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Letter from Jamaica #7, 21 September 2012:

“Are you a yam and banana (wo)man?”

Yam. And banana. And ackee & saltfish. The burning issues. For the last few weeks. For the last few months. For the last few years. The Chinese sent top scientists to Jamaica to figure it out. The Americans sent Curiosity to Mars. Everyone wanted to know. Is it yam and banana that makes some of us run so fast?

You could write a book on this. The internet is bulging at the biceps with the very question. And umpteen others, be they about chicken nuggets or children racing goats. Linford Christie even cited his grandmother telling him to run errands before her spit dried on the red dirt!

When not glued to the race screen, I've recently spent the odd ten seconds looking at the many reasons persons give for Jamaica's recent pre-eminence in sprinting. Here is my take on it.



But first, what do we really mean by recent success? Well, the 400m at London 1948 saw Arthur Wint take gold and Herb McKenley silver. From three medals that year, we had five in 1952, with McKenley getting silver in the 100m and 400m, plus gold in the 4x400m relay. But after that, we missed 1956 and then had 1 or 2 medals until 1980. Not until 1996 did we

exceed 1952's tally, with six medals. Even after nine in 2000, we were back to six in 2004. All of which puts the eleven of 2008 and the twelve of 2012 in striking context.

The eating of yam and green banana is one of a group of factors that seems to me to be a pre-condition for success. Yam and banana offer great carbohydrates that the body can readily convert to glucose to feed muscles for fast running. Scientists like Dr Errol Morrison, President of UTECH, see the diet as being as useful to children as if they were taking steroids. Combined with the protein and nutrients of ackee and saltfish, some children start the day with a great meal. Many adult sprinters have the same breakfast before training - there's even an Island Grill restaurant at one of the top running clubs in Kingston.

Another cultural factor stems from growing up in a rural area, like Trelawny or Manchester. Daughters and sons of Trelawny alone include Merlene Ottey, Veronica Campbell-Brown, Usain Bolt, Michael Frater, Inez Turner and Warren Weir - plus Ben Johnson. VCB has highlighted the benefits to her of having to traverse hills on her daily walk to school. Carrying home big pots of water also helps build strength. Yohan Blake points to times in nearby rural St James when animals were his main childhood friends - leading him to race goats!



Another underlying influence may stem from the slave trade. We all know that only the very strongest survived - both travel across Africa and across the Atlantic, in appalling conditions. You needed to be strong; and to have a strong immune system.

Did you know, however, that the most obedient slaves were taken to eastern Caribbean islands or to America? Jamaica became one of the last destinations on the slave trade routes. So the more rebellious slaves landed

in Jamaica – persons who were both the toughest and the more aggressive. Some slave owners seeking to cut costs magnified the effects through forced breeding of the strongest and fittest slaves.

“Is there a sprint gene?” has been much pondered. The mutant form of the ACTN3 gene has been associated with endurance. The non-mutant form has been associated with sprint performance. Yet, this gene affects females and males differently. For example, more than expected of the mutant form has been found in female sprinters. So the evidence is far from clear-cut. But what we do know for sure is that both Jamaican females and males are world beaters!

Also, why aren't there lots of modern elite sprinters competing for west African countries? Okay, there are lots of endurance runners from places in the east like Ethiopia. Yet we now know about the benefits of altitude training in the Rift Valley. Indeed, white endurance runners now train in similar locations.

The body type of some persons does, however, seem to confer benefits. Narrow hips enable the knees to be lifted high. Long limbs help. Low levels of subcutaneous fat (partly from diet) mean reduced air drag.

As I said earlier, all these factors played – or didn't play – a part fifty years ago and longer. Some factors - like body type and diet - clearly give some Jamaicans a good starting point. **But why couldn't we thrash the Americans until the last decade?**

Well, I reckon the things that changed and brought glorious success are bound up with developments like new role models, intense school-level competition, new training regimes and much better funding.

While the five medals of 1952 were not bettered until 1996, great role models began to appear. Usain Bolt points to McKenley and Don Quarrie (200m gold and 100m silver, Montreal 1976). As Bolt said back in 2010: "For me Don Quarrie was somebody to watch and be amazed by...That's why I love the 200m so much because I've seen Don Quarrie and I said 'I can be that good. Quarrie, McKenley, these are the guys that I looked up to'". (Here and elsewhere, quotes are from interviews with Donald McCrae in the UK Guardian, 1April 2010.)

Jamaica then managed to build on the early role models by developing great mentors. For example, Veronica Campbell-Brown's mentor was the great Merlene Ottey. Wonderful mentors were followed by excellent coaches.

