

# Dawn Harper Nelson

by Sieg Lindstrom

Last season, her eighth as a pro, Dawn Harper Nelson—'08 Olympic champion, '12 silver medalist and now the Diamond League titlist 3 years running—finally earned her first No. 1 in the T&FN World Rankings.

More than anything that tells you just what a brutally competitive event the women's 100 hurdles is at the top level. No ducking, no dodging, line up and race—over and over again. Never a gimme to be had.

When Harper Nelson talks about the race in which she's specialized since she was 13, her passion for it pours like rain. Appropriately, Harper Nelson even first met her husband Alonzo in a hurdle race.

Their long friendship blossomed into romance 3½ years ago when Alonzo, a teacher and Arena Football player, asked her to come speak to his class at their alma mater, East St. Louis High.

Six times an Illinois prep champion (thrice doubling in both hurdles), Harper followed the same path as earlier East St. Louis star Jackie Joyner-Kersey to UCLA, where JJK's husband Bobby was, and still is, Harper's hurdles coach.

While part of the deep Bruin corps in the event,

waiting to go probably to my next store.

**T&FN:** Are you stocking up on essentials or shopping recreationally?

**Harper Nelson:** I actually am buying a couple things for track. I just got my massage that I have to get on Wednesday mornings and I need to buy a measuring tape for my blocks. We're switching some things up.

Honestly, we've never really sat down and zoned in to work on my blocks so this is the first time that we're checking angles, making sure I'm pushing off right. That's something I feel like you almost do at day 1 but we've worked on so many other things, now it's time to say, "Hey, let's see if we can get you out with everybody to the first hurdle."

**T&FN:** Let's start around Day 1. You're from East St. Louis. It has a reputation as a pretty rough place.

**Harper Nelson:** Yes but it's also known as the City Of Champions. We do have a label that it's kind of rough around there but for me I think I kind of just took it as it makes you tougher, makes you able to deal with things, not let it deter you from what you want to do.

If I can make it and show that good things do come from East St. Louis, all I want to do is give back and keep pushing forward.

**T&FN:** Jackie Joyner-Kersey preceded you as an Olympic champion from East St. Louis and Nino Fennoy coached you both. Did Jackie have a role in getting you into track?

**Harper Nelson:** No, she didn't but she definitely motivated me once I was there. Someone told my mom that she should get me into track because I was the one that was the busy body, the one playing football with the boys, outrunning them.

Mom said, "I can't do this every weekend, she's just all over the place." So they said try track. Once I tried I remember Jackie Joyner-Kersey came out one weekend and pulled me aside.

She said, "I see a gift in you, you have something special."

I was just "Omgod, Jackie, what?" That meant a lot. I was in

## Harper Nelson In A Nutshell

- **Personal:** Dawn Renee Harper was born May 13, 1984, in Norman, Oklahoma, and is married to Alonzo Nelson; 5-6/132 (168/60)
- **PRs:** 100—11.66 ('07); 200—23.97 ('06); 60H—7.98 ('06); 100H—12.37 ('12) (=8, x W; =3, =3 A)
- **Schools:** East St. Louis (Illinois) HS '02; UCLA '06; now represents Nike
- **Coaches:** Nino Fennoy & Roderick Glover (East St. Louis); Jeanette Bolden & Bobby Kersee (UCLA); Kersee (pro)
- **Major Meets:** 8sf)NC, 1)USJ '03; 8)NC, 6h)OT '04; 3)NC, 8)US '05; 4)NC, 7)US '06; 8)US '07; 3)OT, 1)OG '08; 1)US, 7)WC '09; 3)US, 3)WC '11; 1)OT, 2)OG '12; dnc-sf)US, 4)WC '13; 1)US '14.
- **World/U.S. Rankings:** x/8 '05; x/9 '06; x/6 '07; 3/2 '08; 2/1 '09; 3/2 '11; 2/1 '12; 2/2 '13; 1/1 '14.

