Schools:** Woodham HS (Pensacola, Florida) '00; Tennessee (left after soph year in '02); now represents Xtep

•**Coaches:** Vince Anderson (Tennessee), Trevor Graham (pro), Dennis Mitchell (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 60—4)NCi '01; 1)USi, 1)WIC '03; 2)USi, 1)WIC '12; 100—1)NC, 1)USJ '01; 1)NC '02; 2)OT, 1)OG '04; 1)US, 1)WC '05; 2)US, 4sf)WC '11; 1)OT, 3)OG '12; 200—4)NCi, 1)NC '01; 1)NCi, 1)NC '02; 2)OT, 3)OG '04; 1)US, 1)WC '05.

•**World/US Rankings:** 100—4/3 '03; 2/1 '04; 1/1 '05; x/3 '11; 3/1 '12. 200—x/5 '01; 2/2 '04; 1/1 '05

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to make it through USATF and get on that team.

Gatlin: I was so relieved. It was between 5 and 10 meters before the line I was able to see that I was between 2nd and 3rd so that I could throttle down and not try to pull anything.

T&FN: *Adjusted for wind and altitude, the Moscow final was your fastest race ever. You said afterwards that you felt you got “reachy” trying to match Bolt’s stride and cadence over the last 20 or 30 meters. If that hadn’t happened, do you have any feeling for how fast you might have been able to run?*

Gatlin: You know, when you get to a certain level of top-end speed and you’re trying to match guys like Bolt and Yohan, it’s definitely about angles and science and where you’re applying the most power.

I think that against probably anybody else in the world I can get away with reaching at the end of my race and trying to just cover ground without worrying about speed.

But when you’re dealing with somebody like Bolt, who’s 6-5, and you try to go stride for stride with him and gut it out, that’s not the game plan. I had to learn that the hard way a couple of times and now I’m more wise to it. I gotta be able to change some things around towards the end of the race.

T&FN: *When you’re out training do you still feel the way you did in years past?*

Gatlin: I feel like a 26-year-old kid, man. I feel good, actually, running with the other guys. You’re going to have soreness here and there. Everybody has soreness, no matter if you’re 22 or 32. It’s just about making sure that you take care of your body.

I know that I’m older so I’ve got to make sure that I’m going to get my massages, not skipping any gym classes and just staying focused on what I’m supposed to be focused on.

T&FN: *Is there anything you feel the general public doesn’t understand about what it takes to be a world class sprinter?*

Gatlin: Yeah, I could give you an even better one: what it takes to maintain world-class sprinting status. You hear about a lot of football players that they can run 9.9, and they may be able to under certain conditions on a good day.

But if you throw in variables of you just traveled 12 hours, got off a plane and now you’ve got to go warm up and go to the track, shake your legs out when you still haven’t even rested and then get ready for the next day and go compete at top-end speeds of 9.8, 9.7, there’s wear and tear on your body.

A lot of people don’t understand that. We’re only in these countries for 72 hours and within that 72 hours we get little rest. We’re already ready to go.

By the time we come across that finish line at 10:00 at night and get through the press conferences and everything like that, there’s six people left in the stadium and it’s almost midnight. Then you’ve got to catch a flight at 8:00 in the morning so you have to get to the airport at 6:00 in the morning and go to another meet. You’re always on the go.

T&FN: *In high school and even into your frosh year at Tennessee, you were a really good hurdler. You were faster than David Oliver at that age. Do you think you could have been world-class?*

Gatlin: I had a conversation with David in Zagreb. He wanted to take me up on a bet. He said if I trained for two months to do hurdles and he changed straight for sprints, would he have a faster time [relatively speaking] in the 100 than I would in the hurdles.

I wish we had some time to really do that. That would be great. I love the hurdles to this day. My heart beats fast when I watch hurdle races. I’m such a fan of David Oliver, Ryan Brathwaite, Jason Richardson, Aries Merritt. I’m a fan of watching those guys compete. So I think it’s still a part of me.

I always tell Dennis, “You should let me do the hurdles.”

He says, “Yeah, if you go out there and break the American Record, I’ll let you do the hurdles.” He tries to give me a little incentive.

He knows I love the hurdles. I think I would be a very good competitor, right next to those guys, if I’d kept on hurdling.

T&FN: *What do you like to do in your spare time?*

Gatlin: I’m a big video game kind of guy. I play Xbox—*Grand Theft Auto* and all kinds of games like that. I wish I could play more sports, but it seems like the ACL/MCL bug is going around and tearing people’s knees up so I’m going to stay away from that.

T&FN: *When you retire and you’re still pretty fit, what sport would you play?*

Gatlin: I love flag football. If I could just relax, not work another day in my life and just have hobbies, I would play flag football and paintball all day. And video games.

T&FN: *You’re having Cajun seafood tonight. Sounds delicious. Do you get to relax your dietary regimen a little during the offseason?*

Gatlin: A little bit but I don’t try to create a habit. I try to have a little bit of indulgence; maybe a cheesesteak here and there or a sweet tea but I try to make sure I stay close to my diet. I don’t want to come back too heavy and then have to work too hard in the fall season.

