



(From left to right) Usain Bolt and Yohan Blake lead Jamaica's pursuit of the sprint gold medals against Justin Gatlin and Tyson Gay of the US. "People are trying to pit (Bolt and Blake) against each other," said track expert Leighton Levy.

A mighty island unto itself

Look for Jamaicans to make life very tough for everyone else in the sprints

By TYM GLASER
tymglaser@chinadaily.com.cn

*If you are the big tree,
We are the small axe
Sharpened to cut you down, (well
sharp)
Ready to cut you down, oh yeah
Small Axe — Bob Marley*

Jamaicans take their sport seriously. I got my first taste of that — quite literally — in 1996, when Deon Hemmings won the women's 400 meter hurdles at the Atlanta Games.

As she thrust herself across the line in a golden moment of the ages for the Caribbean nation, the packed Gleaner newspaper's sports club erupted into a shower of Red Stripe beer and white rum (which is just slightly less potent than kerosene).

In a nation born to run, it was the country's first Olympic gold medal since the sinewy and balding Donald Quarrie won the 200 in Montreal 20 years before.

During that drought, it was close but no cigar for the islanders — particularly on the women's side with the likes of Merlene Ottey, Juliet Cuthbert and Grace Jackson picking up silver and bronze pieces while the United States hoarded the gold at the Games.

Push the fast forward button eight years after Hemming's heroics and Jamaica claimed two track gold (Veronica Campbell-Brown in the 200 and the women's 4x100 relay) in Athens. Four years later, Jamaica ran off with five of the six gold medals in Beijing (that's if you don't count the 400m as a dash) and left the mighty US bewildered and fuming while also sowing the seeds of a rivalry for the ages. You can have your Lochte-Phelps clash in the pool or the Ethiopians and Kenyans trying to outdo each other while running seemingly endlessly around the Olympic track.

The real battle of the Games will feature vignettes between red, white and blue and green, gold and black and last far less than a minute each time.

“People are trying to pit them against one another because they feel they shouldn't co-exist but this is nothing new.”

LEIGHTON LEVY
JAMAICAN TRACK EXPERT ON
THE RIVALRY BETWEEN BOLT
AND BLAKE

There has been a paradigm shift in sprinting, and now Jamaica is the big tree.

In Usain Bolt, the world's fastest man, and Yohan Blake, his heir apparent, the island — basically an up-and-down flight away from Miami — has (barring false starts) the gold to lose in the men's 100 and 200 dashes. Toss in Asafa Powell and possibly evergreen Michael Frater and the 4x100 relay world record could fall again to Jamaica — just as it did in 2008.

The US' Tyson Gay and reborn Justin Gatlin will be well and truly in the medal hunt in the 100 and Wallace

Spearmon won't be all that far away in the half-lap event, but these gold medals are Jamaica's to toss away.

Much has been made of a potential feud between "Lightning" Bolt and "Beast" Blake, but Jamaican track expert Leighton Levy says it's much ado about nothing.

"Blake and Bolt are fine," Levy said. "They've been good pals since Blake joined the Racers camp from St. Jago High four years ago.

"People are trying to pit them against one another because they feel they shouldn't co-exist, but this is nothing new. Leroy Burrell and Carl Lewis broke the 100m world record four times between them while they were members of the Santa Monica Track Club, whose members won about 18 gold medals between them and world championship medals as well."

Levy is confident Jamaica will sweep the men's sprints, but says the US is not for revenge.

"The US-Jamaica rivalry has been intense since 2008 because they are not used to being on the outside looking in when it comes to the sprints and they are going to come at us hard in London," he said.

"They will have more success on the

women's side where Jamaica's women have faltered since 2008 and the US women have gotten better. And it doesn't help that Campbell-Brown is not going to be a threat in the 200, where she won gold medals in 2004 and 2008.

"She won't medal in the 200 as she has put on too much muscle mass. She will struggle to run fast. Also she has had too many coaching changes in too short a time."

That would appear to leave US veteran and two-time Olympic bridesmaid Allyson Felix and teammate Carmelita Jeter, who seems to age better than a Napa Valley red, chasing 200 glory.

However, in the 100, Jamaican pocket rocket Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, the reigning Olympic and world champion, is in the pink of form and, if she gets off to her customary bullet-like start, will be near impossible to catch after improving her top-end speed.

The women's 4x100 will be a raffle as both teams blew it in Beijing, but if they can get the stick around, the US should just pip the Jamdowners.

So, that's Jamaica four, US two. Enjoy world ... and don't blink!

TYM'S PICKS

MEN

100m

Gold: Usain Bolt (JAM)
Silver: Yohan Blake (JAM)
Bronze: Tyson Gay (USA)

200m

Gold: Bolt
Silver: Blake
Bronze: Christophe Lemaitre (FRA)

4x100m relay

Gold: Jamaica
Silver: United States
Bronze: Britain

WOMEN

100m

Gold: Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce (JAM)
Silver: Carmelita Jeter (USA)
Bronze: Veronica Campbell-Brown (JAM)

200m

Gold: Allyson Felix (USA)
Silver: Jeter
Bronze: Campbell-Brown

4x100m relay

Gold: United States
Silver: Jamaica
Bronze: The Bahamas

How the heck are they so fast? More importantly, does it matter?

