

GREG FOSTER

by Jon

Hendershott

Barely two years ago, Greg Foster was the fastest high school hurdler in the land, his 13.2 over the 39" barriers matching the national prep record.

That record culminated Foster's high school career over the highs, which began as a 5-5 freshman in 1973.

Now, just in his second full season over the full international highs, the strapping (6-3/185) sophomore at UCLA is the fastest high hurdler ever produced in the United States—thanks to his surging 13.22 victory in the NCAA race.

And Foster's effort is a mere hundredth away from equalling the world record held by Cuba's Alejandro Casanas. Of all the great U.S. hurdlers—Dillard, Davis, Calhoun, Jones, Davenport, Hall, Hill, Milburn—Gregory Foster is the fastest of them all.

No one, but no one, however, has run as fast as Foster at such a young age. He is still just 19 (8/4/58).

Records and renown are really nothing new to the mathematics student from Maywood, Illinois. He was the fastest prep junior in '75 at 13.4 and began his record performances as a senior during the winter of '76 when he claimed the highs record once and lows best three times. All were over 60 yards and his 6.6 over the lows is still the fastest-ever by 0.2.

Then came his big outdoor season, capped by his 13.2 to match the outdoor record while winning the International Prep meet. Naturally, the college recruiters flocked around the Proviso East hurdler, but he shocked a few people by heading west to UCLA.

And that move sat well with Foster as he ran 13.57 as a freshman, placed 2nd in the Pac-8 and 3rd in the NCAA (teammate James Owens winning both) and ranked 7th in the world.

Foster has led the world for all of 1978, first at 13.34 (which beat Nehemiah at the Pepsi meet) and then his 13.22. His sole loss came at the AAU to Nehemiah, no mean talent himself.

Equally impressive this year has been Foster's emergence as a sprinter, with 10.33 and 20.40 (3rd in the Pac-8) clockings.

Greg Foster is quiet by nature, even when he talks about his achievements. But he also knows his efforts have put him among the best high hurdlers who ever lived and that makes him happy.

After the semi-finals at the AAU, he sat behind the starting line on his home track in UCLA's Drake Stadium and talked about this exciting new stage of his career that his efforts have opened up:

T&FN: When you headed to the NCAA, how did you view your chances?

Foster: I thought I had as good a chance of winning as maybe 3 or 4 other top hurdlers. I went in with a winning attitude and I felt good. My main goal was just to win.

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T&FN: Who were you looking for as your main competition?

Foster: Well, Nehemiah and J.O., of course. Also Dedy Cooper and Greg Robertson.

T&FN: Did you ever think it would take an American record to win?

Foster: Not really. It was just something I was going for. Actually, I was going after the world record—not consciously, but just if it happened.

But I didn't let it bother me. It was one of those things that first I was going for the win and then if a fast time came out because of that, that would be all the better.

T&FN: Nehemiah calls you a "strength hurdler," while he classes himself as a "technique hurdler." What would you say are the specific differences between you two?

Foster: Size is one main difference, besides the technique versus the strength. I've got maybe 1½" and 20-lbs. on him. But his technique helps him a lot and my strength helps me a lot.

T&FN: Sprinting this season has added to your strength, but how much technique work do you try to do?

Foster: I would say I try to work more on quickness. I think most anyone can get over a hurdle with even average technique. But if you haven't got the quickness, it's hard to stay up with everyone—especially at this level.

Nehemiah has both quickness and technique and I have quickness and strength. Those things tend to balance us out when we run against each other.

T&FN: So what makes the difference in a particular race?

Foster: That's hard to say. Maybe who hits the least number of hurdles. It's hard to say because each guy is so different. Each guy has his good days and bad days.

T&FN: How did you feel through the qualifying rounds at the NCAA? Did your knee bother you?

Foster: It really didn't bother me. It always gets a little aggravated when I'm warming up, but it didn't bother me during

the races themselves.

I didn't feel I was running as fast as I was—and I wasn't even planning to run that fast just to qualify. But I felt good, confident in myself. I concentrated on 10 hurdles, rather than anybody who was in the race with me. I felt good going into the final.

T&FN: Your times were consistent [13.38, 13.37], which was a good sign. How did the final go for you?

Foster: My start was lousy. I think I was in about 3rd or 4th at the start. Around the 3rd hurdle, I started moving my arms a lot more.

I hit the 4th hurdle because I was close to it, and I hit the 5th and 6th and maybe the 7th. I'm not sure. But I stayed up on my toes and cleared the last three and kept my quickness in between them and pulled it out in the end.

T&FN: You said that you don't start hitting hurdles until you start pumping your arms harder.

Foster: My stride gets a lot longer and I come up really close to the hurdle. I get right on top of it, so close that it's hard to clear them.

T&FN: Do you hit the hurdles with your trailing knee because you just try to hurry your trail leg through?

Foster: That's part of it. Like here in the semis, I saw myself not exactly fall behind, but just being threatened. Once I start really moving my arms, I don't concentrate on my leg action anymore.

