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Front Page

Female track athletes strive to escape obscurity

Shannon J. Owens | From the Press Box
June 17, 2008

CLERMONT

Most of our eyes were fixated on [Kobe Bryan](#)'s quest to save the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) from playoff extinction Sunday.

Or we watched [Tiger Woods](#) mount an unbelievable comeback in the [U.S. Open](#) to force Monday's equally unbelievable playoff.

But 30 miles outside Orlando, behind a hospital, located on a sandy lot, Jamaican sprinter Veronica Campbell-Brown clocked the world's fastest 100-meter time this season Saturday during the National Training Center All Comers Sprints and Hurdles meet.

Campbell-Brown breezed through her prelim in 10.88 seconds with no flashing cameras in sight, no thunderous applause, no headlines in the next day's paper and no reward other than the satisfaction she is getting better.



Shannon J. Owens
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Williams, will shatter a record in Beijing this August. Campbell-Brown's personal record time is 10.85 seconds three years ago, at least four seconds off the world-record holder, the late Florence Griffith-Joyner.

Although Flo Jo's record-shattering performance was 21 years ago, there is still a hunger for the next female track star.

Campbell-Brown, of course, would like to play that role. But it's too bad she has to run like [Big Brown](#) week in and week out to achieve that status.

It's hard enough to get viewers to tune to track and field, much less to watch the women unless there's an adorable, likable American star who happens to be on the verge of rewriting record books.

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It was not the Olympics. Heck, it was not even an Olympic qualifying meet.

But the meet did showcase a host of world-class athletes who are prepping for the biggest stage of a track athlete's career.

In just a few short weeks, Campbell-Brown could likely be the face of women's track and field.

And even with that, I wonder how many people really care.

Before Marion Jones, when was the last time anyone really felt excitement about Olympic women's track and field.


"I wish there was more excitement around my event," said Campbell-Brown, who lives in Clermont. "I do think it would be different if a record could be broken on the men's side."

She was referring to fellow Jamaican Usain Bolt, who set a world record in the 100 meters, 9.72 seconds, earlier this month at the Reebok Grand Prix in New York.

There is slim to no chance she or her main rival American Lauryn



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Those are big shoes to fill. So big, in fact, that I sometimes sympathize with the athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs on some level. The bar is set so incredibly high because not only do they feel the pressure to win, but they also feel the pressure to sell the sport.

You have seconds to impress the world. And that chance comes for a few weeks every four years.

Of course, everyone has a choice. But it would be shortsighted to say track athletes, unlike other sports with juiced athletes, feel a greater obligation to promote their sport.

Unlike football, basketball and baseball, USA Track and Field does not gross millions and it certainly isn't must-watch television. Matter-of-fact, the last Olympics to get really high ratings was more than 10 years ago with the 1996 Atlanta Games.

Only a handful of chosen track and field athletes, usually men, land major endorsement deals that can afford them commercial time and shoe lines.

So the pressure mounts for the women sprinters. It is not that they want to be stars. They have to become stars in order to stay relevant.

And let's not forget, we want them clean. Now all we need to do is act to make them compete.

Shannon J. Owens can be reached at sjowens@orlandosentinel.com.

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