



from the editor

E. Garry Hill

CAN YOU IMAGINE the Lone Ranger without Tonto? Batman without Robin? Juliet without Romeo? How about track & field without Usain Bolt? That’s a pretty jarring concept, isn’t it? For almost a decade the Jamaican Jet has defined our sport. You say “track” and the person in the street responds “Usain Bolt!”

All that is scheduled to come to an end this summer. Oh sure, he’s going to remain a major player; the sports marketeers aren’t so silly that they’d not make it worth his while to hang around as a goodwill ambassador of some sort, but the sporting world can be cruel to its stars, no matter how great they were. “What have you done for me lately?” remains very much in play.

Bolt has had multiple triples, but think about Lewis’s quads

Can the sport possibly remain a major player without its star attraction? We’ve asked this question before. There was a time when the colossus that was Carl Lewis stood astride the track world, dominating all that he saw. We dreaded his departure too. We came out of that one just fine, as the winding down of Lewis’s career dovetailed nicely with the rise of Michael Johnson’s. And I’m sure that—even though I can’t name you a mortal-lock option on who that might be at this point—we’ll find someone else to take Bolt’s place.

Because of his rash of “triple crowns” (Olympic and World Champs golds in the 100, 200 and 4x1) and the rise of social media, Bolt has reached a level of world-wide public consciousness that Lewis never did. But allow me to propose that if Lewis had been operating under the same set of circumstances as Bolt that his achievements would have far outstripped the Jamaican’s. He got the short end of the (non-relay) stick in multiple ways.

- He was boycotted out of the ’80 Olympics as a 19-year-old. I figure his podium appearances would have started that year with a long jump bronze (to go with the 4 golds that actually followed) and would have earned a 4x1 gold.

- He was competing in an era where at first the World Championships didn’t even exist and then, during his prime years, happened only every 4 years, not the 2 that Bolt has enjoyed. What about the “if only” World Champs of ’81, ’85 & ’89 had been in play?

So start the WC in ’81 and he picks up—forget a triple!—a quadruple, with golds in the 100, 200, 4x1 and long jump.

In ’83 there was a WC, and he got a 1/4x1/LJ triple, but with modern marketing in play, I bet he adds the 200 for another quad, a feat he did for real at the ’84 Olympics.

For ’85, add another WC that didn’t happen, and another quad (if not he, whom?).

Rome ’87 did happen, and once you subtract Ben Johnson from the mix, there’s another quad.

The ’89 year was eminently forgettable in many ways and Lewis low-profiled it, rating only No. 2 in the 100 and leading the long jump. Make it a WC year and I project another quad (at worst a triple, as he sets the 200 aside as an “aging” 28-year-old.

At this point the modern WC scheduling comes into play and he gets his 100 WR at the ’91 Worlds and adds two more Olympic long jump golds in ’92 and ’96.

His medal total blows Bolt’s away. ’Nuff said.

- He spent the first half-decade of his career in a world where while he certainly wasn’t starving, his ability to “legally” make money from the sport was severely restricted. So his ability to make headlines, and his motivation to maximize his public profile was nothing like that which Bolt enjoys.

It was absolutely thrilling to watch Lewis in action, and Bolt—who really knows how to play to modern showmanship—has been no less a joy.

Having said that, I eagerly await whomever is next. The king is dead; long live the king!

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