

The Moment

Bob Beamon's Epic Jump and the Photograph that Changed Two Lives

By David Davis

*Bob Beamon
8.90m*



An historic date:
18th October 1968,
Mexico City, 15.45.
Defying gravity.
Beamon jumped
8.90 m.
Top: Bob Beamon's
autograph.

Photo: Gettyimages/
Tony Duffy

The 1968 Mexico City Olympics were among the most controversial and volatile of the twentieth century. The first Games to be held in Latin America, they occurred against a backdrop of deep social unrest around the globe. Civil Rights rallies were roiling the United States even as the Vietnam War divided the nation against itself. In France, student protests led to a general strike that paralyzed the country, while the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to squash the "Prague Spring" reforms. Just ten days before the Opening Ceremony, government forces in Mexico City opened fire on a peaceful demonstration and killed at least 250 unarmed people (an attack known as the Tlatelolco Massacre).

The Olympic Movement was not immune to strife and calls for change. Athletes increasingly perceived the "amateur ideal" of the Olympic Games as outmoded, even as they watched corporate sponsors and TV networks profit from their skills without recompense. The introduction of drug-testing did little to slow the use

of performance-enhancing drugs among competitors. African countries threatened to boycott if South Africa was allowed to compete, and athletes and officials alike complained about the autocratic rule of IOC chief Avery Brundage.

Despite all of these distractions, the athletes managed as always to shine. The high attitude of the host city led to many world-record performances in track and field, and American high jumper Dick Fosbury demonstrated his new head-first, back-to-the-bar technique that earned him the gold medal and, not so incidentally, revolutionized the event. Gymnast Věra Čáslavská brought gold-medal glory to beleaguered Czechoslovakia, while African runners, from Kip Keino to Naftali Temu, showed off their budding prowess in running events.

Today, as the 1968 Olympic Games prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary, it's an appropriate time to look back at perhaps the great individual performance in Mexico City: Bob Beamon's astonishing long jump of 8.90 metres.

Not only did this mark obliterate the Olympic record of 8.12 metres, set by US teammate Ralph Boston in 1960, but it blew well past the world record of 8.35 metres set by Igor Ter-Ovanesyan of the Soviet Union in Mexico City in 1967.

One reason why Beamon's record is so memorable even today, some 50 years later, is because of the famous photograph taken of Beamon at the climax of his leap. The picture was taken by Tony Duffy, an amateur photographer who was watching the event from the stands. Indeed, the story of how Duffy happened to snap one of the most memorable photographs in Olympic history – and how that moment forever changed his life – is almost as remarkable as Beamon's epochal leap.

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In October of 1968, several days before the long-jump competition took place at the Mexico City Olympic Games, Tony Duffy casually wandered into the Athletes' Village with nothing more than his bravado.

The area was strictly off-limits for those without proper credentials, of course. Duffy was not an athlete, nor did he hold press credentials. He was an accountant from London who happened to be spending his vacation at the Olympics. But he was friends with one of the competitors from Great Britain and, in an era of lax security, managed to sneak into the Village without much effort.

That afternoon, Duffy found himself relaxing poolside inside the Athletes' Village with British long jumper Mary Rand. As they chatted, Lynn Davies and Ralph Boston approached Rand and began handicapping the men's long jump competition. It was then and there that Duffy first heard the name of the man who would alter the trajectory of his life.

Duffy paid careful attention to the conversation because he knew that the two men were worth listening to. Davies was the defending Olympic champ in the event, having jumped 8.07 metres to win at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The veteran Boston was the 1960 gold medallist and the 1964 silver medallist; he was the man who surpassed Jesse Owens's long-jump mark that had stood for 25 years. Boston was also the current co-holder of the world record, along with his rival from the Soviet Union, Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, at 8.35.

The conversation came around to Bob Beamon, Boston's precocious American teammate, "a slash of a man, 1.91 metre, 73.5 kg," according to *Sports Illustrated* magazine. Boston knew that Davies liked to play psychological games with his opponents, and he had some advice for the Welshman about the long-limbed, long-necked 22-year-old Beamon: "Don't get him riled up because he's liable to jump out of the damn pit."

Duffy immediately filed away that tidbit. "Wow, this Beamon must be worth watching", he thought to himself.

Mexico City was an unsupervised playground

Tony Duffy was born in London just before Second World War. He spent most of his youth there, except for when he and many other children were transported to the countryside for safety when Germany bombed the city during the war. He went on to study law at the University of Manchester before becoming an accountant. He joined a large international firm and worked in the taxation department. He wanted a lot more.

