
A Talk With Cuban Coach Santiago Antunez

This talk with Coach Antunez took place in Curaçao, at the 1994 NACACTFCA Congress. McFarlane, a well known authority on the hurdles and now the Canadian head coach for Sydney gives an excellent report on the conversation. It is rewarding to see this kind of exchange between coaches from different countries. If you are interested in attending a conference where you might meet such coaches as McFarlane and Antunez, contact Victor Lopez at the Rice University Track Office in Houston, TX.

REPRINTED FROM TRACK COACH #150 (WINTER 2000)

Santiago Antunez is one of the world's top hurdle coaches. In Curaçao he spoke in detail of his last 11 years of work, experience and philosophy as a national coach with Cuban elite level hurdlers Emilio Valle and Aliuska López (100mH 12.74). The following is a summary of several select issues translated with the author.

How did you develop these two world class hurdlers. . . and others?

“It's hard to explain 11 years work in two hours. We worked for years to find talented athletes. In the beginning in Cuba, we never saw many talented athletes in athletics. They were in other sports. We worked for years step by step with the very young teaching a broad base of skills, developing general strength and teaching the discipline required to be an elite level hurdler.”

What types of activities did you begin with your young hurdlers?

“To achieve 10 to 12 years of performance a coach must:

- start the young athlete off with a broad base of general strength, using medicine ball strength exercises but no great volume
- develop motor control in the athlete with lots of specific speed and hurdle drills but with no weight resisting the skills
- introduce components of throwing and jumping exercises, using both legs and both hands (for strength, motor learning and symmetry)
- initially (first 2 years) get sprint hurdlers to work with the 400m hurdlers to get a similar cross-training effect as occurs in the multi events
- teach our young to compete/train

in several events such as 60m, 60m hurdles, scissors high jump from both sides of the bar (for strength), and to do many of the combined events

- develop torso strength in the young to enable them to learn skills. Many hurdle drills are done incorrectly because the torso is weak. We often do our drills without the use of our hands
- enhance fitness and enjoyment in our young by using children's games and partner activities.

I believe it is important for all coaches to work with the young (children) to know and to see/understand the correct progressions of learning skill, developing strength and understanding the process of discipline.”

When do Cuban hurdlers begin to specialize?

By Brent McFarlane, Canadian Head Track & Field Coach, Sydney 2000

“Specialization begins around the athlete’s third year of training (age 16 or 17). The athlete now must perfect and dominate the correct hurdle technique. Perfection is a key word. Athletes who wish to hurdle cannot violate scientific rules or laws. Weight training begins three times a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Six to eight exercises are done for 10 reps at varied sets of 3, 4 and 5. After one week the reps go to 12 and after two weeks the weight per exercise is increased 5 lbs.”

What type of hurdle drills would you recommend and why would you use them?

“Firstly, most tracks today are synthetic. We train on a cinder track (. . . so did the GDR) which is soft to prevent major injuries—especially in the feet.

[Author’s note:

- Spikes are used only one day per week for drill sessions.
- An enormous amount of hurdle drill work trains elastic strength.
- The following drills are designed for the *women’s* 100m hurdles.]

- 12 to 13 hurdles at 7.50m between hurdles (3 strides between hurdles done over the middle of the hurdle). “We do these longer intervals/runs/drills to help to prevent injuries, especially to the heels and feet.”
- 5 hurdles at 7.5m between hurdles doing isolation drills *only* on the side of the hurdle. Athletes run in a straight line using only one leg over one side of the hurdle, isolating and alternating the lead and trail leg as follows: lead, trail, lead etc. (Figure 1).

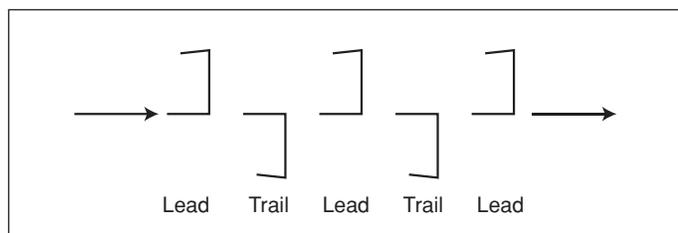


Figure 1

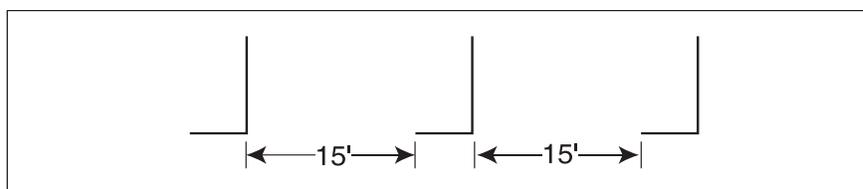


Figure 2

Men: 12-15 ft. between hurdle bases.
Women: 10-12 ft. between hurdle bases.

- rhythm with intensity using specific hurdle exercises.
 - The 3 short strides/steps rehearses the 1.1 or better touchdown times required between hurdles for racing at a sub-13-second 100m hurdles.
- iii) 5 to 6 hurdles placed 10 ft. apart (measured from the hurdle bases as illustrated in Figure 2). Men use 15 ft. between hurdle bases. “This drill helps to prepare race technique.”

What type of testing or evaluation do you use?

“In my first preparation phase, I use 4 + 1 microcycles (4 weeks work + 1 week testing). I wish to test my training plan and the amount of work done by using standard medical tests (blood, urine, muscle biopsy), flexibility (static) and strength (weights). In the pre-competition phase, I use a special hurdle technique test which is: 2 x 10 low (76cm) hurdles at 8.5m spacing. I never run this test at race height since the athlete must dominate the lower height before moving to the higher hurdle. Young men do the same test at 91cm while international men hurdles use 100cm hurdle height at 6.20m spacing. I want maximum hurdle velocity using perfected hurdle rhythm. From these tests I increase my volume and intensity of work for the next microcycle.”

What type of sprint hurdle rhythm might you do for someone like Aliuska Lopez in preparation for the World Championships?

“I call this ‘special training.’ In this session Aliuska would run two 3x10 hurdles at 6.5m between hurdles at a 76cm height. Initially she would run 13.10 seconds for each trial which is 92% of her maximum. Later she would run two 4x10 hurdles at 13.0 which is 94% of max. Aliuska must pass/achieve at these two tests in the pre-competition phase to run 12.60 seconds or better later in the competition phase. These tests are a big psychological builder. When the athlete has control of her times, she also controls her own psychology and physiology.”

What would you recommend in the final weeks of preparation before a major meet, for instance, the World Championships?

“My training cycle for the competition phase looks like this:

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| Monday: | Hurdle technique |
| Tuesday: | Rest |
| Wednesday: | Test (2x10 low hurdles) |
| Thursday: | General exercises on hurdles (easy) or warm up for recovery. |
| Friday: | Competition |
| Saturday: | Competition |
| Sunday: | Rest |

“Over the years we had good and poor results. Sometimes we had too many competitions so we corrected this. We also began our outdoor season where we left off from the indoor one

which had enormous gains. In 1987 at the 1st World Indoor Championships we had already done four years of preparation as a junior so we move quickly into the senior level. We used a systematic approach with our young hurdlers working from lower height hurdles doing fast rhythm, gradually adjusting to the senior hurdle height and spacing.”

Author’s Note

I first met Santiago at the 2nd World Junior Championships in Sudbury (Canada) in 1988 where he impressed me with his friendliness, wealth of knowledge, rapport with his athletes and his ability to share.