

Derek Drouin soars above field in Rio to win high jump gold medal

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By Israel Fehr

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RIO DE JANEIRO – Derek Drouin paced. Short, efficient steps – not the long, purposeful strides that propel him to soar effortlessly over the high jump bar – and watched Tuesday night as one jump stood behind him and an Olympic gold medal.

Drouin had cleared 2.38 metres on his first attempt to take the lead. Ukraine's Bohdan Bondarenko missed his first two attempts going for 2.38, but instead of trying to tie Drouin to stay in the hunt for the gold Bondarenko asked for the bar to be raised.

One shot at 2.40. Bondarenko jumped. The bar rattled and fell to the floor.

Drouin put his hands over his head in disbelief. The gold was his. But there was still an opportunity to chase more glory.

The Olympic record for the high jump is 2.39 metres. So keep that bar at 2.40, because why not? The Summer Olympics are every four years and Drouin was feeling good.

Drouin clipped the bar on his attempt, but the smile splashed across his face as he landed on the mat said it all.

"I knew it was going to be tough. I really just wanted to give it a shot," said Drouin. "I had a flood of emotions and I tried to get rid of it really quickly. It didn't work out the way that I wanted. It would have been an awesome moment."

It was the only jump he didn't successfully execute – a perfect four-for-four in qualifying and six-for-six in the final – at these Games. There was only room for so much history on this night.

Second Canadian man to win Olympic gold in the high jump. First Canadian to win back-to-back medals in track and

field since 1932. First Canadian to win gold in track and field since Donovan Bailey in 1996.

"You're going to make me cry because I wasn't (aware of the historical context)," said Drouin's coach Jeff Huntoon "I'm superstitious as hell, so there is no way I'd be looking at any of that kind of stuff. That's amazing."

Canada's lone athletics medallist in London – Drouin shared the bronze with two others that cleared 2.29 metres. His triumph at the 2015 World Championships in Beijing came at 2.34. The field in Rio was more competitive. Ten of the 15 finalists made it through at 2.29 this time around and there were six left after jumping at 2.33. And then three remained after 2.36. Drouin was the only one to clear 2.38, with Bodarenko taking bronze and Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim the silver.

Between attempts Drouin walks around the track, constantly kicking his left leg up, raising his left arm to the sky, and taking deep breaths. Right before beginning his run up he slaps himself in the face rather forcefully, an adrenaline boost for a 26-year-old who has no problem maintaining his composure during the meet.

"He talks about being able to zone everything out," said Huntoon. "He says he doesn't see anything else and that doesn't surprise me at all. He's focused on what he's going to do, he goes through the process, and that's why he looks like he does.:"

"I think that's always been one of my strengths. I thrive in a situation like this where there's a lot going on and I can just focus on the bar, essentially," added Drouin. "I certainly was calm. I wouldn't say that I feel a lot of pressure, I do a pretty good job of dealing with it, but there's obviously still some. The last couple days I've had realizations where I'm like 'I don't feel nervous at all. I'm not anxious at all. I am so excited to get out there,' because I was confident in my preparation and because I just love the Olympics."

Drouin's medal gives Canada three in track and field at these Games, but the historic circumstances surrounding his will ensure that it stands out for a very long time.

"I still kind of feel like I'm in competition mode. I think it's going to take a little while to sink in. At least until tomorrow night, when they give us the medals," said Drouin.

He'll want to open his ears soak in the atmosphere then, as he stands on top of the podium listening to his country's national anthem The sharp focus with his eyes will be useful, too. But instead of staring at the high jump bar, he'll be seeing a gold medal around his neck. That will be an awesome moment.

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