

Life in the slow lane

Michael Johnson's steely perfectionism made him the fastest man on earth, but not necessarily the nicest. Now he's learned to relax – sort of. By Helena de Bertodano

The gold shoes may have been auctioned off and his 200m record broken but Michael Johnson is still – in many people's minds – the fastest man on earth. Not only does he hold the world record for the 400m, he is the only male athlete in history to win the 200m and 400m at the same Olympics.

"I was the face of the 1996 Games," says Johnson, now 44, matter-of-factly, when we meet at his exquisite home high in the hills above San Rafael, northern California. More than the face of the Games, he was the feet of the Games: those gold Nike racing spikes pummelling the ground as he sped over the 200m finishing line and – in an uncharacteristic display of emotion – roared with pure joy when he saw his phenomenal time flash up: 19.32 seconds.

But Johnson was more than just an extraordinarily fast runner: he was the sport's first multimedia superstar, a sort of Tiger Woods of athletics, bringing it into the mainstream. The Man With The Golden Shoes – as he became known – graced magazine covers around the world and secured multimillion-dollar-endorsement deals previously unthinkable for a sprinter. "I'm proud of being remembered as someone who changed the sport in terms of what's possible," says Johnson in his distinctively deep voice. He sits down on a gold-print sofa adorned with pale gold cushions. "People thought it wasn't possible to be a champion at 200 metres and at 400 metres. What I did changed sprinting and how people looked at sprinters. It also changed the economics of the sport in terms of the financial demands I was able to make." Dressed in a purple-and-white-striped shirt, jeans and black loafers, Johnson is far more relaxed and friendly than I had anticipated, with a streak of wry humour. In fact, he is so approachable that I find myself telling him that I had not been expecting an easy interview.

"I didn't used to be this way," he agrees amiably, taking a sip of coffee. "I have changed. As an athlete, I was never really comfortable with being a celebrity. Everybody wanted something of me and I didn't really do a good job of understanding that. It was a huge intrusion into my life... and when journalists asked me questions... it became this kind of..." he trails off and growls to show the stand-off that resulted.

Despite the austere demeanour he projected in those days, Johnson was always an athlete who stood out – partly because of his peculiar running style: the stiff straight back coupled with the short piston stride. As a child, his friends laughed at him for running "funny"; as an adult, reporters compared him to a running duck. "It was funny to me too," says Johnson drily. "I was winning."

"Opting for gold shoes could have been considered downright cocky," he writes in his book, *Gold Rush*, recently published in paperback, "but I was confident and never doubted my ability to deliver gold medals to match my shimmering footwear." His confidence was not misplaced. Even 12 years after retirement, Johnson is still tied with Carl Lewis for the most gold medals won by any runner in history. He has four Olympic golds and eight golds at world championships.

Portrait by
Kevin Kuneshi

There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance and Johnson treads it carefully. He has high expectations of himself but knows his flaws. "I work hard to improve myself as a person – as a father, as a husband, as a manager. I'm always on that mission." In the past, he says, he was a perfectionist. Was that a good thing?

"No," he says, smiling. "It creates some struggles when you have that expectation of other people. I've gotten much better with it. I've had to learn that not everybody does things my way. But I do expect the absolute best of everyone around me and I'm disappointed when people don't expect that of themselves." He once said he was difficult to live with. "I think I was. I don't know if I still am – you'd have to ask my wife." He and his first wife, Kerry D'Oyen, an entertainment reporter and the mother of his 12-year-old son Sebastian, broke up after Johnson retired from racing. Now he is married to Armine Shamiryan, a chef – whom he says he met "randomly" through friends in Los Angeles nine years ago.

So while he is having his photograph taken, I ask Johnson if he minds if I talk to her. "Go ahead," he says, unfazed. I find Armine, a petite, dark-haired Armenian, in the kitchen, making Greek salad for lunch. "He is a control freak," she says affectionately. "And he makes me work out in the gym every day, which I hate. But I think he's changed a lot. As he's got older he's realised that he can't make everything perfect and once you realise that, you can either accept it or be miserable about it. He's accepted it."

