

Allen Johnson

by Jon Hendershott

Off the track, Allen Johnson is quiet by nature. But put 10 high hurdles in front of him—or competitors of any ability on either side of him—and he becomes a tiger.

The 31-year-old South Carolina resident has rated among the event's super-elite since winning his first of three world titles in '95. The '96 Olympic gold medal, a World Indoor victory, three No. 1 World Rankings and four in the U.S. ratings—Johnson has claimed plenty of honors.

The slight Johnson has run fast over the 42-inch barriers: of history's 19 times under 13-flat, he owns 8—and half of the 6 fastest. He has twice run 12.92 for a share of the American Record, just 0.01 off Colin Jackson's World Record.

Even with all Johnson has achieved in what's sure to be a Hall of Fame career, he remains driven to add the WR to his résumé. A man who loves to compete in general, and especially against his chief barrier foes, he feels he is far from finished writing more history over the hurdles:

T&FN: Going into Edmonton, had you ever thought about winning a third World title to match Greg Foster's string?

Johnson: I thought about it a little bit, just like I thought about it some in '99. I thought about the number three to match Greg's achievement, but to me the fact that he did it three times in a row and over an 8-year span is a little different from me. I did it over 6 years, but not three times in a row.

The pure numbers show that we both won three. But I still give him the nod because he did it first; he won his three in a row and the amount of time he did it over is more longevity than me.

T&FN: Did you have any thoughts about Edmonton erasing memories of your injury-plagued seasons in '99 [calf] and '00 [hamstring]? Or was '01 just a clean slate in your mind?

Johnson: Honestly, the aim wasn't much to erase the previous two years. It was more to prove to myself and to other people that '99 and 2000 weren't going to be the norm for me in terms of keeping moving forward.

Even more than that, I wanted to qualify for 2003 [the automatic berth that goes to the defending champion]. That's what I was focused on more than anything. I'll be 32 then, it'll be the year before the Olympics and [Edmonton] would be a great chance for me to not have to worry about making the team for Paris.

I wouldn't have to stress myself out about being in tip-top shape for nationals that year. Also, if I'm fortunate enough in 2003 to have good success, that can springboard me toward the Olympics in Athens.

T&FN: Winning in Athens was a great way for you to end the three-year championship cycle with wins in the '95 Worlds—'96 Olympics—'97 Worlds. But some observers feel that having title meets three years out of four puts too much strain on athletes—especially sprinters and hurdlers who often compete right on the red line of injury anyway.

Is it possible that winning your three titles had any degree of stress carryover to '99 and '00 for you?

Johnson: I don't think it did. I've heard people say that championships shouldn't be close like that, but everybody tries to run as fast as they can every year. Also, it's just one competition and you're not redlining it in every round. You redline the final, but the others are just another race.

Each year you learn some new things and my personal feeling is it's healthy to have a big championship every year. Having one doesn't mean I'm going to be tired or anything. That's a cop-out.

T&FN: You have said in the past that it's most important to win the big titles. Sure, everybody wants to run fast, but are the titles still the major thing for you?

Johnson: They are, but I have to say that I really do want to run that 12.90. That's really starting to bug me now. I guess that's another title: "World Record holder." I know my chances to do it are coming to an end; I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm not a young guy anymore, but I still feel I can do it. It's something I'll focus on more this year.

When I say I'll "focus" on the record, it's not so much the time but rather I'll focus on areas around my health, diet and nutrition, my weight regimen, workout plans with coach [Curtis] Frye. Things to do every day that will help me—or anyone—to achieve those high-level performances.

T&FN: You've been quoted that if you ran a "perfect race," you felt it could be a 12.70. Yet by their very nature are the highs an imperfect race? Terrence Trammell has said there are 10 ways to screw up, but does a hurdler have to go all-out every time? Or is a "perfect" race possible?

Johnson: I'd say no, it's not possible to run a perfect race—mainly because, as a person, you're imperfect. But I think you can get very close to running perfectly. I still feel it's pos-

sible for me to run in the high 12.7s. It may sound crazy and I may never come close to doing it, but I'll always believe that I'm capable of doing it.

It's a matter of having all the cards fall right. At Edmonton, I was actually surprised how fast and how well I ran during the heats. I was inconsistent, but on the days when I really needed to run fast, I was able to do it.

I was surprised by that because I had been injured for so long and I hadn't prepared nearly as much as I had planned on had I not been hurt. So being able to run 13.04 last year really gave me a lot of motivation and confidence going into this season.

