

The Conversation Team Blog

Our voices on, in and at the Games



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POSTS BY KAREN FARQUHARSON

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6 August 2012, 2.07pm AEST

Jamaican sprinters reign again



Usain Bolt is only part of a strong Jamaican sprinting team.
hannahspanna

For decades Jamaican sprinters have punched above their weight. Jamaica has won at least one medal for sprinting at every Olympic Games since 1968. Jamaican men and women have both excelled, but the women have had the edge in numbers of medals since the 1980s.

The current Jamaican Olympic sprinters are the best Jamaica has ever fielded. Jamaica won the gold and bronze in the women's 100m sprint on Saturday, and last night (this morning Melbourne time) won the gold and silver in the men's 100m sprint, with Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and Usain Bolt both successfully defending their 2008 Olympic crowns. With Veronica Campbell-Brown and Usain Bolt being the previous winners of the 200m, Jamaica is

looking pretty good for that event as well.

Of the 24 athletes Jamaica is sending to the 2012 Olympic Games, nineteen are sprinters and only three are not in track and field. So Jamaica is (rightfully) placing its Olympic hopes on its sprinters. Of the 59 Olympic medals Jamaica has ever won, 58 have been for sprinting events, and 15 of these have been gold. At the 2008 Olympics Jamaica won six gold, three silver and three bronze medals. In 2012 they have already won two golds, a silver and a bronze.

Why are Jamaican runners so good? Not surprisingly, academics have looked into it. Many explanations focus on biological factors, for example, that people of West African descent (which includes most Jamaicans) have better genes for sprinting than other people. If this was the case, then we could reasonably expect West African athletes to be the best in the world at sprinting. Clearly, given the dominance of the Jamaicans and Americans, this is not the case. Those who are convinced by the genetic arguments say that those who left West Africa and went to the US and Jamaica (among other places) have evolved into better athletes. This argument is not convincing—the conditions in Jamaica are quite different from the United States, and it is unclear why genetic changes that favour sprinting would be selected for. Indeed research into the genetics of Jamaican elite athletes has shown that they don't actually differ from the general Jamaican population, the vast majority of which are decidedly not elite athletes.

More compelling are the social explanations. These suggest that Jamaica does an outstanding job of identifying promising sprinters and nurturing them. Tellingly, Usain Bolt and his teammates have not moved overseas for training, preferring to remain with their Jamaican coaching team. A recent documentary on Usain Bolt showed the quality of the Jamaicans' training regime and the excellence of their coaches. Explanations for success need to focus on social and organisational factors, such as training regimes and investment of resources, not only financial but also social and cultural. Clearly the Jamaican coaching system is doing something right.

Regardless of the reasons, Jamaica will likely once again continue to do very well in sprinting, dominating the shorter events. Given that I am originally from Jamaica, I join other Jamaicans in hoping that they do, and recognising that their success is grounded in the social context of Jamaican athletics, and not in genetics.

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