

Is Blake the man to beat on the track at the London Olympics?

There was a moment last month, during Yohan Blake's press conference before the Adidas Grand Prix in New York City, when all of the reporters in the room were confused.

Blake, the 22-year-old Jamaican sprinter who trains with Usain Bolt, repeatedly made oblique reference to "the fastest man in the world." The more questions Blake answered, the less clear it became to whom he was referring. Then, finally, a reporter asked about the upcoming Jamaican Olympic trials, which were just weeks away. "The trials are going to be a cracker," Blake said, invoking the Jamaican lingo for a hotly contested race. "The fastest man in the world is going to be there," he continued, "and also Usain." A tiny gasp rippled through the room. Did Bolt's training partner really just call himself the world's fastest man? Last year, Blake won the 100 meters at the world championships in Daegu, South Korea. Because Bolt was disqualified after a false start, though, Blake's "world's fastest man" title belt was treated as something of a consolation prize. But three weeks after that press conference in New York, Blake beat Bolt in both the 100 and the 200 at the Jamaican trials. Save for the DQ at worlds, Bolt had won 13 consecutive 100 races, and 15 consecutive 200 finals, dating to September 2007. Now, while Bolt's "slightly tight hamstring" has dominated track news, there is growing sentiment that Bolt's comparatively below-the-radar training partner may be the man to beat in London. "[Blake] is the favorite right now, whether Bolt is healthy or not," says Ato Boldon, the four-time Olympic sprint medalist, and NBC track and field commentator. Blake, at 22, is the same age that Bolt was four years ago when he turned the Beijing Olympics into his personal invincibility tour. And that's just where the similarities begin. Blake, like Bolt, grew up poor in the Jamaican countryside wanting to be a cricketer, until, like Bolt, a school principal saw him run at Jamaica's school "sports day" and steered him to track and field. Blake, like Bolt, first became a local star in Jamaica by winning at "Champs," the Jamaican national high school championship that runs every year before a standing-room-only crowd in Kingston's National Stadium. In 2003, Bolt set Champs records in the 200 (20.25) and the 400 (45.35). In '07, Blake set the Champs 100 record (10.21). Blake, like Bolt, sought out sprint sage Glen Mills after high school. Since joining Mills -- "the guru," as he is known in Jamaica -- "my life has been great, and I've run really well," Blake says. With the Olympics approaching, Blake seems to have mastered the legendary relaxation of his taller, more famous training partner. The day before his race in New York City, Blake was strolling Park Avenue in red sandals and calf-high rainbow socks. "Usain showed that you can relax and do funny stuff before the race and it pays off," Blake said that day. "Not thinking about pressure has been working out for me." But while Blake has adopted some of Bolt's qualities, he has shunned others. In his 2010 autobiography, *9.58: Being the World's Fastest Man*, Bolt writes: "I'm so lucky that I'm raw talent. If I really worked at it I could be extremely good indeed, but I never have ... missing gym and training sometimes, and not doing all my workouts. It's hard, man. I don't know how some sportsmen do it." Blake is one of those sportsmen. He earned the nickname "The Beast" in part for his furious training. "When other people are sleeping, I'm working," says Blake. "Yohan is working even when he's watching TV." When Bolt stays at practice as long as Blake, their coach jokes, says Blake: "Big Man, what you doing here?" Source: Sports Illustrated