

Blinding Speed of the Games

By [John Leicester](#)

August 05, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

In less time than it took you to read the first 16 words of this comment, four Olympians' hearts were crushed. Two others were filled with joy. Losers, winners, just like that. Gallons of sweat, liters of tears, hours upon hours upon hours of grind over years of slog and training that, in "a hundredth of a second, a blink of an eye," were either tossed away or rewarded.

Victoria Pendleton choked out those words. For Britons, the Olympic hosts, she is one of the faces of their games. Feisty, fast, telegenic. Britain expected great things of her. She expected great things of herself.

But in her sport, track cycling, the line between winning and losing is razor-thin, a matter not of centimeters and seconds but of millimeters and milliseconds. It is as much a science as it is a sport. To be faster, always faster, no detail is too minute.

To keep their muscular thighs warm so they would be in optimum shape to produce speed, Pendleton and her teammate, Jessica Varnish, wore battery-powered heated pants before they raced, a human equivalent of the heat blankets used to warm tires in Formula One. Their bikes

are sleek to cut through the air. Their helmets are, too, built with honeycombed aluminum to make them light and tough.

And the Olympic Velodrome, a new arena as wondrous as the athletes who compete in it, is kept tropically warm, because warm air is less dense than cold air and so slightly easier to slice through on an aerodynamic bike. That, too, shaves milliseconds off races. And because of all this attention to detail, chances seemed good that world records would fall on the track, made of Siberian pine. And they did.

Pendleton and Varnish broke one with their very first ride Thursday night. Three minutes later, the Chinese team of Gong Jinjie and Guo Shuang then broke it again, leaving us wondering whether that was itself a world record for the shortest time that a world record has lasted. In all, the crowd of 6,000 saw "world record" flash up on giant screens six times over the evening. But one thing sports scientists, engineers and coaches cannot guard against is human error.

Pendleton and Varnish committed the track cycling equivalent of dropping the baton in a relay race. So did the Chinese duo. In the team sprint, a new Olympic event, riders set off together, one behind the other. After one lap of the 250-meter track, the lead rider peels away and the second rider then completes a second lap to the finish.

If you're in the crowd and go to the bathroom or leave to buy a drink, the race is over before you have time to squeeze out of your row of seating. The new world record the Chinese set in the women's team sprint over two laps is 32.422 seconds.

There has been much talk at these games about whether the British team would get an advantage from performing before roaring home crowds. The royal princes, William and Harry, and William's wife, Kate, plus Prime Minister David Cameron were in the house, and Princess Anne was on hand later to present medals to the men.

But the way Pendleton described it, it was more stressful than helpful. "We were probably a bit too overwhelmed by the whole thing, excited about the ride and just a bit too eager." And so out they went, disqualified. Thanks, goodbye.

In 116 years of Olympic history, there have been oceans of pain and mountains of heartbreak. But this, because of the blinding speed of it, seemed particularly cruel. And perhaps even crueler for the Chinese, Gong and Guo. Because something similar happened to them in the gold medal race. Having crossed the line first, they were already celebrating and answering reporters' questions all-smiles when word started to filter through that their changeover had been flawed, too.

A couple of hours later, having given blood and urine to drug testers, Gong was still struggling to digest how the gold they thought was theirs ended up draped around the necks of Germans Kristina Vogel and Miriam Welte, with the Chinese bumped to silver. After they were disqualified, Welte said she went over to commiserate, telling the Chinese: "I feel really sorry for you because this wasn't the way we wanted to win."

But they took it anyway. "You can't have more luck than we've had today," she said. Luck. How bizarre that seemed in a sport that fixates so intensely on minutiae. But also how human.

"That's what sport is about, human error, making mistakes," said Anna Meares, the Australian bronze medalist with Kaarle McCulloch. "The less of them that you make sometimes is what makes the difference."

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