Living in London during the Swinging Sixties, Duffy grew to hate the "staid, stilted, conservative accountancy environment where you're expected to be sober and careful and prudent and all that stuff," he said in a broad accent that Mike Myers might have studied for Austin Powers. "It was totally the opposite of what my personality was."

He turned to photography as a hobby. He bought an old Voigtländer camera "mainly for holidays. I was never really into photography as a medium. It was a method of taking pictures of my trips and various girlfriends I had. That was about it."

Patricia Nutting, an 80-metre hurdler who was talented enough to represent Great Britain in three Olympics, was one of those girlfriends. "She'd say, 'Look, I'm competing on Saturday. Why don't you come along?'" Duffy remembered. "I started taking pictures of her in action out of something to do, rather than just sit and watch."

His photos turned out quite well, especially the action shots, and Nutting encouraged him to send them to a local track-and-field magazine. When they used one, sent him a small check, and published his name on the credit, he was encouraged. "Damn, this can't be bad," he said. "That's what gave me the first inkling of an alternative route."

He travelled to local meets to shoot pictures, even after he and Nutting split up. He upgraded his camera to a Nikkormat, the consumer version of a Nikon, not the sort of equipment a professional would use. He had to manually advance the film each and every time he took a picture.

But he now had the bug even if he couldn't be bothered to take a photography class. In the fall of 1968, Duffy decided to combine his love of sport with his fledgling hobby and attend the Olympics in Mexico City. He saved money and signed up for a package tour organised by a Welsh outfit. He purchased a 300 mm f/4.5 lens for the occasion.

Duffy discovered athletic nirvana in Mexico, thrilling to the dramatic performances that were occurring daily inside Estadio Olimpico Universitario. Kip Keino's victory in the 1500 metres marked another milestone in Africa's dominance of distance running, Dick Fosbury unveiled a revolutionary approach to the high jump,

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and Jim Hines clocked a 9.95 in the 100 metres. Their heroics were overshadowed by the National Anthem protest registered by American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos after their one-three finish in the 200 metres.

Operating without media credentials, Duffy found that in the relatively carefree days before the terrorist attack at the 1972 Munich Games, Mexico City was an unsupervised playground. It was Nutting, in fact, who lent Duffy her tracksuit top so that he could sneak into the Athletes' Village with little problem. Duffy recalled waving his camera at the security guards as he walked alongside actual competitors.

Qualified with the last attempt

While Bob Beamon's competitors knew his talent, they had no idea how much he had overcome to reach Mexico City. Beamon's mother died before his first birthday, and he never knew his biological father. He was raised by his step-father's mother in Jamaica, Queens, where he joined a gang and dealt drugs as a teen before being sentenced to one of the dreaded "600" reform schools in New York, operated by the Bureau for the Education of Socially Maladjusted Children.

Beamon rescued himself when youth coaches helped him realize his nascent athletic talent. By 1964, he ranked among the top high-school jumpers in the USA, right up there with Bobby Bonds, the future Major League Baseball star (and father of Barry Bonds). Beamon and fellow New Yorker John Carlos met and competed for the Pioneer track club before Beamon went off to college in Texas. Just before the 1968 Olympics, while he was still a student at UTEP, he was suspended for boycotting a meet against BYU in protest over what he considered to be racist policies of the Mormon Church.

Unlike Ralph Boston, an elder statesman who was technically skilled, Beamon was not a scientific jumper. But he had sprinter's speed, which Carlos helped him harness and hone, and he caught fire in the months preceding the Olympics. He registered 20 victories in 21 meets in 1968, and uncorked a personal best of 8.39 metres at the US Olympic Trials. (It didn't count as a world record because it was wind-aided.)

With Beamon joining Boston, Davies, and Ter-Ovanesyan in Mexico City, legendary sportswriter Dick Schaap billed the competition "as a battle among four of the half-dozen greatest long jumpers in history".

On the morning of 17th October, one day after Smith and Carlos raised their black-gloved fists from the podium after running the 200 metres, the long-jump field gathered for the first round of the competition. Each athlete had three jumps to surpass the qualifying distance of 7.65 metres to reach the finals. Boston, Davies, and Ter-Ovanesyan did so, as did Charles Mays, the third American in the field. Beamon fouled badly on his first two jumps.

Boston played the role of mentor and advised Beamon to take off well short of the board to ensure a clean if unspectacular jump. Beamon did so, leaping 8.19 on his last attempt to qualify for the finals the next day.

That night, Beamon later admitted, he relaxed with some tequila and committed the "cardinal sin" of having sex with his girlfriend. "All I could think of were words that started with 'D' – deplete, drain, dissipate, distract, da dadadum!", he noted in his memoir, *The Man Who Could Fly*. "'You have just left your gold medal on the sheets', I told myself."

