

Ben Johnson's Flying Feat

While Canadian athletes have always excelled at winter sports, they have also established a rather good track record in summer events ...

On September 29, some 15 000 people lined the streets of Toronto, Canada, for his triumphant homecoming parade. In Ottawa, the next day, politicians queued for his autograph. In the House of Commons, members of Parliament gave him a standing ovation. The star attraction: Ben Johnson, whose record 9.83-second 100-m sprint in Rome last August made him the "world's fastest human."

In the annals of athletic achievement, Johnson's coup will undoubtedly be ranked among the greatest ever. The list includes Roger Bannister of England who ran the first under-four-minute mile in Vancouver in 1954, and Bob Beamon of the United States who, in Mexico City in 1968, became the first person to long-jump more than 8.8 m. Now the list includes Ben Johnson of Canada, running the 100-m dash in a stupendous 9.83 seconds.

Prior to Johnson's historic sprint, the world record for the 100-m dash was held by American Calvin Smith who, in 1983, ran the race in 9.93 seconds. Smith's successful run took place in the relatively light atmosphere of Colorado Springs situated more than 1 830 m above sea level.

Johnson had already matched the sea-level world record of 9.95 seconds, but few save perhaps Johnson and his coach, Charlie Francis, considered a new

world record within reach, particularly in the heavy Rome air, just 14 m above sea level.

"If you had asked me before the race, 'Could anybody run that fast?', I would have said, 'No'," explains Carl Lewis of the United States, quadruple Olympic gold medalist and Johnson's main rival.

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For Johnson and coach Francis, the victory was the result of a fine-tuned body and running technique refined to a level previously unknown. Said the 25-year-old Jamaican-born Johnson, "Everything in my training was geared to this race."

Canada's Ben Johnson making history: 100 m in 9.83 seconds.

The key to Johnson's success, according to Gordon Robertson, professor of kinanthropology and a biomechanics expert at the University of Ottawa in Canada's capital, is that his flying feet "land more quickly, softly and with a different motion than many of his competitors." By running high on his toes, with the ankle fully extended, Johnson makes better use of his leg muscles and improves his speed.

While one expects powerful legs on a sprinter, many observers have commented on Johnson's superb upper-body development. Both Johnson and coach Francis believe that sprinting requires more than lower-body strength. Watch Johnson train off-track and he is seen effortlessly bench-pressing more than double his body weight.

Ben Johnson first emerged as a Canadian sport hero in 1984, when he won a gold medal in the 100-m event at the Canadian National Outdoor Championships — a feat he has repeated every year since. At the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, he captured bronze medals in the 100-m dash and the 4×100-m relay. In January 1986, at an international track meet in Japan, he set a world record of 6.50 seconds for the 60-m run.

On July 8, 1986, Johnson reached new heights at the Goodwill Games in Moscow, winning the 100-m event in 9.95 seconds, and established a new record for the fastest

