

## Bolt's DQ at worlds illustrates stupidity of new false-start rule

Here was the moment, the only moment that truly matters beyond the four walls of a flagging sport. It was 8:41 Sunday night in a stadium set among green hillsides outside this industrial city. The seats were no more than two-thirds filled, but the halfhearted turnout of apathetic locals whose leaders simply bought a world championship event, is more than balanced by millions watching (or readying to watch later) on televisions and computer screens around the world.

This was the final of the 100 meters at the 13th world championships of track and field, and that is Usain Bolt's time. The announcer spoke Bolt's name and the big man stepped forward like Bono or Gaga seizing the microphone. Bolt playfully fixed his hair and goatee, using the massive stadium screen like a bathroom mirror; and then pointed first to the opponent on his left (Walter Dix of the U.S.) and then on his right (Yohan Blake, Bolt's Jamaican teammate), each time shaking his head. Then he used both hands like he was chopping carrots with a cleaver, fingers outstretched to show his own lane, as to say, it's just me and the clock. Bolt does not just run footraces (although he does that much faster than any man in history), he performs a one-man show that lasts from several minutes before the gun until long after the finish. His work is not just watched, it is experienced. "People want to see him," Kim Collins, the 35-year-old age-defying veteran from St. Kitts and Nevis would say after winning a bronze medal in Sunday's race. "The show must go on." That show has made Bolt the only international celebrity in the sport and, perilously, the only real reason for anyone but card-carrying track nuts to watch it. But since the remarkable 15-month period in 2008-09 when Bolt not only took the world record in the 100 meters from 9.73 to 9.58 and in the 200 meters from 19.32 to 19.19 and created the one-stop shopping entertainment superstar persona of Usain Bolt, he has turned oddly mortal. His times have been slower, his dominance muted. But here in Korea on Saturday night, he was brilliant in his first-round heat. And then he was brilliant again in his semifinal early on Sunday evening, shutting down 70 meters into an easy win. In two races, he had brought back that unmistakable ability — Jordan had it, Tiger had it, Vick has it — that something incredible might just happen. So it was that he settled into the blocks in lane five at the starter's command of "Take your marks." At the call of "Set," Bolt rose with the other seven starters, as a slight breeze whispered past them. And then he lurched forward, officially, .104 seconds before the gun was fired. A second gun cracked, signaling a false start detected by the automated system that senses early pressure on the starting blocks. There was no question, even to the naked eye, that it was Bolt. Tyson Gay, the injured U.S. sprinter who is the second-fastest (9.69) man in history behind Bolt, was watching in the stadium. "I was shocked," said Gay. "It took some air out of me." But let's get one thing straight here: Bolt absolutely false-started. In fact, it was the 56-game hitting streak of false starts, a clear and obvious jump that could be used to educate young track fans on what a false start looks like. As soon as the second gun went off, there was an audible gasp in the stadium. While Koreans are clearly not track-crazy, the worlds are attended in solid numbers by serious track fans from all over the globe. All of them knew that Bolt was the guy who jumped and they knew what that meant: Because of a ridiculous rule enacted by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, the international governing body of track and field) and put into effect on Jan. 1, 2010, any athlete who false starts once is disqualified from the race. There had been previous false start rules; from 2003-2009, a first false start was charged to the field, with a second slapped on the offending runner, disqualifying him. So Bolt was gone. He tossed off his singlet while walking back past the starting blocks. As the stadium continued to buzz, seven sprinters restarted their pre-race routine. "I really didn't think they would kick him out," said Dix. "They have him on every poster." Dix also made a conscious decision to sit in the blocks. "You know if they are going to take out a big guy like that," said Dix, "They'll take me out next, so I've got to stay in those blocks." Bolt was seen in stadium cameras slamming the walls behind the starting area, and then leaning against the fall. The race was definitively anticlimactic, won by promising 21-year-old Jamaican Yohan Blake in 9.92 seconds into a significant headwind. Dix got the silver in front of Collins. Good for all three of them, but they became a subplot as soon as Bolt jumped. When the race was finished, Bolt left the stadium through a long tunnel to the adjacent warmup track. He declined to answer questions. He was met by his longtime coach, Glen Mills, who briefly embraced Bolt and then ordered him to run four 50-meter cool-down sprints, which he dutifully did, cruising alone on the blue track as if he had raced. He then took a brief rubdown from a Jamaican team masseuse before falling into a folding chair while Vilma Charlton, 64, a three-time Jamaican Olympian and now an official with country's federation, rubbed his shoulders. Mills had been sitting nearby through all of it. "He's only human," said Mills, who is as old-school, seen-it-all as Bolt is cutting edge. Asked what time Bolt was ready to run, Mills asked what the wind had been, thought about it for a few seconds and then said, "I think he would have run in the sixties," meaning nine-point-sixty-something (which only two men in history — Bolt and Gay — have done, and nobody, ever, into a headwind). Bolt had started sensationally in each of his first two 100s here, and when he starts well, he's unbeatable by other humans. "They were good starts," said Mills, breaking in a laugh. "But they were at the wrong time." (Of course, starting well leaves a sprinter flirting with jumping the gun. It's remarkable that Bolt does not false start often, because in big races, he clearly attacks the start). There is, of course another issue in play. Bolt broke a rule and deserved his punishment. But it's a terrible rule and not just for Bolt, although it's especially bad for the sport of track and field when it's applied to Bolt, because he is carrying the sport on his back and without him, there's no reason for the casual fan to even watch (and by watching, maybe the casual fan discovers others competing, like U.S. decathletes Trey Hardee and Ashton Eaton, who