I just concentrate on pumping my arms a lot harder, instead of concentrating on getting over the hurdle. I just have a tendency with my trail leg of trying to snap it down a lot quicker than I should, so I hit the hurdles.

T&FN: Could you ever sense where Nehemiah was, or were you just concentrating on those 10 hurdles in front of you?

Foster: I glanced out of the corner of my eye once or twice. I never turned my whole head, you know, but just glanced so I knew where he was all the time. That's good for me, because then I can judge when I have to turn it on, or when I can relax and take it easy.

T&FN: Were you ever sure you had won the NCAA race?

Foster: No, not really. Timewise, I knew I could run fast enough to win it, but I never thought it would end up being that

fast of a race. I was moving quickly between the hurdles, but I hit so many that it just didn't seem like a 13.22.

T&FN: *What do you think about having Nehemiah around as your main rival? You guys will meet many more times in the future.*

Foster: Well, I know he's a competitor, just like me. He likes competition, so that makes us good for each other.

Whenever I've been around him, he has always been a good guy. He's about as quiet as I am. During the indoor season, another hurdler who trained with him some told me he thought Nehemiah tended to become big-headed, but I've never noticed that at all.

T&FN: *So you like having a rival of such high class?*

Foster: I do. It's good for me and sure isn't a bother. We would run against each other sooner or later. It's just good to have fast competition, because that's the way the fast times are going to come. It's hard to run 13.22 by yourself.

T&FN: *Since the NCAA race didn't feel that fast, were you surprised at the time?*

Foster [chuckles]: Very surprised.

T&FN: *Even though you said you were considering trying for a world record?*

Foster: Yeah, but considering that I hit so many hurdles, I didn't think the race might be that fast.

T&FN: *But you were pleased, I'm sure.*

Foster: Oh yes, very happy. Mmmm, what more can I say?

T&FN: *What has been the reaction of friends and people here at UCLA to your record?*

Foster: I'm still getting congratulations. Every so often, somebody will say, "Hey, what's happenin' with the new American record holder?" and I'll just get a big smile on my face. It makes me feel really good.

T&FN: *At the beginning of the year, let's say, what was your reaction to the words "American record holder" or the idea of "second-fastest hurdler in history"?*

Foster: I always wanted to be there, *Bible of the Sport*

but I never gave it any consideration as to when or where or how fast. I always wanted it, though, wanted to be up with the very best guys.

I always liked Rod Milburn. I liked to see him run. I felt that if I stuck with it, maybe one day it would come out and I might be as good as him.

T&FN: *You had had some experience*

mother.

T&FN: *What was the reaction of people in Illinois?*

Foster: I've gotten calls and messages from many people. My high school coach, Charles Farinella, is very happy. All during high school, he just knew that one day it would happen and he is very pleased to see it has. He knew I could do it over the big hurdles, not just the high school.

T&FN: *When you ran 13.2 over the high school hurdles, did you ever consider you would run even faster over the big ones?*

Foster: I didn't give any thought to moving up to the bigger hurdles. Sometimes before a meet, I would work out over them and it was easy then so I thought it would probably be easy once I got to college. I didn't have much problem adjusting.

T&FN: *How would you rate yourself as a technical hurdler?*

Foster: My technique isn't really that good—but I guess it's good enough to keep me up with everybody else.

T&FN: *What do you feel you need to work on?*

Foster: My arm action. I have a tendency for my arms to go outside, instead of pumping straight through.

