

Unattainable records leave female athletes struggling for acclaim

Women at the World Athletics Championships are competing in the shadow of a murky past but deserve more acclaim



Sanya Richards' best at 400m is still 1.10sec slower than Marita Koch's in 1985. Photograph: Hannibal Hanschke/EPA

It was an enduring image: Usain Bolt, centre stage, at the Jamaican team press conference in Beijing, while squeezed to one side were his female Olympic gold medal winning teammates. A thousand camera flashes illuminated the triple world record holder's grin as the women were comprehensively ignored.

Pursing their lips, Shelly-Ann Fraser, Veronica Campbell-Brown and Melaine Walker had been here before. Yes, Bolt's achievements were extraordinary, but for the female athletes the dynamics were all too familiar.

So why are women so routinely consigned to the bottom of the page? When she was finally

given the microphone, Campbell-Brown bravely broached the issue.

"It's a touchy subject, but if I should be honest, I really believe men get more attention in this sport. It's based on the fact that the world record in the 100m and 200m for men is reachable. For me, my PRs [personal records] are 10.85[sec] and 21.74[sec], which I just accomplished here and I only ran that once. It is hard for me to even think about the world record."

Why so? Because since Florence Griffith-Joyner's 1988 world records in the 100m and 200m, no female sprinter has come anywhere near breaking them – not even a drug-fuelled Marion Jones. Meanwhile, in the men's sprints, the 100m world record has been broken 11 times in the past two decades. With Fraser and Walker nodding in unison, Campbell-Brown spelled out the awkward truth.

"It is beyond my reach. The 200m world record is 21.34[sec] and the 100m record is 10.49[sec]. How many females have even run 10.6[sec] in the past 20 years since Flo Jo set that record?" Actually the only other woman to run a 10.6sec time was Jones, ahead of the Sydney Olympics, but after admitting that she took performance-enhancing drugs in 2007, that mark was swiftly erased.

"It's disappointing to not get the respect that the males do," Campbell-Brown said, "because they are capable of breaking the record and people are excited to see them run because they know the possibility of breaking the record is close. I don't have that luxury."

The problem is not unique to the sprints. With 13 women's world records in the Olympic track and field events still standing from the 1980s –

all before the introduction of mandatory random drug testing in 1989 – some feel that a clean athlete will never be able to surpass those marks.

Compare that to the men's events, in which only the hammer and the discus world records date back to the 1980s, and the opportunities for male and female athletes could not be more different.

The frustrations are obvious. How can it be that no contemporary athlete has managed to get within the same second as Jarmila Kratochvilova's 1983 mark in the 800m? Why is Sanya Richards' best – the fastest 400m runner in over a decade – still 1.10sec slower than Marita Koch's effort in 1985? Why is the legendary Carolina Klüft's best score in the heptathlon 259 points behind the world record set in 1988 by Jackie Joyner-Kersey?

There are no easy answers. Flo Jo and the others never failed a drugs test, but the flamboyant American's achievements were dogged by rumour and suspicion as critics whispered about increased muscle tone, an elongated jawline, a deeper voice, a hasty retirement and death by heart seizure aged just 38.

So why the discrepancy between the sexes? We know that doping has a greater effect on women than on men. Victor Conte, the man behind the Balco laboratory, explains. "Steroids can help a female sprinter to lower her 100m time by about four tenths of a second or four metres faster," he says. "The effects of steroids upon male 100m sprinters are about two tenths of a second or two metres faster."

But perhaps unattainable records are not the only problem. Even in the days when women

were breaking sprint records they still didn't get the headlines of their male counterparts. Some may argue that personality is as much a part of the equation – and Bolt's celebration dances certainly add weight to that theory – but Flo Jo ran in one-legged fuchsia tracksuits with six-inch nails, so why were her achievements so often overshadowed by the rivalry between Ben Johnson and Carl Lewis?

The media have a major part to play. Britain's 17-year-old Shaunna Thompson, who won double gold in the sprints at the Commonwealth Youth Games last year, says she sometimes struggles to recall who won the women's 100m at major championships.

"That's one of my events and even I'm forgetting sometimes! People know all the men, but sometimes the women get forgotten about. If Usain Bolt is all you hear about on TV then that sticks in peoples' heads. No one's saying Shelly-Ann Fraser, so everyone's like who's Shelly-Ann Fraser?" But with promoters consistently billing the men's sprints as the blue riband event, the idea that women's events don't deserve prime-time exposure is simply reinforced.

At the root of it all lies one question: is the fastest man in the world intrinsically more interesting than the fastest woman? Some people argue that the fastest time on the clock equals the biggest achievement, but with most people outside the athletics world incapable of quoting world record times, this theory doesn't add up. Surely the value of a race should be based on a combination of several factors – records, profile, the events of the race itself and personality. But with at least two of these four elements still out of reach for most female athletes, sadly we are unlikely to witness a female Bolt any time soon.