

## T&FN INTERVIEW

# Kerron Clement

by Jon Hendershott

Ever since Kerron Clement won the World Junior title in '04, he was tabbed for global greatness over the 1-lap barriers.

He has certainly had the speed, as shown by an indoor WR 400 of 44.57 in '05. But his sometimes-shaky technique, which could lead to his stutter-stepping up to the homestretch hurdles, raised questions.

But last year, still just 21, he erased a lot of doubts as he took the World Championships gold in Osaka. Still, that was the only one of his 11 finals he won all year. Consistency remains an issue.

Last fall Clement moved from Florida to Southern California to work with noted coach Bobby Kersee. Their twofold goals are simple—make the U.S. Olympic team and then win in Beijing:

**T&FN:** How has the training gone with Bobby as your coach?

**Clement:** Training is like really, really good. I'm very strong this year. I've been doing more mileage, like I used to do in high school. In high school I ran cross country and now I'm basically incorporating the same things, like long distance work. After practice, in the evening, Ginnie Powell and me will go for a run; 30 minutes or run several miles on the track.

**T&FN:** How is this different from what you

did at Florida with Mike Holloway?

**Clement:** It's not that much of a drastic change. At Florida, we also did the 600s, 800s. But with Bobby, it's more intense. So I feel stronger now.

**T&FN:** In your IAAF Diary back as early as January, you wrote that you started training wearing spikes. Is that a departure from what you did at Florida?

**Clement:** Actually, yes. Then, we would get into spikes in maybe February.

Here I wasn't used to putting on spikes early, but I

felt I had to trust his program and I did and things have been going good. I'm extremely fast. And we do a combination of sprints and endurance in the same day. So it's working out well.

**T&FN:** Does some of that work include you going over hurdles?

**Clement:** Yes, in some of the repetitions we come back and do maybe the last 150 over hurdles. So we're trying to duplicate what's going to happen in a race when you're tired.

**T&FN:** What made you decide you wanted to start training now with Bobby? It's an Olympic year and many athletes don't change anything in a Games year. What was behind your decision?

**Clement:** I just felt it was time to move on. I had been at Florida for four years and just felt it was time.

People asked why I didn't move in a year like '06 when there weren't any title meets, but I didn't feel then was the time. I felt I should wait. But I knew I would leave regardless, whether I won the World Championships or not.

**T&FN:** Has some, or a lot, of the strength work been aimed at correcting the stutter-stepping problem you have had in the past? Has that been a concern for both you and Bobby?

**Clement:** Well, not really. I'm also working on switching my lead legs over the hurdles. I had worked on that in Florida, but I never really did it in a race.

Now I'm working more on my left leg, my off-leg, trying to feel the movement of it. Running while fatigued in practice while jumping with the off-leg. I'm naturally a right-leg leader.

### Clement Facts

•**Personal:** born Port of Spain, Trinidad; October 31, 1985; 6-2/184 (1.88/83)

•**Schools:** LaPorte (Texas) HS '03; Florida '04-05; now represents Nike


•**PRs:** 200—20.40i ('05-06). 400—44.48 ('07) (44.57i WR '05). 110H—13.78 ('04). 400H—47.24 ('05)

•**Coaches:** Mike Holloway (Florida, pro), Bobby Kersee (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 400—1)NCi '05. 110H—1)NatScho '02; 5)NatScho '03. 400H—1)NatScho '03; 1)NC, 2)USJ, 1)WJ '04; 1)NC, 1)US, 4)WC '05; 1)US, 1)WCup '06; 2)US, 1)WC '07. 4x4—6)NC, 1)WJ '04 (WJR); 4)NC '05

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** x, 5 '04; 3, 3 '05; 4, 2 '06; 1, 1 '07.





**“In the hurdles, you have to train like an 800 runner, or even a miler”**

**T&FN:** *What have you and Bobby done to address the problem of chopping your stride at the last couple of hurdles?*

**Clement:** We have talked several times. He said that in the 400 hurdles, there are zones you have to be aware of and what I need to look out for and what I need to concentrate on. I'm more aware of my positions when I'm running into the hurdles. I know where I have to be. Bobby's very technical on that side of things.

