

# You won't be Bolt

Scientists say mind-blowing speed of top athletes more genes than hard work

Scientists have claimed genetics are just as important as hard work for anyone with ambitions of becoming like the world's fastest man Usain Bolt, or any elite athlete for that matter.

The research goes against the common accepted notion that, with the right amount of practice, anyone can achieve the desired results, an argument championed by researcher Malcom Gladwell. Gladwell's model asserted that innate talent was a myth and that 10 years of deliberate practice was enough for anyone to become an expert in any field, including sports. Not so, however, says research published in the online journal PeerJ. The Grand Valley State University researchers studied the biographies of 26 world-class athletes, which included 15 Olympic gold medallists. The study found that every sprinter, either male or female, was recognised as having exceptional pace prior to beginning formal training. Secondly, researchers put the 10-year time period to the test and found that most sprinter actually achieved world-class performances in less than five years. Olympic champions tended to reach the top level in three years. The research was conducted by Michael Lombardo, professor of biology, and Robert Deaner, associate professor of psychology. "We expected that most sprint champions' biographies would indicate that they were always the fastest kid in their neighbourhood, even before they did any formal training or received any coaching," Lombardo said. "But the consistency of the pattern was surprising, from Helen Stephens, a 1936 Olympian, to Usain Bolt, there were no exceptions. "Gathering the data systematically allowed us to see how strong the patterns were. It also allowed us to test and rule out alternative explanations," Lombardo added. The sprinters also recalled being faster as children. The researchers, in addition, pointed out that collegiate sprinters' best performances in their first season of high-school competition, generally the beginning of formal training or deliberate practice, were consistently faster than 95-99 per cent of their peers. "Our results won't come as a surprise to most biologists, sports scientists, or coaches, all of the previous data pointed to this conclusion," said Deaner. "But our results are important because the deliberate practice model and its '10-year rule' remains enormously popular among many social scientists and intellectuals."