T&FN: *What do you like to eat?*

Gatlin: I’m from the South, man, but I like all kinds of food. That’s one thing I like about traveling. I wish I could be on the bizarre foods show or Anthony Bourdain, traveling around the world and eating different kinds of food and seeing different kinds of cultures.

When I went to China, me and my coach, Dennis, we ate all kinds of crazy stuff. We like to see what we can eat that other people

Gatlin — continued

won't. We ate duck brain and duck tongue and webbed ducks' feet.

T&FN: But you're not eating scorpions?

Gatlin: No. I've eaten scorpion before. I've eaten bear in Estonia and I ate a scorpion in China.

T&FN: Were they good?

Gatlin: To be honest, the scorpion tasted like crunchy bacon. The bear was like a gamy steak. I don't mind gamy. It was good.

T&FN: Your agent, Renaldo Nehemiah, told me you went to Milan last week to appear at a truffle festival. Were those chocolate truffles or the mushroom-like truffles?

Gatlin: They were the mushroom truffles, which was kind of weird. It's like having that cousin who's not your first cousin but maybe your third cousin and you're not exactly sure how you're related. I couldn't categorize that truffle. It was like a mushroom but it tasted a little bit like garlic and it wasn't soft like a mushroom. It had a weird texture; it didn't add up for me. But it tasted good as a seasoning; it tasted great on truffle pasta and stuff.

T&FN: I have to ask you about the relay in Moscow. It looked like you stumbled.

Gatlin: Yeah, I did, man. I stumbled when I came out. The first thing I thought about,

The Tyson Gay Case

Tyson Gay made a major mistake this year, testing positive for a banned substance and says he trusted somebody he shouldn't have. Since Gatlin went through a similar experience we asked for his thoughts.

"One, we shouldn't pass judgment so quickly. There are people out there who are trying to get an advantage and then there are people out there who happened to fall into an unfortunate situation.

"That's a lesson that should go to all the young athletes out there. Make sure you can trust who you're around, make sure you know their backgrounds.

"Sometimes you shake their hand, you think they're a nice guy and they're nice to you, and all of a sudden you realize their background is a little seedy sometimes. You don't realize that sometimes until after the fact, and after the fact can be tragic.

"So I know it's a tough time for Tyson—especially toward the latter portion of his career. You don't know what's going to be dealt to him, whether it's a career-ender or it's going to give him motivation to come back for 2016."

and I told this to Doc, was, "Oh, no, not a Doc Patton, not a Doc Patton."

You have so much riding on it. You've got three other guys that want to see you do good. I'm more nervous for the relay than I would

want to make sure we get the stick around and are able to come across victorious.

The thing about USA Track & Field is we have to understand that there's a high turnover rate of talent within the U.S. team.

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Gatlin handed Bolt his only loss of the year

be for a 100 meters. That's always been the case because you're putting the fate of your competition and vice versa in the hands of three other people. They have to trust you; you have to be almost like brothers going into battle together. You've got to be able to close your eyes and say, "I trust him. I know he's going to get the stick around, he's going to get the stick to me, I know he's ready."

T&FN: Jon Drummond was the "relay czar" for the London Olympiad. Now he's out. Is the relay program still on the right track?

Gatlin: There's always room for improvement. I could tell you this, though. What Jon Drummond brought to the relay in 2011 and 2012 has never been done before since I've been running. He was able to help put the runners in the driver's seat.

We're not kids. We're not 17, 18-year-old kids that just want to go out there and run and don't know the dynamics or the orders. We all understand the abilities that we bring to the table.

Trell Kimmons knows that he's a great starter. He might not be the best finisher so he's not going to look to run anchor leg. We don't care about the glory of the run; we just want to get the right order so we can win and we all get gold medals.

Maybe back in the day people were always fighting about who would run anchor. We don't care about that. We just

On the relay team this year none of those guys were on the team last year except for me. So there's a whole different dynamic and you have to be able to understand who you're working with in a short period of time and be able to bring that out.

I think that USA Track & Field is starting to get that now—that we have to not cookie-cut every team but make it successful and make every athlete as comfortable as possible to compete well.

T&FN: Muhammad Ali's boxing career was interrupted and he felt he lost his prime years. Do you feel like that about your 4-year suspension?

Gatlin: I think success over a period of time can backfire on you. You can become a complacent champion. I think that if I'd stayed in the sport and ran for those 4½ years, I would have done great things but I think mentally I would have been a little more burnt out going into 2016. You know: "If I make it, that's OK, cool."

I would have been so distracted with my fame and success, I might have tried to be a movie star or something like that and not taken it as serious as I do now.

I think I appreciate and have a lot more respect for the sport and how long your life span is in the sport. It makes me hungry because now I know that I'm fighting against a time limit and I'm fighting against other athletes who haven't seen what I've seen, haven't been through what I've been through. It makes me unique and it makes me grateful to be in the sport once again. □