

Wallace Spearmon

by Jon Hendershott

Only two sprinters ever have better combined all-around sprint PRs than Wallace Spearmon. They happen to be Olympic 200 champions Michael Johnson and Mike Marsh.

The 23-year-old Spearmon has run 9.96, 19.65 and 45.22 to share No. 3 on the all-time combined list with former SEC rival Xavier Carter.

Over the course of the last three years Spearmon has won World Champs silver and bronze medals in the 200 and ranked in the top 3 in the world each year. He was the No. 2 American last year, rating behind only former training mate Tyson Gay.

To be the second-rated American in the half-lapper, which has become so hypercompetitive in recent years, still doesn't satisfy the former Arkansas speedster. He always wants better:

T&FN: Last fall, after your season-ending meets in Asia which included your 100 PR, you said you felt you didn't compete to the best of your abilities in '07. Why did you feel that way?

Spearmon: I'd say because of my fall training and everything leading into last season. I went from doing coach [Lance] Brauman's workouts, to working some with Jon Drummond, and I was also on my own.

I didn't feel I had any consistency in coaching. Lacking that consistency kind of messed with my confidence going into the season. I kind of questioned whether I was ready or not.

T&FN: Was that part of the reason that you decided to go with your dad, Wallace Sr., as your coach?

Spearmon: Yes. I was looking for consistency. Coach Brauman is a great coach and I did think about staying with him. But I wanted to keep things pretty much the same, which they had been before last

year. Also coach [John] McDonnell and coach [Kyle] White at UA helped out some too.

Then, my father knows me. He has always had coaching tips and keys and guidelines of what I should do. So I thought, "Why not?" He's here every day and he wants me to run fast, so I figured I'll be successful.

T&FN: You and Tyson Gay both had great loyalty in sticking with Brauman as your coach during his incarceration, but can you describe how difficult it was to manage in that situation?

Spearmon: It kind of made everyone in the

group grow up. We knew we would have to. All we had to depend on was each other; on coach White to some degree. But that wasn't the same with him trying to fill Brauman's shoes.

But at the same time, he didn't want to step on anyone's toes or cross any boundaries. So he was put in a tough position. We had Veronica Campbell-Brown, Omar Brown and 400 hurdler Derrick Williams in the group.

T&FN: This is the first full year with your dad as your coach and you ran a PR 6.70 in the 60 and 20.19 for 200 in your only indoor meet this winter. But how would you say things have gone as far as the coaching aspect?

Spearmon: We just clicked right off the bat. There was no down period or hesitation. He didn't come in with an ego; he came in first to learn. See how we worked out. He just kind of took over and things have been going great.

T&FN: Your dad ran 20.27 in '87 and ran in the World Championships that year. But has he kept your career, from high school through college and now as a professional, separate from his?

Spearmon: Even when I was young I went to practices with my dad, so I was around greats like him and Mike Conley and a bunch of great Arkansas jumpers. Coach McDonnell too and the whole track tradition at Arkansas.

I learned that you have to be the best. That was imprinted in my head and throughout my career I just never wanted to lose. I wanted to be like the older guys.