T&FN: You also have talked about being "real with yourself" in terms of goals. In the perfect race,

— JOHNSON IN A NUTSHELL —

Allen Kenneth Johnson was born March 1, 1971, in Washington D.C., and is 5-10/165. Graduated from Lake Braddock High (Burke, Virginia) in '89 and North Carolina in '93. Co-holds the American record in the 110 hurdles (12.92).

PRs: 100—10.48 '98 (10.10w '99); 200—20.26 '97; 110H—12.92 '96; 400H—52.00 '91; HJ—6-11 '89; LJ—26-8 1/2 '93; TJ—48-8 '89.

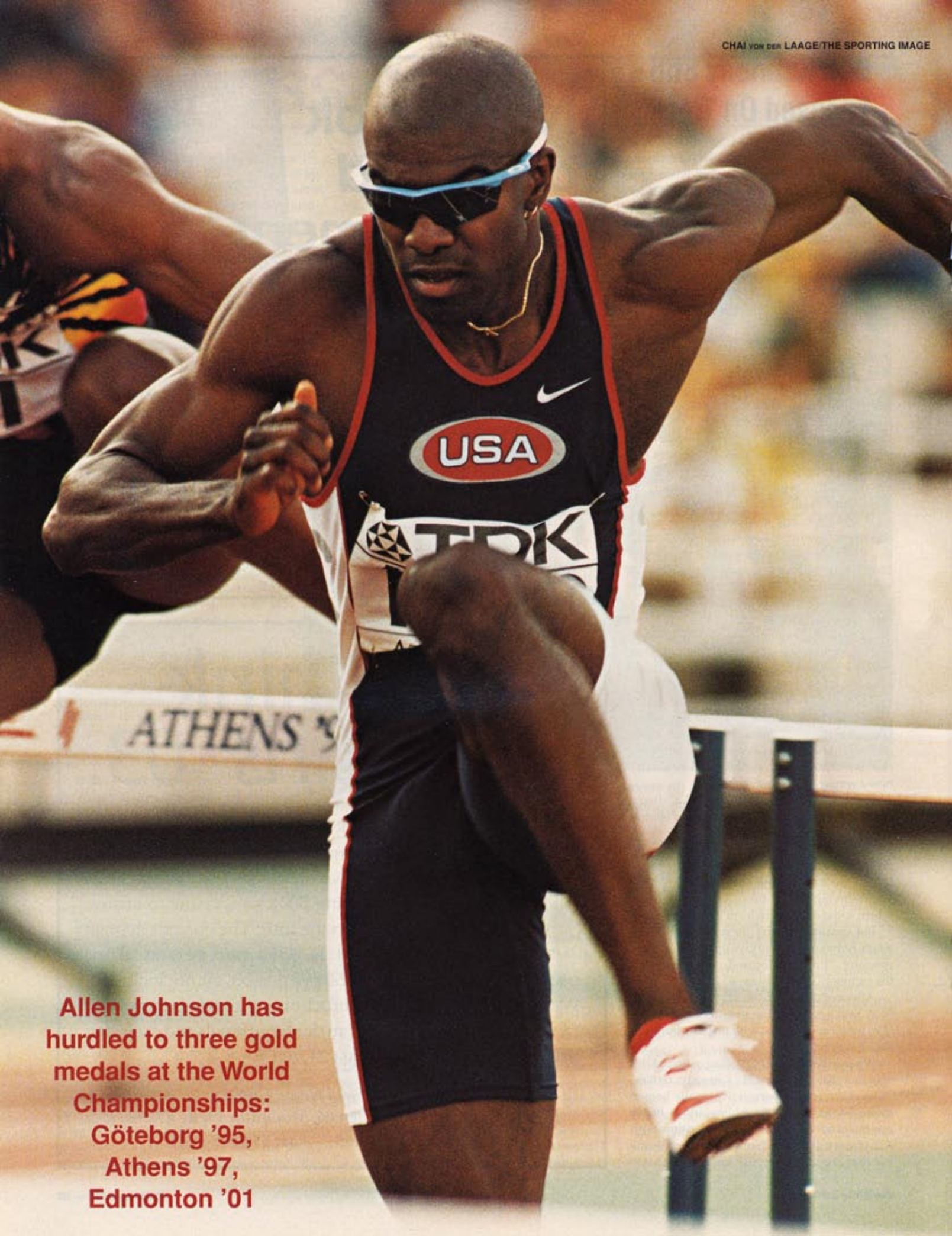
Year	Age	Affiliation	Mark/Rank	Major Meets
'89	18	Virginia HS Sr	14.21hs	
'90	19	North Carolina Fr	14.4	
'91	20	North Carolina So	14.11	
'92	21	North Carolina Jr	13.63	3)NC, 7h)OT
'93	22	North Carolina Sr	13.47 (x, 6)	2)NC, 5)US
'94	23	Nike TC	13.25 (6, 3)	2)US, 2)WCup
'95	24	Nike TC	12.98 (2, 2)	2)US, 1)WC
'96	25	Nike TC	12.92 (1, 1)	1)OT, 1)OG
'97	26	Nike TC	12.93 (1, 1)	1)US, 1)WC
'98	27	Nike TC	12.98 (2, 2)	2)Goodwill
'99	28	Nike TC	13.01 (5, 3)	2)US, dnc-sf)WC
'00	29	Nike TC	12.97 (2, 1)	1)OT, 4)OG
'01	30	Nike TC	13.04 (1, 1)	1)US, 1)WC

