

The Phenom

USAIN BOLT

The newly crowned fastest man alive redefines speed and reignites the sport

BY CHARLES BUTLER | PHOTOGRAPH BY NITIN VADUKUL

THE FASTEST MAN IN THE WORLD IS SLOWING DOWN. AT LAST. “I’M TIRED,” he says, drooping into a chair in a New York City hotel room. It’s not even noon on this late September day, but he looks finished for the day. ■ Why is Usain Bolt so weary? Could be that for a year he’s been sprinting around the globe trying to prove to those outside his native Jamaica—where he’s known as “Lightning Bolt”—his true talent. Six-foot-five-inch giants aren’t supposed to make world-class sprinters. But the 22-year-old has the capacity to accelerate—from a coiled, motionless crouch—like a Ferrari.

It could be he’s exhausted from his little trip to China. He went to the Beijing Olympics in August and won three gold medals—for the 100 and 200 and as part of Jamaica’s 4 x 100-meter relay team. No one had ever pulled off such a triple. And world records got annihilated each time. But in the mind of the general sports fan, his individual records—9.69 for the 100; 19.30 for the 200—are minutia already misplaced. His smile, his joy, his exuberance, his goofiness, his golden Pumas, his Lightning Bolt poses, his dance moves—these are what will be remembered. With his staggering speed and charismatic charm, Bolt emerged from the Bird’s Nest a star.

Michael Johnson, the original golden-shoe champion, was at the Beijing stadium and witnessed the Bolt magic—including watching his own 200-meter world record disappear. “If you take Usain Bolt out of those Olympics, track and field was horrible,” Johnson says. He’s not knocking the achievements of other track athletes—like Kenenisa Bekele or Tirunesh Dibaba or Sammy Wanjiru, each of whom set records en route to wins. But they weren’t as transcendent—or as telegenic—as Bolt’s heroics. Bolt provided the jolt the sport needed. “You had a situation where swimming and gymnastics had surpassed track and field as the premier sports on TV. Now, because of Usain, track and field has a chance to regain the status it once had for the 2012 Games.”

Johnson emphasizes “chance” because he knows what four years can do. Recent doping scandals have stripped gold medals from such champions as Marion Jones and Antonio Pettigrew.

Bolt is well aware of track’s tarnished image, but hopes he can

make it shine again. “The sport has been humiliated,” he says. “People believe that anyone who runs fast is taking drugs. When people say that to me, I understand.” He pauses. He’s come to accept the speculation *against him*. He maintains that he’s clean. “All I have to do is stay clean, and over time the talk will stop.”

But for now, Bolt could use a nap. His time in New York has been a whirlwind—he followed the *Late Show with David Letterman* with a night out dancing, returning to his hotel at 7 a.m. in time to change for *Live with Regis and Kelly*. He’s had three hours of media interviews and photo shoots and... “And all I want to do is sleep.” The fastest man in the world is human after all. **EW**

TALL ORDER

With his record-setting performances and larger-than-life personality, Bolt was the brightest track star of the 2008 Olympics.



GROOMER: SACHA HARFORD/THE ARTIST; LOFT: RIGHT: DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS



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HEART OF GOLD

Following the Beijing Olympics, Bolt donated \$50,000 to Chinese earthquake victims.