T&FN: *What lured you to California from Illinois?*

Foster: Well,

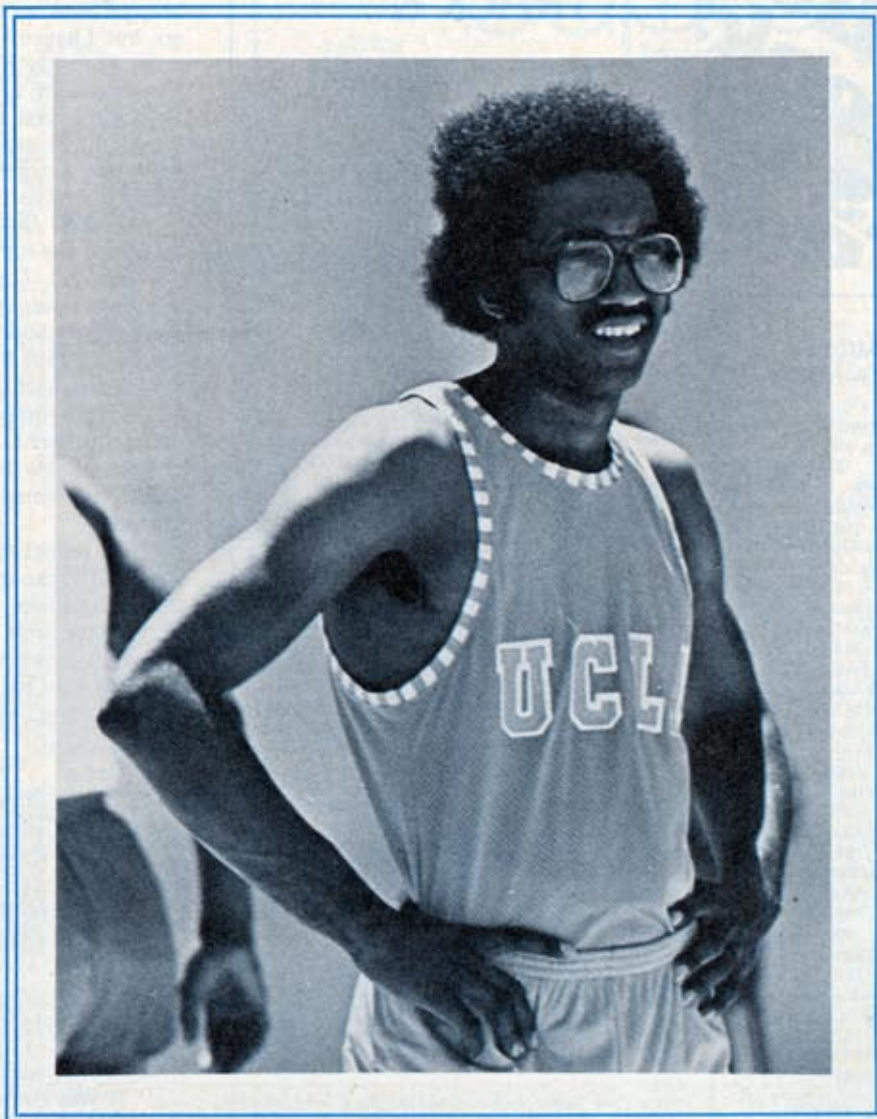
most everybody back in my hometown wanted to see me come out to UCLA. Coaches from different schools at home told me I should come out to the West Coast. The weather is good and there is good competition all year. So I'm here.

T&FN: *Because you had such a good prep career—records, national recognition, probably a lot of recruiting—what did you hope to achieve in your college career?*

Foster: When I was in high school, I just wanted to become world record holder. No special time, not freshman or senior year. Just sometime. Even just a couple of hundredths under will make me very happy.

T&FN: *Will an auto-timed 13 seconds be run in the near future?*

Foster: I think the low 13s is



Bill Leung, Jr.

at being a "record holder" from holding indoor and outdoor marks as a prep, but this is the big leagues now.

Foster: Yeah, it is. It makes me feel really good. I've been in a record holder's position before, but nothing as fast as this.

T&FN: *Have you ever seen yourself as being so close to being world record holder?*

Foster: No, I just dreamed of it happening some day, maybe.

T&FN: *So how does it all seem?*

Foster: I feel just great about it. I always thought before that if I worked at it, maybe the dream would come true. I guess it's something everybody wants to be and it makes me feel super good. Everybody is really happy, especially my

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definitely possible, but 13-flat or so is getting pretty fast. You have to be really moving for that. Everything has to be perfect: get off fast and end up fast—and stay fast in the middle, too.

T&FN: Are the Olympics important to you, or have you thought about that yet?

Foster: Mmmm, the Olympics have always been an important place for me to go, but I haven't given it any thought up to now. Probably by next year, though, I will have thought a lot more about it. I will have done that much more work towards the Olympic year, concentrating on getting ready, on not getting injured, on just being ready when the time comes.

T&FN: How, in fact, did you get into track and the hurdles?

Foster: I got into track because I couldn't make the basketball team as a freshman in high school. I wasn't as tall as I am now, about 5-5 or so.

The coach just wanted me to come out on my first day and experiment with different events. He had me go over a couple of low hurdles and, even being so short, it seemed easy. The hurdle wasn't that high.

He taught me more and more things in terms of technique and I got over the fear of hitting them, which always takes time. I eventually grew a lot, too, and I was fortunate enough to do pretty well.

T&FN: You're a quiet person, but at the same time there is a strong competitive streak in you.

Foster: Yeah, I've always been a competitor. Even in elementary school track meets, I loved to compete.

(Laughs) A lot of people say I'm quiet, but once I get to know a person well, I run off at the mouth.

T&FN: What do you feel would be the ultimate achievement you could make as a high hurdler? A world record, competitive consistency, what?

Foster: I'd say both of those, plus going well under the present world record.

It was funny, but before the NCAA, my mother just guessed at what she thought I could run there and she picked 13.18.

Then, entirely separately, my girlfriend picked a number and she picked 13.18, too. So that's what I was thinking about. Not aiming directly for it, but keeping it in mind. I just wanted to get a good time and win.

T&FN: But would you have rather won in 13.40 or lost in 13.18? Is that victory more important?

Foster: Much more important. Anyone can run a time, but it won't necessarily be a winning time. You can be happy with a time; James was very happy to run a personal best even though he finished 3rd.

But everybody is looking to win. The really fast times will eventually come when you win. □

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