The Sherbrooke experience

Reflections on the 3rd IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics

by Steven Downes

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ABSTRACT

The author, a long time international athletics correspondent, attended the 3rd IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics in Sherbrooke, Canada. There he met and spoke with some of the event's organisers, participating athletes and their coaches. Whilst probing the appropriateness of the nature and format of the championships, a question he leaves open, he experiences the special atmosphere created by the event. He is particularly impressed with the "This is Athletics" clinic organised on the days immediately prior to the championships and the valuable interaction between all-time athletics greats, such as Edwin Moses and Jackie Joyner-Kersee, and the young athletes taking part in the event.

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It is the universal language of sport. Forget Esperanto, in Sherbrooke, Quebec, on the day before the official opening ceremony for the 3rd IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics, we are talking pins.

"*Changer pins*?" Veronica Davis, a 16-year-old triple jumper from Venezuela, says as her opening conversational gambit as she arrives on the bleachers alongside the training track at the University of Sherbrooke.

Davis's accreditation tag carries the proof that she has *parlé* pins already with members of at least a dozen countries who had sent teams to compete at the event for athletes aged under 18.

Alongside Davis and her relaxed teammates were several hundred fellow competitors, from China to Guam, from South Africa to Brazil. Many of them were on their first international sporting trip, and some, like Davis, had left their home country for the first time in their lives.

There is an air of anticipation among all the young athletes. And then comes the announcement: that three of the all-time greats of athletics, Edwin Moses, Jackie Joyner-Kersee and Michael Johnson, are about to arrive at the stadium with IAAF President Lamine Diack.

Davis is off, like a sprinter from her blocks, out of her seat and posing with JJK for a picture. Joyner-Kersee beams a smile as warm as the morning sun. This, you sense, is what these championships should be all about.

"Make sure you keep a journal, and all your pictures," the Olympic champion tells her audience later, "because one day, when you have your Olympic gold medal, you'll be able to look back to today, and remember what it took you to get you there."

There is no doubt that all of those who took part in this year's World Youths will remember the experience. The medallists will obviously have cause to reflect happily, and those who battled through to finals will probably also have learned from their experience in Canada.

But what of the others? What of those who arrived in Canada and were clearly out of their depth against other, perhaps more mature or better prepared athletes? And what of those kids left behind, the many hundreds more who failed to make it on to their team?

"The risk we run with the event is of having a world champion at 16 who is an ex-athlete at 21," said one respected coach, who saw his star athlete win a gold medal at the first World Youths in Bydgoszcz, Poland, four years ago.

After three editions of these championships, it is appropriate to ask: Who are the World Youths for? Is it the national federations? Is it for the hosts? Is it for the IAAF? Is it for the coaches?

Or is it for the athletes themselves?

One suspects that, too often, the teenaged athletes are among the last people to be considered in the equation. It is very likely that those of immense natural talent, such as Usain Bolt, the giant Jamaican 16-year-old who won the 200 metres in Sherbrooke, or Mark Lewis-Francis, from Britain, who won the 100 metres at the first World Youths, or Yelena Isinbayeva, the Russian pole vaulter who in July became the first former World Youth champion to graduate to being a senior world record-holder, would progress with or without the opportunity to compete at an event such as the World Youths.

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But what of those who need to train harder to tap into their natural ability - might competing at the World Youth Championships, or even just making the effort to qualify for them, be a case of too much too soon?

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Certainly, the IAAF itself is now far more guarded in its approach to the World Youths, seeking ways to broaden the championships' appeal to its core customers, the athletes themselves, and offer something more than simply their first international experience.

Istvan Gyulai, the General Secretary of the IAAF, is at pains to point out that the World Youth Championships is less about fierce competition, but for development, for friendship and for education. "We decided that to stage this event for competition only was not enough," Gyulai says. "We must do more.

"Our sport has perhaps not done enough in the past to celebrate its history, its heroes and its traditions. Yet, when Edwin Moses was introduced to the young athletes here in Sherbrooke. . .". Gyulai pauses in apparent disbelief. "I have never seen an ovation like it, not even at the Olympic Games or World Championships themselves." Moses's career,

remember, ended in 1988, when even the oldest athlete in his audience that night will have been but two years old.

Bruno-Marie Béchard, of the Sherbrooke local organising committee, which did much to develop the clinic idea, reinforces Gyulai's point. "These Games were not just about what appears on the scoreboard," he says. "To us, it is not just what happens on the track, but what happens outside the arena, the cultural and fraternal exchanges that are really important."

To that end, Sherbrooke devised a programme of daily excursions and tours around the local area for the athletes who began arriving in the week before the meeting, as well as talks from the stars. "We did not want it to be too much like a school exercise," says Gyulai, "but when we offered the youngsters the chance to go on excursions or to sit in classrooms and talk to the likes of JJK, Ed Moses or Michael Johnson, they all wanted to talk to their heroes."