He and the other 16 long-jump finalists reconvened the next afternoon, 18th October. That day, Duffy had tickets in the nosebleed section of the stadium along with the other members of his tour-group. The long jump was the first event on the afternoon programme, and as the athletes began their warm-up routines, Duffy noticed that the stadium was slow to fill. Vast number of seats were left unoccupied, perhaps because of darkened skies that threatened rain squalls.

Seeing that there were plenty of empty seats next to the track, Duffy thought to himself, "You know what? I bet I can get in there." With the Nikkormat dangling from his neck, Duffy began to hustle his way closer to the action. He waved and blustered past the Mexican students who were serving as security guards.

"The students were there to have a good time", Duffy said. "I bullshitted and blarneyed my way through by smiling a lot and patting them on the back and fiddling around with credentials I didn't have. I just kept on walking until I made it to the front row of the seating."

Sports scientists have studied this sequence of pictures many times to find out Beamon's secret. Their conclusions were that several optimal conditions coincided. The approach speed of 10.7 m/s was faster than anything previously seen as was the take-off angle of 24 degrees. The altitude of Mexico City and a following wind of 2.0 m/s also helped but ultimately it was down to the ability of the athlete.

Photo: Archiv Volker Kluge



With the runway for the long jump placed outside of the track oval, Duffy was perfectly positioned to get a head-on shot of the jumpers as they leaped toward him. And, with most of the media focused on the 400-metre finals that was scheduled to begin immediately after the start of the long jump, he was practically the only photographer stationed near the pit. He estimates that he was just 15 metre away.

The competition began shortly after 3:30 p.m. The first three men fouled. The fourth jumper was Beamon, the young American that Duffy had heard about after he'd snuck into the Athletes' Village. As Beamon readied for his first attempt, Duffy stood and aimed his Nikkormat over the low railing.

In the thin air of Mexico City (elevation: 2248 metres), conditions were "synchronistically ripe" for Beamon, according to Duffy. The temperature was 23 degrees. The rain was holding off. The wind speed on the track measured 2.0 metres per second – the maximum allowable by the rules for setting official records.

Beamon stood motionless on the runway, his close-cropped hair parted neatly on the left side of his head. He stared at the pit, rocked briefly to gather himself, and then took off, his impossibly long legs advancing toward the board. His last thought, he said later, was, "Don't foul".

Nineteen strides later, or about 40 metres, he planted his right foot squarely on the board and flew skyward. It appeared that he was running in mid-air. He hovered as high as 1.80 metres above the sand, estimated Jesse Owens, who was watching the jumpers through binoculars.

"He took off running, man, and when he hit the board he just kept climbing," John Carlos told me.

As gravity took over, Beamon swung his arms backwards and outside his legs for one last thrust. His white Adidas spikes made landing and disappeared in a cloud of brown sand, with his knees and ankles taking the brunt of the jarring impact that folded his body into itself. His butt momentarily brushed the sand. The sequence took all of about six breathtaking seconds.

Beamon hopped forward, using his momentum to propel himself onto the green grass beyond the pit. He glanced back to see if he had fouled, then turned onto

the straightaway of the track, shaking out his limbs while jogging past the officials in red blazers who were staring at him in wonderment.

He took another peek at the mark, as it to implant the moment forever, before loping toward the starting-point. He was practically dancing by the time he reached Boston and Mays. They greeted him with low-fives before Beamon stepped across the runway and faced down Ter-Ovanesyan and the Soviet contingent, swathed in red jerseys, their jaws agape.

"It looks like a marvelous jump," was the reaction from the ABC-TV announcer, which might be the grandest understatement in Olympic broadcast annals.

Olympic officials had installed an electronic measuring device that ran on a rail alongside the pit. The judges moved the optical sight to the point where Beamon landed – out, further, out some more – until it fell off the far end of the rail. They hurried off to find a measuring tape.

Some 20 minutes passed as the officials checked and double-checked the distance. Finally, three numbers were posted on the scoreboard: 8.90.

It was the distance of the jump in metres. Beamon did not know what that translated into feet and inches. Boston informed him it was beyond 29 feet – and Beamon collapsed onto the track.

He had obliterated the world record by almost two feet, soaring past the previous best of $27-4\frac{3}{4}$, *past 28 feet*, to $29-2\frac{1}{2}$. The record lasted for 23 years. It remains, arguably, the greatest individual feat of the modern Olympics.

