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TRACK

Double Disaster for U.S.

Dropped Batons Hurt Relay Teams

By Lisa Dillman Los Angeles Times

BEIJING — Torri Edwards' screeching expression said it all on a night of rain-soaked relay calamity on the Olympic track Thursday.

Think about the famous Edvard Munch painting, "The Scream," and you get the general idea of back-to-back disasters unfolding for the U.S. relay teams within about 30 minutes. There was disqualification for the men in the preliminaries of the 400-meter relay, followed by the same for the women, a huge dose of Olympic-size ignominy.

This wasn't a whisper to a scream. It was a scream to a scream at the Bird's Nest.

And, on top of it all, the botched exchange came at the same juncture for both relays, on the last handoff. The men's snafu occurred on the Darvis Patton to Tyson Gay exchange, and the women stumbled when there was a drop between Edwards and Lauryn Williams because Williams couldn't close her hand around the baton.

Who wouldn't feel for Williams? Four years ago, there was a blown handoff between Marion Jones and Williams at the Olympics in Athens in the same event. Williams' miscue there came when she ran out of the zone on the exchange.

"I don't know how — the same pass, the same situation," said Mechelle Lewis, who ran the second leg. "A big, huge unfortunate coincidence. But it happened.

"... She'll give you a better idea of what she's going through. But I'm pretty sure, two games in a row with a bad pass, I wouldn't be so happy if I was her."

Said Williams: "Maybe someone has a voodoo doll of me."

If so, then that voodoo doll was making the rounds for Team USA. And it could be argued that the male equivalent was the star-crossed Gay, who will leave Beijing emptyhanded, an apt metaphor for the relay.

He said when he reached back to grab the baton from Patton, "there was nothing." It also appeared Gay almost started to move too slowly in taking the exchange.

Gay and Patton may not have connected on the track with their exchange, but they were in lock-step in the mixed zone, both attempting to take the blame.

"I'm a veteran. I've never dropped a stick in my life," Gay said. "It's kind of the way things have been going for me this meet. I take full blame for it. I kind of let them down."

Patton disagreed.

"It's my job to make sure he had it secure," Patton said. "I thought he had it secure, so I take the blame for this."

Textbook exchanges were few and far between on Thursday night with DQs littering both fields. There was one other high-profile victim on the men's side, defending gold medalist Britain, which was disqualified after blowing its final relay exchange.

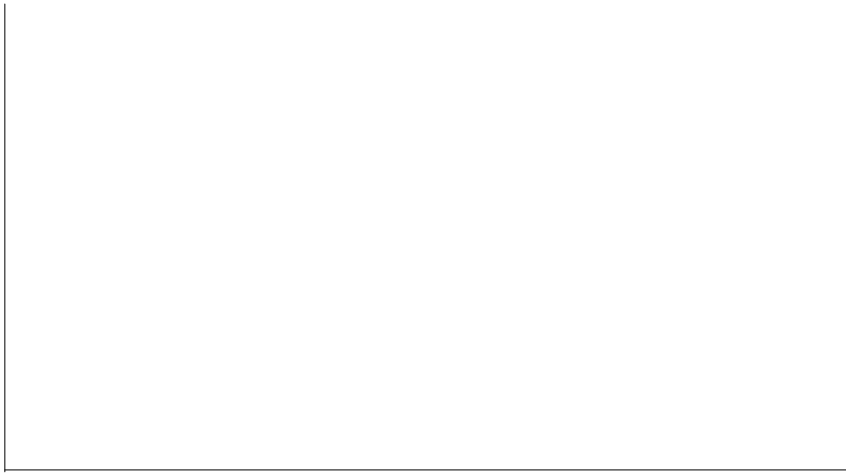
The rain? Certainly the slippery wet conditions didn't help. Or the gremlins of the Bird's Nest? Yes, this night was for the birds.

"I'm telling people the stick had a mind of its own," Williams said. "It wasn't me. It wasn't Torri. It was electronic."



NATACHA PISARENKO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS USA's Darvis Patton, second from right, and Tyson Gay drop the baton in the men's 400-meter relay. Gay says, "I've never dropped a stick in my life."





NATACHA PISARENKO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Torri Edwards of the U.S. is consoled by Mechelle Lewis.