Name: _____ Date: _____

The Race Too Close to Call

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 706 words

Runners lean toward a white line. Their chests push out. At the finish, it is too close to see. This was the men's 100-meter final at the Paris Olympics on August 4, 2024. All eight men ran in under ten seconds. World Athletics called it a first for one race with a fair wind.

The race began in a crouch. Behind the line, each runner had two metal plates called starting blocks. Feet pressed on the plates. Fingertips touched the track. The rules ask for this start in races up to 400 meters. The starter calls out two things. First comes "On your marks." Then comes "Set." Then everyone waits, very still.

Next comes the signal. In Paris, reports said it came from speakers behind each runner, not from a pistol. The blocks have sensors in them. A runner who pushes off less than a tenth of a second after the signal is flagged. That is a false start. All the runners are called back. The one who broke the rule is out.

Noah Lyles, an American, left his blocks 0.178 seconds after the signal. That was at the slow end of the eight starts in the final. They ranged from 0.108 to 0.178 seconds. A slow start does not end a race. Team USA reported that Lyles was in last place for the first 40 meters.

Then he began to move up through the field. In the last ten meters, Team USA reported, he and Kishane Thompson of Jamaica were dipping, and so were five others. A dip means leaning your chest toward the line. Seven runners were nearing it at almost the same moment.

Why lean? Because of a rule about the finish. Judges do not look at the head, the arms, the legs or the feet. They look at the torso, the middle of the body. A runner is placed by when the torso reaches the front edge of the line. A good dip can matter.

Sports Illustrated wrote that neither Lyles nor Thompson was sure right away who had won. Team USA called it a seven-way photo finish. The athletes had to wait for the official results. Only a camera at the line could sort out so close a finish.

The camera sat at the finish line. It did not take a normal photo. It looked at one thin line, the finish line itself, over and over. Its maker, Omega, said it could take up to 40,000 pictures every second. Each thin picture was placed next to the last one. Together they made one long image of the finish.

In that image, runners look stretched or squeezed, depending on how fast they move. The picture is not for looks. It is for reading. Judges slide a line across it. They see whose torso was first. The rules say two cameras should watch, one from each side. One view can back up the other.

The image put Lyles first. Team USA and others reported the times as 9.784 for Lyles and 9.789 for Thompson. World Athletics said the gap was five thousandths of a second. The official list shows both as 9.79. Times are rounded up to the next hundredth. The order came from the picture. Lyles had won the gold medal.

How big is five thousandths of a second? Lyles ran 100 meters in 9.784 seconds, about ten meters every second. By this book's math, five thousandths of a second is about five centimeters. At his top speed, it is about six. That is about two inches. Two inches of running decided who stood on the top step.

Team USA reported that no American had won this race since 2004. Four days later, on August 8, Lyles ran the 200 meters. He came in third, in 19.70, for a bronze medal. He had won bronze in the 200 at the Tokyo Olympics too, in 19.74.

The race was over in seconds. The blocks had watched for the first push. The torso rule had decided what counted as the finish. A camera had built one long picture from one thin line, and judges had read it. In the end, the race came down to that picture, and whose chest reached the line first.

Questions

1. What do the sensors in the starting blocks flag?

A. A tired runner
B. A wrong lane
C. An early push

2. Which part of a runner decides the finish?

A. The feet
B. The torso
C. The head

3. Why do runners lean forward at the line?

A. To get the torso over sooner
B. To rest their legs
C. To spot the camera

4. In the sentence "he and Kishane Thompson of Jamaica were dipping," what does dipping mean?

A. Falling down
B. Slowing down
C. Leaning forward

5. How far apart were the first two finishers, as World Athletics reported?

A. Five hundredths of a second

B. Five thousandths of a second

C. Five seconds

Words to know

torso: middle of body

sensors: detecting devices

dip: lean forward

signal: go sign

Answer key: The Race Too Close to Call

1. C. An early push
2. B. The torso
3. A. To get the torso over sooner
4. C. Leaning forward
5. B. Five thousandths of a second