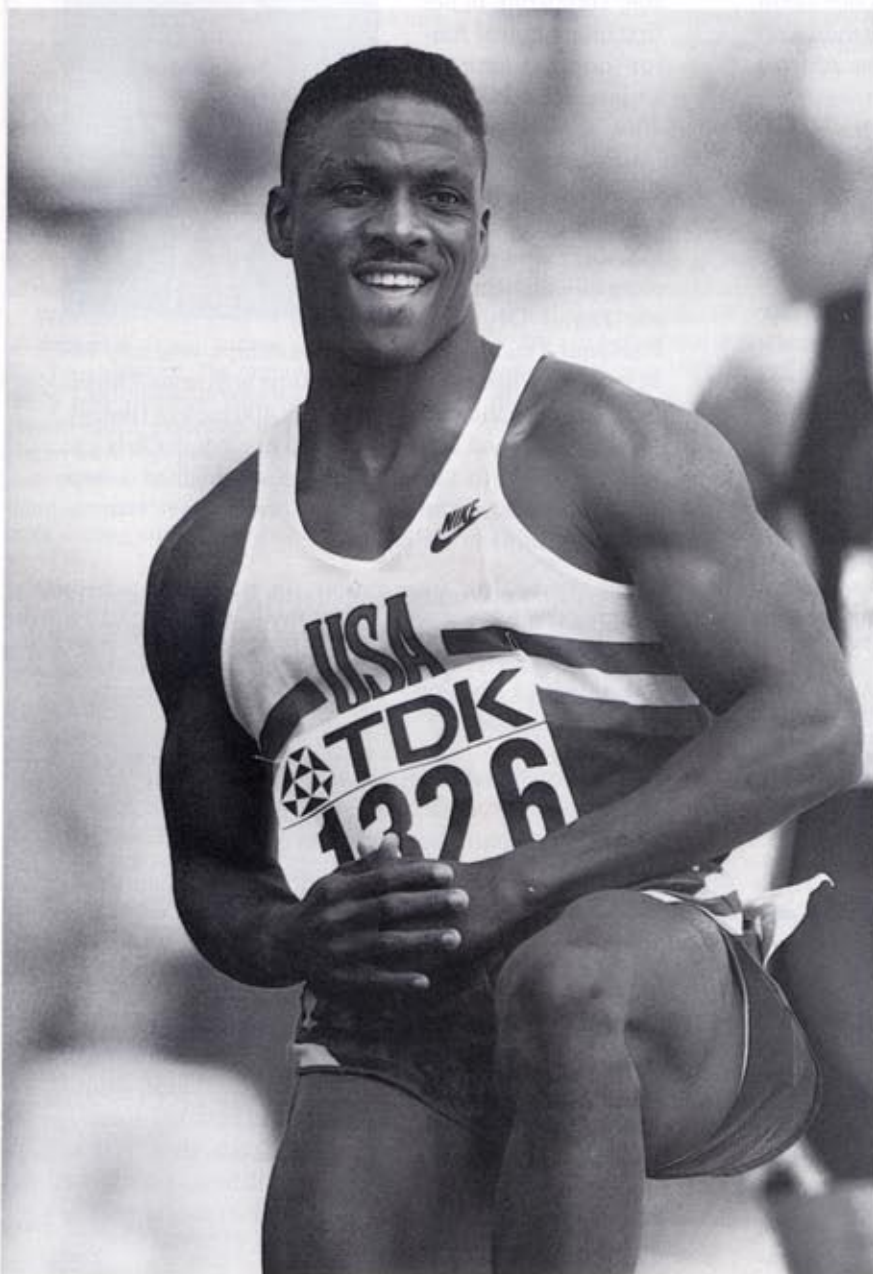


# Dennis Mitchell



Claus Andersen/ALLSPORT

by Jon Hendershott

Dennis Mitchell has never had a better year running the 100 than he has enjoyed in 1994.

That's a pretty heady credential for a sprinter who has World Ranked every year since 1988, owns bronze medals from the past two Worlds as well as the Barcelona Olympics, and has run on the six fastest 4 x 100 relays ever.

But Mitchell has never before enjoyed the consistency he has produced this season. Heading into the GP Final, he had run five sub-10.00 centuries, including two PRs of 9.94. Throughout the year, he repeatedly met his major foes and beat them all at least once.

This self-testing is the whole point for the 28-year-old Gainesville resident. Mitchell is a man who lives for giving the absolute best out of himself—and he has

become a global star thanks to both his speed and his enthusiastic, entertaining manner of displaying it.

