

T&FN INTERVIEW

Keni Harrison

by
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<<I'm the WORLD RECORD HOLDER 12.20. I am a walking testimony of how incredible God truly is.>>

That 90-character declaration is pinned atop Keni Harrison's Twitter feed, with an attached motion-GIF that says it all: Harrison at the finish line after the London DL 100 hurdles, turning in slo-mo toward the scoreboard, competitors clapping in the background. She reads the time, her mouth opens wide and she two-hand palms her cheeks as rival Nia Ali clasps her in a hug.

It's a dream scenario that played out for real—24-year-old first-year pro breaks 28-year-old WR—and the crown jewel in a nonpareil Diamond League-winning season.

Nonpareil in every respect but one, that is. The Kentucky grad also ran 12.24, faster than every

Harrison In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Kendra Rae "Keni" Harrison was born September 18, 1992, in Nashville, Tennessee; 5-3/115 (169/52)

•**PRs:** 100H—12.20 WR, AR (12.50—3, 4 C) (also 12.24—x, =3W; 2, 2 A); 400H—54.09 (5, 6 C); 60H—7.77 (4, = 5 A) (also 7.87—=3, =5 C)

•**Schools:** Clayton, North Carolina, High '11; Kentucky '15; now represents adidas

•**Coaches:** Steve McGill high school, Lawrence Johnson (Clemson), Edrick Floréal (Kentucky) college & pro

•**Major Meets:** 100H—sfjNC, h)OT '12; 5)NC, sfjUS '13; 5)NC, 7)US '14; 1)NC, 2)US, sfjWC '15; 6)OT. 400H—sfjNC '12; 4)NC, sfjUS '13; 2)NC '14; 2)NC '15. 60H—h)NCi '12; h)NCi '13; 4)NCi '14; 1)NCi '15; 2)USi, 8)WIC '16

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** 100H: '15—8, 6. 400H: '14—x, 6; '15—x, 6.

hurdler in history save herself and former WR holder Yordanka Donkova, put up 8 of the 10 fastest times of the year and won 10 of her 11 finals.

But the one final she lost (6th) was at the Olympic Trials, and away slipped her line on Rio gold.

Our sport and the sprint hurdles can be cruel. But North Carolinian Harrison—who has 10 siblings, 8 of them like her adopted—is a competitor. She picked herself up and made the most brilliant statement imaginable under the circo.

T&FN tracked her down on a Saturday when she was feted at a Wildcat football game for an autumn chat about the season that was and those to come.

T&FN: What are you doing to recharge your batteries in the short off-season?

Harrison: Just relaxing, being with friends. There's a lot of down time, eating a lot of junk food, that kind of thing. I'm drinking soda and eating a lot of fried foods, fast foods, that kind of thing [laughs].

T&FN: I saw your tweet that you did a 15-minute run the other day, and that you felt, let's say, less than fightin' fit.

Now after 2 months as the WR holder, do you have any thoughts on the season, the remarkable consistency you achieved and the record?

Harrison: Well, I just take it as a learning experience. I've shown myself that I do have what it takes to run at the next level.

You know, you've just got to believe in yourself and that's still something that I'm trying to do better at—especially at the bigger meets.