Johnson thoroughly enjoys the wealth that his success has bought him. "From as young as I can remember, this is the life I always wanted. I wanted to have the luxury of having really nice fast cars – I have a couple of McLarens and a Porsche and..." he stops himself, perhaps thinking he has said enough. But in his garage, I also glimpse a silver Mercedes SLS AMG – which seriously impresses the photographer who identifies it for me – and a Ferrari. "I wanted to be able to live wherever I wanted, to travel the world and to be able to take care of my family back in Texas." Indeed, his large, secluded house looks like a high-end show home, with a general impression of tasteful opulence but hardly a hint of anything

personal. A bar with a wine refrigerator dominates the living room (Johnson is something of a wine buff) but there is none of the usual paraphernalia of family life.

As we talk a tall boy walks past the room, a school backpack slung over his shoulder. "That's Sebastian," Johnson tells me. "What's up?" he asks his son. "Nothing," says Sebastian defensively, moving swiftly on. Johnson raises his eyebrows at me: "It's not always been easy for Sebastian. People are absolutely silly with him – they start asking him how fast he is and if he's going to be a runner too and it's just not fair to him. I've encouraged him to be involved in lots of different things. I've groomed him not to feel any pressure. He's not actually crazy about sports, he plays the drums and wants to be a writer."

As the youngest of five children growing up in Dallas, Texas, Johnson says his parents – a truck driver and a schoolteacher – set high standards but also encouraged their children to seek out their own paths: "My dad taught me that the more you put into something, the better the result. I have a lot of similar personality traits to my dad. He



GOLDEN BOY From top, Michael Johnson, second from left, in 1972 with his brothers and sisters; on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1996; before a race in his senior year of high school in Dallas, Texas, in 1986; and the famous golden shoes



is a hard, demanding, no-nonsense person, my mother is much more compassionate. But when she's not happy with you, whew, I'd much rather be dealing with my father at that point because she just does not hold back." Johnson started running competitively at the age of 10 and at Baylor University, where he took a degree in business, he beat Calvin Smith, then the world champion, in the 200m. By the time he graduated he was the first male athlete ever to hold the number one ranking in the 200m and 400m.

Yet he had more than his share of bad luck. He prepared for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, only to develop a stress fracture in his left leg before the trials began. At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, he was the favourite to win the 200m but contracted food poisoning shortly before the Games, causing him to lose weight and strength. He failed to reach the final. "By 1996, I was in danger of finishing my career as the greatest athlete ever at 200m and 400m, world-record holder – but without winning an [individual] Olympic gold medal." Finally, however, the stars aligned and he won two. At the time Johnson said he knew his record would be broken one day but most likely the grandmother of that athlete had not been born yet. And then, just 12 years later, along came Usain Bolt, breaking Johnson's 200m record by 0.01 of a second at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, then the following year absolutely shattering it when he ran 19.19 seconds at the 2009 world championships.

"Unbelievable," exclaimed an astonished Johnson no less than six times in his on-air commentary directly after the race, wearing his hat as a BBC commentator, one he will don again during the forthcoming London Olympics. And yet he genuinely doesn't seem to mind that his record has been broken. Surely it must have hurt the moment it happened? Johnson chuckles and shakes his head. "No it didn't. But I've come to realise that I'm different. I'm just able to move on. That doesn't mean that I'm not extremely proud of what I was able to do. I will always have the memory of that moment – that can never be taken away. But you cannot expect to hold a record forever. And I'm not doing anything these days to keep it!"

Part of the fascination with watching sprinters, says Johnson, is witnessing the limits of human ability. Does he think man is nearing his fastest speed possible? "We're always trying to figure out what the limits are. Part of it is psychological – we always want to do better than people did before us. That's the most significant reason why people continue to get faster. I doubt if Bolt would have run 19.31 at the Beijing Olympics if I hadn't run 19.32 before him."

In a documentary on Channel 4 last week he also argued, controversially, that athletes like him and Bolt, who are descended from West African slaves have a "superior athletic gene" due to selective breeding by slave owners and appalling conditions that meant only the strongest slaves survived. All things being equal, however, does he think he could have outrun Bolt? He's not willing to speculate. "Look: it's fun for everybody else to debate who would win a race between Usain Bolt and myself – but it's never going to happen. If it did happen, it would have to happen now, and we already know who would win that!"