But make no mistake: Mitchell is all business when it comes to producing his best efforts in the biggest races. He shared his thoughts from his Paris hotel on the eve of the GP Final:

**T&FN:** Even though you've run so well, some stories this year called you sprinting's "forgotten man." Do you feel you're somewhat overlooked in the whole scheme of the sprints?

**Mitchell:** I've read some of those articles, but personally I don't think I'm "forgotten." If you look at most major races back to 1988, and even '87, I've been there. I personally look at that as a great accomplishment. I don't look at the situation in terms of how much publicity I get, or if I'm put on a poster, or did I get a headline in the paper the next day. Those aren't the types of things that drive me as an athlete. I don't focus on that.

**T&FN:** What is a prime source of motivation?

**Mitchell:** I'm driven very much on a spiritual level—I like to be at one with the people who are working around me, like my coach, my trainer, my family. I like everybody to have the same frame of thought that I have. That has a lot to do with my inner strength—which is probably the biggest key for me to run as fast as I want to and achieve the physical things I want. I have to be at peace in my mind.

**T&FN:** From another angle, you have a collection of championship medals which is second to very few. But would a major 100 gold medal really establish you in the minds of everyone as one of the true elite?

**Mitchell:** Maybe, but things like hardware just don't drive me for some reason. Sure, it's nice to have, and when you get those things, a lot of other nice things come with them.

I'm really a very simple type of athlete. I run most of the time for my self-satisfaction and those closest around me. If my family and people supporting me are satisfied with what I'm doing, and I'm satisfied, then I'm happy with it.

**T&FN:** You ran a PR 9.94 in Oslo, then matched it in Durham. After that race, you were quoted that it was the "easiest 9 seconds I've ever run." Was that your best race ever, or have you run it yet?

**Mitchell:** My best race hasn't been run yet. When I put that race on the track, people will be shocked at what the time is. But that Durham race was the easiest 9.9 I've ever run. I didn't feel at all that we were on that type of pace. When I crossed the line, it was shocking. I just ran the race so easy, almost like I was just doing a stride in practice.

**T&FN:** Isn't that often how it happens, though, the fastest efforts feel the easiest?

**Mitchell:** Coaches can tell you that and so can athletes who have set records. But until you actually experience it, it's kinda hard to believe. You train so hard and you concentrate so hard on the mental aspect

of your race. Those things come very, very hard. Then for somebody to say that the exact opposite approach will drive you to be the best you can be, sometimes that's hard to accept.

**T&FN:** Another aspect about your '94 season is that you've been willing to meet anybody, anywhere, and most often in the big races. You must hate to lose, but are losses as bitter when you know you're meeting the top guys and putting yourself on the line?

**Mitchell:** No, they're not. No matter how a season goes, I'm always going to get in those big races and try to be the best I can be. Whether a guy has more wins over me or less, I'm always going to go out there and compete. That's what I train for.

My style always has been, whenever the gun goes off, I'm going to be there. I'm going to give you every opportunity to beat me—so that I can

**"It's our nature as sprinters to be a little cocky, self-centered and to jaw-flap some. It's all just part of the game."**

have every opportunity to beat you.

**T&FN:** *Something else about your career, too, is that you've run in the last three WR races. Unfortunately you haven't won them. . .*

**Mitchell:** . . . But I've been in 'em! I've had front row seats.

**T&FN:** *So what is it like to be in races like those, where you're just fractions of inches behind times that define the "world's fastest human"?*

**Mitchell:** Well, the first time it happened [Leroy Burrell's 9.90 in '91], I was just happy to be a part of it and get a PR myself [10.00]. That was a very exciting moment.

But the latest time in Lausanne was like, "Aw man, I got another one run on me!" It was pretty disappointing to say to myself, "Dennis, you keep putting in all this hard work, but then somebody else sneaks in there and gets it on you."

But my attitude *hasn't* changed in terms of wanting to achieve that. I still believe my day for a record will come, just like it has for other guys. I'd say maybe 40% of the 100m is luck, whether it's going to be your day or not. There are so many different factors that coincide with you running fast.

But I also believe I'll have my day, too. The main things are to remain patient and believe in myself. I believe my day will come—and if I ever find that I don't feel that way, it'll be time for me to get out of the sport.