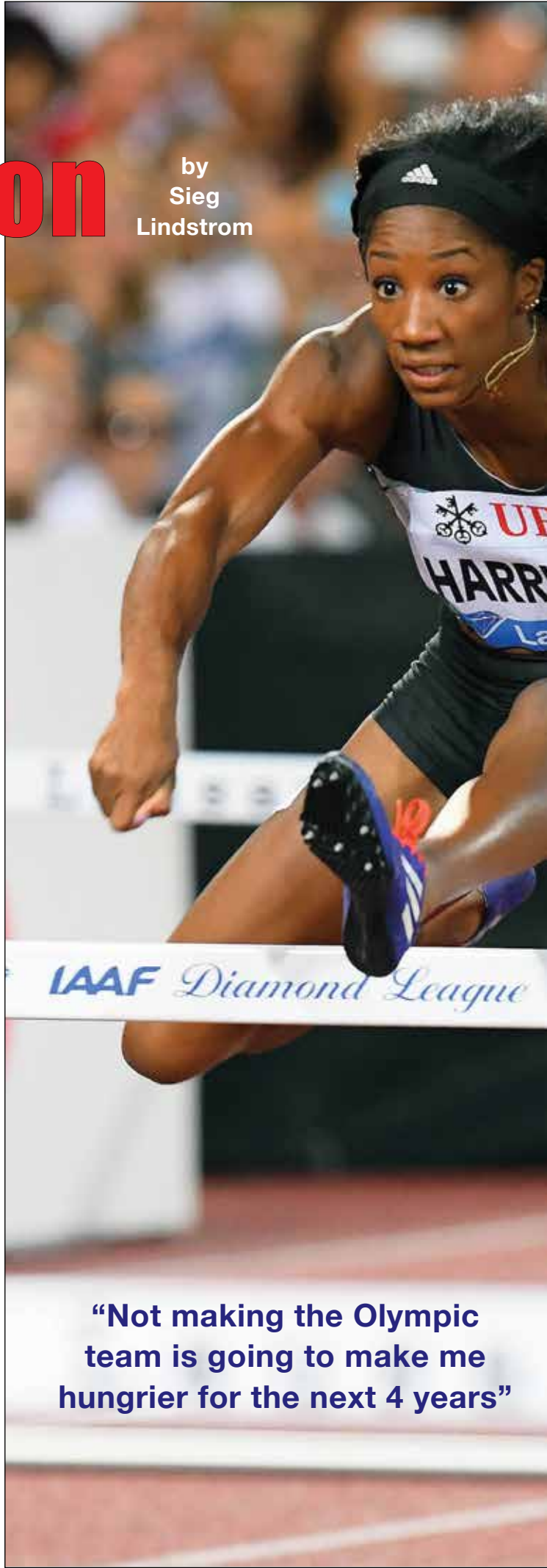
I just put so much pressure on myself and I don't relax, just tell myself what I always tell myself at all the meets. I always try to put extra emphasis on the bigger meets and I need to learn not to do that.

I'm still young and I'm still really blessed to have the season that I had. Not making the Olympic team is going to make me hungrier for the next 4 years to try to make that Olympic team. I still have something to look forward to and to train really hard to accomplish that goal.

Making the Olympic team and maybe breaking the World Record all in the first [pro] year probably would have made it harder to continue to be motivated and keep fighting. So I just continue to look on the bright side. I just have so much support around me, I'm just really blessed.

T&FN: Since no 100 hurdler has ever run faster, do you now just seek even greater consistency?

Harrison: The goal is always to PR. I always want to improve each year, and with that PR is another World Record.



“Not making the Olympic team is going to make me hungrier for the next 4 years”



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Technique is an important thing Coach Flo [Edrick Floréal] tries to have me focus on, and I think improving my technique will allow me to continue to improve and run faster (see sidebar).

T&FN: *You come from a family of 11 kids. Are the reports true that track's appeal was that it allowed you to stand out among all those brothers and sisters?*

Harrison: [laughs] Yeah, doing sports was one way that I was able to get my parents' attention and whatever sport that I wanted to do, I always excelled at it. I always liked being active and capitalizing on my athletic abilities.

T&FN: *Did any of your siblings compete in track?*

Harrison: My two sisters ran cross country but it was just for leisure and that kind of thing. Everyone in my family has done a sport growing up and everyone was able to do something that they enjoyed.

My parents were fortunate enough to allow us to do what we wanted to do. I told them I wanted to try gymnastics and they put me in gymnastics. I want to do cheerleading now, they put me in cheerleading.

