

Not All Heroes Wear Kits

# UNSUNG

Behind the Scenes With Sport's Hidden Stars



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## START ME UP: Athletics Starters

*The sound of gunfire is the precursor to every great sprint in athletics history. Yet those pulling the trigger are much more than a hired gun. Meet the volunteer officials whose strict codes on rule-keeping can break as many dreams as they make – for even the world’s most famous athletes.*

### **It All Starts with a Bang**

#### **‘ON YOUR MARKS’**

At the 2009 World Athletics Championships in Berlin, the field for the 100m final included the fastest man in history. He smiled at the camera and produced his famous pose before accepting the invitation to his blocks. His nervous rivals were beholden to superstition. They jumped on the spot, fiddled with jewellery, sipped water, and prayed.

**‘SET’**

Over 50,000 fans at the Olympiastadion held their breath, and their phones. They were anticipating the new

world record that a global audience of 95 million were about to witness. The sprinters were poised. The world now waited on one man.

His name was Alan.

BANG!

You may not have heard of Alan Bell, but you've almost certainly heard his gun. Now in his 70s, he remains the highest-ranked chief starter in the UK and one of the most experienced in the world. As well as the World Championships he has fired the starting pistol at the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games, the World Indoor Championships, and the European Championships. It makes him the only international starter to have officiated at every major athletics meeting. And it means that when Usain Bolt cemented his greatness in Berlin, Alan had the best seat in the house.

'That night will probably be the greatest moment of my life, with the exception of the birth of my kids,' he told me when we first chatted in January 2021. 'You fire a gun at the World Championship Final, which is not a bad bonus in itself, and the big fella from Jamaica creates history. And nobody has been anywhere near since.'

Hanging on the wall of his study is the certificate that displays Bolt's name and the astonishing time of 9.58 seconds. As starter, Alan's signature also appears on there. He was keen to point out that without it, the record would not have been ratified. 'That's my 17th world record,' he said, before pointing to another framed memento from the night. It was Bolt's warm-up vest. 'My son tells me it should be on eBay. I've suggested over my dead body!'

A former high jumper who represented England at amateur level in the early 1970s, Alan was forced to retire in his mid-20s when he ruptured the achilles tendon in his take-off foot. 'I'm a knackered athlete,' he boomed in a Geordie baritone as loud as his gun. As a member of North Shields Polytechnic Club, he was invited to help out at a youth track meet. He agreed, expecting to judge the high jump. Instead, club secretary and local bank manager John Kennedy opened a briefcase and handed him a pair of pistols. Alan chuckled at the memory. 'I looked at him and said, "Mr Kennedy, I haven't got a bloody clue how to do that!" He said, "Don't worry, the kids won't know." And I did it.'

Alan was in his 45th season, in 17 of which he had featured on World Athletics's (formerly the IAAF) elite list of officials. Serendipity has played a big part in his ascent. A shortage of starters in his native north-east meant that only days after firing John Kennedy's gun, he was sitting the required exam in the kitchen of another club official. The region's renown as a host to top-level athletics, spearheaded by Olympic long-distance runner Brendan Foster and centred around Gateshead International Stadium, also came at the perfect time for Alan. He had regular exposure to high-profile events in the 1970s and '80s. 'Sometimes ambition plays no part in what happens to you. Sometimes it's just good fortune and opportunity,' he said, before adding that he occasionally bumps into Foster for a 'beer and a cry over Newcastle United'.

Some of Alan's earliest experiences at elite meetings were in Gateshead's call room, where athletes are checked

to ensure they're abiding by competition regulations. It's here where they have their bags searched, their spikes checked, their bib numbers distributed, and any non-conforming logos covered with tape. 'Believe me, we used to find some really dodgy stuff in the bags,' said Alan. He described on one occasion being grabbed by the testicles and pinned to the wall after finding a vial in a Russian shot putter's bag. 'I have to be careful with naming some of them,' he added. More in hope than expectation, I told him he couldn't be sued if the athletes were now dead. 'Chances are they will be if they were taking as much as we found,' came Alan's deadpan response.

Originally a PE teacher at Benfield School in Newcastle, where he taught a young footballer by the name of Steve Bruce, Alan became a school inspector before moving into the job that would dovetail perfectly with his voluntary role as a starter. As international development director at the Youth Sport Trust, he worked with the Ministry of Sport to implement programmes all over the world in the build-up to London 2012. The recruitment process for the role saw him interviewed by Baroness Sue Campbell, a day after he oversaw seven false starts in a single 110m hurdles race at the European Cup.

