

For a few seconds in Beijing last summer, long-jumper Dan Bramble thought he had leapt into the big time.

The Team GB rookie's approach to his final qualifying jump at the World Championships in the Bird's Nest seemed relaxed and smooth. As he hit the sand the competitive instinct told him, "It's big, I'm in – I've made top 12."

Only walking back towards the board in anticipation of confirmation he would contest the final did he see the dreaded red flag, as unexpected as it was deflating.

Close inspection of the plasticine showed a mark no more than 2mm long – the width of a household match or less than your average size flea.

So while team-mate Greg Rutherford completed the clean sweep of Olympic, Commonwealth, European and World titles, the man aspiring to his mantle was left in the shadows.

Even in a sport where at one end of a standard ruler you are an also-ran and the other you are world class, this was a small margin with bitter consequences.

"I'd attacked that last jump and everything felt right, so to see the flag and then the plasticine killed me," he reflected.

"The fast runway caught a lot of people out and the plasticine was really high up, so even if you didn't touch it when you hit the board, when you rolled off you were likely to make a dent.

"It was probably the smallest foul I've ever done, but that's the sport."

"Last year was good, but I don't want to be one of those one-hit wonders who jumps far one year and then disappears the next, never to produce it those distances again"

Missed opportunity or not, Bramble's presence in China was the latest step forward for a man who labels himself "a late bloomer" for whom long jump wasn't his first sporting love.

The football-mad Ruislip youngster's capacity for spring was first spotted aged nine by his Taekwondo teacher, who noted he bounced so far up on to the mat prior to competing he almost came off the other side.

The sight of Michael Johnson at the 2000 Olympics made athletics seem "cool", but even then javelin and 100m preceded attempts at long jumping.

He recalls his first proper competition in the colours of Ealing Southall & Middlesex was anything but "proper".

"I knew I had to run and jump, but I didn't know from where, so it was 'There's the pit, run towards it, jump and stick your legs out when you land'," he admits.

From such rustic beginnings, Bramble's first coach introduced him to plyometrics, something else that didn't start well. "I did one big bound and collapsed because I had no strength," the 25-year-old laughs.

Athletics won out in the battle for his sporting affections and there were light-bulb moments, like qualifying for the English Schools one year with his last jump, but he pulled up no trees as a junior. And when in 2011 he appeared to have plateaued in terms of performance he contemplated walking away from the sport, "getting a real job and being a normal person".

Those plans were shelved, but it took a serious chat with then coach Larry Achike prior to London 2012 to produce a real U-turn in Bramble's approach.

"People had been talking about me saying I was going to be the next big thing, but I'd never really fulfilled that," he says. "I was going out with friends and just being social, so I did not really have that drive or determination to be an athlete. I was a bit too relaxed, thinking, 'It's just long jump'.

"I was kicking myself after Larry's chat because the Olympics was the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Seeing GB athletes get gold, gold, gold on Super Saturday clicked a switch and it was like, 'I can't not go to the next Olympics now.'"

Hunger restored, a British Championships silver medal in 2013 behind another of his heroes, Chris Tomlinson, provided extra motivation. It was Bramble's first medal as a senior, made all the sweeter by a personal best 7.91m, putting him within touching distance of the magical eight-metre mark. Another plateau in 2014 tested the new-found resolve before Bramble forged another significant breakthrough in Clermont, Florida, early in 2015.

The PB went in the first round when he leapt 7.92m, a figure bettered by a fourth-round effort just a centimetre shy of eight metres.

That barrier too fell next time up with a mark of 8.19m and he trumped the lot in the last round with 8.21m.

"At the time it put me third in the world for 2015 as well as fifth on the all-time British list, which was a bit crazy," he says, before admitting his first reaction was frustration that he hadn't jumped it sooner.

"It felt easy and I was a bit annoyed. I said to Frank Attah, 'what have I been doing all this time?' because I have been trying hard and it has not been working, but when I relax it works better."

“the Olympics was the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Seeing GB athletes get gold, gold, gold on Super Saturday clicked a switch and it was like, ‘I can’t not go to the next Olympics now’” He was tempted to put the extra distance down to the warm weather Stateside, but that theory was put to bed by further jumps in excess of eight metres at both the British Championships in Birmingham and the Diamond League meeting at the same track, both in conditions less conducive to long jumping.

So, despite the disappointment of Beijing, plasticine and all, his own expectations have risen.

“I’ve always had the potential to jump further, but I’m only just unlocking it in the last couple of years,” he said. “Now something instinctively tells me there is a big one in me somewhere.

“So my target area this year is to be jumping 8.10- 8.15m. In fact, a bad day will be jumping that.

“Last year was good, but I don’t want to be one of those one-hit wonders who jumps far one year and then disappears the next, never to produce it those distances again.”

If extra motivation were needed, 2016 means that “next Olympics” Bramble referred to earlier and that man Rutherford will again be the one from whose shadow he and everyone else must emerge.

Bramble is undaunted, citing Rutherford’s journey as a model to follow and be inspired by.

“Greg being as good as he is is a help because it makes me want to step up,” he said. “He is Olympic, World, European and Commonwealth champion, so even being in the same competition as him makes you want to do better. I don’t come to a competition thinking, ‘oh Greg is here so I’m not going to win.’ I think, ‘Greg’s here, time to step up.’

“At the last World Championships or the one before, Greg didn’t get through qualifying, so knowing he has been there I feel like I am in a similar position.

“I have only just jumped 8.21m this year, so I couldn’t be expecting to become a world medallist much as I’d have liked to. I have to be patient and use what I have to fuel next year.

“Greg does it when he absolutely needs to, you can’t fault him. I remember seeing his 8.41m. He literally just attacked the board, no stuttering or anything. You almost expect him to find that bit more.”

Right now the focus is gruelling winter training with Brunel cohorts such as Conrad Williams, Ashley Bryant, Nigel Levine and Margaret Adeoye his companions on lung-bursting, gut-wrenching running sessions.

Rio of course is great motivation and Bramble has been further boosted by an upgrade from British Athletics on to podium potential funding with a focus on Tokyo 2020.

That will help with the relaxation and patience game for a man who freely admits Rio is never far from his thoughts, but who insists you have to embrace every minute of the journey – winter training included.

“I haven’t got the willpower to go through the suffering of training by myself,” he adds. “It is better when you die in a group as there is that team spirit of all working towards the same goal.

“But you can’t just go off to training every day knowing you are going to get hurt and just hate it because you won’t get anywhere. I put in a lot of hard work last winter and then jumped 8.21m, so all that throwing up, all that lying on the floor dying after a run made sense.

“It sounds weird but you have to fall in love with that pain because you know you have to look at the end result.”