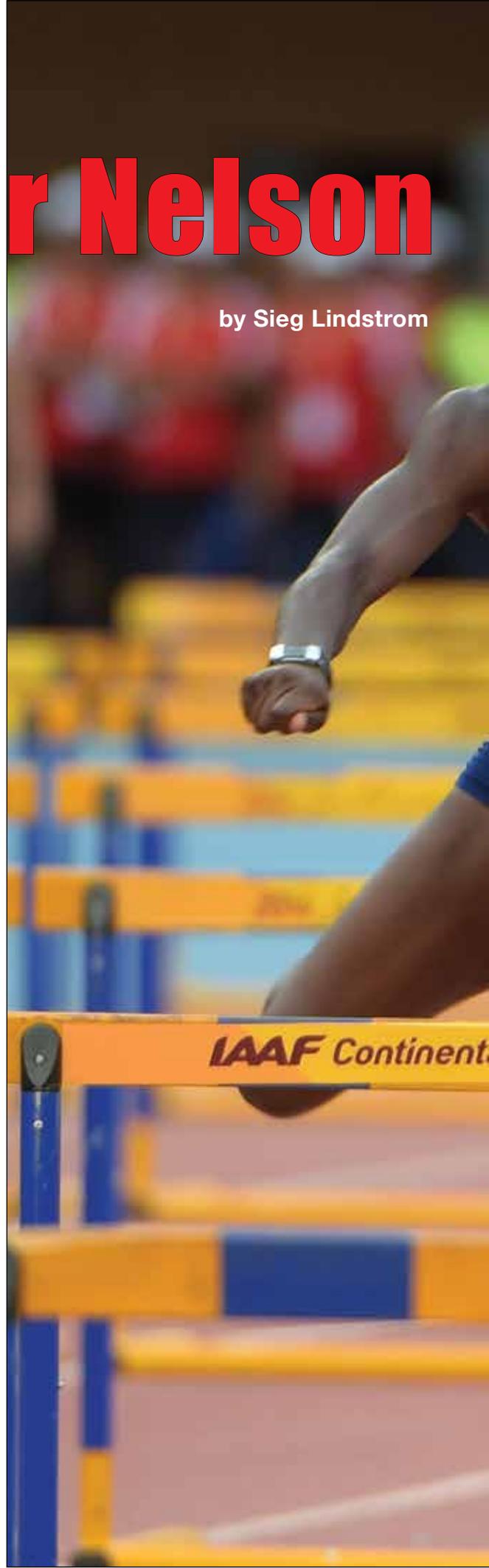
Harper never won an NCAA title but she kept getting faster and believed Kersee when he told her she could stand atop the most elite podiums.

In Beijing she proved him right, succeeding Bruin alum and then training partner Joanna Hayes as Olympic champion.

Determined to take her shots at gold, World and Olympic, in the three championship seasons ahead, and splitting her time between off-seasons with Alonzo in Illinois and Kersee's LA enclave, Harper Nelson spoke with T&FN on a Wednesday training rest day in late February.

**T&FN:** You're obviously not racing indoors, so where do you find yourself?

**Harper Nelson:** I was out running errands because it's an off day so right now I'm just





“I think my mindset has to remain the same: ‘You’re the baddest thing out there.’ ”

6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. That really was like a dream come true: “Wow! I’m talking to her,” and now it’s so funny that I can pick up the phone and call her and she picks up the phone and calls me.

**T&FN:** *And you started hurdling in 8<sup>th</sup> grade?*

**Harper Nelson:** Yes. Coach Gerald Nave started me on the hurdles at Clark Junior High. He came to me and said, “I believe with your speed and your intelligence you can master the hurdles and be the best in the world.”

It was crazy, and that literally changed my life. From that day forward, I was undefeated in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade I was undefeated until I tore my PCL and meniscus. Then after that I went back undefeated again for junior and senior year.

**T&FN:** *That’s a serious knee injury. How did it happen?*

**Harper Nelson:** I’ll just leave it at being a kid. I fell, obviously, being a kid and being silly. That was a real eye-opener: wow! things can really change in the blink of an eye. Even to this day I keep that with me that things can change, you’re not invincible.

**T&FN:** *That would be scary. Sounds like it increased your focus even more?*

**Harper Nelson:** Yes, in high school, coach Fennoy took me on, just pushing toward the next level where I would even do extra practices on my own. Even with the hurdle drills,

I was very good at them so coach Fennoy and coach Glover, the other hurdle coach, came up with different things for me to do.

Coach Glover would put quarters on the hurdles and tell me to take them off with my hamstring. I think back and I don’t even know if I could do that today.

**T&FN:** *When you finished at UCLA and began your pro career, you joined a power training group, to say the least: Joanna Hayes,*

*Michelle Perry and Ginnie Powell.*

**Harper Nelson:** That’s the thing. It was different, it was an adjustment, when Ginnie joined the group because it was three girls and now there’s a fourth. Technically, even if the race went perfect someone won’t make the team.

You had to buy into that you believe Bobby is preparing you the best that anyone could ever prepare you to run the best race of your

## Mr. Monk Is A Mess

**T&FN:** *What do you like to do when you’re not on the track?*

**Harper Nelson:** I like to really be around family. That takes my mind off of things, keeps me grounded. I like to go bowling with friends; bowling is a really fun thing to do. And then I love to watch TV. I know that can be bad sometimes but I love TV.