One of the most powerful figures in UK Sport began their encounter with the question, 'Were you the idiot doing the starting at Gateshead yesterday?' Even for someone familiar with explosive starts, it caught Alan by surprise. But it proved to be the beginning of a fruitful relationship and he has since visited over 70 countries combining his developmental work and his role in athletics.

Now retired from the former, the latter keeps his passport well thumbed. He told me he is planning a six-day trip to Finland for the national championships, having opted against two weeks in Nairobi for the World Under-20 event. When I asked if I might be able to shadow him at a forthcoming meeting, he suggested we meet a bit closer to home. 'People think, "Wow, you started a big race in Berlin." But the skill of starting that race is perfected at the Tyneside Track League in Gateshead or the National Junior League in Birmingham.' And so we arranged to reconvene at a Division 1 meeting of the North East Youth Development League.

### **The Slowest 100m Race in History**

'I did not move!' shouted Jon Drummond. And then he didn't move. He lay on the track, with his hands behind his head, and the 2003 World Championships in Paris descended into a French farce. Baffled officials resorted to waving flimsy, print-at-home red cards, but they were like aircraft marshals on a deserted runway. They adjudged that Drummond, along with Jamaican Asafa Powell, had jumped the gun in heat two of this highly anticipated 100m quarter-final. It was the second false start of the race, following Dwight Thomas's overeager hamstrings the first time around. As per a controversial new rule, one false start would see the entire field cautioned, regardless of who committed the offence. Any sprinter beating the trigger thereafter would be instantly eliminated.

It was a rule as unpopular with the public as it was with the athletes, and a furious Drummond found himself



with a stadium of allies. With the video replays on the big screen appearing inconclusive, the whistling French crowd – never shy about sticking fingers up to the establishment – appeared to be backing the American. Frantic officials in red caps scattered like the laser target from a drunken sniper. Unlike the baying mob, they had proof of the unfair advantage. Starting-block sensor readings showed that Drummond had moved 0.052 seconds after the gun and Powell 0.086. Anything below 0.100 seconds is judged to be beyond the limit of human reflexes and is penalised accordingly.

Finally, after 15 minutes of acting like a sulking toddler insisting he hadn't fed his greens to the dog, Drummond pulled down his top and strutted off. His eyes were bulging, his head was shaking, and his bottom lip was quivering. But the drama continued. As the American whipped up a frenzied crowd, a word from a mischievous US official appeared to persuade the Olympic gold medallist to return to his blocks. Skinsuit back on, Drummond duly obliged, shaking the hands of his perplexed rivals and leaving beleaguered officials to begin the unenviable process of evicting him all over again.

Meanwhile, Powell, who had accepted the decision without the petulance, also felt emboldened to return. The crowd cheered and the athletes recommenced their warm-ups while stern men in beige suits joined their hapless tracksuited colleagues. The decision was made to postpone the race, and run the two remaining quarter-final heats instead. The sprinters walked off to a chorus of Gallic jeers.

When the six remaining entrants were eventually able to return minus the offending duo, Drummond was pictured on the big screen. He was weeping in the arms of his coach at the nearby practice track. The irate Parisians continued to pull for their guy, and, like Drummond, they refused to take their orders when a forlorn starter pleaded for silence.

Eventually, Ato Boldon crossed the line in first place, 51 minutes after the race should have been run. The new false-start rule had been intended to reduce delays and keep television networks sweet. Instead, with the schedule in disarray and advertisers puce with rage, the Stade de France had become the scene of the slowest race in 100m history. Commentating for the BBC, USA track legend Michael Johnson set aside any sympathy for a former teammate and reflected the ire of his producers. '[Drummond] knows the rules, and the IAAF should have something in place for this kind of situation,' he said. 'If somebody won't go off, they should be escorted off by security. He has disrupted the entire competition. The rules work. The problem is what we do when we have an idiot athlete on the track. It is very distasteful. He should be penalised for embarrassing the sport.'

Lamine Diack, IAAF president and later jailed for corruption in 2020, felt that the incident had brought shame on the sport. Sat next to Olympics chief Jacques Rogge, he had witnessed the whole charade from the stands and he was particularly frustrated with starters who appeared tame and toothless.