Johnson is so enamoured with Bolt, in fact, that he's urged the Jamaican to take on the 400m – in other words, to usurp Johnson completely. And he even gets frustrated with Bolt's famous laid-back attitude to racing – so different from his own tautly controlled pre-race nervous energy. "It's debatable whether that gives him his best performance. Maybe his time could be even faster."

Maybe, I suggest, Johnson might have been even faster if he had taken Bolt's relaxed approach? He shakes his head firmly: "I know that I could not have been. I spent all those years trying to understand who I was as an athlete – the

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SUPERSTAR From top, Michael Johnson with his wife, Armine Shamiryan, in 2006; celebrating his new world record at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996; his book 'Gold Rush'; and with Usain Bolt, who has smashed Johnson's world record in the 200m, as Bolt was named Laureus World Sportsman of the Year in Toronto in 2009

'Gold Rush', by Michael Johnson (Harper Collins) is available to order from Telegraph Books at £8.99 + £1.10 p&p. Call 0844 871 1516 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

only approach that works for me is to be extremely focused." And yet he feels he never quite fulfilled his potential: "I always knew that I could run faster than I ran. I spent my entire career trying to run a flawless race – which is rare for anyone. I ran out of career time before I achieved my perfect race."

Originally he had five Olympic golds: three individual and two for the 4 x 400m relays. But in 2008, one of the other sprinters in the 2000 Sydney Olympics relay, Antonio Pettigrew, admitted he had taken performance-enhancing drugs and agreed to return his gold medal. A disgruntled Johnson announced that he would return his medal too.

A shadow crosses Johnson's face when I bring up the subject. "I was very angry and disappointed. For eight years I could say I was a five-time Olympic gold medallist. Then I had to start saying four-time. It doesn't sound the same." He sighs deeply: "Now I'm more sad than angry. [Pettigrew committed suicide in 2010.] The stupid thing is it was so completely and totally unnecessary. We didn't need him in the race. We were so far ahead we could have put you on the team and we would still have won."

In Gold Rush, Johnson describes himself as "somewhat of an honorary Brit" and is looking forward to cheering on both Britain and the United States in the London Games. He expects at least two of the same athletes from 2008 to dominate again. "It will be about [US swimmer Michael] Phelps and Bolt again. It's rare that you have athletes who are superstars at two consecutive games [but]

Bolt can still do something spectacular." Britain, he reckons, will have good results in certain sports. "I think the UK will do well in cycling and in rowing. They've also got some good swimmers. But in athletics it's going to be tough. I don't think they're going to do poorly but it certainly won't be great. The problem in Britain is you have a small country that is very powerful in terms of its standing in the world. But the media attention focused on the talent that comes up is so intense that they don't stand a chance."

Johnson says he is relieved to have retired from the fast lane and doesn't miss the intense pressure to perform. He doesn't even enjoy working out any more. "I do about an hour four days a week. It's hard to get motivated. I used to get a gold medal when I went for a run. Now I don't get anything."

Having been the fastest man on earth, the rest of one's life must feel like a bit of an anticlimax. "Yes and no," replies Johnson. "When I won [the Royal Television Society's] pundit of the year [award] that was huge for me. I can't say that was something I dreamed of as a teenager and I don't expect any of those things to equal the feeling of winning a gold medal, but I knew when I got into that sport that I was going to have to retire at a very early age, I would have a lot of living left ahead of me, and I would have to set new goals which are probably not going to equal the joy of this."

These days he is a man who really knows how to enjoy life. "My life is pretty good. I'm on vacation every three weeks. In the evening I get to sit here with this view" – he sweeps a hand toward the well-manicured garden outside the French doors and the bay beyond – "and I have a glass of wine with my wife and have friends over. It's a great life, I love to play and I play very hard. I work hard too."

"My expectations aren't what they used to be," he continues. "Take that candle for example," he says, pointing at a tall cream candle on the coffee table in front of us. "That candle has been twisted the whole time that we've been sitting here. In the old days, I would have turned it as soon as I walked in. Now it doesn't bother me."