But I also love to read books. When I travel, books are my thing.

**T&FN:** *What have you read recently that you really enjoyed?*

**Harper Nelson:** *Mr. Monk Is A Mess.* You know the TV series *Monk*? There are 16 books and I’m on the 14<sup>th</sup> book. I’ve found the last two, I’ve already purchased those, so I’m really excited to finish those up too.

**T&FN:** *And TV shows?*

**Harper Nelson:** I love the show *Spooks*. I want to do a cameo on there or something. I really like *Empire*, and *Family Guy* and *American Dad*. At night I’ll turn on Netflix and say, “Oh, it’s time to go to sleep. Let me watch a good episode of *American Dad* and then I’ll fall asleep.”

life and after that the cards fall where they may. That was tough.

It was hard for me because there was Joanna Hayes, Michelle Perry—at the time, 2-time world champion—and then you had Ginnie Powell, the NCAA recordholder, and me. I was, “Where do I fit in here, Bobby?”

I remember I had a talk with him and I said, “Bobby, do you believe that I can make the 2008 Olympic team? I need to know that you go to sleep worrying and stressing about me just as much as you worry and stress about the other three girls.”

And he said, “Dawn, yes, I honestly believe that you have a gift and you can go out and compete for the top of the podium.” After he said that, I was OK, but I had to have that talk and look him in his eyes to honestly believe. I was all in then.

**T&FN:** *You obviously made that ‘08 Olympic team and you won in Beijing. That may not have surprised Bobby but it surprised a lot of people.*

**Harper Nelson:** The whole thing was really surreal because I had knee surgery on February 29<sup>th</sup> of that year. I was at practice and I felt something happen with my knee. I went to Bobby and I said, “I have to go back to St. Louis; something’s wrong, I can’t hurdle.”

I remember the whole time I was on the plane, I went home and then I went to the

## Harper Nelson — continued

doctor, I was thinking, “The three people at practice are practicing right now and getting better and better, and I’m injured.”

I’m trying to break through, I’m not even there, and I was sitting on the doctor’s table and we came to the decision of are you going to do knee surgery or not. The doctor said, “I’ll give you a minute.”

I gave myself 60 seconds. I cried, I was sad, I screamed, I hollered, and afterwards I was, “OK, doc, let’s do surgery, I don’t have any more time to waste.” I gave myself a solid 60 seconds to be sad, pitiful, woe is me, and it was like, “That’s all the time you have, now you have to suck it up because your competitors are getting better.”

I came back to LA and me and Bobby talked. He worked me back, worked me back. He still doesn’t know to this day: I would go do late night practices all by myself. I couldn’t even walk all the way but I would just limp and run around the track over and over again trying to get better and better. I was not playing.

When I made that team it was just like, man, hard work can really pay off—the nights when you were nervous, stressing and you told yourself, “Suck it up, suck it up, the only thing that can get you closer is do an extra rep, the only thing that can get you closer is do an extra crunch or an extra calf raise.”

So when I made the team I felt like, “I deserve to be here.” We had four girls at practice, I was the only one without incredible accolades, and

then to make the team and keep Bobby’s hurdle legacy alive—think about it, he had a hurdler every Olympics—and then little me was the one to go and carry that on.

When we went to Beijing I was like, “Bobby, whatever you say to do. If you say, ‘Jump!’ I’m gonna say, ‘How high?’ because I don’t know

everything together and being close to her helped me because she’d been there before—seeing her go through her nervousness, seeing what she did at practice. OK, this is where the best of the best come to represent their countries.

And Bobby told me before the final, “You’re on the podium but the color of the medal is up

to you.” Before the finals, before they called us in, Bobby cut my warmup short. He said, “Sit down.”

I said, “What are you doing?!” He said, “I see it, you’re ready to go.” I was sitting down as the rest of my competitors were still going over hurdles, still coming out of the blocks. I thought, “This man has lost his mind, he’s crazy.”

He told me, “I don’t care who’s to your left or your right, run with blinders on. The only time I want you to look up is after you cross the finish line.”

That’s why after I crossed the line I thought, “Omigod, I think I did pretty good.” I didn’t know I’d won and then Sally [Pearson] started screaming.

I thought, “Second is pretty good, omigod, I’m so glad I took 2<sup>nd</sup>.”

And then Priscilla [Lopes-Schliep] started screaming. There’s a picture of them hugging each other and I was like, “3<sup>rd</sup> place is so amazing!”

Then Damu Cherry came over and said, “Dawn, you won.” That’s when I fell into her arms and aaaaagggggggghhh. It was crazy.