Privately, Diack and the IAAF vowed that local officials would no longer be trusted to start races at

major meetings. It was time to introduce an elite group of international starters who could handle troublemakers like Drummond. And they knew exactly where to start.

### **Local Heroes**

It was a sunny July morning in Morpeth when I pulled into the King Edward VI school. A friendly car park attendant told me where I would find Alan, and I discovered later that this helpful chap was none other than Jim Alder, the marathon runner who won Commonwealth Games gold in Kingston in 1966. Alder was given the honour of carrying the Olympic flame through Northumberland in 2012. Still engaging and sprightly in his 80s, he remained the club president for Morpeth Harriers. He pointed me to a small, pebble-dashed storage building, situated just behind the hammer and discus cage.

As I made my way over the field, there was a nervous buzz of activity as the athletes, all aged between 13 and 17, exchanged excited chatter. One father chided his daughter for not stretching her calves, while a mother scrambled for safety pins. Half a dozen officials placed hurdles out on the track. I found Alan and his two colleagues sitting on a bench, reading through the timetable for the day. Alan stood up to hand me a copy, and I instantly understood why the IAAF thought of him when drawing up a list of elite starters. He's 6ft 3in, with closely shaved grey hair, and his voice is even louder in the flesh. He didn't strike me as the type who would have too many issues with stropy sprinters.

He towered over the two gentlemen next to him, who he introduced as Micky and Malcolm. Malcolm Dewell

was 63 and a highly experienced national starter. He had worked alongside Alan for many years, including at the London Olympics in 2012. Micky was Michael Baker, a relative newcomer to the role. Wearing dark sunglasses that seemed to be hermetically sealed to his face, he was keen to make the next step up from regional level. 'It's important that the likes of Malcolm and I come here to support the local guys and bring on the next generation of officials,' said Alan. 'And Micky is the next generation. He's a young lad.' Micky was 61.

The three of them were finalising where they would stand for each race. Ensuring clear visibility of each lane was the challenge, but it wasn't the only consideration. They also needed to keep an eye out for objects falling out of the sky. 'At this level that's not a big issue, as the kids might only throw the hammer 20m,' said Alan. 'But if this was a major meeting, it'd be going out 70m. You keep more than an eye out for it, believe me.' Malcolm's silver watch reflected in the sun as he pointed to the sky. 'It comes down like a bomb,' he said.

The two seasoned pros were in white polo shirts, meaning they would be acting as starter's assistants. They were to make sure that all competitors were where they should be before the chief starter set them off. That would be Micky, as he racked up some valuable experience and advice from his distinguished peers. As is standard for the role, he was wearing a red polo shirt and red cap. He also had an additional item of kit in the form of a luminous yellow sleeve slipped on to his right arm. Either there's a niche company making standalone glow-in-the-dark

sleeves, or there's a trove of one-armed steward jackets discarded somewhere. I kept that thought to myself and asked instead about their guns.

Alan was the first to draw, producing a 9mm Ruger. 'That is *the* gun. The Olympic gun. The one used in 2012,' he said. Given the lofty introduction, I was a little startled when he casually passed it to me like it was the TV remote. I reluctantly took it in soft hands as if I had just been given a maternity-ward baby. If it wasn't already apparent that I'm as comfortable with a gun as a sheep is with a skateboard, I went on to reveal my ignorance in full when I asked to take a picture of it. Alan and Malcolm closed their eyes and shook their heads in sombre unison. 'It's fine taking a photograph of somebody using it, but not the gun itself, because people then know ...' Alan didn't finish his sentence, but I got the gist.

They may only be permitted the use of blank ammunition, but that doesn't exclude starters from the intense security checks that come with owning a firearm in the UK. In order to qualify for a gun licence, and to pass the renewal every five years, local police may search their house, write to their doctor, access their medical records, and request character references. They also reserve the right to conduct spot checks at any time, to ensure the gun and ammunition are correctly and securely stored. Starters even get asked if they're happy in life.

Courtesy of a farming background in Teesside, Malcolm has been around guns all his life. He remembered one particularly dramatic visit from Cleveland Police as part of strict checks following the 1987 Hungerford

Massacre. ‘The firearms team arrived – all of them – in a Range Rover. They were in full SWAT suits, holding AK47s, parked right on my drive.’ An incredulous Malcolm shuffled them into his house before any curtains began twitching, and took them to the attic where he stored his gun case. Despite it being mounted to an internal wall and reinforced with high-tensile steel plates, they adjudged the box to be deficient. ‘They said the heads of the bolts on the outside needed to be welded. And they took all my guns away until I did it.’

