

SPORTS FEATURE

Move aside Carl, make room for 'Big Ben'

By ROY T. ANDERSON

"I respect the American athletes and I want them to respect me too."

Ben Johnson

That rather surprising remark was made by Johnson after he won the 60-metre dash at the First World Indoor Games last February in Paris, France. Jamaican born Johnson demanded respect then, and no doubt commands more than his share today.

Johnson, 24, a bonafide superstar in Canada and the rest of the world, is recognized in international track and field circles as the fastest man on this planet.

"Big Ben," as he is referred to, has been under 10.10 seconds no less than 10 times this year in his specialty—the 100 metres.

"I don't know of any sprinter to have achieved such outstanding results in one year," says Charlie Francis, Canadian national sprint coach and Johnson's personal coach. "He is a truly remarkable athlete."

Consider the Goodwill Games this summer in Moscow and Johnson's much publicized win over arch-rival Carl Lewis—his winning time of 9.95 seconds for the 100 metres, a world best at sea level, was just 2/100th of a second off the world record set by Calvin Smith at a much higher altitude in 1983. Because there is less air resistance, runners are able to obtain better times the higher they are above sea level.

Thanks to media magnate Ted Turner (the games were his brainchild) and the technology of television, the whole world saw Canadian Ben Johnson defeat American Carl Lewis with ease; the 60,000 fans at Moscow stadium that day would agree.

To add insult to injury, Johnson's starting blocks slipped at the start of the race preventing him, many say, from breaking the world record.

"I false-started once in that race," Johnson explains. "If I had a good start the second time for sure I would've broken the world record."

Some American observers felt Johnson had a rolling start in that race. Francis is adamant that this is not the case and contends that "Ben's forward progress was hampered by his start. Everyone who saw the race knew that." But in a sport where patriotism plays a leading role, such behaviour on the part of our neighbours to the south is not surprising.

One has only to look back to last year and controversy created by the Track and Field News (TFN) which is the major athletics publication in the United States. According to TFN, Lewis beat out Johnson for the 1985 sprint crown. They based their ranking on a 39-year-old formula which

applied to six outdoor meets, and gave Lewis the edge over Johnson by 0.02 points at the end of the 1985 season.

Many observers feel that Johnson was shafted. Some, like former Canadian triple jump champion, Lou Goulding, contend that "TFN is 100 percent biased towards American athletes. The situation is inexcusable and as far as I'm concerned, it's just a big propaganda machine for the American track and field athletes."

"Sure, I should've been ranked number one last year," Johnson said, "but what TFN says is final." Francis agrees with Johnson. "Ben was the best in '85," Francis said, "Lewis missed the most important meet of the year—the World Cup." At that meet in Canberra, Johnson clocked 10.00 seconds for the 100 metres into a headwind.

"Lewis clocked a 9.98 in Modesto, with a mild tailwind, no doubt about that," continues Francis, "but he should've been at the World Cup. It's clear he was ducking Ben." Francis probably has this opinion because the World Cup is considered the most important Track and Field meet as it features the best runners from across the world and is not marred by boycotts as the Olympics have in 1980 and 1984.

Most observers would have to agree with Francis. After all, Lewis had nothing to gain by showing up. A loss to Johnson, however, would have dealt a severe blow to his ego.

Johnson took notice of the man whom he met for the first time at the 1980 Pan Am Juniors in Puerto Rico. Lewis won the 100 metres in 10.43, Johnson finished 6th with a 10.88.

"Carl was not well known then," says Johnson. "He seemed like a nice guy."

The two arch-rivals met again four



FASTER THAN A LOCOMOTIVE? Johnson stretches at the Track and Field Centre.

years later at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Lewis captured the 100 metre crown on his way to collecting four gold medals at the games. Johnson finished third, preventing an American sweep in that event. This time Johnson saw a different man. "Lewis was not gracious at all in his success," Johnson recalled. "Four years certainly changed him; he was not humble any more. This time he was pretty cocky."

But Johnson was not the only one looking this time. Lewis also took

notice—Johnson was for real. Lewis will remember 1984 as the year Big Ben came out of his shell.

On came 1985 and the First World Indoor Games in Paris, France, where Johnson ran the 60 metre dash in 6.62 seconds, capturing first place. He went on to capture the sprint crown on the Indoor Grand Prix circuit.

Johnson's success on the indoor circuit served notice to his American rivals that he was indeed for real. He dominated the likes of Kirk Baptiste, Calvin Smith, even the invincible

Carl Lewis. The outdoor season finished with Ben's World Cup record 10.00 seconds at Canberra.

Ben for his part received numerous awards in 1985, including Canadian amateur athlete of the year.

1986 was even more satisfying for Big Ben. It started in Osaka, Japan, where Ben shattered Houston McTear's world indoor record for 60 metres, clocking 6.50 seconds. The memory of his 9.95 performance at Moscow's Goodwill Games, his 100 metre gold medal at the recent Commonwealth Games in Scotland, and three triumphs over Lewis—they all come to mind.

Big Ben is confident he will not be denied this year as is his coach. "There's no doubt who number one is," Charlie Francis said. "There is only one candidate." What does Ben think of that? "I would have to say my coach is right," he replies. "1986 is my year."

Johnson is now training for the 1987 World Cup next August in Rome, where, he says, we should see a new world record set. "The indicator," Johnson said, "will be the first outdoor meet. My result in that meet will set the pace."

Johnson has two other goals in mind; a gold medal in his specialty at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea—and on the personal side, he would like to wed his fiancée, Denise D'aquir, after that.

Ben Johnson, a man with lofty goals and aspirations, once demanded respect and is now sending a message for all to take notice—he will not be denied in 1986.



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