The scent of ganja hangs in the air like some doctor bird with no place to go.

The sun is disappearing behind the grandstand, but the day's stifling heat remains. The fans, clad in their respective team colors, cheer and jeer; the boys taunt and the girls flaunt.

This is the Boys and Girls Championships — the biggest event each year on the Jamaica sporting calendar.

The western Caribbean island is nestled under Cuba and next to threadbare Haiti — a proximity that allows for the relatively free passage of drugs and guns between the former English and French colonies.

But the only guns and drugs the fans at Kingston's National Stadium are interested in during the early spring meet are the starter's pistol and, for more than a few among the 30,000-strong crowd, the odd spliff or two.

This is Champs, where the old school ties come out and the boys teams from the likes of Kingston College, Calabar, Jamaica College

and Wolmer's and the girls squads from St. Elizabeth Tech, Holmwood, Edwin Allen and St. Jago battle it out for bragging rights at the four-day event that provides a school with bragging rights and a nation with a glimpse of its world conquerors to be.

The overwhelming majority — if not all — of the Jamaica team at the coming London Games competed at Champs. The seeds of talent are not planted at the concrete slab called "the Office," which witnessed Jamaica's independence 50 years ago on Aug 6, when the Union Jack was lowered and the green, black and gold flag of Jamaica was raised, but this is where the stars of the future — the Veronica Campbell-Browns, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryces, Usain Bolts and Yohan Blakes — bloomed.

Juliet Cuthbert, who won the 100 meter and 200 meter silver medals at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and cut her teeth at the same venue (if not on the same resurfaced track), said Champs was a major reason for Jamaica's track and field success, which dates back to the country's



TYM GLASER

first Olympic appearance and a one-two finish in the 400m in London in 1948 by legends Arthur Wint and Herb McKenzie.

"Champs is hugely important to a young athlete's development. It is simply the biggest event of the sporting year here and can get the best into US colleges," Cuthbert said.

Leighton Levy, one of Jamaica's leading track and field experts who ran the sprints at Champs, concurs with the woman who finished behind Gail Devers in the 100m and Gwen Torrence in the 200 at the Games in Spain.

"You have to understand we have a strong primary school tradition, which identifies talent at an early age, and that flows through to the Boys

and Girls Athletics Championships," Levy said.

From Champs, the best of the best are chosen to represent Jamaica at regional and world youth and junior events. Bolt, the world's fastest man, dominated the 200 and 400 races at all levels as a novice. Campbell-Brown was also a force, as was Blake.

Not so long ago, Jamaica's best were scouted at Champs and lured to colleges in the United States. But now, due to the emergence of two local-based track clubs (MVP and Racers), they can stay at home and eat, drink, train and party in a familiar environment.

The facilities at Kingston's University of the West Indies and the University of Technology, both a few kilometers east of downtown, may seem rudimentary to outsiders, but the athletes don't appear to mind. Their records speak for themselves.

Bolt, a member of the Racers Track Club, has the world's fastest times in the 100 (9.58 sec) and 200 (19.19) while his stablemate Blake, the world 100m champion after Bolt blew his start in Daegu, South Korea, last year, has the best time in the

100 (9.75) this season and clocked a massive 19.26 in the 200 last year in Brussels.

Meanwhile, MVP's Fraser-Pryce, the defending women's 100 Olympic and world champion, has run the best time over the short sprint and the fourth-fastest ever (10.70) this year. Asafa Powell, also from MVP with a final chance to redeem himself at a major meet, is only just a blink of an eye behind the "Killer Bs" this season with a best of 9.86.

Of course, the question that always springs to mind is how has a country of about 3 million people won 55 medals (and only one of those outside of track and field — cycling) since joining the Olympic party in 1948?

Two researchers were trying to work that out a few months before I left the land of wood and water three years ago.

They were looking at things like the fast-twitch fiber that makes people's muscles react quicker and the environment in Jamaica. They also studied athletes' heritages and even the yams from the red earth parish of Trelawny — the region from which

Bolt and Campbell-Brown hail.

At the end of a long interview that blinded me with science, I asked, "So, any clues yet?"

They looked at each other, smiled and said, "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Maybe some things are simply best left unexplained.

In a Caribbean island where obeah, a religion based on sorcery, is still practiced, is it really necessary to have rational explanations for everything?

On Aug 6, the winner of the men's 100m in London will be awarded his gold medal.

If that green, black and gold standard is raised and the rousing *Jamaica Land We Love* played, do we really need to delve into the why?

Can't we just let the mystery of brilliance be what it will be and savor the moment of a likkle but tallawah sunburned country that has shone before the world again?

Tym Glaser is a senior sports copy editor who lived in Jamaica for 14 years. He can be contacted at tymglaser@chinadaily.com.cn