you feel 12.70 is possible but 12.90 is the more realistic goal?

Johnson: I feel I have to run 12.90 before I can run 12.80—something and then 12.70—something. I'd be very surprised that when I break the World Record, it's a 12.78 or 12.79. When I do get to 12.7, I should have already broken the record maybe three times at least.

That's because I don't know what any of those times feel like yet. I know that when I ran 12.92, even with mistakes, I was on pace to run 12.86 or 12.88. So I know already what that type of race feels like. But to go farther is someplace I've never gone, at any point in any race. So, the challenge is trying to find that point. It's an awesome challenge, but it's one I'm up for.

T&FN: Off the track, without your game face on, you're a pretty quiet-mannered guy. Yet the



**Allen Johnson has
hurdled to three gold
medals at the World
Championships:
Göteborg '95,
Athens '97,
Edmonton '01**

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Allen Johnson

event would seem to demand aggression since hurdlers constantly flirt with disaster. How do you turn that on and off so that you can run the best race possible?

Johnson: You just keep it on the track. Most people, and especially my competitors, know that on the track I'm a totally different person: mean, nasty and I take every little thing personally. When it's time to race, if you also run hurdles, I do not like you at all.

But once we cross the finish line, all that's over because it's just a race. Then we can go back and be friends, have fun and get to know each other for who we are. Honestly, I don't know how I control it. It's just the nature of competition, but it's also something to motivate me.

T&FN: A big plus specifically for the highs is that you guys meet year after year and that makes the event so competitive. So meeting Terrence and Mark Crear and Anier Garcia and Colin race after race must be a huge motivator for you.

Johnson: It definitely is. I look forward to those clashes so much, partly because I know that if Garcia beats me one time, he won't spend the rest of the summer ducking me to hold on to a ranking or not be beaten by me.

It works the other way, too, because we all have a respect for the others. Also, there's no other track event that compliments the hurdles, so if you don't run them one day, you don't run at all.

T&FN: After you won in Atlanta [in an Olympic Record 12.95], you said you rushed things so that you hit 8 hurdles of 10. How do you control that aggressiveness, not rush it, so you can be smooth and fast? Is that also hard to do?

Johnson: It is, but you've just got to do it. Or else, you'll go out there and blow the whole thing. You have to be somewhat under control—recklessly in control.

T&FN: Going back some, is it true you watched the '92 Olympic hurdles final with your family, then said you'd win in '96?

Johnson: Yes, I saw the '92 final with my family but I said I was going to be there in '96.

T&FN: What made you feel that? You were a college junior and had a 13.63 best at that time.

Johnson: I've always believed that if I work hard enough, I can be at least as good as the next guy. I felt that, at that point, I had enough room to improve to be able to make the '96 team. I also felt if I could make the team, I'd make the final. And if I made the final, then anything could happen. All I ever wanted was to have a lane in the final.

T&FN: Then it must have been tremendously encouraging to keep improving as you did through '94 and then winning the Worlds in '95. Was that a springboard toward '96?

Johnson: Yes, but actually the first big thing for me was the '92 NCAA Indoor when I won the 55-meter hurdles in 7.07. Hurdling was still new to me and I didn't know what a fast time

was. I thought 7.07 was fast, but I didn't realize it was a meet record or that I'd broken the meet record held by Tony Li and Roger Kingdom.