Alan’s first gun was a muzzle-loaded, black powder, sawn-off shotgun registered in 1877. Passed down to him from within the athletics community, it was the only licensed gun of its kind in the UK. Alan would occasionally fire it to launch large outdoor events such as the Great North Run. That was until he received a letter from Northumbria Police saying they had received a complaint from a member of the public. He reluctantly surrendered the weapon to his local police station, unwilling to risk losing a gun licence that doubles as his passport to the sporting elite.

Given that close attention from law enforcement is one of the more unexpected aspects of the role, it’s little wonder that there are fewer than 100 starters in the UK authorised to carry firearms. Micky, a former local club runner whose involvement in officiating began when he responded to an email titled ‘does anybody want to fire a gun?’, is constantly awaiting a visit from his local force: ‘I live in Newcastle, where they’ll hold up the corner shop for anything. Every time I see a story in *The Chronicle* I expect a knock on the door.’

Rather than examples of meddlesome bureaucracy, I told them that I found their stories reassuring. They nodded their heads, rather unconvincingly. Suddenly there was a sharp toot of a horn that made me jump, indicating that a competitor was about to throw the hammer. Alan's radio crackled, and it was time for us to take our places at the start line for the opening race – the under-13s 70m hurdles.

As Malcolm and Alan trundled off to collect the runners, Micky entered the combination on the trigger locks of his two 9mm Smith & Wesson pistols. A lanyard and whistle hung around his neck as he loaded both guns, one for starting and the other for recall in the case of a false start. 'Before I did this I'd never held a gun. I was like you,' he added, miming his right arm flopping under the weight. 'I know nothing about guns, I didn't want to know anything about guns. If we could do this another way, I wouldn't have them. But that's the way it is.'

Micky may one day get his wish. Starters at national and international events use the latest electric guns provided by the likes of Seiko or Omega. But at that moment he stepped up on to the platform, called the hurdlers to their marks, and pulled the trigger. I jumped. It was to be the first of over 60 races that he would commence.

The day was in full swing. The sun was shining, accompanied by a breeze that carried every noise for miles. The honk of the horn, the crack of the gun, Alan's thundering voice. Parents, no longer permitted to stand at the finish line, attempted to make up for their relocation

by cheering even louder from behind a Covid perimeter at the side of the track.

As Alan and Malcolm lined up runner after runner, I told them I was impressed by the level of organisation and sophistication at such a junior level. The guns, the hurdles, the walkie-talkies; some kids even brought their own starting blocks. It was certainly a step up from jumpers for goalposts. But it was the high level of officials that really set it apart from, say, a junior football or rugby match. And while teaching kids the rules enforced at the elite level was a key reason for Alan to attend, there were moments where exceptions were made. ‘If a kid goes early here, Micky won’t disqualify them,’ said Alan. ‘He’ll take them aside and have a word. That’s part of the process.’

It’s a process that could well mean a future British medallist was among us. Malcolm recalled seeing a young Richard Kilty break records as a ten-year-old in Middlesbrough, 22 years before he would make his Olympic debut in Tokyo. And on the weekend that Joy Eze claimed a bronze medal in the 100m of the European Under-20 Championships in Finland, Alan vividly remembered the first time he saw her at Gateshead International Stadium, flying past kids two years older than her.

But while the competitors in Morpeth may have represented the next generation, the officials, to put it bluntly, did not. Alan told me that he remained the only level-five international starter in the country. Below him were 41 starters at level four – including Malcolm – who are qualified to start top national events. Of this number, only four were under 60. It turned out Alan wasn’t joking



when he said that Micky, a level-three starter, was among the youngest on the scene.

‘If we held the Olympic Games tomorrow, we would still have the best start team in the world on duty,’ said Alan. ‘But if we were to hold it in five years’ time, I’m not sure we’d even get a start team good enough. We’re trying really hard to recruit new officials. The dilemma is you don’t suddenly go from this level to the Olympic Games. It took me 20 years.’

Malcolm chimed in, ‘This is where an athletics meet differs drastically from a game of rugby or football, where only one to three officials are required. At a meeting like this, there’ll be between 20 to 30 officials. At a Diamond League, it’ll be up to 100. What’s going to happen in ten years’ time? Alan won’t be carrying firearms around when he’s 80. It’s quite worrying really.’

