

Allen Johnson

by Jon Hendershott

There are few titles Allen Johnson hasn't won in his stellar hurdling career. He had placed 2nd in two World Cups ('94, '02), but he finally scored that win this year in Athens—beating WR setter Xiang Liu in 12.96. And, the Cup win finally corralled another longtime aim for Johnson: making our cover.

The 35-year-old dean of world hurdlers had rebounded from the hamstring injury which bothered him much of '06 (T&FN, September) and showed he will be a major player in the coming championship seasons. We talked with Johnson just after his return to his South Carolina home from season-ending races in Shanghai and Daegu:

T&FN: You stay on Eastern time when you're competing overseas?

Johnson: I do that only when I'm in Europe [see box]. Competing in China and Korea this year might help a little for the next two years in Osaka and Beijing, but to me it's most a matter

Don't Turn Your Clock Back

Avoiding local time while racing in Europe has been Allen Johnson's practice since he first ran on the Continent in '94:

"The competition is usually at a time when I would be awake anyway. With the exception of Daegu: we ran at 5:40 p.m. there, so that was sometime after 4 a.m. Carolina time. That was the only one that was difficult. When we ran in Shanghai, we ran at 10:00 p.m., which is like 9 a.m. here.

"For my body, that's a little early, but I had been over in Europe so long that I had kind of adjusted to that time zone. It wasn't too bad.

"I stay on Eastern time because it just made no sense to adjust to the time change. The thing that's never made sense to me was, when I might sleep at 2:00 p.m., people would ask me why I was sleeping so late. Then when I was up at 3:00 a.m., people asked why I was up so late.

"My comeback always was, 'Why do I need to be in bed when my race isn't for another 18 hours?'"

of what time the competition is.

I think what's going to prepare me more for the next two years is the fact that I've competed for so long so deep into the season. It was unfortunate I had the injury this year, but even with that, this year showed me that as long as I can make a team, I can then go back home and train and be ready for the Worlds at the end of August.

People seem caught up with what time it is where they are, rather than "What time do I run? What time does my body need to be at its best?" My body needs to be at its peak between

8 and 10 p.m. So it doesn't do anything for me to worry about the 10-12 hours before that. It's all about my body being at its peak at race time.

T&FN: You said in Eugene in August that you felt about 85% back, so then you went over and won in Zürich.

Johnson: Under the circumstances, I'm happy with how my season went. In spite of the injury, I was able to run as fast as I did and be very competitive. It basically always came down to a photo finish to see if I won or lost, except in the World Athletics Final. So I'm right where I want to be going into the next two years.

T&FN: How did you end up running in the World Cup?

Johnson: Ryan Wilson had an injury, kind of a last-minute thing. I was there training with my coach Sylvanus Hepburn because it was useless to come home to train since I don't have a track right now that I'm allowed on. So I stayed in Europe to train and was in the right place at the right time.

T&FN: Championship meets bring out your very best, so was the Cup yet another example of you rising to the occasion at a major meet?

Johnson: To some extent, but maybe more it was me remembering that the last time I ran on that track, it was a total disaster. So it was trying to run well there and, after how my season had gone, the Cup was an opportunity to run a fast race against the other top hurdlers in the world.

T&FN: And maybe also show the world that you're still a very big factor in the event?

Johnson: Yes. I always want to do that and while it's been a little frustrating for me, I don't

understand why people were so surprised at the way I'd been performing. I ran 12.99 last year, so it's not like the bottom is going to just fall out one day.

It's not like a light switch that's either on or off. Whenever my skills start to diminish, it will be a gradual thing. I don't anticipate it being a thing of great one year and terrible the next. The fact that I ran faster this year than I've run in almost a decade should tell people there's still a lot of running left for me.

T&FN: Did you really think much about the idea of redemption after the fall in the Olympics?

Johnson: There was some of that because that was a very disappointing moment for me. I hadn't even been back to Athens since I left after the Olympics. I hadn't been inside the stadium or anywhere near it. So I was kind of

"I wanted to beat Liu, sure; he's the World Record holder." Johnson's World Cup win made him 12–8 lifetime against Liu—since then the gap has closed to 12–10.



going through the process at the World Cup.

There were the thoughts in my mind of, "The last time I ran here, I fell. I remember

walking down this tunnel the night I fell. Under the stadium, I sat right here just before I fell. I looked out at the track at the race before mine on the night I fell." There was a lot of what I was doing before I fell. So I couldn't help but think about it.