Moses, Joyner-Kersee and Johnson were all in Sherbrooke as IAAF ambassadors, gladly speaking to the athletes about their careers, their training, their lives as a part of the "This is Athletics" Clinic.

"What do I do for fun?" says Johnson when asked by one gathering of kids, all seated at the feet of a master sprinter, clearly keen to hear what he has to say. "I come here to talk to you. That's fun for me."

Stars such as these not only impart wisdom, but there is an unshakeable feeling that inspiration is being passed across, from one generation of champions to the next.

"Be as good as you can be," says Joyner-Kersee as she addresses her next group of youngsters. Through her work in her home city with her own charitable foundation steering teenagers towards athletics and other sports, instead of a life on the streets, Joyner-Kersee has developed a well-rehearsed style of delivery every bit as dynamic and attention-grabbing as the time when she dominated the world of heptathlon and long jump.

"If you always do your best, whether you finish first, fourth or just get a PR in your heat, it means that one day, when you manage to get out there and win, it will make it all the more worthwhile, will mean so much more to you".

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The IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics were introduced in 1999 to give youngsters aged under 17 the opportunity to compete internationally, an unforgettable stepping stone in what is hoped to be a successful career in the sport.

"We have a problem with the sport," says Gyulai, "of winning over new talent and retaining it.

"We have many, many coaches in many countries who tell us that they often lose talented youngsters to other sports, especially football. The thinking behind the World Youths was to find a way of keeping some of those talents interested in the sport, motivated to train and compete. "But it is not the only way. We must look at every idea for the development of our sport."

Bolt, who won the World Junior 200 metres title in front of a rapturous home crowd in Kingston, Jamaica, when just 15, is an example of how the IAAF's development policies are being used to carefully nurture potentially huge talents.

Later this year, he will take up residence at the IAAF's High Performance Training Centre in Kingston, where the Jamaican AAA will organise tutors to help him with his studies.

Anyone who has seen Bolt stretch his long legs to their full extent when sprinting will know that here is a kid who has the potential to challenge Michael Johnson's 200 metres and 400 metres world records. But at 6ft 5in (1.95 m) tall (and probably still growing), he also has the potential to attract lucrative offers of basketball scholarships from highly competitive US universities.

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And while it is true that Marion Jones returned to the track after a college career playing basketball, it is by no means certain that athletics could be quite so fortunate with other talents lured away by hoops and dollar signs.

One of the great discoveries of Sherbrooke 2003 was Jason Richardson, a 17-year-old Texan who won both the 110 metres hurdles and 400 metres hurdles.

This was so much more than kids' stuff. This hurdles double has been beyond the greatest hurdlers in more than 100 years. Richardson is lanky and lean and a studious Texas teenager - not for him the usual sports jock scholarship to university; Richardson is bright enough to have offers from Harvard and Stanford.

Yet so truncated was the programme at Sherbrooke that, to accomplish the biggest test of his brief athletic life so far, Richardson had but 45 minutes between his 110 metres hurdles final and the semi-final of the 400 metres hurdles. Is that "good development"?

Richardson had the strength to come through it all. But in his twin abilities, on the track and in the classroom, Richardson also embodies the double challenge confronting many of those young athletes who are prepared for the World Youths. Here is an added pressure, an extra challenge, coming at a time when their bodies are already going through massive physical changes, and at a time when, in most countries, they are also facing the examination demands of the end of their secondary school careers.

Richardson is an exceptional athlete, and an exceptional young man. "I see my life as a two paths road. I want to be a lawyer first and I also want to be an Olympian," Richardson said. "I believe I can be capable of succeeding in both. I want to prove that one can be sharp both mentally and physically. It obviously looks like a utopian world, but why not?"

Fortunately, Richardson's athletic ability has thus far allowed him to excel without having to do undue amounts of training. Richardson only trains three times a week. "It's really not much, I know, but I have so many other things going on in my life," he said, sounding almost apologetic.

Richardson had been inspired ahead of the competition when he met Edwin Moses, who combined a brilliant athletes career that included four world records at 400 metres hurdles with a career in law.

But Moses told him how he had remained "grounded" by his academic work and by only starting hurdling seriously when he was 17. Sure, it is 27 years since Moses burst on to the international athletics scene and won the first of his two Olympic gold medals at the Montreal Games, before going on to dominate the event for a decade.

"When I was 17 years old, I think my best time for 400 metres flat was about 50.8 seconds - no hurdles," Moses told the kids gathered at his feet in Sherbrooke. "I wasn't even thinking about the hurdles.

"My first 400 metres hurdles race was on March 26, 1976, and in that race I ran 50.1 seconds. Four months later I was the Olympic champion and world record-holder with 47.63. Some things take longer: if you are not successful at 15, 16, or even 20, it doesn't mean you won't be successful when you are 26."