### **Mr Anonymous**

Just weeks after Jon Drummond’s trackside tantrum, Alan received a letter from the IAAF, inviting him and his wife to the headquarters in Monaco. He had been headhunted, along with six other respected officials from around the world, to form a new elite class of international starters.

Unbeknown to him, Alan had been assessed during the 2003 World Indoor Championships in Birmingham. The assessors were particularly impressed by the confident manner in which he had dealt with Britain’s Allyn Condon, who had refused to leave the track after being disqualified in the 200m final.

‘I’m 6ft 3in and 14st. Within my portfolio of characteristics, I do know how to intimidate,’ explained Alan. ‘I just got into his face, very quietly, knowing it was on international television. And said, “You’re going to leave the track, or we’re going to have a situation where you are going to be the joke of international athletics.” He looked at me and realised I wasn’t kidding. And he left the track.’

Alan told me that the UK’s officiating was the envy of the world, knowing every trick in the book to ensure things run smoothly. ‘If someone kicks off about a false start the officials here become intimidatory and surround them to say “leave now”. And what’s become an interesting strategy is, if it’s a big strapping bloke kicking off mouthing and swearing, we send a woman to deal with it. It’s amazing how that works.’

His adept handling of the tricky situation in Birmingham, combined with Drummond’s shenanigans in France five months later, saw Alan swiftly promoted from a dependable national starter to a formidable presence on the international scene. The IAAF tasked Alan and his peers to develop protocols for the conduct of an international starter, who would be appointed to manage the entire start process for major meetings around the world. Wary of stepping on the toes of experienced local starters, and given the scope of his day job with the Youth Sport Trust, Alan persuaded the IAAF to take a more developmental approach. He argued that they should aim to raise the standards of existing start teams. To this day he remains the lead trainer for international starters.

Ahead of the Olympics in Tokyo, Alan made three trips to Japan to train and mentor the local starters.

He teaches the fundamentals one must adhere to in order to become a starter of pedigree. Somewhat incongruously, for a man holding a gun in public, the main intention is to go unnoticed. To be, as Alan described it, 'Mr Anonymous'. Given that starters are usually out of camera shot, he insisted that he is never happier than when he returns from an event and his friends say they didn't see him on television. 'If they see me, it's usually because something's gone wrong.'

To prove Alan's point, Malcolm told a story from the 2020 Glasgow Indoor Grand Prix. Ahead of the women's 400m the electric starting system malfunctioned, leaving the athletes rooted to their blocks after the trigger had been pulled. As a frantic Seiko technician struggled to fix the device, antsy TV producers directed their camera operators to show the viewers the source of the hold-up. As the commentators speculated on the problem, the live coverage cut to the starter. It was Malcolm.

Relief came in the shape of Swedish sensation Armand Duplantis, who was on the verge of a new pole vault world record. When the cameras turned to Duplantis, Malcolm made a dash for his car in search of his pistols. On his return he warned the athletes that he was reverting to real guns, and managed to start the race the old-fashioned way. Meanwhile, the young Swede had jumped 6.18m and broken the world record.

Malcolm remembered his phone being inundated with cruel texts from friends at the rugby club, but a more

satisfying memory is of an unlikely source of gratitude for the gun glitch. ‘Duplantis came over to me after the race,’ said Malcolm. ‘And he said, “Hey man, thanks for holding up that race.” I said, “Think nothing of it, bonny lad!”’

Studying the idiosyncrasies of each athlete before they take to their blocks is another of Alan’s golden tips. This allows starters to spot when showmanship crosses the line into gamesmanship. Usain Bolt’s crowd-pleasing theatrics were known worldwide. But it was up to Alan to know the pre-race traits of the entire field, whether that be kissing crucifixes, closing eyes, exhaling loudly, or simply hanging back. That way, he could ensure that the race would be won via feats of athleticism rather than by unsporting tricks of the mind. ‘There’s a game that they often play of psyching each other out. But they also have their own idiosyncratic preparation,’ explained Alan. ‘And part of what I have to judge is, are they playing games? Or are they doing what’s natural?’