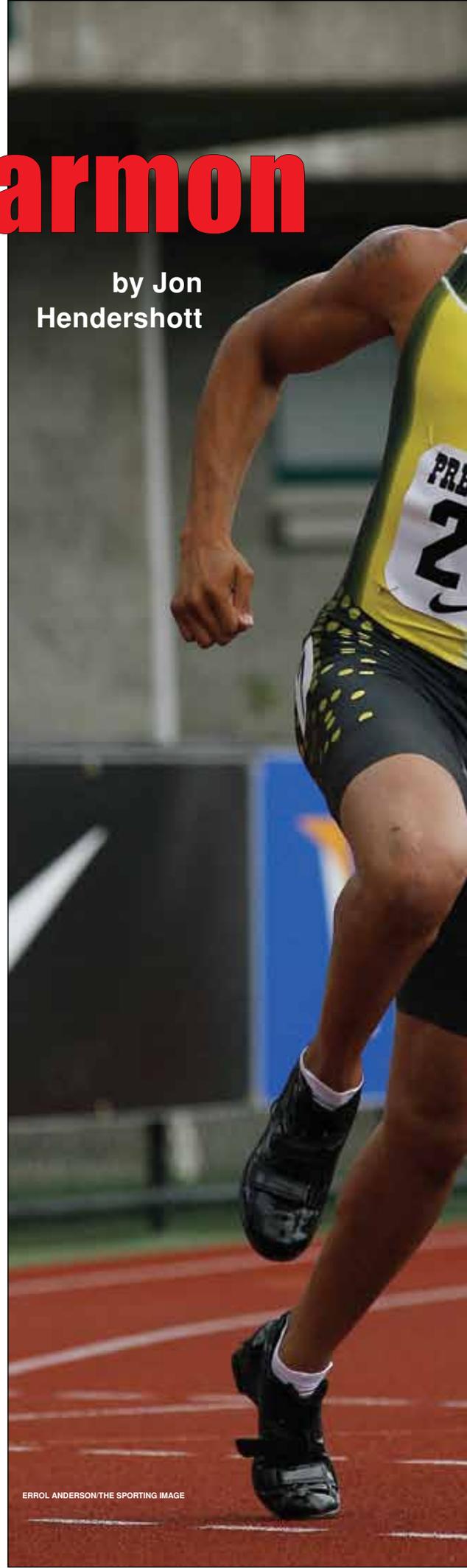
My father likes to set goals and give me challenges. So my first year of college, he told me his PR and I ended up wiping out every PR he had except for the 100, which I only ran twice.

But besides that, he hasn't really said anything about our careers. He has said, "You're faster. You're a much better athlete than I ever was." And every so often, he'll throw in a joke like, "But I still could get you."

T&FN: You ran 21.45 as a high school senior, then 20.25 as a college frosh in '04. Besides officially being a member of the Arkansas team and program, as well

— In A Nutshell —

- Personal:** born Chicago, Illinois, December 24, 1984; 6-3/174 (1.91/79)
- Schools:** Fayetteville (Arkansas) HS '03; Arkansas '04-'05; now represents Nike
- PRs:** 100—9.96 ('07); 200—19.65 ('06); 400—45.22 ('06); 300i—31.88 WR '06
- Coaches:** Lance Brauman (Arkansas, professional), Wallace Spearmon Sr. (professional)
- Major Meets:** 100—4)SEC '04, 4)SEC '05. 200—2)SEC, 1) NCAA, 8s)OT '04; 2)SEC, 1)NC, 4)USATF, 2)WC '05; 1)US, 1) WCup '06; 2)US, 3)WC '07
- World/U.S. Rankings:** 100—10, 2 '07. 200—x, 7 '04; 2, 2 '05; 3, 3 '06; 3, 2 '07.





“I have two chains—but one is faster than the other.”

as physically maturing as an athlete, what was behind that huge improvement?

Spearmon: I played so many other sports in high school as well as track. I think I went to six track practices my whole high school career and most of those were for relays. We never did run for effort.

I was more trying to get in shape and condition for football. I never would have guessed that I would end up running track for a career.

T&FN: *Were you more a fast football player?*

Spearmon: Not really, but I also think I hexed myself a little when I was young because I would take off slow in a race, just playing around. Then I would go catch everybody late. It looked good, but it wasn't the most efficient way to run.

But that was the cool thing to do when I was in high school. But now that won't get you very far.

T&FN: *After your soph year at Arkansas, how difficult a decision was it to turn pro?*

Spearmon: That was '05 and I had a lot of ups and downs that year. It was very tough; my performances showed that I was stressed about it. Coach McDonnell told me once, "I've known you since you were born. If you were my son, I'd tell you to turn pro."

That made my decision a lot easier because I didn't want to let down anyone. I didn't want to let down coach Brauman or coach McDonnell or the team. He told me he thought the price I was getting was fair and I should turn pro, so I did. And I've felt comfortable with that decision ever since.

T&FN: *Back at the '04 Olympic Trials, you made the 200 semifinals at age 19. How do you feel you benefited from running in those Trials and being exposed to the entire Trials experience?*

Spearmon: That year at the NCAA meet, one of the rounds was canceled and we had to run only two rounds. I was inexperienced running rounds, but now if you told a professional athlete that he had to run hard for only

two rounds, that's no big deal.

But when I went to the Trials and there were four rounds, I really had no idea what I was doing. Coach Brauman tried to coach me, and Tyson and some of the other guys I was with tried to tell me what to do, but I was a hardheaded young guy and still into the showboat thing.

