

# Renowned Track and Field Coach Brooks Johnson Discusses 2017 World Championships, Future of Team USA

*On the eve of the 2017 Track and Field World Championships in London, U.K., Disney Sports PR caught up with former U.S. Olympic Track & Field head coach Brooks Johnson, who regularly trains athletes at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney World Resort and has coached at least one athlete in every Olympics since 1968. We checked in with Johnson to get his thoughts on the future of Team USA Track and Field, Usain Bolt, and the overall competition at this year's event. The World Championships take place Aug. 5-13.*

***Disney Sports: The World Championships are a great litmus test for nations, with two years to go before the next summer games. What's at stake for Team USA going into Worlds?***

Brooks Johnson: The biggest thing is to see if this is the changing of the guard or not. We have more college athletes on this team than we've had in a very long time. At the last Olympics, there were 21 coaches that produced the 32 medals. Of those 21 coaches, only nine were non-institutions. So, we're getting more and more college coaches producing people at the top level. The question is for some of the older guys, like Justin Gatlin, who aren't coached by college coaches – will they be supplanted now? 2018? 2019? 2020? The biggest thing is to see how fast the changing of the guard will take place.

***DS: Are there any up and coming names we should pay attention to that could be in that changing of the guard?***

BJ: The one that is the most likely is that kid [Fred] Kerly from [Texas] A&M. He's the NCAA Champion and national champion in the 400-meter, an event in which this country is getting progressively weaker. He's big enough, physically, to carry that banner.

***DS: With that in mind, how do you see the team performing overall?***

BJ: This year is sort of the "feel them out" year. It's like the first round of a championship bout, to assess where we are. We are going to find out whether we can hold serve. [In Rio] we got seven medals in the distances, eleven out of the sprints and hurdles and seven out of the field events.

I think in the sprints, it will be very difficult to hold serve. In the field events, we may be able to. We have very good pole vaulters, throwers, a couple of very good long jumpers.

***DS: When the guard does change, will that be a good thing? Is the up and coming talent on par with the veterans?***

BJ: Whether it will be good or bad has to do with whether college coaches, who are producing the majority of the medals now, can give these kids the kind of attention they need (while also working at a college) and can they sustain the energy and effort over the summer. They're not used to coaching people into August and

September. They're used to getting people ready to go in early June. So, the question is can they sustain it another two months. That's the big question. Because now that the college coaches are dominating the independent or club coaches.

***DS: How does that differ from how teams from other countries are coaching?***

BJ: A track coach here in the U.S. gets paid to win his conference championships and NCAA championships. He does not get paid to win at the Olympics. So, at the end of the day, if there's a conflict, you know where he's going to go. For them, the Olympics is not necessarily the priority. For other countries, they have federations where their full-time jobs are just to coach for the Olympics.

***DS: How has the competition changed in recent years?***

BJ: We just can't show up anymore and beat everybody, because the rest of the world is catching up, especially in the sprints. We still have the fastest times in most events, but the rest of the world now has the technology to close that gap. You see it in the 400-meter race: the three fastest times in the world right now are all from Africa – two from Botswana and one from South Africa. We've never seen that before in the short distances.

***DS: Is Allyson Felix still our brightest track and field star? Will she avenge her second-place finish to Shaunae Miller-Uibo at the 2016 Rio Games?***

BJ: Felix is the most consistent and the most stable sprinter for Team USA. I don't think there is anybody who is better than her, but she certainly has competition from [Shaunae Miller-Uibo] from the Bahamas. So, if they are both on their A-game, I think their positions will be reversed this time. Right now, Allyson has the fastest time in the world, but we will see.

***DS: Do you think this is the year the men's 4×100-meter relay team gets back on top of the podium?***

BJ: I don't think people really understand how difficult that race is. You've got a baton that's a foot long. You've got 20 meters for the hand-off zone. You've got guys coming in at 25 mph. It's a lot harder than it looks, and at the end of the day, it has nothing to do with coaching. Athletes just make mistakes. Nobody wants to put it on the athletes, but sometimes, that is what it is.

***DS: Usain Bolt says he is planning to retire after Worlds. Do you think these are his final races?***

BJ: I think he goes out at 2020. If they [the competition] were to run 9.7 or 9.6, then maybe this would be it. But they're going to run 9.8 and 9.9. He knows he can roll out of bed and do that. He may miss next year and 2019, but he's still the prohibitive best.

***DS: Do you think anyone has a shot at catching him this weekend?***

BJ: This weekend, maybe, since he's not in his best shape. This is probably the most competitive field for the 100-meter race since 2004. From 2008 until 2016, it was pretty predictable. But now, less so. Justin Gatlin could challenge him, or Bolt's training mate, Yohan Blake.

The thing about Bolt is his timing. He's facing his competition when they aren't at their best, so he doesn't have to be at his best. The one time he was facing a competitor at their best who could have beat him was in 2011, and Bolt false started. Timing has really worked out for him in his career.

***DS: Any events that could lend a surprising result?***

BJ: If we don't win the women's hurdles events. Eight of the top nine times in the world right now are American women and we have four competing this weekend. The Olympic champion won't be there but the world record holder will be. But then Sally Pearson, the girl from Australia, who won it in 2012 will be there, and she's looking really good. But if the U.S. doesn't win the women's hurdles events, that would be something of a surprise.