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News

Huge crowds hail athletes

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Olympic gold medallists Veronica Campbell-Brown (left) and Shelly-Ann Fraser greet fans during yesterday's motorcade through Kingston, the first event in the seven-day homecoming celebrations for Jamaica's team to the Beijing Olympics. Thousands of Jamaicans flooded the streets of the capital to show their appreciation to the athletes for their magnificent performance at the Olympics. Jamaica won a record 11 medals - six gold, three silver and two bronze - at the games. (Photo: Garfield Robinson)

Jamaicans flooded the streets of Kingston - the capital city - yesterday to pay homage to the island's athletes who brought home a record 11 medals - six gold, three silver and two bronze - from this year's Olympic Games in Beijing, China, a performance that stunned the world and raised the country's profile in international track and field.

The city came to life as the thousands of flag-waving, autograph-seeking Jamaicans greeted their Olympians, who travelled around the city on a motorcade consisting of nine trucks.

Smiles, laughs and 'shout-outs' greeted the

Olympians on the 'homecoming motorcade' which started its journey at the Harbour View round-a-bout and slowly wound its way around the city to the National Stadium.

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A section of the large crowd that greeted Jamaica's Olympians as their motorcade made its way through Half-Way-Tree yesterday. (Photo: Garfield Robinson)

There were those who had left work or school early and there were those who didn't go at all. The unemployed and retired were there, and so too were suckling babes.

And while most people weren't particular but were excited to see the entire team, there were some who said they came out specifically to see Asafa Powell, some wanted Usain Bolt and some wanted Veronica Campbell-Brown. There were a few others, however, like six-year-old Ashanti Roxbourne of Harbour View Primary School, who weren't sure just why they were out.

"I come out here on the road to look, to see the cars and trucks," said the little girl. Added another six-year-old: "I want to see Veronica because I love her."



Prime Minister Bruce Golding (centre) greets triple Olympic gold medallist Usain Bolt while 100m champion Shelly-Ann Fraser is hugged by Minister of Transport Mike Henry at yesterday's function to honour the country's 2008 Olympians at the Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston. (Photo: Lionel Rookwood)

The grade one students were among the large group at the Harbour View round-a-bout who had to endure the brow-beating heat of the sun for two hours more than they planned since the motorcade, scheduled to begin at 11:00 o'clock, didn't get underway until about 1:00 pm. More than a few fans, including high school students and senior citizens were visibly upset with the delay and threatened to

go home.

"This is definitely too long. When I come out here this morning is only di police and di vendor dem did out here. Dat was 'bout 9:30 [or] 10:00 o'clock," one woman was overheard telling another female standing beside her.

"Everybody must just get bex an go home," said Pamela Williams. "Dem too disrespectful and out of order. Look how long wi stan' up out yah ah wait. Dem tell we 11:00 o'clock and now is afta 12:00."

However, when the first truck was spotted coming along the Palisadoes Road at 12:54, the disquiet subsided and gave way to glee, excitement, euphoria. The first four trucks had no athletes onboard but they played music and got the crowd doing the 'Nuh Linga', a dance move made popular by triple gold medallist Usain Bolt at the Beijing Games in August.

The already hyped crowd became more frenzied when they saw 200m gold medallist Veronica Campbell-Brown, 400m hurdles gold medallist Melaine Walker and 100m gold medallist Shelly-Ann Fraser on truck number five; triple gold medallist Bolt and Aileen Bailey on truck number seven; and 4x100m gold medallists Asafa Powell and Michael Frater, as well as several others, on truck number eight.

The height of the vehicles off the ground made it difficult for fans to touch the athletes, but they ran up alongside the floats and stretched their hands up towards them. Some were satisfied with merely shaking hands, touching fists and rubbing thumbs. Others wanted more and whipped out notebooks, flags, caps and whatever else they could get their hands on to secure signatures.

The motorcade, which also included six empty buses that had transported the athletes to the airport earlier, travelled along Michael Manley Boulevard, Port Royal Street, Duke Street, Ocean Boulevard, Marcus Garvey Drive, Portia Simpson Miller Square, Hagley Park Road, Hope Road, Trafalgar Road, Knutsford Boulevard before going onto Oxford Road, Tom Redcam Avenue, Arthur Wint Drive and ended in the car park at the National Stadium.

All along the route, scores of people came out of their offices, business places and schools lining sidewalks, banging empty buckets on rooftops, shouting and applauding through windows. Some captured the moment with camera phones.

Yesterday's motorcade was part of a seven-day celebration in honour of the entire Jamaican delegation to the Beijing Olympics.

The motorcade followed a welcome reception at the Norman Manley International Airport where the gold medallists were presented with the Keys to the City of Kingston.

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