Alan used the example of 1992 Olympic gold medallist Linford Christie, still the fastest male sprinter Britain has ever produced. He described Christie’s tendency to remain completely unmoved after starter’s orders, while his rivals made straight for their blocks. A starter sticking rigidly to the rule book may have been tempted to caution Christie for delaying. But Alan had seen it all before. ‘If you’re an inexperienced starter, you could warn him for not following the instruction. But over time you realise that when everyone else has gone forward and is getting ready, Linford then zoomed forward, went straight down, and he was the first one ready. It’s about studying the athletes.’

On another occasion, at the 2014 European Championships in Zurich, French athlete Cindy Billaud was among the favourites in the 100m hurdles. Lining up in lane seven ahead of the first semi-final, Billaud chewed gum ferociously but hadn't taken a single step forward almost ten seconds after Alan had called 'on your marks'. He concluded that her actions had disrupted the field, and called for the athletes to stand up.

As the athletes walked back behind their blocks confused as to what had happened, what followed was a rare chance for Alan to go off-script. Viewers watching all over Europe heard the jarring combination of an authoritative Geordie voice, at an athletics meet in Switzerland, speaking French.

Still out of shot, Alan could be heard sternly telling the athletes, 'Will you all respond to the instructions when given immediately', before leaving no doubt as to who he was directing his comment to by adding, 'Comprenez-vous, mademoiselle?' A sheepish Billaud raised her hand in apology, and Alan delivered a decisive 'merci'. The athlete smirked like a mischievous schoolgirl but she had no hesitation in taking her mark at the second time of asking. Steve Cram, commentating on proceedings for the BBC, found the time to quip, 'Well, that's Alan Bell. I don't know if that's posh Geordie, or poor French.' Billaud comfortably won the heat and went on to claim a silver medal.

As Alan reflected on his patchy bilingualism worthy of a role as Eurovision Song Contest host, he said it was another example of discretion trumping Draconian. 'There

are purists that say I shouldn't have done that. They'll say that I should have shown a yellow card because she's supposed to know the rules. I'm not about that. In that situation, I wanted to impose my standards. But more importantly, I wanted the other athletes to understand. I'm fair to everybody. So they all got the message.'

'Fair' is the word that Alan repeats more than any other when talking about his career in athletics, and it's one that underpins his ethos as a starter. He prides himself on a reputation for being consistent and, as he puts it, 'scrupulously fair'. Even if that requires making unpopular decisions. At the 2021 British Championships, which also double as the Olympic trials, Alan disqualified top contender Zharnel Hughes in the 100m final. Hughes was the 2018 European Champion and such is his class that only one British male has clocked a quicker time than his personal best of 9.91. That's his coach, Linford Christie. After the race, Alan was summoned to the competition director's room.

'I went in, and Linford shook my hand and said hello. And Zharnel started with, "That would never have been a false start in America." I said, "No, probably not. They would have said the gun didn't work properly, or there was something wrong with the false-start equipment. Or an athlete farted and set you off," and Linford burst out laughing.'

Hughes's point wasn't entirely wide of the mark, and Alan knows of occasions where big-name runners have been given leeway at high-profile national meets elsewhere in the world. But it wasn't going to happen on his watch.

‘I said, “Listen, three starters saw you go, the reaction time on the machine says you went under the gun time, the waveform – which shows where an athlete has applied pressure on the blocks – is conclusive. I dare say the slow-motion on television will show you went early. You false-started. Leave it.’

Hughes was nevertheless selected to represent Team GB at the Olympics in Tokyo a month later. Although impressive in the 100m heats and in with a genuine chance of a medal, he would be disqualified in the final. For a false start.

### **A Separate Life**

It was past 4pm in Morpeth and while the sun was still shining, there was a noticeable dip in the energy on the school track. Patient parents glanced at their watches, fatigued athletes rubbed cramping calves, and even the horn sounded tired. But the volunteer officials remained brimming with vigour, none more so than Alan.

He radioed in a request for water bottles, only to be told there were none left. ‘Any chance you can bring a tap?’ came his reply. A discus thrower requested permission to cross the track, and Alan asked if he was running the 10k. No smile, or any emotion, was forthcoming. ‘Sorry, I’m an acquired taste,’ said Alan, before telling the lad about the common sand-removing tricks athletes would try in a bid to make the discus lighter. ‘It’s called cheating,’ he said.

Later on, when there was a delay in proceedings, he kept a group of 300m runners entertained by quizzing them on call-room rules, letting them guess whose kit

would fall foul of the censors due to excessive logos. It led to a story about the time he came across East German shot putter Udo Beyer, a haystack of a man whose rule-breaking Adidas gear could only be covered with industrial quantities of black tape.