"My mind was set for 27 feet or 27.5 feet", Beamon later told reporter Ron Reid of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "But 29 feet! Who was jumping on the moon in 1968? I was in the Twilight Zone, between time and space. I didn't believe I had jumped that far."

No one else could either. Then the rains returned.

"Compared to that jump, the rest of us are children," said a shaken Ter-Ovanesyan, who jumped 8.12 metre to finish fourth.

"I can't go on after that," said Davies, who managed 7.94 to place ninth.

Beamon took one more of the permissible six jumps (8.04) before retiring from the competition. East German Klaus Beer became the answer to a trivia question by



Klaus Beer was not intimidated by Beamon's 8.90 m. (right at the medal ceremony). The East German recorded 8.19 m on his second jump to make sure of silver. Far left: Ralph Boston's bronze completed a set of medals of each colour at his third Games. He had previously won gold and silver.

Photo: picture-alliance



finishing second (8.19), with the veteran Boston regaining enough composure to take third (8.16).

Two days after Smith and Carlos startled the world with their podium protest, Beamon raised eyebrows when he accepted the gold medal with his warm-up pants tucked inside a pair of black socks that stretched to his calves.

The perfect shot of the perfect jump

Tony Duffy had snapped exactly one frame of Beamon's jump. He recalls seeing "the whites of his eyes" as Beamon came toward him. Even after he became aware of what Beamon had done, Duffy carried around the roll of undeveloped film for a couple of days before taking it to get developed. "I had no conception what I'd got on the roll," he said.

He brought the film not to a professional processing lab, but to a one-hour place near his hotel that catered to tourists. Back in his room he unspooled the roll of 36 black-and-white negatives and held them up to the light.

He looked for the distinctive USA emblem, then matched the images to the athletes' bib numbers from the programme he'd been given at the stadium. The frame with Ralph Boston was fuzzy. The frame with Bob Beamon, wearing No. 254, was sharp.

Indeed, while the jump was nearly out of the pit, the photograph of the jump was out of this world. Duffy captured Beamon at his zenith: right arm extended over

his right leg, left arm by his waist as if readying to brace for landing. His mouth is formed into an "O" while the scoreboard frames his figure. He appears to be leaping over one background judge and, simultaneously, jumping out of his white shorts (you can glimpse his jockstrap).

It was the perfect shot of the perfect jump.

After Duffy returned to England, he sent the Beamon photo and others he took at the Olympics to a local magazine called *Amateur Photographer*. The Beamon shot was first published in a double-truck spread in the 4th December 1968, issue of the magazine, alongside a picture of British long jumper Maureen Barton, under the headline "Mexican Ballet".

The reaction in Europe, where track and field is venerated, was profound: Duffy the amateur had scooped the pros. And, even though other photographers had snapped pictures of the moment, none managed to catch Beamon at peak height and head-on. (*Sports Illustrated* used a color picture of Beamon on his way up that was taken by veteran photojournalist John Dominis.)

Duffy's photo was so good, and had so little competition, that naysayers insisted the image must have been of Beamon's second jump. Said Duffy: "When that happened I thought, 'Well, damn, how am I going to prove this?'"

When Duffy compared his picture with images of Beamon's second jump, he noticed that Beamon had donned black socks for the latter attempt. That evidence clinched it.

"I got the shot, but I had no idea what it meant", Duffy said. "It took another six months before the light gradually began to dawn on me that I had got something special."

The Jump was soon reproduced in magazines and posters around the world. The acclaim that Duffy received gave him the confidence he could be a fulltime shooter. He began trolling for work at the myriad publications that lined London's Fleet Street, all the while learning the craft through trial and error and by asking questions of veteran photographers.

He fell in with John Starr, an experienced hand who had the technical training and acumen that Duffy lacked. They rented out a little studio in the back of a friend's insurance business. "I'd do shoots indoors and say, 'John, how do we do this?' He'd say, 'Well, you need to strobe it.' I said, 'Can you do that?' He said, 'Yep.'"

For a while Duffy balanced his marriage, his accounting job, and shooting sports part-time, but photography eventually won out. Duffy divorced his wife and quit accountancy at the end of 1971. By the time the 1972 Munich Olympics rolled around, he was a fully accredited photojournalist. With Starr's support, he formed a photo agency called Allsport.

Duffy remembers shooting the pole vault in Munich next to an elderly woman. He thought to himself, "Boy, they're giving out credentials to anybody." Then he was informed that the woman was Leni Riefenstahl, the infamous Nazi propagandist and mastermind behind the coverage of the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

What Duffy remembers most about Munich is the feeling that he and *Allsport* had arrived. "We had deals with people for coverage and the access was really good," he said. "We were in business."

