

Peak Performances

Track and swimming face challenges when their athletes compete against their own legacies

More than a year has passed since the Beijing Olympics, which featured the transcendent performances of Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt, among others. Yet until this summer's World Swimming Championships in Rome and the World Track & Field Championships in Berlin, American sports fans had not seen either athlete perform since Beijing. Instead, for a full year after Beijing we were concerned more with Phelps' out-of-the-pool activities while we wondered what Bolt's true potential was in the 100 meters if he ran through to the tape. And the fact that we had to wait a year before we could see them compete at their peak again causes me to sympathize with the stewards of sports like track and swimming who have to find ways to attract fans in between Olympics and world championships.

The world championships in these sports provided intriguing subplots, specifically the controversy over polyurethane bodysuits in Rome and the gender of South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya in Berlin. But let's focus on Bolt. In his last six events at the Olympics and the World Championships, Bolt has broken five world records—lowering the 100-meter mark in Berlin to 9.58 seconds, the 200-meter mark to 19.19, and coming close to the world record he set with his Jamaican 4-by-100 relay teammates at the Olympics. Yet anyone who saw Bolt's 9.69 time in Beijing knew that he could go at least one-tenth of a second faster. Why did it take him a year to do so?

The answer lies in the fact that track athletes, like swimmers, train for peak performances. There are only a limited number of times per season when the athlete gears up to push his or her limits. "You simply can't be at your peak all the time," says Peter Snell, the great New Zealand middle-distance runner who is now an associate professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Pushing

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the limits of human capability can't be done every week or even every three weeks. Thus, Bolt's records took place in the two showcase events in his sport.

So what if Bolt shows up at a track event in the United States—let's say the Penn Relays—and runs the 100 meters. If he ran a 9.92 or even a 9.75, would the

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crowd go away disappointed? They shouldn't, says Doug Logan, CEO of USA Track & Field. Logan acknowledges that in track and field you have "competition against a legacy" as well as "competition against an opponent." But he doesn't think that fans will go away happy only if a world record is broken. He also points out that team competition can drive fan interest, as can patriotism. And indeed Logan is exploring ways to create interest in a team competition, complete with flag-waving, by bringing back the historical concept of track duel meets but in an international setting, such as a U.S.-Jamaica meet limited to the sprint distances.

No doubt, such a meet would interest fans. Yet when you are dealing with sports like track and swimming where performance can be so objectively measured in times familiar to us all, we know how well an athlete has performed against his or her historical best, and it can't help but affect our assessment of what we have just seen. It is certainly true that athletes in other sports, like Tiger Woods and Roger Federer, gear up for major championships. Yet when Tiger Woods wins the BMW Championships at Cog Hill, it doesn't look that much different than what he might do at Augusta or Pebble Beach.

When Roger Federer plays Rafael Nadal in Madrid (and beats him as he did earlier this year) it may not be as epic as a Wimbledon final but the effort Federer brings to the table looks very much the same as the effort he puts forth in a major. There is no objective measurement to tell the difference.

In track, since there are a limited number of peak performances, they are carefully scheduled. In fact, athletes collaborate to avoid each other when they are not at their peak. Thus, we had to wait a year for a race between Tyson Gay of the United States and Bolt—and they didn't disappoint in Berlin with Gay running a remarkable runner-up time of 9.71. By contrast, Federer and Woods don't avoid anybody at any time (including each other, apparently).

Swimming will face some unique challenges in this regard in the years ahead, and we may be able to see how much fan interest is driven by world records—the "competition against a legacy" in Logan's words. If the performance-enhancing suits that were credited with producing so many world records in Rome are banned, it may be years before the majority of world records in swimming are broken.

The NFL is considering eliminating or limiting preseason football—in part because fan interest is limited since we aren't seeing those teams at their best. The outcomes of those games don't matter much to anyone. The challenge for track and swimming is to create competitions that matter to the average sports fan even when their athletes are not at their peak. Having been riveted by the competition in these two sports in Beijing, and having had my interest whetted again by the competition in Rome and Berlin, let's hope that they can do so. ■

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