Some of my siblings are more artistic so they went and did stuff with that. We were just really fortunate to do what we desired.

T&FN: *Was there anything you found immediately appealing about hurdling?*

Harrison: I think it was that it was a combination of all the sports that I'd played. Gymnastics, flexibility to be able to open my leg and snap it back down. My soccer skills, just having a lot of speed and being able to stop and go.

So just a combination of all my sports that I played and being really good at it when I didn't really train that hard for it.

T&FN: *You won the New Balance Nationals high school title your senior year and then that summer the USATF Youth 400H. When did you really start thinking you could maybe be the best hurdler in the world?*

Harrison: I trained with the best, I trained with Brianna Rolins and Bridgette Owens and all of them when I went to Clemson [where she schooled for 2 years] and they were better than me. I looked up to them and I kept tell-

ing myself, 'One day this is going to be you.'

They pushed me and that's when I realized this is what I want to do, and my senior year in college winning my first NCAA definitely capitalized that. I just told myself, 'This is one of my dreams, to do this in my event.'

T&FN: *Did you make any technical breakthroughs early in college?*

Harrison: No. I was just trying to find myself

The Tech Side Of Hurdling

How did Kendra Harrison's technique improve this year?

"I would probably say running off my trail leg and actually using my trail leg. A lot of times I just rely on my speed, and I realize I can't do that if I want to run fast because when the end of the race comes that's when you start hitting the hurdles.

"So fixing my trail leg and also my height in between the hurdle and myself. The lower I am to the hurdle, the easier it is to execute but it also is a risk because if I do mess up then it could be a bad fall. But that's the risk I take."

Does "run off your trail leg," mean the impulse off the ground as you launch yourself toward the hurdle or the motion of bringing it through over the hurdle?

"A little bit of both. Force actually pushing off the ground and pulling it all the way through so I can run off of it. The goal is to make it seem like I'm just running instead of hurdling. You know, get back into that running position as fast as possible."

What does it feel like when you're doing all that extremely well as you did this season?

"I don't really know how it feels but in my mind I just feel like I'm running. It's not '1-2-3 hurdle, 1-2-3 hurdle,' it's 'run-run-run-run-run.' If you set up the beginning, basically the rest of the race is just your rhythm and just staying as relaxed as possible as well as trying to execute going to your top speed."

at Clemson. Going from being No. 1 in high school to not being No. 1 in college was hard for me. My confidence was not there and it was a process that I needed to go through to get to where I am now.

T&FN: *Do you watch the YouTube video of your WR a lot?*

Harrison: [laughs] Yeah. It's motivation and it still feels unreal that I actually broke it so watching that makes me realize, 'It's real, Keni, you did it and a lot of people saw.'

T&FN: *Now you're at that rare moment where you have an entire 4-year Olympic cycle stretching out before you and some time to plan. On the clock, you're in the very best of positions. What is the plan?*

Harrison: Next year, we haven't decided for sure, but I'm probably going to try to get a [World Championships] medal in the 100 hurdles. The following year is an off year so the 400 hurdles is definitely something that I want to do and an event that I want to see how fast I can run.

Technically, I think I'm going to be 100% better. It's just getting that quartermile work in and training really hard for that event. I definitely want to try to run as fast as I can, low

Harrison — continued

53s, high 52s. It all just takes determination.

Taking a break from the 100 hurdles will do me some good and I want to show the world that I can do both events. It's never been done and I'm just trying to make my name in track & field.

T&FN: *What were your thoughts seeing the U.S. women sweep your event in Rio?*

Harrison: I kind of figured that they would, I predicted that they would and I hoped that they would. They were the strongest hurdlers out there and to have all three of them in the final just made it even cooler to see.

I accepted it. I congratulated them and I put that in the back of my mind as something that I want to do. It just motivates me and that's why I smiled, because it just makes me train even harder just to watch what they have accomplished and know that I have the opportunity to do it in a few years.