Duffy and Allsport continued to break ground after Munich. He worked with *The Times of London* on a photo spread that featured nude athletes. ("Sport and the Body" was, in retrospect, the precursor to *ESPN The Magazine's* "Body Issue".) With journalist Paul Wade, he published a book of photos of female athletes entitled *Winning Women: The Changing Image of Women in Sports*.

He travelled the world shooting the most important sporting events (including those behind the Iron Curtain). The "accidental" photographer won major awards and produced iconic images: a stunning shot of Austrian synchronized swimmer Alexandra Worisch; a riotous photo of the Twickenham Streaker, his privates covered by the fortuitous placement of a London bobby's helmet; Steve Prefontaine at the 1972 Olympics; and Bruce Jenner at the 1976 Games.

Meanwhile, Allsport grew into an industry behemoth. The company hired top photographers, like Bob Martin, Simon Bruty, and Mike Powell, whose work rivaled the best that *Sports Illustrated* and other publications produced. They acquired other photo agencies and collections to expand their archives. In 1983, Duffy moved to the United States to start Allsport USA and to cover the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Tony Duffy used the moment

Duffy and Beamon crossed paths on several occasions, including on the 25th anniversary of Beamon's Bombshell, which also coincided with the 20th anniversary of the founding of Allsport. Each acknowledged the other's role in helping to create and document history.

But while Duffy used the moment to launch a new career, Beamon struggled at times to escape the spectre of his accomplishment. Injuries slowed him after Mexico. He never again jumped 8.90 or 8.54 or even 8.24 metres. He was drafted by the Phoenix Suns of the National Basketball Association, but did not ever play in the NBA.

"It's like, what do you do for an encore?" Duffy said. "There was no way he could better what he did in Mexico City."

Beamon graduated from Adelphi College and was the subject of a gem of a book, entitled *The Perfect Jump*, written by Dick Schaap in 1976. (It featured Duffy's photo



The champion and his chronicler: Bob Beamon and Tony Duffy 25 years after the "leap of the century".

Photo: Getty Images

on the cover). Now in his 70s, Beamon and his wife live in Las Vegas. He is enshrined in the US Olympic Hall of Fame and the National Track and Field Hall of Fame.

"It was great," he told Schaap of the jump, "but it was just something I did."

Years, then decades passed as challengers, including the great Carl Lewis, fell short of his record. Finally, in 1991 at the World Track and Field Championships in Tokyo, Mike Powell leaped 8.95 meters – 29-4½ – to surpass Beamon.

Tony Duffy happened to be sitting in the stands in Tokyo that evening. He noticed that the air in Tokyo felt "remarkably similar" to Mexico City in 1968, "with the intermittent rain holding off and the same atmospheric conditions. I wonder what sort of impact that had."

Duffy did not get the shot of Powell breaking Beamon's record; he had deferred his place on the track to an Allsport colleague, coincidentally named Mike Powell. "I knew he was going to nail the shot, and I knew his chances of getting it were a lot better than mine", Duffy said. "My eyes were shot in those days."

Duffy worked his last Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996, not long after he and Allsport split ways. He received a healthy compensation package from the company he founded, but that figure was dwarfed by the reported \$51.1 million "purchase consideration" that Getty Images paid to acquire Allsport and its archives in a transaction that was finalized at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. The deal included the rights to the Beamon photo.

For a while Duffy hoped to launch another sports photo agency, but he soon concluded that he was too old to build anew. He concentrated on shooting female athletes – "my personal *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue", he joked – before slipping into semi-retirement. He received US citizenship in 2000 and has written most of his memoirs.

Now 80, he lives in Southern California in an airy condominium on bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. When I asked him if the Beamon photo was the best picture he'd ever taken, he didn't hesitate.

"It was the luckiest one", he said, "and it was the most important one, but it certainly was not the best because no work went into it. He ran and jumped and I clicked the camera once." ■

In This Moment is an American heavy metal band from Los Angeles, California, formed by singer Maria Brink and guitarist Chris Howorth in 2005. They found drummer Jeff Fabb and started the band as Dying Star. Unhappy with their musical direction, they changed their name to In This Moment and gained two band members, guitarist Blake Bunzel and bassist Josh Newell. In 2005, bassist Newell left the band and was replaced by Pascual Romero, who was later replaced by Jesse Landry. See more of In This Moment on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of In This Moment on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created 9 March 2010. People. The official site of In This Moment. Get In This Moment updates including tour dates, videos, news and more. Welcome to In This Moment's mailing list. Customize your notifications for tour dates near your hometown, birthday wishes, or special discounts in our online store! Please fill out the correct information. Postal Code. First name.