I thought, "Whoa! I ran faster than Roger Kingdom did in college?" He was World Record holder by then and two-time Olympic champ and I thought if I broke his meet record, maybe I could run almost as fast outdoors as he did. So that gave me confidence.

I didn't do well at the '92 Trials [7th in his heat], then in '94 I worked really hard. I got in some [European] races that year and ran 13.25. For '95, my goal was to run 13.09—just a number I picked—and get 2nd at the Worlds. That was the only time I ever surpassed a goal I set for myself [with a 12.98 seasonal best and the world title].

T&FN: Then you went on in '96 and won the whole show. Was it tougher getting to the top or staying there—or are they separate things?

"It's not possible to run a perfect race—mainly because, as a person, you're imperfect. But I think you can get very close to running perfectly"

Johnson: They're a little bit separate. It was hard getting there because a lot of people didn't believe in me; I had a lot to prove. It was hard staying on top, but not as hard as getting there. I was able to sustain a lot of my success after '95 on into '96 and '97.

For me, it was harder to get back this past year. Once you're on top, people think of you and treat you in certain ways. When you fall down, you expect that people mostly are going to treat you the same. But they don't.

All of a sudden, your competitors get a whole lot more confidence. It's harder coming back because you already know how good you are, but everybody else is like, "Aw, he's not really that good anymore." I felt like I needed to prove myself in a different way. So the coming back has been the hardest thing.

T&FN: What was the "different way" you had to prove yourself?

Johnson: The main thing was, I had to learn all over how to run for 3rd-place. For so long, I ran for 1st-place and that's all I knew how to do. When you fall down, you aren't ready for it. People don't understand that after you've fallen down, you try to win a race but realistically, you're not ready to win.

So you have to look at 3rd place, or even 4th; something more realistic for that day. After you reach that goal, you can next shoot for 3rd and then 2nd. But it's not until after that that

you can shoot for 1st-place again.

That was the hardest part: going into some races last year, especially early in the season, admitting mentally to myself that 3rd-place was realistically the best I was going to be able to do on that day.

T&FN: Renaldo Nehemiah—who did one or two notable things in the hurdles—is your agent and Curtis has been your coach your entire career. How did they help you through that stretch?

Johnson: Renaldo helped me a lot, just by being there for me, continuing to believe in me and not brushing me off. He talked with me about some of his experiences and how I just needed to stay strong mentally and continue to believe in myself.

Then, coach Frye was there every day. He's the one who told me that I had to learn to run for 3rd-place. I appreciated him telling me that because I can't imagine anyone else being a coach and telling an athlete to run for something other than 1st.

But he explained it to me and taught me how to set my goals all over again. That helped a lot and also him being patient with me and continuing to believe in me.

T&FN: What's the training atmosphere like in Columbia? World-class athletes are there like you, Terrence and Melissa Morrison. Imagine being a frosh coming in like Lashinda Demus or Tiffany Ross. It must be a positive, supportive atmosphere.

Johnson: I think it is. They get to see us train and that we put our pants on just like they do. We struggle just like they do. When I was a college freshman, I imagined that the Fosters and Nehemiahs of the world were perfect: they could handle any workout and they did everything larger than life.

The frosh coming in see us and realize we're just normal people, if they didn't know that already. We have our flaws, just like everybody else; we need help, like everybody does. They're even better than we are at certain things. So I think it puts a lot of things into perspective and hopefully they realize that if any of us are capable of doing things, then they can too.

T&FN: After you won in Atlanta, you carried your daughter Tristine on your victory lap. She was 3 then...

Johnson: She turned 9 in September. I can't carry her anymore.

T&FN: Does she have any idea who her Dad is and what is his place in the world called running?

Johnson: It's hard to say. Of course, she understands that I run and she wants me to win all the time. But I don't think she fully understands the magnitude of it.

Like in Sydney, when I didn't win, I was told she cried. I didn't see her because I was on the track, so I don't know if she cried because she picked up from others that it was a big deal that I didn't win. Or if she cried because she realized, "This is the Olympics and my Daddy didn't win like the last time."

But in the past couple of years, she has seen me lose more races than I have won. One time she told me, "That's alright. It doesn't matter if you win or lose. I still love you the same." I thought, "Man, that's really cool coming from a child. That says it all." □

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