Top class - and very intense - competition between schools has also played a crucial part. While "Champs" started at Sabina Park in 1910, the boys and girls strands were only merged into the current format in 1999. Champs is extremely competitive and widely praised. Each year in the week before Easter, 30,000 persons turn up to watch and display their incredible knowledge of many youngsters on the track. Bolt, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and VCB all gained enormously from Champs. Again, Bolt has said: "The competition is fierce and the tradition is deep. If you can do well at Champs, you can do well anywhere".

Bolt went on to sympathise with Asafa Powell for his very limited exposure to Champs. As Powell has said: "I love Champs. But I went to a very small school, Charlemont High in St Catherine...and we didn't get to qualify for Champs". Sadly for Powell, the one time they did qualify, he got himself disqualified. Bolt elaborated: "After running so much at Champs I don't worry about anything. Asafa is different. I've said to him he shouldn't stress too much or worry about the crowd".

Children like to run. In Jamaica, thanks to Quarrie and others, poor children see running as their way out of poverty. As Juliet Campbell has said: "If you ran fast you made it to Champs. If you ran faster you got to university and the Olympics".



Getting yourself into a school with more of a focus on Champs does seem to help. VCB went to Vere Tech High in Clarendon. Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce attended Wolmer's, as did Michael Frater. Bolt's William Knibb Memorial High School has a strong focus on sport as well as on academic success - and Marvin Anderson is another former pupil. Camperdown High School's location in downtown Kingston may have helped Don Quarrie's access to Champs. Warren Weir attended Calabar High, as did Arthur Wint. Hopefully the fact that Yohan Blake went to St Jago High School in Spanish

Town shows that a wider group of schools is now better placed to develop potential - though, like Powell, Blake missed out on Champs.

Beyond the schools, new resources have helped to complement facilities at both school and athletic club. Only from 1995 did lottery funds become available via the new Sports Development Foundation. And more recently the likes of Puma have added funds for all age groups. Since 1995, the SDF itself has built around 350 multi-purpose courts and has helped to build 130 playing fields.

New money coupled with great coaches have enabled two elite Kingston clubs to flourish. The MVP Track and Field Club with Stephen Francis as the lead coach has members that include Fraser-Pryce and Brigitte Ann Foster Hylton. In case you haven't guessed, MVP stands for "Maximising Velocity and Power". And they also have Asafa Powell, Michael Frater and Nesta Carter - three of the four who struck gold in the 4x100m at Beijing. The fourth member of that golden team together with Yohan Blake are members of the other great club - the Racers Track Club, with coach Glen Mills. With Powell unfortunately absent from the 2012 final and Blake present, the two clubs managed half each of the world record winning gold.



Finally, there is a very special factor. Really special. Showing off can make a big difference! Many of us like to show off, especially when young! In the modern era, this counts for a lot, both within and beyond the athletics track. Perhaps even more than Muhammad Ali, Usain Bolt must be the ultimate showman. As Bolt himself has said: "I'm a person who always liked to express himself...Even when I was younger I would do stuff and notice that the crowd really clicked to that...It's fun for me and people come out

also to see me run fast but also to see 'What new things is Usain going to do today, what is he going to come up with to make us laugh?'" (McCrae, 2010).

By establishing such a wonderful collection of persons and facilities within Jamaica, those with elite potential no longer seek access to clubs and universities in the USA. Being slightly older, that was the route taken by VCB - and before her by the now US sprinter Sanya Richards-Ross, along with many others. Even the great Don Quarrie's base was the University of Southern California. Now athletes prefer to stay in Jamaica.

Having reversed "the body drain" of athletes, Jamaica has shown how a country of 2.7 million persons can beat one of more than 300m in two consecutive Olympics - and beat the rest of the world to boot!



If only we could apply just a few of the sprinting lessons to the problem of "the brain drain", perhaps we could begin to improve Jamaica's economic performance. We just need to find new ways of encouraging the skilled and highly educated to stay home - or return home. Let us all continue to bear in mind what our great track athletes have done and see how we can help to build on their exceptional work to transform Jamaica's future.

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Some useful source documents

I have drawn on many source documents; but the following were particularly helpful:

"Why Jamaica is so damn good" by Delano Franklyn, 26 August 2012, The Gleaner

"Cradle of champions where Jamaican sprinters earn their spurs" by Donald McCrae, UK Guardian, 1 April 2010

"A need for speed: inside Jamaica's sprint factory" by NPR staff, 2012 (NPR is a digital news distribution service from the USA)

"The Science of Sprinting: What makes Jamaicans so good?" by Michael Viggars, 5 August 2012, kettlemag.com

"Lightning Bolts: Why do all the top sprinters come from Jamaica?" by Paul Gittings, 21 June 2012, CNN