*T&FN: You’ve got Olympic gold—and silver. But a World Championships title is still out there.*

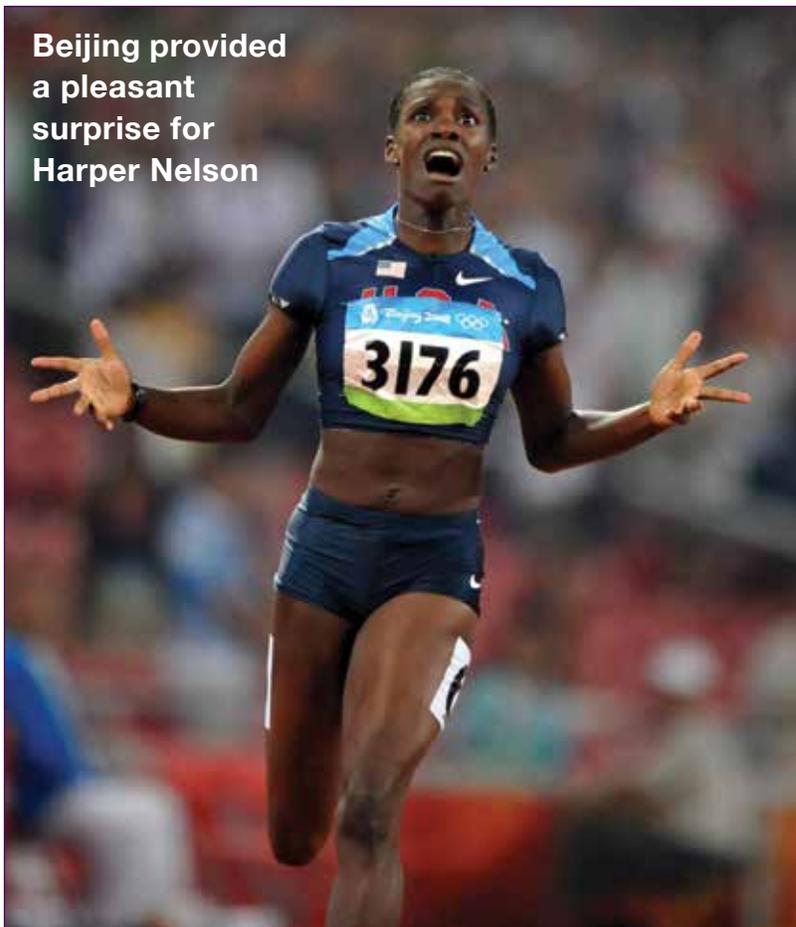
**Harper Nelson:** It’s just dangling over my head, let’s just say it. Just dangling there, saying, “You want me or not? You comin’ to get me?” But honestly, not too much will change mindset-wise because every single time I go into a race or go into a year I go in believing I’m the best and I just have to execute.

There’s no saying, “Go back to the drawing board,” or, “You gotta work hard this year.”

No, we’ve come up with a pretty good recipe and we’re going to tweak a couple of things.

But I think my mindset has to remain the same: “You’re the baddest thing out there and the times you have a hiccup in a race, those are going to be the challenges because you have to immediately remind yourself, ‘Put that in the past, the next one is a new day.’ ” □

### Beijing provided a pleasant surprise for Harper Nelson



KIRBY LEEMAGE OF SPORT

what I’m doing here.”

It was so cool because me and Allyson [Felix] did everything together: our practices, going to eat: “OK, I’m going to take a nap.”

“Me too, see you in 30 minutes.” We did ev-

deal with all that comes with trying to be the best in the world—because mentally sometimes I’m just not there.

“He brought to my attention—and this is when we were dating, I didn’t realize it—he said, ‘You will get on your computer and you will start watching races, and you are gone for two hours, just breaking stuff down.’

“He said what made him realize that it’s worth it is that if he would tell me, ‘Hey, I need you to be in the moment,’ I would do it.

“It’s nice to have someone that can come to practice. He’ll line up with us and he’ll race me. He gets in the blocks and I tell him, ‘I need you to understand I’m killing you to hurdle 1.

“Accept that your wife is going to beat you. I usually don’t but I always tell him I’m going to.”

### The Dating Game

One wouldn’t exactly call it a “first date,” but Dawn Harper Nelson has a very clear memory of when she met her husband, whom she married two years ago:

“Alonzo Ellery Nelson, Jr., that’s my honey. We actually met in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It was a hurdle race. I was the only girl and they put me in with the boys. He was the only guy to beat me and I was furious: ‘Who is this guy? Who is this guy over here?’

“He remembers going to his mom and saying, ‘Who is this girl that’s so upset that I beat her?’

“That’s how we met and for a long time we were just really good friends. But I will say it really is a blessing to be with someone that can