**T&FN:** *So the whole stride thing, has it been a matter of confidence, of training, just gaining experience running the race or what?*

**Clement:** Actually, it's matter of all those things. And also strength. In the hurdles, you have to train like an 800 runner, or even a miler. Right now, early in the spring, I'm training like a miler.

Coach is really bringing us down, as far as pushing us to our limits. You have to know how to recover from the lactic acid and come back the next day and do it again. We once did more than two weeks of just intense strength work. I was just laid out, I was so exhausted.

Bobby tested us to see just how far our bodies could go. But it just prepared me. I feel like this is my year and I'm really ready and I'm really strong.

**T&FN:** *When you do encounter the chopping problem in the final stretch, you're going from 13 strides down to 15?*

**Clement:** Yes, when I'm changing my strides to stay on my correct lead leg, my right.

**T&FN:** *You admitted after the '05 Worlds final that you didn't run hard on the run-in after the final hurdle. Has all the strength work you've done been aimed at remedying that? And also working on your psychology of, "I can drive hard off the last hurdle"?*

**Clement:** Yes. Many days, regardless of the distance we run, the point is to run through the line. Helsinki in '05 was a learning experience; I was only 19. But kids will see that and realize, "This isn't how I should

do it." [laughs]

**T&FN:** *As disappointing as Helsinki was, was it the best way for you to learn that lesson?*

**Clement:** I truly think it was. I feel that I probably wouldn't have been as hungry as I was in Osaka. I believe that God works in mysterious ways and makes things happen in ways to open up your eyes so you can see a certain picture.

For me, the bigger picture was Osaka. I became hungrier and I also feel that Osaka helped prepare me for the coming Olympics.

**T&FN:** *Back in '04 when you were a freshman*

## **Kersee High On His New Pupil**

Bobby Kersee has coached no end of noted 400 hurdlers—'88 Olympic champ Andre Phillips not the least among them—in his storied career.

He now directs the fortunes of Kerron Clement. "In terms of talent and ability, he's got as much of both as any 400 hurdler I've ever seen," says Kersee. "From John Akii-Bua, Edwin Moses and Danny Harris, to Andre Phillips and Kevin Young; Kerron has those qualities—size, strength, stride length, speed, the work ethic. So I just think that the sky's the limit for him.

"I think his only weakness right now is lack of experience. There's just the development issue of understanding stride pattern and the rhythm of the race. I just think that the more he trains for and runs the race, that's going to take care of itself."

Of Clement's tendency of having to chop his stride to clear the final hurdles, Kersee says, "Frankly, what we have to do is eliminate [the problem]. It's as simple as that and practices work around that. We've been training for that and I've been putting him through drills and workouts that should help him get consistent in his stride pattern.

"If you talk with any top hurdler, the thing is to integrate their speed. Basically, the hurdles aren't there. You're running *through* the hurdles; you're not hurdling.

"In many instances, on their better races, hurdlers have to think back, 'What did I do?' For a guy like Kerron, who is capable of running 13 steps all the way around, it comes down to not thinking and just doing."

*at Florida, you won the NCAA title, then decided not to go to the Olympic Trials but went to the U.S. Juniors instead. Ultimately, you won the World Juniors in the hurdles and anchored the winning 4x4. That must have been a tremendously valuable experience to get at the age of 18.*

**Clement:** I felt that I made a good decision to go to the Junior meets, because I had never run especially internationally before. I felt that if I was ever to go to the Olympics, I had to win the Juniors. I wasn't ready for the Trials or Games at that time.

I have a winner's mentality and if I had gone to the Olympics then, I would have felt that I had to win. So I decided it was better to go to the World Juniors, test out the international

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## Clement Interview

competition and see what it was like. Then when I'm ready, I'll go to the Olympics. And today is now. But things happen for a reason. You can sometimes question things, but I certainly don't.

**T&FN:** *Just like your move to the U.S. from Trinidad. You were 13 in '98 when your family moved, but why did they decide to come here?*

**Clement:** It was basically for a better education. But also a grandmother, my mom's mother, had lived here for some time and it was also to keep her company. We went to LaPorte, Texas, and better education was a major reason.

