

Competition fuels two generations

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Both underclassmen, LeShon Collins and Cameron Burrell are pushing each other to be better sprinters. | Courtesy of UH Athletics

Stories like those of Leroy Burrell and Carl Lewis, two men with vastly different personalities who shared a special bond and rivalry, are rare in track and field.

Despite the fame these two men would reach, the fierce competition between Burrell, the former “world’s fastest human,” and Lewis started with a scandal rather than a challenge. Until the 1988 Seoul Summer

Olympics, Canadian 100-meter sprinter Ben Johnson had been Lewis' major competitor. In Seoul, Johnson made a grave mistake, one that would effectively end the sprinter's career.

"We went to the U.S.A. Juniors in 1988, and Ben was there, but he may not have even made the finals," Lewis said. "Ben was never really that good, but four years later he medaled. When he started running super-fast and talking a lot, we knew what he was doing."

"We tried to beat each other. There was never a time that I think I let Leroy win and vice versa. He changed the way I had to think and compete and forced me to challenge my career. I would have never been able to run 9.8 if Leroy had not come along." -Legendary sprinter Carl Lewis on his competition with head coach Leroy Burrell

Lewis said he saw his rivalry with Johnson as a way to build their brand, despite the potential pitfalls he saw.

"It was the USA versus Canada," he said. "I was the confident one, and he was shy. I knew it was a double-edged sword, though, that drugs could kill the sport."

Lewis said that the difference between the rivalry with Johnson and the rivalry with Burrell was that in the latter, it was all about business and friendship and that all their personal feelings were put aside. With Johnson, it was personal. The performance-enhancing drugs scandal that enveloped Johnson would effectively close the door on his career and the rivalry, but it opened the door to another.

"It was a great relationship," Lewis said. "Leroy and I just ran against each other. We tried to beat each other. There was never a time that I think I let Leroy win and vice versa. He changed the way I had to think and compete and forced me to challenge my career. I would have never been able to run 9.8 if Leroy had not come along."

Burrell would beat Lewis for the first time at the 1990 Goodwill Games and again at the 1991 World Track and Field championships in New York. In 1992, they would team together with the likes of Mike Marsh and Dennis Mitchell become the "fantastic four" and win gold at the Barcelona Olympics. But their history, however revered it is, is exactly that — history.

Twenty-three years later, as coaches, these titans of track and field have passed the blazing torches to two young men with frighteningly similar dispositions and who represent the next generation of budding superstars: Leshon Collins and Leroy's son Cameron Burrell.

Cameron is the No. 3 sprinter in the nation in terms of the 60-meter dash, and Collins is No. 6 in the 100-meter dash, but the closeness of their times, their recent honors as All-American athletes and performances during their collegiate careers are not the only things that show similarities to the elder Burrell and Lewis.

The Seattle Times in 1991 described Burrell as a "blue-collar sprinter of few but well-chosen words." Burrell, true to the statement made by the Seattle Times, deflects the notion of a rivalry and says that the same could be said about his son.

"Cameron's a really hard worker on the track, and truly a man of few words," Leroy said. "He's definitely about being the best sprinter he can be. There are similarities, but Carl and I were further along and at different stages when we met than when Leshon and Cameron met."

Cameron reaped the results of his work ethic at the NCAA Indoor Championships in Albuquerque, N.M.,

where he again broke the school record in the 60-meter dash.

However, Lewis said that if compared to one of the two, Collins would be the one closest to him in personality.

"I understood my talent, but I also understood the importance of the flash," Lewis said. "When I got to the stadium, I made sure they saw me and made sure that they knew I was there, because I was the one they paid to see. That's like Leshon."

Despite the presence of a rivalry, none of the four men accept the term. Each sees them as motivation for the other, and Collins' comments echo the sentiment of what Leroy and Lewis felt and how Cameron and Collins now feel.

"The coaches tell us that we're establishing a rivalry, but even though Cameron's my biggest competitor, it doesn't really feel like a rivalry," Collins said. "We work hard for each other. We want to make it together as opposed to him versus me."

The younger Burrell's comments fell nearly in step. He said he feeds off his determination, and that is his biggest motivation to be a better competitor.

"All we ever want to do is push each other to our highest limits," Cameron said. "We are teammates before we are rivals."

Though the state of track and field may be on the decline, Lewis believes the sport needs contrasting superstars like Cameron and Collins, just as it needed Burrell and himself nearly two decades earlier.

"I competed 17 years from a freshman to retirement," Lewis said. "In those 17 years, there were 25 Olympic and World Championship medals awarded to athletes that came out of the UH track and field program. No other school has had 10 in the 17 years since. Track needs a great story, something for people to follow. Cameron and Leshon aren't just a breath of fresh air to the sport. Track is suffocating right now — it's on oxygen."

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