Mike Powell in mid leap.

By Philippe Broussard

In the second feat of the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo to go to the credit of the American team after the men’s hundred metres world record, Mike Powell pulled off on Friday 30th August a jump of 8.95 m, thereby wiping from the annals of the long jump the legendary record of his compatriot Bob Beamon (8.90 m in Mexico in 1968). He also beat Carl Lewis, previously winner of sixty-five successive competitions over ten years, who, with 8.91 m, had himself already broken Beamon’s record.
Mike Powell first of all walked up with great strides in the manner of the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Head high, chest straight, eyes forward. His arms moved back and forth in a perfectly synchronized pendulum motion. Then he began to speed up. He took off. His straight and harmonious run-up took him right to the board. One last time, he touched the ground with his left foot. Then, his body seemed to go into a weightless state. Like a clumsy wading bird trying to stave off a forced landing, he flailed with all his limbs, head tilted slightly backwards. His hand and feet beat the air to prolong just one more instant his airborne state. Would he ever come down?

The American, finally a man once more, placed his feet on the ground and his rear end on the sand. Then he shot an incredulous look towards the results board in the Tokyo stadium. In one second, the time it takes to jump 8.95 metres, he had wiped out twenty-three years of history and frustration. On 18th October 1968, when Powell was not even five years old, his compatriot, Bob Beamon, had taken off in the same way. He too had fought heroically with the void before landing 8.90 m from the take-off board. At the time, his feat was described as “a leap into the 21st century”. No one believed that it could be improved upon before the year 2000. Dozens of jumpers have tried in vain.

While Mike Powell danced with glee, Carl Lewis seemed to be lost in time, somewhere between 18th October 1968 and 30th August 1991. Ten minutes earlier, the champion, unbeaten in long-jump since 1981 (65 competitions) had made 8.91 m, but he knew that the distance would not go down as a new record, because as he jumped he was “pushed” by a wind of over 2 m/s. The unwelcome breeze had robbed him of a performance he had been chasing all his life.

A record like that - “long as a Cadillac”, as Lewis used to say - was one of those legendary feats whose fame travels beyond the stadium and - the ultimate accolade - into the playground. The day they are outstripped by a bold trier who has grown wings, no one knows whether to regret the myth or applaud the new hero. Already, yellowing images of Beamon’s jump pale before those of Powell’s leap - full of light and colour. They suddenly seem to belong to a bygone age, faded images of another era.

The champion in Mexico appears frail and thin (1.90 m for 75 kg) compared to his successor, all thighs and muscle. On 18th October 1968, he came up for his first try and stretched out his endless legs and basketball player’s arms. That long body did not look a likely candidate for a leap into legend. And yet his abdominals were so strong that he was able to keep his legs in the air for what seemed like forever.

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The best performance in his career thus far was 8.33 m, two centimetres short of the record then shared by the American Ralph Boston and the Soviet Igor Ter Ovanesian. The Olympic title therefore seemed within his reach. Nevertheless, no one thought this young man of twenty-two capable of a leap into history. Was it the rarefaction of the air at an altitude of 2,250 metres, a favourable wind just on the authorized limit of 2 m/s, and the electric atmosphere of a storm that helped him to his prodigious achievement? Twenty-three years later, the debate still raged, as long as the performance remained unequalled. He himself never came near it, either before or after.

ADVENTURE IN WEIGHTLESSNESS

Twenty-three years later, in Tokyo, Mike Powell was to inspire barely more confidence: despite good performances (8.66 in May, 8.64 in June), he did not seem likely to worry Carl Lewis, world champion in 1983 and 1987. His second try had taken him only 8.54 m from the take-off board.

And yet their adventures have something in common. Beamon took a short run and took off on the right foot. It is undoubtedly there, at the highest point of his prodigious leap (he is said to have been 1.78 m from the ground), that his image really overlaps with that of Mike Powell. At the instant they defied the law of gravity, both champions had in their eyes that same incredulous look, that same sensation of experiencing a privileged moment somewhere between heaven and earth. A unique instant which prompted Beamon to say: “Tell me I’m not dreaming!”, and his successor: “I knew I was far, but not that far”.

The resemblances between the two champions stop there. For while Bob Beamon could savour his record right away - his competitors that day were not able to rival him - Mike Powell had to await the last two tries of Carl Lewis. He sat on a bench, his hand on his heart and fear in his belly. He contemplated at length the six-fold Olympic champion, convinced that he was going to reach 9 metres. What could be going on in Lewis’ head? He was there, faced with the greatest challenge of his career, a record he had believed himself alone able to beat one day without having recourse to a high-altitude pit. He came within nine (8.87 m) and then eleven (8.84) centimetres of outjumping Powell.

Once the contest was over and he had received his gold medal and listened to the American anthem without removing his white cap, Mike Powell said of Carl Lewis: “I hope he will leave me this record for a while”. Above all, he had this word of farewell for Bob Beamon, the legend condemned to gradual oblivion: “Thank you for jumping so far in 1968, because without you I would never have felt all I am feeling today”.

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