**T&FN:** *How did you get interested in track?*

**Clement:** When I was younger, I used to run with my brother. But it was never really into track like knowing about Michael Johnson or Carl Lewis. I just ran because it came to me and it was like a passion for me. It wasn't until high school that I started learning who were the big names.

**T&FN:** *What drew you to the hurdles?*

**Clement:** In junior high, I tried the hurdles once and I had perfect form. The coach watched me and thought I had potential. He took me to the high school and worked on my form with the high school kids. I just got better and developed.

**T&FN:** *When did your talent in the flat 400 begin to blossom? When you went to Florida?*

**Clement:** Yes, coach Holloway is a great sprint coach and he brought out that talent in me. As you could see, in '05 when I broke the [indoor 400] World Record, everybody was shocked—including myself. [laughs] I certainly didn't expect to run that fast. But it opened a lot of doors. That's when I signed with Nike.

**T&FN:** *It's rare that other 400 hurdlers have your kind of flat speed. Maybe only Angelo Taylor does. How does having that kind of speed affect you in the hurdles? In Osaka you said, "Yes, I have the speed but I also have 10 hurdles to clear."*

**Clement:** It's an advantage and a disadvantage. The disadvantage is, when I run too fast, I come up too close to the hurdle. So I have to back off in the last half of the race. That causes me to stutter-step. So I have to take more control of my speed.

The advantage is I can actually be in 2<sup>nd</sup>-place off the last hurdle but then come in 1<sup>st</sup>. Run people down in the finish, which I'm known for. I'm working on that and also my steps and just trying to make everything perfect for the Olympics.

**T&FN:** *You have said you've had to be patient in your career. Has that been hard to do?*

**Clement:** I've been patient for the past three, four years, since I've been a professional. Yet

I really don't question things when they happen, because I know they happen for a reason. When I was coming in 2<sup>nd</sup> place all of last year, I knew it was happening for a reason. I was like, "I'll be patient, stay focused and I won't let it affect me." I always wondered when would I come in 1<sup>st</sup>.

Then the day came in Osaka and it was on the big stage. I realized that that was the plan. Sometimes God has to humble you so you can see what He would do. I'm a very spiritual person and I just rely on Him every single day.

## Flat Speed—How Valuable?

Few hurdlers—ever—can match the native quarter-mile speed that Kerron Clement possesses. He holds the indoor World Record at 44.57 and PRed outdoors in '07 with a 44.48 clocking.

But how does that high velocity translate to the hurdles? Says coach Bobby Kersee, "For the 400 hurdles, I think it's more important than for the women's 100 hurdles. You can use your flat speed more in the 400 hurdles than in the sprint hurdles for women. That is great asset in terms of Kerron's overall ability."

How is that kind of speed integrated with the rhythm inherent in the 1-lap hurdles?

"It's just the rhythm," Kersee says. "It's like the Kentucky Derby: if you have a horse that can win the Derby, you've got to know what rhythm you're going to take out the horse.

"You can't let the race decide that; you have to decide that. You can't get excited. You might have a horse that's fast up front, so if you go out with the field and that's not your rhythm, then you're going to get into trouble.

"As a matter of discipline, you have to depend on your strength and not over-run the front end. But in my opinion, Kerron doesn't use as much speed up front as he could. We've been working on that.

"I think it's a matter of discipline. You've got to be horse and jockey, in terms of knowing when to hold back and ride high, or when to get down low and go to the whip."

**T&FN:** *Have you really given any thought to how fast you would like to run in Beijing, other than fast enough to win? Or do you even worry about that right now?*

**Clement:** Of course, there is the World Record. That is the ultimate goal for any 400 hurdler. I would love to PR in other events. I love running the 200, and of course the 400. I'd like to run 44-flat or better this season. In the 200, who knows?

**T&FN:** *Might the hurdles as an event somehow reflect who Kerron Clement is as an individual?*

**Clement:** That's a hard question. Some people have said that maybe I'm in the wrong event since I'm so fast. The 400 comes so easily for me. But I personally like the 400 hurdles because they are a challenge.

Is it who I am? Right now, yes, because that's what I do. People know me as a hurdler and I've made my reputation mostly in them. I like them—but I also would like to make my name in the 400 as well. □