**T&FN:** *Maybe it's because everybody is aiming for the same goals, but the rivalries in the sprints in recent years have gotten very intense. Do guys really dislike each other, or is that hair-trigger atmosphere just part of the event?*

**Mitchell:** It's part of our nature as sprinters to be a little cocky, self-centered and to jaw-flap some. It's all just part of the game.

Being a sprinter could be the most exciting thing that can happen to a person. It requires so much of a person to actually get out there and run 100m. So everybody has to find their own way, and their own niche, in order to get through it.

I mean, look at the theory of how you're supposed to run fast over 100m: you have to come out of some metal starting blocks in a crouch that human beings don't naturally do. You have to be in your most relaxed state—mentally and physically—and yet run faster than any other human on the planet.

Actually, the thought of it—the process of running fast—requires pretty much an eccentric type of person. I have to reach the highest levels of my mental and physical capacities in about 10 seconds. And I do it repeatedly against my highest level of competition.

So you have to be sort of eccentric even to just accept that kind of lifestyle. All people are ec-

centric in their own ways and this new generation of sprinters is another facet of that.

**T&FN:** *Is it possible that the guys today who are more demonstrative are displaying some of the emotion they have invested in the race?*

**Mitchell:** I think so. The types of antics I have on the track allow me to bring the fans into it. I want the people in the stands out on the track with me. When I'm out there preparing for my race, I want them to feel and experience the same things I do.

That way, they can identify—but very few people can identify with the 100 if they just go out and watch the race. It's over too fast—it's hard to get into something that's over in 10 seconds.

But we're beginning to put on a show that's maybe 10 minutes long. Fans get in our minds and our hearts; they feel the nervousness that we feel. We're actually becoming characters that people can relate to.

**T&FN:** *Maybe best of all, the sprints have become so competitive.*

**Mitchell:** You know you can't count out anybody. Any eight in any race in the world will be a contender. And I think that has a lot to do with the type of characters the 100 is producing now. I mean, how many years have you had six or eight guys who could run under 10-flat and win the race? It's been a long time since we've had competition of this magnitude.

**T&FN:** *Is it that everybody knows how competitive the event is, so they want to give themselves every edge they possibly can?*

**Mitchell:** Exactly. When we get in a big race—the Olympics, Worlds, Zürich, whatever—we all know that everybody has been doing the exact same things. Everyone is the same type of physical athlete.

The only thing we can work on to beat the others, before the gun goes off, is in the mind. So a lot of what we do out there is meant to take our opponents out of their game, while at the same time putting our own mental game at its height.

**T&FN:** *And everyone tries to do the same thing, which can create really an electric atmosphere?*

**Mitchell:** Yes, and that's what's happening in the 100 today. It's becoming a spot-light event and people want to get to the meet early enough to see us in our warmups. That 10 minutes before the race oftentimes is as exciting as the race itself.

**T&FN:** *You have become the box-office guys.*

**Mitchell:** Yes, that's what we're doing now, even though we didn't purposely try to do it. But people are starting to be attracted to everything—like the green outfit I wear. Yeah, "The Green Machine."

People are starting to relate to that now. They're learn-

ing that there are a lot more facets to the 100 than just going out and running fast. I think a lot of people have had that stereotype of 100m sprinters.

So people sort of disassociated themselves from the event because they thought, "Well, everybody can't be a 100m runner." But we're getting people to realize that there are different areas of the 100 we go through that they can relate to.

They are starting to identify with us; to characterize us. When we achieve that, we'll be as big as WWF wrestling!

**T&FN:** *Another side of you is that you have been a fixture on the U.S. 4 x 100 team for a number of years. What is your special talent on that third leg?*

**Mitchell:** When I'm out there, I think, "Nobody else in the world can run this turn as fast as I can." Every time I run it on a U.S. team, I have that feeling.

I'm just out-of-body when I run the turn for the U.S.A. I can see myself running around that turn! If you run a turn very tight, you aren't going to run very well. You have to be super relaxed.

I get myself as relaxed as I possibly can by sort of pulling myself out of my body and making myself feel like I'm a little puppet going around that turn.

Actually, I feel many times like I run more relaxed and technically sound when I'm running that turn than when I'm running the 100 itself. Sometimes I even feel more comfortable—when I'm running that turn, I feel like I'm running faster than any other human being ever has.

**T&FN:** *What else is special about the relay?*

**Mitchell:** Something else is, by the time the relay comes around, your work is done. It's more relaxing because, to us, the relay is a lot of fun. And it's a different type of challenge from

**MITCHELL IN A NUTSHELL**

Dennis Allen Mitchell was born February 20, 1966, in Havelock, North Carolina, and is 5-8/154. Graduated from Edgewood Regional High School in Atco, New Jersey, in '84.

