

Danny Harris

One of the world's great hurdlers talks frankly about his successful escape from cocaine addiction

by Jon Hendershott

Danny Harris set World Junior Records and won an Olympic silver medal as long ago as 1984, ended Edwin Moses' legendary 107-meet winning streak in '87 and was ranked No. 1 in the world in '90, but he scored the greatest victory of his career in '95.

Having beaten a cocaine addiction problem, he was returned to full eligibility and reestablished himself as one of the world's best 400 hurdlers.

Harris got deeper and deeper into drugs as the '90s dawned, although never during the season or when he competed overseas. The Iowa State alum produced a positive cocaine test early in '92 and became the only athlete ever to serve an IAAF suspension for that "recreational" drug.

The positive test, during the '92 indoor season, forced Harris to face his addiction. The renowned 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous and coaching/moral support from coach Bob Kersee helped him pull his life away from the abyss he faced.

After Harris successfully completed two drug rehabilitation programs in Southern California,

USATF approved a sentence-commutation in '94, but after only a few meets, his return was short-circuited by the IAAF, which said Harris had to serve the entire 4-year suspension. At year's end, however, the IAAF agreed with USATF, so Harris was back to full stride, literally and figuratively, in '95.

Even though a strained hamstring kept him out of the nationals final and a shot at a Worlds team berth, Harris subsequently won Grand Prix races in Stockholm, Nice and Cologne and clocked a 47.56 in Brussels.

He attends four or five AA meetings a week in Ames, Iowa, where he is working to finish his studies at Iowa State and training under his college coach, Steve Lynn.

Harris, now 30, looks ahead to the fast-approaching Olympic season, for his aim is nothing less than victory in Atlanta. While he doesn't dwell on the past, he knows his Olympic hopes for '96 were bolstered by the lessons learned in years gone by and applied successfully in '95:

T&FN: Is it safe to say that '95 gave you a whole new lease on life, athletically?

Harris: Life is different and, as a result, my approach to running is different: I'm having fun again. To go out and train isn't the burden it had gotten to be back in '91 and '92. Being able to relax, have fun and accept the challenge of the guys out there is really the sweet part.

T&FN: Did finally reaching a No. 1 ranking in 1990, which you once told us was very important to you, subject you to a whole new set of situations and expectations?

Harris: Not really, because the expectation every year, whether you're ranked No. 1 or not, is to win as many races as you can. But making it to the top certainly was a journey. I was ranked No. 2 twice, No. 3 twice and No. 4 once before finally being No. 1. So I had toiled and being ranked No. 1 was something I wanted very much.

T&FN: Is your main goal still to win every race? Or have your goals changed over the years?

Harris: Of course, you like to win every race. To be able to compete against the top guys today for a full season is what it's all about. The No.

1-ranked guy definitely has to earn it on the track.

T&FN: Earlier in your career, you raced Edwin Moses a good deal. What do you feel you learned from racing him?

Harris: Edwin, of course, brought 13 strides to the event, which I had never even thought of doing—and still can't do to this day. But it was wonderful to be behind him and watch him do that.

The intensity he brought to every race, especially the nationals, was remarkable. He was always super-ready at nationals. I admired him for always being in top shape and running what he needed to win. That's a big thing I learned from him and admire him for, and I try to do the same.

T&FN: You have said how disappointing it was to not make the '88 Olympic team. We quoted you in '89 that "poor preparation promotes pain and I don't like pain." Were you poorly prepared in '88?

Harris: I wasn't poorly prepared and actually was right where I wanted to be. But I tore my hamstring about three weeks before the Trials. I ran 47.74 basically on one leg. Every step I took in Indianapolis was measured. I couldn't let go.

To make the '84 team at age 18, I thought even back then if I managed things right, I could run in '88, '92 and '96 and have four Olympic teams. I was bitterly disappointed.

And it wasn't about money or going to Europe. It was about being able to put on that uniform and represent the United States in Olympic competition—which is the single greatest sporting event we have. That's what it's all about.

T&FN: Did the disappointment of missing the '88 team cause you to start dabbling with drugs?

Harris: I don't think missing the team led to drugs. I think I was predisposed to do that anyway. Having real disappointment on the track wasn't something I'd had to deal with too much in my career.

At the same time, I realized it was the Olympic team. The guys who made the team all ran great times, and I ran well myself. So it wasn't like I went to the Trials and didn't compete well.

But having extra time on my hands, not being a part of the Olympic team and not being focused on going to Europe to try to salvage the season, then the more that de-

HARRIS IN A NUTSHELL

Danny Lee Harris was born September 7, 1965, in Torrance, California, and is 6-0/170. Graduated from Perris High School in California in '83. Set 5 World Junior Records in '84, with best of 48.02 still standing.

PRs(with all-time list positions in parentheses): 100—10.5 (9.9w) '84; 200—20.91 '84; 400—45.19 '86; 400H—47.38 '91 (7, x W; 4, x A).