finished one-two, or two-time world champion long jumper Brittney Reese). The false-start rule was changed in an attempt to streamline the sport by eliminating the multiple false starts that can slow down a meet (and a telecast). And while there are good intentions behind that thinking, the IAAF missed badly. Collins was asked if it's a bad rule said, "To me, it is. At least make it one false start on the field, in fairness to the people of the world, they want to see him." Mills said, "Tonight people lost their whole purpose of paying for the tickets." And if Bolt false-starts out of the Olympic final? "Those tickets," said Mills, laughing, "Cost a lot of money." Almost two hours after the race, the IAAF issued a two-page "statement," explaining the rules. It included the mind-boggling sentence, "While the IAAF is, of course, disappointed that Usain Bolt false-started in the final of the 100, it's important to remember that a sport's credibility depends on its rules . . ." (Imagine, Roger Goodell writing: "While the NFL is disappointed that James Harrison laid out Mohamed Massaquoi last Sunday with a head shot . . .") It's clear that the IAAF has been caught with its pants around its ankles, ham-handedly trying to justify a boneheaded rules change. But it's not funny; the stakes are only the survival of its sport. After Sunday's Bolt Affair, sprinters lobbied for a return to the old rule. "Hopefully it will change by London," said Dix. Collins, in fact, spoke as if it was certain to change. "We'll see what happens when they change the rule because of him," he said. "Because of him?" "Not because of him," Collins corrected. "Because of what it's done to the sport." Ato Boldon, the respected NBC analyst and four-time Olympic medalist, has been railing against the one-and-done rule since it was enacted, suggesting that a major star would be knocked out at a the worlds or Olympic Games. I texted him after the race and asked: "Should the rule be changed?" Boldon's response: "Yeah, tomorrow." Gay said, "Usain worked hard to get ready for the championships, and we can't see him run because of a rules change." There are no perfect false start rules. On general principle, sprinters are supposed to be reacting to the gun, not anticipating it. The previous rule, with the first single false start charged to the entire field, allowed anyone to take a random flyer. Before that, two individual false starts meant disqualification, which led to interminable waits for races to actually begin (and fliers taken by everyone in the field, with no penalty). But in its effort to find a fair solution, the IAAF has gone much too far. Like when the when NCAA outlawed dunking to neutralize Alcindor/Kareem; how did that work out? Legislating game can be a dangerous thing. On the second page of its awkward post-race statement, the IAAF spokesmen wrote, "In extraordinary cases, the IAAF Council has the right to make interim changes to Technical Rules, pending official approval by IAAF Congress." If this means it can happen Monday, it should happen Monday. Bolt left the stadium by walking across the middle of the field in the center of the practice track. He is expected to run the 200 meters beginning Friday and also run on Jamaica's powerhouse 4X100-meter relay. Reporters and cameramen followed him to a waiting car. "Looking for tears?" Bolt said. "Not gonna happen." It's a lousy image. An angry Bolt, leaving a major championship without having run. No dancing. No fixing the hair. Just anger and frustration. It's the kind of image that could help bury a sport in its own stupidity. Source &dash; Sports Illustrated