

100 METRES



Tonguing for it: Tyson Gay wins the '07 World Champs in Japan.

SPEED RACERS

Blink and you'll miss the most exciting race at the Olympics

Sometimes, sports people are really not the best candidates to describe their feats. Take Jamaican Usain Bolt, who tore up a New York 100m track at the end of May, stopping the clock at 9.72secs. His judgement? "Pretty good." You've just run quicker than any human being ever has, mate. Fire up!

The athletics world is full of fast men right now. Olympic champion and former world record-holder American Justin Gatlin has just had his final appeal against a drug ban rejected, but who needs him? Until 9.72secs ago, Bolt was barely on the radar; it was his fifth 100m and he was considering not running in Beijing. Now he's thinking again.

Until Bolt bolted in New York, half the Beijing gold-medal betting was on his quiet compatriot Asafa Powell, the previous world

record-holder at 9.74 secs. It's strange to think Carl Lewis, the man many consider the greatest sprinter, is now only history's seventh (legitimate) fastest man.

The other half of the betting was on the man who's currently world champion, American Tyson Gay. And as any fool (including *Alpha*) will tell you, the Olympics are about winning the race, not necessarily world records.

In an event dominated by simple men with big mouths and fast-twitch fibres, Powell is a notoriously complex character: shy, low profile, reluctant to train, hard to motivate. He interrupted a spectacular 2007 season by crumbling and coming third in the only race that counted: the World Championships in Japan, which Gay won. By his own admission he "just panicked and tightened up", before giving up when he realised he wasn't going to win. Two weeks later,

Powell lowered the world record in Italy.

Strangely, Gay also seems to be a humble man. He'll actually tell you how humble he is. "It's all about discipline, humbleness and respect," he said. As for "Lightning" Bolt, he's 21, 1.96m and running out of his skin – and that's pretty much all we know about him. Maybe that's just enough for Olympic gold.

By any measure, the Olympic 100m final will be a sensational race, and anyone running over 10 seconds just isn't going to cut it. Sadly, this leaves Australia's fastest men (Matt Shirvington, Patrick Johnson and Josh Ross) out in the freezing cold

– we couldn't even get one on the starting blocks in Beijing. Not just that, we also failed to field a team in the 4x100m relay.

The blocks in the Olympics' blue-riband event will be filled out by the likes of American Derrick Atkins (second in Japan), Jamaica's Nesta Carter and Olusoji Fasuba, a Nigerian, but the centre three lanes will be Gay, Powell and Bolt. You won't want to blink.

The world of women's sprinting is still recovering from the imprisonment of Marion Jones on perjury charges related to drug use. She'd been a fading star, but Jones was still by far the best-known 100m female,

and no new sensation has taken her place (certainly none from Australia). The women's final in Beijing will probably feature Jamaican Veronica Campbell-Brown, going for a 100/200m double, and America's Lauryn Williams and Carmelita Jeter.

But the one to really watch is the lavishly talented Allyson Felix, also of the US. Like Bolt, she's still not sure exactly which events she'll run in Beijing. She's run the fastest times in the world this year at 100m and 400m, but claims her best discipline is 200m. Likeable, smart and, yes, humble, Felix could emerge as women's sprinting's new face, and heaven knows it needs one.

Cool running: Usain stands by his new world record.



PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB MARTIN (GAY); GETTY IMAGES (BOLT).