Teenagers are a notoriously tough crowd, but these athletes were either heart-warmingly polite or genuinely interested. And Alan isn't short of a tale. He shared the story of him being the first to congratulate Jessica Ennis moments after she won her World Championship gold in Berlin ('She sees me and she's beaming, and I just said, "Oh Jess, give a Geordie a cuddle!"). There was another about him becoming good friends with Greg Rutherford due to the fact that the configuration of an athletics track has Alan standing by the long-jump pit when starting the 200m.

And there was the time he witnessed David Rudisha produce one of the most breathtaking displays ever seen on a track, at the London Stadium in 2012. 'I've started many great races. But I don't think I've ever seen an athlete dominate an event so gracefully,' said Alan. 'Bolt won many races through sheer raw power. But Rudisha was just remarkable to watch. And because it was the 800m, I had the advantage of being able to stay and watch it as he came around twice, and crossed the finish line where I'd started it from. So I was able to soak it in. It was just awesome.'

Alan offered to retire following the London Olympics, admitting that he cried following its culmination. The tears were a mix of relief and overwhelming pride, and



stepping down following the rare privilege of officiating at a home Games felt like the right moment. But UK Athletics and the IAAF didn't agree. And on a day when he was wearing an Adidas polo displaying a logo for the 2015 World Relays event held in the Bahamas, it was clear that it wasn't only the kids he was infusing with aspirations.

'I'll never get to where Alan's been because I started off too late,' said Micky, as he reloaded his guns for the final races of the day. 'But if I can get to level four and get to a few national meetings ...' As Micky's mind wandered, Alan and Malcolm could be heard in the distance, managing the unenviable task of corralling six teams of four for the relays.

I asked Micky why there aren't more people gunning to be the next Alan Bell. Sure, it's an unpaid gig. But an international starter gets to travel the world in business class, stay in the best hotels, and has a chance to stand on the doorstep of sporting history. Then there are the associated perks that Alan has enjoyed, like being asked to start events like the Great North Run alongside people like Sir Bobby Robson, and TV appearances on shows like *Superstars* and *A League of Their Own*, where David Walliams tried to grab Alan's gun.

Micky thought it might have something to do with people staying fitter for longer, and competing rather than officiating. It's certainly a more palatable and less cynical theory than the one many of his fellow volunteers subscribed to; that young people are no longer willing to give up their time for free.

As the final relay concluded and the clock ticked on towards 5pm, I joined the queue of athletes and parents making their way to the car park. Behind me a handful of officials remained, collecting the hurdles and equipment to be placed into storage. Most of them had been here since 10am. I was reminded of one of the first things Alan told me when I asked him what it takes to do his job at the highest level. ‘You’ll have gathered that I’m a pretty verbose individual,’ he began. ‘My personality is gregarious, I like being with people. I love my sport. I’ve made absolutely no money from it at all. It probably cost me my first marriage, if the truth be known, in terms of living a separate life.’

As I said goodbye to the three starters, one of the 300m runners that Alan had entertained earlier walked past him and said thanks. ‘That’s the other nice thing,’ said Alan. ‘The thank yous.’

### **Blunting Bolt**

Two years after his stunning world record in the Olympiastadion, Usain Bolt was once again lining up in the 100m final of the World Athletics Championships. This time the venue was Daegu Stadium, built for the football World Cup in South Korea in 2002. On a sultry August evening, the Jamaican was facing an almost entirely different field to that which he destroyed in 2009. Other than Bolt, only one man, Daniel Bailey of Antigua and Barbuda, had returned from that historic night in Berlin. Actually, make that two. For Alan Bell was once again the man with the bang.

The false-start rule had again been tweaked. A year before the World Championships, the IAAF voted to remove any clemency for a race's first offender. It was felt that this privilege was being abused in an attempt to stifle fast-starting sprinters. Those slower out of the blocks could deliberately false-start and put the entire field under pressure. Now there would be no doubt and no margin for error. Anyone who false-started was out.

With the now obligatory pre-race theatre over, all eight finalists took to their blocks with minimal fuss. Daegu, like Berlin, was expectant. This city wanted its own page in history. A hush descended. Enter Alan, stage right. 'You might find this hard to believe,' said Alan, 'but I take no notice of who's in the race. That's irrelevant. You've got eight bodies, end of.'

