



Andre De Grasse celebrates after winning the men’s 200-meter at the International Mohammed VI track and field meeting in Rabat, Morocco on July 16.

De Grasse drives renewed interest in track and field

Lori EWING *The Canadian Press*

At the Canadian track and field championships in Ottawa in early July, star sprinter Andre De Grasse had just finished a race, and fans were frantic for auto-graphs.

One particularly opportunistic dad picked up his young daughter and boosted her by the behind up and over the eight-foot chain-link fence that stood between the fans and the warm-down area to get to De Grasse.

“We had security nicely put her back over the fence... You can’t throw your children onto the competition area,” Mathieu Gentes, Athletics Canada’s chief operating officer, said with a laugh.

“People just lose their minds (over De Grasse). It’s amazing.”

Whether it’s the almost whimsical way in which he raced at the Rio Olympics – who smiles while roaring down the track on the sport’s biggest stage? – his unabashed admission that he wanted to dethrone Usain Bolt, or his meteoric rags to riches rise, the 22-year-old from Markham, Ont., has Canadians paying attention to track and field.

Athletics Canada is putting the final touches on a partnership that will make De Grasse an ambassador of the sport, much like rapper Drake’s role with the Toronto Raptors.

“Andre has absolutely transcended track,” Gentes said. “He’s got an impact that I have never seen a track athlete have on kids and adults.”

The young Canadian will be in the spotlight starting Friday at London Olympic Stadium, when he races Bolt for the final time at the world championships. The Jamaican superstar and 11-time world champion plans to retire afterward.

Tickets are scarce, with a record-smashing 660,000 already sold.

The pressure will undoubtedly hang thick in the air. The roar from the crowd is sure to be deafening. But De Grasse is at his best when the lights are brightest, proving he was unflappable in winning a silver and two bronze at the Rio Olympics. His sideways grin at Bolt in the 200 semifinals will go down as one of the Games’ most memorable moments.

“That’s the intangible that a champion does have,” said Doug Clement.

The longtime meet director credits De Grasse with selling out his Harry Jerome Track Classic in June a month in advance.

“And they were there three hours before he ran lining up just to get in to get a good seat because they weren’t reserved. And it



Andre De Grasse and Usain Bolt share a laugh before they cross the finish line as they set the two fastest times in the 200-metre semifinals at the Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Aug. 17, 2016.

was jammed,” Clement said.

The De Grasse effect was seen at the national championships that drew the biggest crowds in the event’s history. People arrived early, packing the grandstand despite pouring rain. Athletics Canada conducted a spectator survey that suggested fans would have happily paid more for reserved seating near the finish line.

“We had people that were camping out two to three hours before he ran so that they had their spot,” Gentes said. “People wrote (on the survey) ‘Charge me more, I don’t care. We just want to have our spot.’

“And we had a lot of people comment that this was their first track and field experience. And guess who pulled them in?”

After racing to bronze in the 100 at the 2015 world championships, De Grasse turned pro, signing deal with Puma worth US\$11.25 million plus bonuses, the richest first endorsement deal ever for a track athlete.

He also has sponsorship deals with Price-waterhouseCoopers, Pizza Pizza and Gatorade. He shares a Gatorade billboard several storeys tall in Toronto’s Yonge-Dundas Square with Raptors all-star DeMar DeRozan, Blue Jays pitcher Roberto Osuna and women’s hockey star Marie-Philip Poulin.

In their 2017 list of The World’s 50 Most Marketable athletes, SportPro Media magazine slotted De Grasse in at No. 23, two spots ahead of Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton, and 13 spots better than enigmatic NBA star Russell Westbrook.

Canadian tennis players Milos Raonic and Eugenie Bouchard occupied Nos. 31 and 47, respectively. Canadian golfer Brooke Henderson was 32nd. Edmonton Oilers star Connor McDavid, at 15, was the only Canadian ahead of DeGrasse.

Boxer Anthony Joshua and NBA star Steph Curry were Nos. 1 and 2.

He’s arguably Canada’s biggest track and field star since Donovan Bailey. Or biggest, period.

“I was obviously around when Donovan was running too, and I would say the appeal that Donovan had wasn’t anywhere near the appeal that Andre has,” said De Grasse’s coach Stuart McMillan. “Especially with kids. Maybe that was because Donovan was a little bit older, in 1996 (when Bailey won gold at the Atlanta Olympics) he was already 28.”

His appeal is pretty simple, McMillan said of De Grasse. Kids can relate to him.

“Andre is so young, and the millennial generation, there’s very little difference

between a 22-year-old and a 15-year-old.

It obviously doesn’t hurt that he’s a good-looking guy who’s into stuff that your typical 15-year-old is into, whether it’s music or video games. The typical kid couldn’t relate to Donovan because he was driving a Porsche and had a job before he ran track.

“Andre’s story is this kid out of nowhere, walks onto the track in his basketball shorts, runs fast and the next day he’s famous.”

Brian Levine, who is De Grasse’s brand manager with Toronto-based Envision Sports & Entertainment, said the young sprinter is an easy sell. Where most Olympic athletes say yes to more sponsorship offers than they turn down, “with Andre it’s obviously the opposite,” Levine said.

They’ve had to say no a lot, to everything from churches, to countless charitable organizations, to companies looking for a one-off product endorsement on De Grasse’s Instagram account, which has 190,000 followers.

In an event that features enormous, muscle-bound athletes, De Grasse is anything but. A slender five foot eight, he’s a greyhound among Mack trucks. When the camera pans the sprinters behind their blocks, De Grasse’s grin stands out from the sinister glares. It’s all part of his charm, Levine said.

“You typically see sprinters having these really tough faces, really aggressive, almost like boxers. And Andre is not like that at all. He’s typically smiling and laughing. He’s competitive, but he’s going to have fun while he’s being competitive. And that motto that he has ‘It’s nothing personal,’ he tries to live by that,” he said.

“It’s also his relative size. He just physically looks sort of like the underdog, and you want to root for the underdog, and what better than a friendly-looking underdog, right?”

De Grasse wants to be known for more than his sprints down the track, and his management team makes a point of fostering his other passions, such as fashion. The photogenic athlete has modelled for Harry Rosen, and, looking at home wearing Hugo Boss, graced the cover of “DTK Men” magazine.

“Basketball players (think: Westbrook, Dwyane Wade, Chris Paul) have been phenomenal at this,” Levine said.

“And I don’t think that’s coincidental, Andre grew up as an aspiring basketball player who had dreams of playing in the NBA, so I think he’s really embraced the stardom in a healthy way because he sort of sees ‘Hey one second, I can have a piece of this too, no different than some of these guys, who are making it to the NBA.’”

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