There was no World Youth Championships in Moses' day, and he did not do so badly. Is there a lesson in that?

In another group at the same champions' clinic, over in a different corner of the Sherbrooke track, and Michael Johnson was warming to his theme.

"What's the most important thing?" Johnson said, repeating the question put to him. "At your age, that you enjoy what you're doing, because the moment that you stop enjoying it and having fun, that's when you'll stop doing it, and I'm sure that we've lost many greatly talented athletes of around your age, simply because they weren't enjoying it any more."

Johnson's message is of course a sound one. Yet, maybe it was directed at the wrong people. The young athletes know what they want and what they enjoy. But do their coaches and teachers, even their parents, always appreciate the fine dividing line between encouragement and coercion, between pleasure and pressure?

"The last thing we want is a world champion at 16 and an ex-athlete by 21," says Steve Platt, one of those rare coaches who has so far guided his charge through from being World Youth champion to World Junior champion. Platt, who is based in Birmingham, in England's Midlands, says his aim is make sure that Mark Lewis-Francis ultimately goes the whole way to becoming a senior world champion, too.

"It's four years ago now," says Platt, remembering how Lewis-Francis had set off to Poland, without coach or parents, at 16 for his first competition outside his home country. "It was the first time the event had been staged, and we knew so little about it, and so little about the athletes who were likely to be there or the standard of competition. We were a bit like innocents, I suppose, we just didn't know what to expect.

"I certainly cannot remember us doing any preparation especially for the World Youths. Mark never did any more than three training sessions a week until after he'd won the World Junior title anyway - he only started doing weight training seriously last winter - so there was no question of doing extra training for the World Youths.

"...there is a feeling perhaps that the earlier you start to achieve, the harder that becomes..."

"He was going to encounter foreign food, hotel rooms all for the first time, he was an innocent abroad, literally. I don't think he realised what was really going on, which with hindsight was probably a good thing.

"It all worked out as a good learning exercise for us. Perhaps if it had been a more mature athlete at the time, he might have worried more, felt the pressure more.

"The one thing it did do was bring Mark to the public attention, and the media, a bit earlier, and with that has come greater expectations all round. A lot will depend on the individual athlete, of course, but it is difficult enough to make it through all the levels successfully to the top flight, and there is a feeling perhaps that the earlier you start to achieve, the harder that becomes.

"It is a genuine concern that some kids might have to do too much training than is good for them at that age. In the end, that is all down to their coaches.

"What we did learn when Mark made it through to the senior World Championships in Edmonton two years ago was there is nothing that can prepare them for when the line up against their idols. World Youths, World Juniors, none of it prepared Mark for the day he lined up on the track with Ato Boldon and Maurice Greene."

Platt's views are those of a successful coach, and of one who has seen his charge move on to bigger and better things. That he has such reservations ought to be of concern.

One of his colleagues in the British coaching set-up, Dave Young, is another sceptic of the concept of the World Youths. Young, a coach of 30 years' experience, saw one of his athletes, Steven Lewis, win the pole vault bronze medal in Sherbrooke, but that did not stop him having nagging doubts about the nature of the event.

"In the back of my mind, I couldn't help thinking about kids of 17, 16 and even younger being involved in an event of that kind," says Young. "There were the flags, the laps of honour, the anthems, it was like a mini-Olympics. All those winners could just make the mistake of thinking they've really arrived, when in fact they still have a long way to go.

"In Britain, we try not to make too much of the World Youths, and most of the team in Sherbrooke made their finals, which showed that they were up to the general level of the competition. But there were some national teams who had organised full-scale training camps for their teams before Sherbrooke. Maybe that's too much.

"I am not convinced of the need for the competition on that scale, with hundreds of countries and athletes. There is a need for competition, of course, but maybe not on that scale.

"We make use of the European Youth Olympics, which has been going for many years now, and is much more low-key, almost like a kids' summer camp, but a worthwhile exercise and possibly more appropriate at this level."

The IAAF continues to review its events, including the World Youths. In some respects, the developmental success of the European Athletic Association, which has introduced an under-23s championship to assist its outstanding juniors bridge those tricky years through until they can establish themselves as seniors, could prompt the world body to shift its own age group championship programme.

But it is without question true that the "This is Athletics" Clinic staged on the eve of the Sherbrooke meeting was a huge success, so much so that Istvan Gyulai, the IAAF's General Secretary, said that the federaton will consider adding similar sessions into the programme for future World Junior Championships.

One wonders whether those athletes from teams that opted not to attend the clinics will get as much from their experience of competing at Sherbrooke in 2003 as those who did spend the morning sitting at the feet of the greats.

And there, as Edwin Moses's group moved on to their next workshop, you could see a young Korean, clutching an autographed postcard of probably the finest 400 metres hurdler the world has ever seen. "*Changer pins?*" he asked.