T&FN: *The World Cup was one of the few major titles you hadn't won. You were 2nd twice so was it somehow extra-satisfying to win, beat Liu and run your fastest since '97?*

Johnson: I had forgotten pretty much that I hadn't won the Cup until someone mentioned it in the postrace interview. I was more focused on just running a good race because I really felt that the week before in Stuttgart, if I'd had a better lane, I would have run a lot better.

At the Athletics Final, I was out in lane 8 by myself. Basically, it was like I was running a

down to him, me and [Cuba's Dayron] Robles. This time, Robles was in lane 8 and I thought, "Let's see how he does in lane 8."

I wanted to beat Liu, sure; he's the World Record holder. You always want to beat the fastest in the world in your event. I was able to do it and the clock first said 12.94. I thought, "Please go down to 93 or 92," but it went up to 12.96.

But I was really happy. It just shows me that for next year, as long as I stay healthy I'll run well. There are some things I'll change for next year to ensure that.

T&FN: *Like what?*

Johnson: The main thing is if I can just get in consistent practice. Then I'll run faster than 12.96 next year. I talked with my coach in Korea and there were so many things we didn't get a chance to do this year.

We probably practiced hurdles consistently for maybe 10 sessions all year. Just between the weather, not running indoors, getting started late outdoors, then having the injury come up.

T&FN: *You said the work you did work over the last two years has made you better. How?*

Johnson: Those years I really concentrated on clearing the hurdle. All the years prior, it was, "Don't worry about hitting the hurdles. If you hit 'em, you hit 'em. Just run."

But in the past two years, I really, really worked on clearing the hurdles and just being better technically. Making sure my body is in the right position going into the hurdle and coming off it.

That was something I worked on a lot my first two or three years on the Circuit. Then I kinda got "complacent" is the best word, and didn't work on that.

Everything about my training program got complacent and it didn't start to show until around '01 or '02. Going to practice and not always working like I did in '95 through '97, when I worked really hard.

T&FN: *Do you feel like a "senior statesman" now, in the hurdles and the sport in general?*

Johnson: I do, especially when I talk to younger athletes like Wallace Spearmon and Sanya Richards and they're 20, 21 years old.

They say, "I was born in '85, or '86." I'm like, wait a minute, I started running in high school round then.

T&FN: *What factors, mental and physical, have kept you a world-class competitor at age 35?*

Johnson: I think it's mostly been mental. Just the determination and drive to want to keep going. A physical part for me is that I've never had a weight problem. When I start training, I actually lose weight. It's really hard for me to get up to just 170lb. I've got to work in the weightroom all the time and force myself to eat to get up to 170. I usually compete at around 165.

T&FN: *Is the World Record still the big motivational factor for you now, or is it regaining the American Record or what?*

Johnson: More than anything it's getting a medal at the Olympics. I mean, I've won the Games. And yes, I'd badly like to get the AR back and get the WR even more. But more than all those, I want another Olympic medal. It

Musing On A Perfect Race

Allen Johnson once ventured that a time of 12.78 could be his "ideal" race. That's a ways from 12.96, as well as his 12.93 PR. Does he think much about an "ultimate" time?

"Actually, I don't. My coach thinks about it more than I do. It's funny because many times he'll tell me what he thinks I can do and that's more than what I think I can do. He's always telling me, "12.9 is nothing. You should run 12.9 eight or nine times a year."

"I sit back and say, 'Yeah, you're right.' But because I've never done it, in my mind I might make it more difficult than it probably is. Or if history says it's difficult, I make it difficult. Sometimes the barriers in athletics are more mental than physical.

"Now I'm starting to get to the point where I say to myself, '13.0 is no big deal.' A 13.05 is a good race but not a great race. I'm getting closer to his mind set."

doesn't matter which one. I want to make the team and be on the track in the final. Go all out and dive at the line. Yes, make everybody earn their medals.

T&FN: *Hurdles expert Wilbur Ross says one thing that sets you apart from other hurdlers is a trait Renaldo Nehemiah also had: you not only know how to compete but you know how to win. Is that a fair assessment of you?*

Johnson: I think so. There are some athletes that, no matter what the circumstances and especially in championships, know how to raise their level of competition that little bit extra to win. I think it's almost who has the most heart. Who's willing to go out there and really risk it all?

Sometimes that's a scary proposition. Anytime you're racing at a high level, you're taking a risk. There may be something you've been working on in practice that you don't have quite right and yet you decide to try it. You have to really, really focus and that's what sets apart the people who "know how to win" from the ones who just run fast. □



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time trial. I ran 13.01 [for 3rd]. In Athens I felt it would be my chance to run against Liu the way I wanted to. I knew the race would come