Then there was Justin Gatlin. I knew of him but I didn't think he was going to do what he ended up doing at the Olympics. In my first race, I said, "I want to beat him," but coach

Leader Of The Chain Gang

Besides his fleet sprinting, Wallace Spearmon has another trademark: the chain he clenches in his teeth during races.

It keeps him relaxed while running, he explains, although he admits, "I can't remember exactly what got me started with the chain. It's just so common now, I don't even think about it. A family member got me a chain and I wore it at practice. I started putting it in my mouth and I've done that ever since."

Naturally, people remark about the adornment, says Spearmon. "Coach Brauman would say, 'Why you got that dang chain in your mouth?' I said I didn't know but that it didn't bother me; so I kept on doing it.

"A lot of people have asked me, 'Why do you wear that chain?' Kids ask, 'Does it taste good? Can you breathe?' It's just my thing."

And not just any chain will work: "Nope, I wear one chain. I had a silver one when I was in college and then when I went pro I treated myself to a white gold one."

Spearmon says he has never had any problem in a meet. "I actually took it off once in '06," he reveals. "I kept losing and losing, so I decided to take off my chain and just see what would happen. I PRed and left it off for the rest of the season.

"Then the next year I decided to get a new one and start off fresh. I've worn that one since. I have two chains—but one is faster than the other."

said just to stay behind him. But I wanted to beat him. Gatlin won in 20.06 and I ran 20.25 trying to catch him. That was my PR at the time, but in every round I got slower [20.60 quarter, 20.92 semi on the same day].

That experience changed me a lot. I realized that I didn't know everything and that I should listen. There is a way to run rounds. I didn't even drink any water while I was there; I just did everything the wrong way. It's a hard lesson to learn but when you do everything the wrong way, you know how to do things better the next time.

T&FN: *Now you know you'll have a big target on your back being an elite sprinter. You'll be the guy a lot of others will want to beat, or do you even concern yourself with that?*

Spearmon: I wouldn't say it's a concern, but just that you always have to be observant of it. You can't go out there and think anyone

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Spearmon Interview

is just going to let you win. You have to realize you've got that target on your back, so the other guys will be gunning for you. You always have to be aware of that fact—and also that an Olympic year isn't like any other year. People come out of the woodwork.

T&FN: You have trained with Tyson Gay and also run at two World Champs with him. What has that been like?

Spearmon: Training with Tyson, we just pushed and motivated each other. It was a love-hate relationship, but it got the job done.

As for the Worlds, I honestly don't know how I feel about that. It was good to have

“But when I went to the Trials and there were four rounds, I really had no idea what I was doing”

someone from your school there to share things with. If you're nervous warming up, you know he must be too.

But you're there for yourself, which makes it so hard. You have to get ready for your individual event, and then like last year, you have to get ready for the 4x1 relay together. It goes from “I hate you, I hate you” to “OK, we're teammates now, so let's go.”

T&FN: The last couple of years the 200 scene has just exploded. Last year, 7 of the Top 10 in the World Rankings were Americans. How has it been to run an event that is so incredibly competitive in this country?

Spearmon: It's kind of cool, but it's also trying at the same time. We're looking to bring some attention back to the 200, but at the same time, I stepped it up and I expected Tyson to step it up. But who were all those other guys?

Nineteen-something used to make you a clear-cut winner of a race. But now, you can run 19 and be 6th place. There's just a lot of pressure on you; you can't ever relax or slack off. We call it “stacked,” it's so deep.

T&FN: What do you feel you have to do to keep improving in the 200?

Spearmon: Improve both my 100 and 400 times. And this is the first time I've ever lifted weights. I think that in training you have to find things to push you to go somewhere that you haven't gone. Take that threshold even higher; take your body where it doesn't want to go. But down the road, it will pay off.

T&FN: Getting in the 44s for 400 like you have said you want would improve your standing on the all-time sprinters list. Do you even think about stat-nut details like that, or do you just want to continue to improve all around?

Spearmon: I'd be lying if I said I didn't look at lists like that. I do. I don't dwell on it, but having Michael Johnson and Mike Marsh ahead of us is something. I have to say I would like to break the tie with Xavier. □