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Powell propelled by personal tragedy as he prepares for greatest showdown on earth



Donald McRae

Jamaican heads for his redemption moment in the 100m with points to prove to his fiercest rivals

Those things are nothing," Asafa Powell says quietly, shaking his head at suggestions that, just four days from the men's 100m final and the most intriguing event of this year's Olympic Games, he is no longer the Fastest Man on Earth but a twitchy choker and nervy underdog. His previous domination of sprinting had been shattered by his surprise loss to Tyson Gay in the world championships last August. If he set a new world record of 9.74 in Italy a few weeks later, after the pressure had been released, Powell was shocked when Usain Bolt, his friend and Jamaican protégé, ran even quicker this May while clocking an astonishing 9.72 in only his fourth 100m. On Saturday, he will face Bolt and Gay in potentially the greatest Olympic sprint in history.

Powell's fierce desire to win in Beijing is palpable, as is his compulsion to crush suspicions of his psychological fragility. But the blurring backdrop of personal tragedy against which he runs cannot easily be forgotten. "I've been through a lot. Other people only see me out there running and they're jeering and criticising and saying a whole bunch of stuff. But they don't know the real person or what I'm going through."

Six years ago, when Powell was only 19, one of his five brothers, Michael, was murdered in New York – shot dead in a taxi by a passing mugger. He speaks softly, but clearly, when remembering how the terrible news broke at home in Jamaica. "I saw my mum running all over the place, crying, and I was trying to find out what had happened and she was just saying, 'Michael's dead, Michael's dead...' It was very disturbing."

Powell's face twitches slightly, and he touches his cheek as if to soothe himself. "I was on my way to the national trials when I heard and I didn't know how to react because I'd never lost a brother. There were just tears falling from my eyes."

He looks up when asked how he found the fortitude to run in those suddenly meaningless Commonwealth Games trials. "I told myself I wasn't going. I put down my bag and took off my clothes. My brother, Donovan, was in Texas and he phoned and told me to go out there and do it because that's what Michael would have wanted. He got me back out there. But I was in tears. I was torn apart. I still made the team and I got to run the 100m at the Commonwealth Games but I wasn't focused on the race. I was in front but I just stopped running and finished fourth. It was very tough."

Powell had barely accepted the reality of Michael's death when "I then lost my brother Vaughan the next year. He was in America, playing football, and he collapsed on the field and died. There are times now when I sit in my room and remember them – and I just start crying. It's not something you really get over."

Yet Powell implies that other memories will bolster him before Saturday's defining final. "I can just imagine how my brothers would be if they were still here now. They would probably be outside the door, jumping and saying 'That's my brother,

that's my brother!' They were crazy, crazy-excited about their brother running."

In the wake of his devastation Powell still ran like a dream – and his supremacy was seemingly exemplified by the fact that, after breaking his own world record last September, he had run the six fastest 100m in history. And yet, in the race which had mattered most to him, in the world championships in Osaka, he inexplicably lost to Gay – a runner he claims to have "beaten a hundred times. I just lost the one that counted".

The experience haunts him and he struggles to explain that defeat. "I was too confident. I never lost a race for three years and so I just thought I have to go out and run a world record. That was wrong because I lost focus. When I saw Tyson running alongside me, I couldn't believe it because I'd been way ahead. I was shocked and I didn't correct anything. It was then too late."

In his very next race, in Italy, Powell not only smashed his world record but eased off completely over the last 30m. "I definitely would have gone under 9.7 but I slowed down because it was a heat. I was disappointed in a way because if I had run like that two weeks before I would have been world champion."

Even if he reasserts his winning record over Gay on Saturday, Powell's bid for Olympic gold has been clouded by Bolt's explosive running. As a 200m specialist the younger Jamaican is on course for a sprint double – if he can maintain his electrifying rise over the shorter distance. Powell's affection for Bolt is obvious but he also bristles at his own demotion.

"It's hard for me to be an underdog when I can run 9.7. I can break the world record and stuff like that. But when Usain goes out on the track he's the one people are expecting to win."

Powell was struggling with a shoulder injury, and anxious about missing the Olympics, when Bolt ran 9.72 in New York on 31 May. "When I heard I was very impressed," Powell smiles wryly.

And shocked? "Who wouldn't be? That was only the [fourth] 100m of his career

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so I was very surprised. I was saying what is he going to run in the next one! I sent him an SMS but I had changed my number so he wasn't sure who it was. So when he called he said 'Who is this?' But when he heard it was me he was almost apologising for breaking the world record. I said, 'Congratulations, man. Keep up the good work'. That love [between them] is amazing."

If Olympic sprinting usually resembles heavyweight boxing with rivals eyeballing each other ferociously, the friendship between Powell and Bolt is more like a cuddly love-in. "Every day we have been together he called me The Fast Man and I called him Sarge. In Jamaica we just mess around with names. We have been friends a long time and nothing changes us. Maybe if he was from the US it might be different and there would be anger in our hearts. But he looks up to me and so it feels good that I've always been helping him and he's such a nice person. I still call him Sarge and he still calls me Fast Man."

The Fast Man re-established his seniority when Powell beat Bolt in Stockholm last month. "I can stand up to the pressure," Powell says. "I'm always confident I can run faster than the rest."

That confidence can be seen in the way Powell almost revels in Bolt's exploits. But his relationship with Gay is notably cooler. "There is always rivalry between the US and Jamaica. Most people in the world have this thing about the United States. Everywhere I go people always say, 'Make sure you beat the US!' So we're not friends. And it's not like I'm going to try to be friends just because we're both running fast."



Powell, represented by SIML management in London, is even more forthright in denouncing the doping cheats who have been the scourge of world sprinting for 20 years. "You know," he sighs, "if everybody approached the sport the way I do, it would be clean. It would draw a lot more people because they would say that's a normal human being running. But I'm tired of it. Every day people ask drugs this, drugs that. It's very annoying."

The Jamaican argues that the dopers should be jailed. "You want to make them afraid. You want them to think that, 'If I do drugs I'll go to jail'. But I can't do anything about it. I can just say some harsh stuff."

Does he expect that some of his rivals in Beijing will have cheated? "I can really only speak for myself. I have no idea what

Portrait by Teri Pengilly

anyone else is doing. There are people out there who do drugs. Sometimes I see them go across the finish line and they're making a cross and praying to God. I'm saying 'Why are they praying when they're cheating! Why are they thanking God?' But some athletes don't have a heart. They don't care. But it gives me an extra boost when I run against guys I think are on drugs and I beat them."

On the hope remains that Bolt and Gay are as clean as Powell then Saturday's final could provide a troubled sport with its most blistering salvation. It will also provide the burningly sincere son of two

Jamaican pastors with a personal opportunity to redeem himself. Claiming that he has not been out at night for two years, despite breaking up with his long-standing girlfriend and yearning for "the party atmosphere" befitting the most famous man in Jamaica, Powell endorses a monastic regime. "There has been pain and strife, but this is my big chance. And that's why it is a lot better that Usain and Tyson are racing against me. If they didn't run in the 100m people would say if Usain and Tyson had been there I would never have got gold. But now, when I beat them in front of everyone, they will see that I deserve to be the fastest man in the world."

To hear audio from this interview go to guardian.co.uk/sport

Asafa Powell revels in the exploits of his close friend Usain Bolt, above

