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BARCELONA, Spain (AP) _ Mike Powell knelt and prayed, his head pressed against the track. After what seemed like minutes _ actually about 15 seconds _ he got up and raced down the runway for his final jump of the night.

Carl Lewis, the greatest long jumper ever, could only watch.

``It was in his hands and the hands of the Father,`` he said.

This was not a battle of hands, though. It was the climax of a competition between the best pair of flying feet on the planet.

Powell, the world record-holder, soared through the muggy air and landed near the mark where Lewis had fallen to earth two hours earlier. That first jump by Lewis _ 28 feet, 5(inches _ had stood up all night as the leap to beat in the Olympics.

After landing in the soft sand, Powell again clutched his hands in prayer and walked nervously away from the pit, waiting for the scoreboard to post his distance.

Seconds later, he got the bad news: 28-4\, 1\ inches short of the gold medal that Lewis won for the third straight time Thursday night.

``I thought that last jump would be enough, but it wasn't,`` Powell said.

Said Lewis: ``I knew he had the capability to do it. I wasn't really sure until the last second.``

Inches, not seconds, decided the most hyped matchup of the Games _ Lewis vs. Powell, the man who ended Lewis' 10-year, 65-meet long jump winning streak with a world-record 29-4(at the 1991 world championships in Tokyo.

The margin of victory didn't matter to Lewis, who added a seventh gold medal to his coveted collection _ four in Los Angeles, two in Seoul and now one in Barcelona, with the 400-meter relay still to come.

``This is my best gold medal of all,`` said Lewis, whose sinus infection at the U.S. trials cost him a spot in the 100-meter dash _ in which he holds the world record _ and the 200.

``I had a rough time earlier this summer and I was so down. To come back and win is so exciting.``

Although he has been slowed recently by a sore hamstring, Powell didn't make excuses.

``I just didn't have it today; I felt flat,`` he said. ``I finally got going at the end, but I came up just short.``

Joe Greene gave the United States its first medals sweep of the Games by taking the bronze at 27-4(. It was the fourth U.S. sweep of the long jump at the Olympics, the others coming in 1896, 1904 and 1988.

``I came here to win, but I'll settle for the bronze medal,`` Greene said. ``The greatest thing is being part of a U.S. sweep of all the medals.``

The greatest thing for Lewis or Powell would have been winning the gold and breaking the 30-foot barrier that seemed within reach after their dynamic duel at the world championships, where Lewis topped 29 feet three times and still lost.

But under the circumstances _ heat, headwinds and the pressure of an Olympic final _ Lewis gladly settled for a winning jump that was a quarter-inch shorter than his best qualifying leap the previous day.

``The wind was very difficult,`` Lewis said. ``It was hard to get my strides in.``

Powell, who wore a red, white and blue, zebra-patterned track suit, said he felt great during warmups. But it took him time to find his form once the competition began.

``I got going at the end, but it was a little too late,`` Powell said.

Lewis, accused of arrogance early in his career, was gracious after beating Powell for the 16th time in 18 meetings.

``It's not the end of anything. This is only the beginning,`` Lewis said. ``There'll be more great competitions in the future. I don't think I'll win every one, and I don't think Mike will win every one.``

The 31-year-old Lewis was noncommittal when asked whether he planned to continue competing until the 1996 Atlanta Games.

``I'm going to take it one meet at a time, one event at a time,`` he said.

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