

THE BEST OF 2009: Usain Bolt

Usain Bolt and Michael Jordan may have graced the world of sport in different eras but they are bonded by their desire to break records, win accolades and, most of all, entertain.

In their eyes, sport is a performance and a chance to send fans home with lifelong memories every time they take centre stage. And in 2009, Bolt did just that - again. For many, the Jamaican's record-breaking exploits in Beijing were the defining moments of the 2008 Olympics. Tongue out, à la Jordan, Bolt had become the new face of athletics. But the question remained: how much faster could he go? That became the running theme of the 2009 athletics season as he whipped up crowds everywhere he went, from Lausanne to Paris to London, but the records stayed intact. American Tyson Gay fancied his chances of dethroning the king, and was not shy in saying so, yet Bolt remained the man to beat.

In April, the Olympic champion then made his one false move of the year literally veering off track and crashing his BMW in Jamaica. The recovery was fittingly rapid and the waiting was finally over when the World Athletics Championships in Berlin rolled around in mid August. As the street sellers did a roaring trade in Jamaican flags, you could not move without seeing Bolt on TV screens, posters or T-shirts. Supporters crowded into the Olympic Stadium to see a race and Bolt gave them a show. The 100m or 200m might be over in a flash yet the Jamaican soaked up every second, posing, smiling then strolling to victory. In the arena where American Jesse Owens overcame adversity to win four gold medals in 1936 during the Nazi regime, Bolt was determined to etch his own name into the history books. Through the heats, he found time to look over his shoulder and grin. He was just having fun, as if it was a pleasure to simply be there on the track, and it confirmed the belief that he would not put his foot down until medals were at stake. Then it happened. First, he rocked Berlin by smashing his own world record with a 9.58 second run in the 100m final - not bad for his opening act. The crowd screamed for an encore and he delivered, clocking 19.19 seconds to win the 200m final. He was a blur whizzing round the stadium's blue track and his opponents looked to be moving in slow motion. Two gold medals, two new world records and he still had the energy to crack jokes at the press conferences with the media hanging on his every word. As expected, Bolt then completed the hat-trick of golds in the 4x100m relay on the last weekend to ensure that the Championships in Berlin would forever be his. And the sprinter's success is having a wider impact too. With athletics reeling from one saga after another, the Jamaican has been the saving grace, the icon to divert the media's attention and the pillar of pure excellence to remind everyone of the sport's beauty and magnetic appeal. The inevitable recognition came in the form of the IAAF World Athlete of the Year award for the second straight year. Bolt, like Jordan in his Chicago Bulls days, has truly transcended his sport and the exciting part is that there may be even faster times to come. - www.morethanthegames.co.uk