Major Meets: 400H—1)NCAA, 2)OT, 2)OG ('84); 1)NCAA, 2)US ('85); 1)NCAA, 1)US ('86); 2)US, 2)WC ('87); 5)OT ('88); 1)US, 5)WC ('91); 7s)US ('94); 5s)US ('95).

Progression (World & U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	Age	Affiliation	400	400H
'82	16	Calif HS Jr	—	36.15 LH
'83	17	Calif HS Sr	—	35.52 LH
'84	18	Iowa State Fr	45.79	48.02 (2, 2)
'85	19	Iowa State So	45.46	47.63 (2, 2)
'86	20	Iowa State Jr	45.19	47.82 (3, 3)
'87	21	Athletics West	45.88	47.48 (3, 2)
'88	22	Athletics West	—	47.74 (4, 4)
'89	23	Athletics West	45.99	48.27 (4, 3)
'90	24	Nike International	45.36	47.49 (1, 1)
'91	25	Nike International	45.85	47.38 (2, 1)
'92	26	IAAF Suspension	—	—
'93	27	IAAF Suspension	—	—
'94	28	unattached	—	48.18 (10, 4)
'95	29	World Class AC	46.20	47.56 (4, 2)



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get in touch with what's going on with me in terms of my disease, where I am and I can make any corrections necessary in my day-to-day living.

T&FN: Coach Kersee also gave you great support, didn't he?

Harris: Yes. I went to work with Bobby at a time when I was starting to have problems. But he stuck with me through my entire suspension. He really walked the last mile with me in every phase of my recovery, both on the track and off.

I'm just proud and happy to have been associated with him for the two years I was. A lot of work we did together reached fruition at the end of this past season, in Cologne and Brussels. I just think he's a great coach—and a great man.

T&FN: During '95, what were the reactions of people to having you back?

Harris: The only reaction I really cared about was to be treated fairly in terms of securing a lane in the "A-list" meets. Also making sure I had performed well enough to earn that lane. Those were the only real concerns I had.

When I was out, I got faxes from a couple of meet promoters that were really inspirational to me during my recovery. They said that when I got myself straightened out, I had a lane in their meet. That made all the difference in the world, as far as my being able to come back and hold my head up and not worry about anyone else's opinion of me.

But everyone I spoke with was glad to see me back. Believe me, in a lot of races, I had a lot of people rooting for me who I could actually hear. That made me feel good, too.

T&FN: Did any one race give you the feeling of truly "being back," in a physical sense? Or is that still to come?

Harris: When I ran in Monte Carlo, even though I finished 6th in 49.29 and crunched the last hurdle, I felt I put together six really good hurdles. I felt the kind of rhythm where I could just relax and go with it.

It was a very fast pace and I blew up at the end. But that race let me know that if I could get out like I did that day and maintain and finish well over the last hurdle, it would put me around 47.7. That race showed me it was real, I was back and I would have the chance to run very fast before the season was over.

— continued —

structive behavior became a factor.

T&FN: In your wildest imagination, or nightmare, could you ever have thought of yourself as an "addict" to anything? You openly identify yourself that way now.

Harris: I feel the scariest thing about drugs is when you lose control. It's real, but when you recognize it for what it is and stop kidding yourself, then doors open up to you.

Believe me, I went with the drugs and it's not a pleasant way to live. For a long time, I didn't see it with myself, even though people around me saw it. It didn't make that much of a difference to me until it was put to me and I accepted the situation. Only then was I able to start finding my way back.

T&FN: Did your positive test in '92 save you from yourself?

Harris: In some ways it did: being shown in that way that I had to deal with it. It wasn't a statement someone put to me. It was put to me that there was solid evidence I had done it. The natural inclination is to fight it, at the same time you know you're standing on the brink of disaster.

But to be able to take help from a different source, other than me being able to admit it to myself, that was a good thing. It was a Godsend, because it was time for me to stop

and that's how it was put to me to stop, by failing that test.

T&FN: What was the hardest part of your treatment and recovery?

Harris: I feel that anybody really can benefit from incorporating the 12-Step program into their life. But for me, the hardest thing was being and remaining honest with myself about drugs. Also, not kidding myself and not having any delusions that even though it's three years behind me, if I was to do it again, I'd be right back where I was.

I also had to accept the losses that came with the positive test: the relationship with my shoe company, the home I had bought, personal relationships. Probably the single hardest thing for me to accept was, "The sport is something I can't do because I've got a problem." Once I was able to accept that, recovery was possible.

T&FN: AA must be a great source of support.

Harris: Yes, AA is great. It's very strong in Ames and I make several meetings a week. I feel I get exactly what I need every day that I go. Someone says something, or someone shares a thought, and it makes me think about where I was, where I am now and what I had to do to get here.

