

Usain, Michael, And Lance

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Usain Bolt,

Michael Phelps.

Lance Armstrong.

What do they have in common? That should be an easy answer. It's certainly not their chosen sports - track and field, swimming, and cycling. These three fine athletes have shown us a glimpse of the levels of human performance that are possible. They have done things in their sports that many thought weren't possible.

Usain Bolt was running with arms spread wide for 30m of his 100m final - and still ran 9.69, a new world record. Then he arrives at what he calls "his event", the 200m, and runs 19.30 - then proceeds to mug with the camera and play to the crowd and run around like a little kid, so carefree and playful.

Having been in Atlanta to witness Michael Johnson's world record in the 200m in 1996, I can only say that I for one thought it would be a very long time before we witnessed another 200m world record. Bolt showed us it could be done.

Michael Phelps won eight gold medals in swimming, which has become a sport of specialization. He won them in every way imaginable - solo and relay, in dominant performances and by the slimmest of margins. That, to me, is the hallmark of a true champion. Though his words "I am at a loss for words" became a tad monotonous, you could tell that this amazing swimmer was simply trying to understand what had happened to him in a sport he has loved for most of his life.

Lance Armstrong is also working on number eight - in 2009, his eighth Tour de France victory. After seven stunning victories he took some time to run some pretty darn fast marathons - a 2:45 is pretty quick for a guy that spent his life on a bike. To make a comeback from testicular cancer is remarkable - to win the Tour seven times is phenomenal - and to take a shot at number 8 is amazing. Every time you watch him on TV, you know you are witnessing something very special in sport.

So yes, they have all shown us some incredible performances in sport. But they have also shown us something else. These athletes share another fine aspect - their joy in participating in and passion for their respective sports. Watching Usain Bolt run around in his bare feet after the 200m final was pure joy and fun. It wasn't hard to tell how much he's grown up simply loving the sport of running. Michael Phelps showed tremendous passion not only for swimming but for bringing his sport to those who had perhaps yet to discover it. Each race finish was sheer joy as well. As for Lance, well, his passion for the sport of cycling could be seen with the infamous "look" back at Jan Ullrich, or while climbing the Hautacam or Alpe D'Huez.

I can't help but enjoy not only the level of performance, but the enjoyment in doing so. To me, that brings us back to why anyone would partake in sport in the first place - the love of the game, as they say.

Unfortunately, we're now hearing the "these things can't be done without drugs" comments yet again. Interesting to me is that of the three, we've not heard that about Michael Phelps - though his eight gold medals could be perhaps more phenomenal and otherworldly a performance than Bolt or Armstrong. I've said it before and I will say it again - we've yet to see the limits to human performance, and we've yet to see the optimal performance based on the optimal training. It seems unfortunate that instead of everyone continuing to revel in the joy and passion of a sport well-played, we are so focused on the perceived impossibilities. Nowadays, even if you're innocent, you've got to prove your innocence in the court of public and media opinion. Perhaps that's just a reflection on our society as we know it today.

As for all three, I truly hope Bolt runs the 9.5 that he is certainly capable of running, that Phelps comes back for the London Olympics in 2012 for more stunning finishes, and that Austin's very own Armstrong returns to French soil and wins number 8, showing the world yet again what passion for a sport can do in the final result.

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