

The Sporting Image: The abstraction of form in sport: A collection of art with supporting narratives

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“Bolt from the darkness”

Jack Thompson and Iain Adams

Bolt from the darkness marks the hopes and aspirations of man. It does not merely illustrate Bolt winning the 100 meter final at the 2008 Beijing Olympics but recognises the significance of the event for him and modern sport. Bolt is portrayed at the moment of transition from being very good to being the very best. This victory was extremely important in his career, not only because it made him the Olympic champion but because it elevated him on the path to becoming a societal hero; in society “sporting achievements figure prominently in the careers of heroes” (Womack, 2003:14). Klapp (1949) described five stages in becoming a societal hero and this victory moved Bolt up to Stage Three, the ‘Image building, legendary process’ granting eventual access to Stage Five, ‘cult status’.

The coverage of his victory also made him as much a celebrity as an athlete, recognisable to most of the public around the world as well as fans of athletics. It may therefore be fair to say that when reflecting on Usain Bolt’s achievements and Stuart’s (2004) “celebrity-hero” matrix, Bolt would now be placed in the ‘high hero, high celebrity’ bracket whereas prior to the Beijing Olympics he would probably have been placed in the ‘high hero, low celebrity’ bracket, being a relative unknown to the global community following sport. Bolt seems to fit both Klapp’s and Stuart’s criteria for being a hero which Whannel (1995:123) appears to qualify by offering the view that, “the sporting hero has traditionally been perceived as epitomizing social ideals, masculine virtues, and as embodying values which learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life”. Whannel’s ideas were based upon some earlier observations and claims that a societal hero is often “young male and successful, there being a stress on a set of qualities traditionally associated with masculinity such as toughness, aggression, commitment, power, competitiveness, courage and ability to stand up to pressure” (Whannel, 1992:124). These qualities appear to be present in Usain Bolt in ample measure and may be



captured in Bolt from the Darkness. Bolt has the flamboyance and the style in winning to show that he not only has the “common qualities like courage and willpower but also specific national and social characteristics” (Holt, 1999:12). Bolt is clearly proud to represent Jamaica and it could be argued that the way in which he celebrated before crossing the finishing line at Beijing highlighted his flamboyant and exciting cultural background. The slightly upward viewing angle and his prominence in the image conveys the sheer scale of Bolt’s dominance over his opponents further emphasising his hero status, where were they? The application of Jung's sporting hero arc theorem, in which “the finest of all symbols of the libido is the human figure conceived as an hero” who rises until he hits a pinnacle in his career before then falling, may suggest that Bolt is nearing the peak of his powers (Jung, 1956:171). The fact that this theory suggests that all heroes begin to fall from grace after reaching a ‘final’ pinnacle is represented by the reference to drug use. Previous Olympic 100 meter champions have fallen from grace after testing positive for banned substances either immediately, or later in their career, casting shadows across their Olympic achievements, although “not until 1988 was the issue thrust into the spotlight, when Ben Johnson was stripped of his gold medal at the Seoul Olympics. Since that time, the media, governments and sports federations have given significant attention to assessing the magnitude of the problem” (Yesalis, 2000:10).

In a sport such as the 100 meter sprint “the difference between superstar status and also-ran status can be a fraction of a second, consequently, elite athletes have a strong incentive to create marginal improvements in performance by taking illegal performance-enhancing drugs” (Seeborg and Fisher, 2010:249). However, it is to be hoped that with the strict testing in force to which Bolt has been subjected, he is ‘clean’ and will never test positive for performance enhancing drugs. This would be an excellent outcome for elite athletics and sport in general, notwithstanding the possibility that it could be an excellent outcome also for whatever biochemist conjured up such an effective masking agent. Here, in Bolt from the Darkness, rather than the shadowy tendrils of drugs clinging to him, waiting for him to slow down, then enveloping him and submerging him into the black; the image is of him bursting through the restraining tapes of drugged performance, leaving it tattered in the darkness as he bursts into the light. Behind him is the athletic dark place, identified by Pampel (2007:29) who remarks that “recent examples of the use of performance enhancing drugs, such as the positive tests of Olympic 100 meter champion Justin Gatlin, are bad for the sports image and a bad example for young aspiring athletes”. Bolt is portrayed as almost the saviour of athletics, single handed giving it back its credibility and making it popular again. In winning this race, Bolt removed Gatlin's status as the reigning Olympic champion and also with it the belief that “athletes have to resign themselves to either accepting a competitive disadvantage (by being drug free) or leaving the endeavour entirely” (Murray, 1983:27).

In Womack's theory of four heroic types, Bolt is a paragon; “the paragon exemplifies social virtues. He is cited as an example to youth and is considered the ultimate in human achievement. The role of the paragon is to abide by the rules and embody social values” (Womack, 2003:17). This theory also suggests that drug cheats, such as Gatlin, can be identified as outlaws; “there is nothing more reprehensible than using pharmacological substances in an attempt to improve one’s performance in competition with others who only bring with them fitness they have achieved through hard training” (Hoberman, 1992:92). The paragon must defeat the outlaw to maintain his hero status; Bolt’s sheer size and power are reducing the athletes symbolised by the drug formulae to insignificance. It is said that if drugs were made legal, “it would dehumanize the sport by not respecting the athletes as people” (Fraleigh, 1985:25), however Bolt’s character and talent is shining through the dark, shadowy drug miasma and emerging as the messiah of athletics and that may only be good for sport.

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