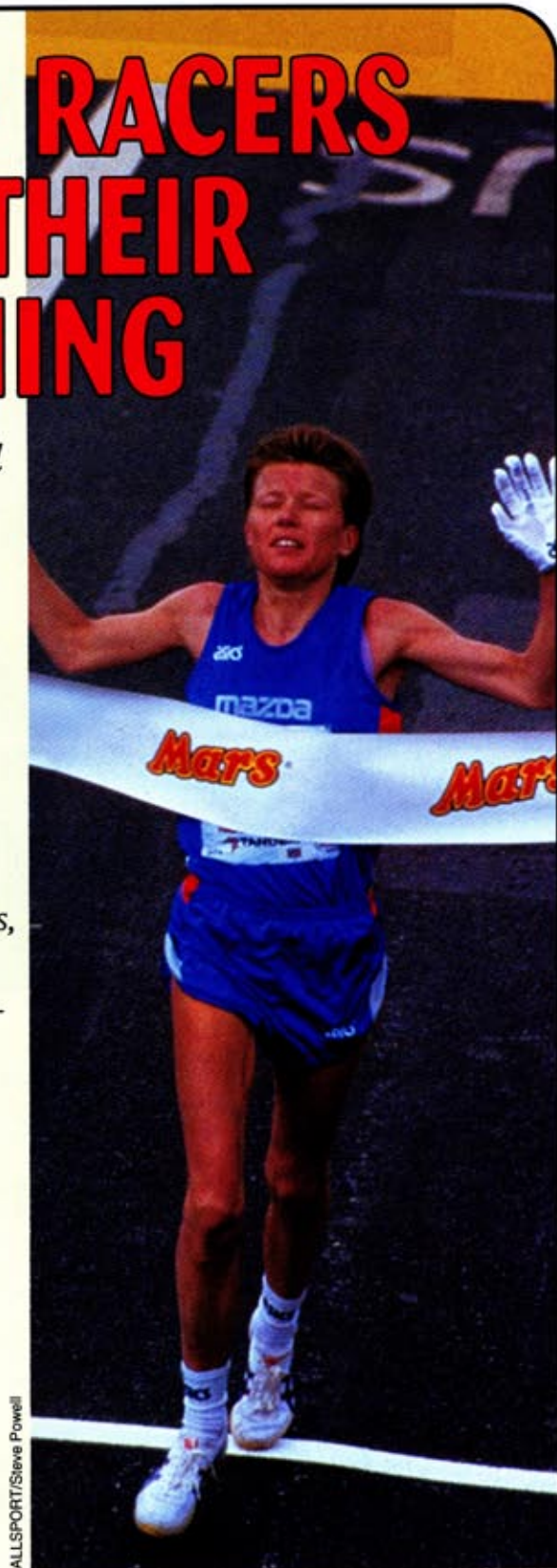
It's a constant reminder; an hour where I can

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HARRIS — continued:

T&FN: Did you view '95 as a springboard to 1996 or just as a season unto itself?

Harris: It was one season unto itself. I needed to look no further ahead than the next date circled on the calendar. I tried to approach each meet one at a time and relearn what I had forgotten, as well as just compete at a high level. The 47.56 being my third-fastest seasonal best over 10 seasons speaks volumes. It definitely will help me a great deal psychologically for '96.

T&FN: You had a strained hamstring that hampered you at the nationals. Was it another big disappointment to miss that final and also a chance at the World Championships?

Harris: I just thought that it wasn't my time and that there was something better out there for me. It hurt to see that opportunity go by. At the same time, I tried to put it in its place and move on, and not check out like I did in '88 and let the rest of the European season go.

T&FN: Is any disappointment on the track actually small potatoes when compared to what you have overcome? Or are they just too different?

Harris: I actually think they both apply: putting things in perspective and being able to enjoy the good feeling of competing and winning. That compared to doing what I have to do every day to stay focused and centered in my personal life.

It all rolls up into one. AA allows me to be centered and stay that way. To be able to handle the highs as well as the lows, on the track and in life in general. That's the greatest thing I've gotten from the program: to have some balance in my life.

That's one thing that's different now: in the past, not making that team would have bothered me for the rest of the '95 season. But today, I understand why I didn't make the team and it makes it easier to carry on.

T&FN: In fact, you do have a whole new perspective on the sport and life itself.

Harris: Track has been so good to me. It has afforded me the opportunity to travel and see some of the beautiful things that this world has to offer in terms of art and history. But the sport is such a small part of life.

But for sure my motivation is to win a gold medal in 1996. Everyone who has wished me well and welcomed me back, I appreciate all of that. But in order for me to stand on top of that podium in Atlanta, there are certain things I must do.

I must be clean and sober. I must have a plan of attack. And I must execute it. If I don't do those three things, it all will be pretty hollow to me.

The new perspective I have now is really great. It's working and it's due, in large part, to the 12-Step program. Without that, there would be no comeback, no day-to-day living. There would be no sanity; life would just be out of control. □