T&FN: *Apart from all you accomplished on the track, how was your first year on the pro circuit?*

Harrison: I liked it. It was intense but I like that intensity. I like to be able to run against the best and just being around all the athletes and seeing how they act.

I'd never really traveled as much as I have been so that was cool to experience. Overall, I enjoyed it and I wouldn't want to be doing anything else. I love training and I love competing.

T&FN: *Now the challenge is to take that consistency into the years ahead. Any thoughts on what you've learned that will help you pick the winning rhythm back up next year?*

Life Isn't All About Track & Field

You'll never guess what Keni Harrison likes to do to relax when she's not on the track.

"I like sleeping," she says. "Sleeping is probably my favorite thing to do. It's simple but it's something I enjoy. Coach Flo tries to not allow me to sleep as much as I do.

But I mentor at a local elementary school a couple times a week because I do have a lot of free time on my hands. Other than that, I just like to hang out."

She also mentors kids.

"It's only a couple of kids at a time and I help them with homework or whatever the teacher says they're struggling with, or I just play games with them, get to know them. They're able to tell me about their lives and I'm able to tell them about mine.

"School was something that I never really enjoyed so to show them how important it is to get through school and to get your education is just giving back to the community, and that's what I love to do."

And when she finally retires?

"I know I want to go into a fitness field, whether that's being a personal trainer or [something like that]. I want to be able to help others and show them what I've learned over the years of being an athlete—how to eat right, how to exercise, I think I have a lot of knowledge with that."

Harrison: Coach Flo and I sat down the other day and talked about my future goals and how we're going to accomplish them. We looked at some things that I did really well this season: being able to get treatment every single day, getting an ice bath every day, eating right, doing abs every night.

Doing stuff like that is what got me to the season that I've had; that's something that we're going to duplicate but we're also going to add some things: more stretching, more film watching.

Like I said, technique is the most important thing that he teaches us, so having more one-on-one work.

He is a college coach so sometimes I don't get that one-on-one work like I would like to—incorporating that. Just small things like that; it's nothing really big, nothing too big to change.

T&FN: *At the risk of asking the obvious, do you do a lot of drills?*

Harrison: Yeah, drills are Coach Flo's favorite thing to do. If we don't understand a drill he will create another drill that we can do. And once we've perfected all the drills and we kind of get an idea of what it's supposed to feel like, that's when we start going a little faster.

Each time we do the drill we'll go faster and faster so we can be able to do it coming out of the blocks.

T&FN: *You mentioned watching film. Do you have that proverbial eye for technique?*

Harrison: Yeah, probably. Watching film is something that I like to do. I don't really look at it as a chore or anything like that. I look at it as an opportunity to fix what I'm doing wrong.

With this technology now days you can basically do anything that you want on the phone—draw on it or that kind of thing.

You can put two hurdle videos right next to each other. The technology now days just makes watching film a lot more fun and enjoyable.

T&FN: *You do that while your practicing?*

Harrison: Yes. I'll do a rep and it will be filmed and right when I'm done

I just walk straight over there and I watch it. I try to do it again, I try to improve.

When we're at practice it's just on his iPhone but once we go to his office we can put it on a bigger screen and he puts it on a flash drive for me to take home, and I put it on my screen

There was no Rio podium for Harrison, but she did get the Diamond Trophy and the \$40,000 that goes with it



or make it bigger on my television.

T&FN: *Any final thoughts as you look toward the next 4 years?*

Harrison: I just want to continue to improve and continue doing what I love. Coach Flo is a great coach and we're able to connect and I'm able to listen to him and do everything that he says. He believes in me and to have that support is amazing. I think that's why I've had so much success.

Even when I didn't make the Olympic team, he pushed me to keep going and to go back out there. You know, that's hard to do, that's probably one of the hardest things I've had to overcome and if I hadn't listened to him I wouldn't have broken the World Record.