**PRs**(with all-time list positions in parentheses): 100—9.94 (8, x W; 6, =12 A) ('94); 200—20.09A ('89); 400—45.26 ('86).

**Major Meets:** 100—4)US Jr ('83); 1)US Jr ('85); 4h)NCAA, 7)US, 6)OF ('87); 3)NCAA, 2)OT, 4)OG ('88); fs-h)NCAA, 2)US ('89); 3)US ('90); 3)US, 3)WC ('91); 1)OT, 3)OG ('92); 2)US, 3)WC ('93); 1)US ('94).

200—4)US Jr ('83); 3)US Jr ('85); 4)NCAA, 5s)US ('87); 1)NCAA ('89); 5)US ('90); 6)US ('91); 7)OT ('92).

400—2)US Jr, 1)PAm Jr ('84).

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

Year	Age	Affiliation	100	200	400
'82	16	NJHS So	10.50w	—	—
'83	17	NJHS Jr	10.47	21.90	46.30
'84	18	NJHS Sr	10.56	21.06	46.02
'85	19	Florida Fr	10.21	20.49	45.99
'86	20	unat	10.33	20.52	45.26
'87	21	Florida So	10.12 (x, 8)	20.36 (x, 10)	45.89
'88	22	Florida Jr	10.03 (5, 3)	20.29	—
'89	23	Florida Sr	10.03 (3, 2)	20.09A (6, 3)	—
'90	24	Mazda TC	10.16 (9, 6)	20.33 (7, 5)	—
'91	25	Mazda TC	9.99 (3, 3)	20.63	—
'92	26	Mazda TC	10.04 (2, 1)	20.20 (10, 6)	46.02
'93	27	Mazda TC	9.99 (4, 3)	20.25 (x, 7)	—
'94	28	Mazda TC	9.94	20.63	—



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## MITCHELL — continued:

the straight 100.

Plus, the crowd always expects the U.S. not just to win, but to set a World Record in the relay. So that also takes me to another level, when people want to see that type of race.

Finally, there's the team aspect. You want to give those other three guys everything you've got. You don't want to go back in the paddock area and hear anybody say, or read later, "Well, Dennis Mitchell ran the slowest leg and that probably cost the U.S. the World Record." You don't want to be the one squeaky cog in the machine.

**T&FN:** *What would you ultimately like to achieve in the 100?*

**Mitchell:** I'd be foolish if I didn't say I would like to set a World Record by the time I retire. That's a big goal, but it isn't a goal that possesses me. If God's going to bless me to achieve that, then it will happen. But I'm not going to try to run a record every time I compete. You just can't do that.

The most important thing I want to achieve in the 100 is just satisfying myself. When I leave the event, I want to be able to say, "I've done everything I could do in it."

I also want the people who have supported me to be able to say, "OK, Dennis, there's nothing else you can show us now." I want to be able to say I've given it everything I have—and no matter what that translates into, I want to be happy with that.

**T&FN:** *Can you be hard to please?*

**Mitchell:** Yeah. We know that we as individuals are our own toughest critics. A lot of times, the people around me—my family, friends, coaches, trainers—are satisfied with what I'm doing. But I'm not.

So sometimes it's a battle between myself and my support people. They say I may push myself too hard at times, because I'm not satisfied with my output.

One thing I hate to do when things are going well is to rest. I have a lot of conflict with my support team about rest when I'm running and training well. My coach might say, "We're taking off tomorrow," and I'll say, "I don't want to take it off! Nobody else in the world is taking it off. I want to keep working out!"

Even on holidays, it's hard for me to take days off. Probably the only easy day for me to take off is Christmas Day. I'll take it off because I know everyone else is—but the day before and the day after, I want to get out on the track.

**T&FN:** *Once the time comes to retire, is there any special way you want Dennis Mitchell to be remembered in the history of the 100?*

**Mitchell:** If I achieve all I want to in the event—not including a World Record—I'd like people to be able to say, "Dennis Mitchell was the greatest ever." If I could get even just five people to say that, I'd be happy.

I'd love to have someone say, maybe in a documentary when I'm 50 years old, "Dennis Mitchell was the greatest 100m sprinter ever." That would make me feel good.

Basically, I want to go out with the same state of mind as I came in. I came in wanting to achieve self-satisfaction and I want to go out having done that. □

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