Instead, Alan is in his own zone, deep in focus. 'I've got the best 30-second concentration span in the world. Outside that 30 seconds, I'm all over the place. But I think it's important to be able to switch on and switch off.' Only once he deems the time right does he summon the athletes. Contrary to what one might expect, given the pressures of television scheduling and the allocation of seven-minute slots for each 100m race, the intricate pauses between commands are for the starter to dictate in the moment. There is no standardised time between the word 'set' and the pulling of the trigger. It is an instinctive call based on the race, and the occasion.

'The real skill in my job is to wait until everybody is at the pinnacle of their set position. When you're happy that they've all had that opportunity to set and concentrate,

you pull the trigger. There can't be a prescribed time,' said Alan. 'The chemistry between the nine people involved – eight athletes and the person with the gun – is unique to that event. It has to be entirely based upon what I see, and the judgement of readiness based on my experience. At a major event, between saying "set" and pulling the trigger, I'm holding my breath. Because I'm praying I don't have to pull the other trigger.'

In Daegu, Alan's prayers went unheeded. The dreaded beep sounded in his headphones and he instantly fired his recall gun. Although he already knew who was at fault, he waited for the computer printout before confirming the reason for the crowd's anguish. It showed that the athlete in lane five had moved 0.104 seconds before the gun had even fired. It was as clear a false start as one could see at the highest level. And no one was more aware than the offending athlete himself, having already removed his vest and with his head in his hands. It was Bolt.

While the crowd squealed in disbelief, the media made hay. 'Within a millisecond there must have been 150 cameramen on the track looking to milk his embarrassment,' thundered Alan. 'I've got to know him quite well as a human being, and he's a resolute and determined character. But he's also a really decent guy, and he didn't deserve that. So I said to the Koreans to get him off the track and put him somewhere that a camera can't get to him. Let him have his remorse.'

Alan was then put under pressure from Korean TV to get the race back under way. 'I said no chance. There are seven people out there now, who think they can win a

gold medal. And I'm going to give them every chance to compose themselves again.' An unimpressed floor manager insisted that Alan recommence the race immediately. 'He went apeshit. He's in my face, and he's getting it in the ear from the director upstairs. So I turned to him and said, "Here, you start the race", and I handed him the guns. And of course, he just looked at me. And I said, "We wait."

Bolt's training partner and fellow Jamaican Yohan Blake was the ultimate beneficiary, becoming the youngest ever 100m world champion at 21 years old. But for Alan, the story didn't end there. As he did at the end of every day of competition, he had arranged to meet his wife Lesley in the VIP area before heading back to their hotel. Lesley is a level-three athletics official.

On this occasion, he sensed something wasn't quite right as soon as he arrived. 'I'm walking up to row Z and I see that Lesley's looking at me with a face like thunder. And I'm thinking, "She knows I had no choice, I had to disqualify the guy." And then I suddenly realise. She's sitting with Usain's mam and dad. She'd met them earlier in the week, and they were just sitting and chatting. I thought, "Oh my God."

As Alan made the tentative walk over, Mrs Bolt stood up to greet him. 'Usain got his mam's genes, believe me. I thought she was going to let rip at me. And you know, she was fantastic. All she said to me was, "He made a mistake." That put me at ease. I said, "I hope he can get it out of his system ready for the 200m." And she just looked at me and said, "He'll be ready." They were great with me.

He's obviously got a lot of that collectedness and stability from his family.'

Six days later, Alan's recall gun stayed silent for the 200m final. As the slowest runner out of the blocks, the false start in the 100m final had clearly had an effect on Bolt. But he powered around the bend as only he could and he comfortably took gold. 'I made a mistake but I came back to show the world that I'm still the best,' said a relieved world champion afterwards.

Alan admitted that disqualifying Bolt was the lowest moment of his starting career. 'Not because it was him, at all. But because I was having to disqualify an athlete in the final of the World Championships. It could have been any of them,' he said. 'But, like all of the people in that final, they'll have worked for 15 years just to be there, and it's sad that you have to apply the rule.'

I asked if, with an expectant crowd engulfing him, an anxious Korean production team on his shoulder, and the world's media having already written the script, there wasn't a small part of him tempted to let this generation's greatest athlete continue. He responded without a moment's hesitation. 'The circumstances were very difficult. But that was the easiest decision I've ever had to make.'