

Derrick Adkins

by Jon Hendershott

Even though he had made the last two World Champs finals and just missed the '92 Olympic team, 1994 was the year when 400 hurdler Derrick Adkins really arrived on the world stage.

From mid-June in Knoxville—where the 24-year-old Georgia Tech grad won his first U.S. title—to Sestriere at the end of July, the Long Island-born Adkins compiled 10 major wins over some of the event's biggest names. He produced eight sub-48s on the year, just one short of the record.

On July 4 in Linz, Austria, Adkins made the biggest declaration so far in his career: a 47.70 clocking which turned out to be the year's fastest.

And even though Adkins won just one more of his six races the rest of the summer, only eventual No. 1-ranked Samuel Matete beat him more than once. Adkins earned a global No. 2 rating, and his initial U.S. No. 1.

Adkins was pleased by his achievements, but he also knows the championship meets now loom on the horizon.

After a 6th in Tokyo and 7th in Stuttgart, Adkins wants nothing less than victory in Göteborg. No road to a gold medal ever is an easy one, but in '94 Adkins proved to himself that he can make the journey:

T&FN: What factors were behind your strong showing in '94?

Adkins: I think the main thing was more focus on my part. In previous years, I still was in school and working on getting my degree. It was pretty tough trying to juggle both track and school, but I finally got my degree in engineering in June of '93.

After that, starting in the fall of '93 and carrying through to the '94 season, I focused just on training. Once I dedicated myself totally to track—became a full-time athlete—I started to see the results.

T&FN: You grew up watching Edwin Moses run the hurdles. Did you ever dream that one day you might lead the event he once did?

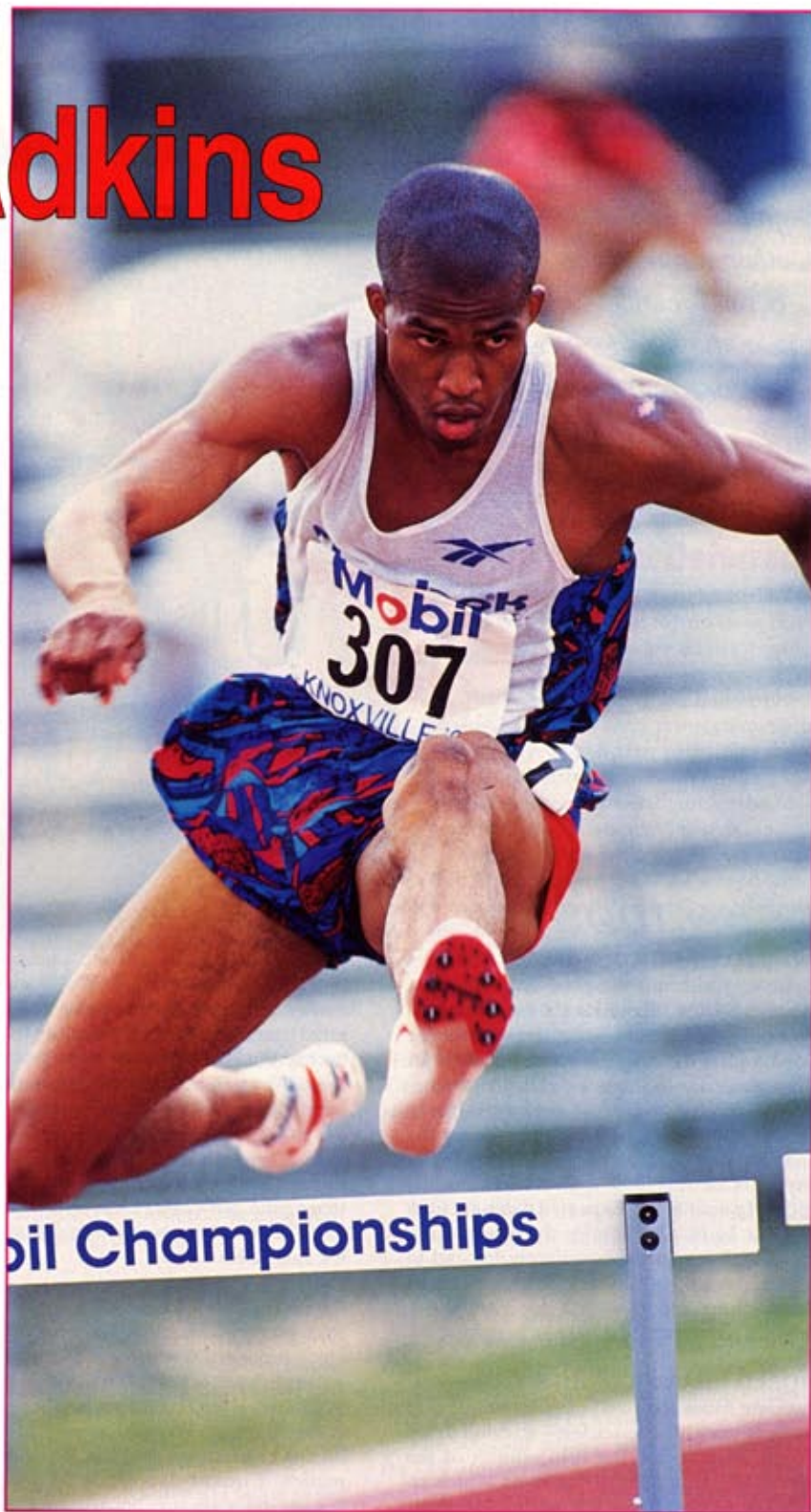
Adkins: [laughs] No, not really. I ran track mainly for the enjoyment of it, not in terms of getting to this level. I remember seeing Edwin run in '84 and I couldn't believe how fast they all moved over the first five hurdles.

I was in the 8th grade and hurdling at that time; running like 65 for the 400H. I was just stunned. I said to myself, "I'll never be that fast—ever." I admired Edwin, and Danny Harris and all the other 400 hurdlers. I trained hard even then, but I just never thought I'd get to this level.

T&FN: You barely were a teenager then, but you have improved progressively. Now the hierarchy has gone from Moses, Harris, Andre Phillips and Kevin Young to you.

Adkins: Back then, my main thought was about winning the Nassau county meet! I thought if I could do that, I'd be so happy. Then you do that and next you think about winning the state meet. Then you want your name to be on the high school lists in T&FN. You just take it one step at a time.

T&FN: Your first coach was your father, who also ran the hurdles. Did he direct you toward them, or let you choose for yourself?



Adkins: Actually, he directed me toward the hurdles. At that age, around 8th grade, every kid wants to run the 100. Of course, I did, but I never won races.

My father saw how dedicated I was to track and told me, "If you want to win, you should try the hurdles. Even though you're not as fast as some kids, if you hurdle with good technique, you can beat them." So he taught me how to hurdle and I've been doing it ever since.

T&FN: In reaching the top in '94, was there one race that made you feel you really had arrived?

Adkins: I'd have to look at my entire season collectively, rather than just one race, as most important. Personally, though, my most

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inspiring race was when I ran 48.06 in Lucerne at the end of June.

That was the race where I told myself I could run in the 47s. Lucerne was a small meet and didn’t have a real big crowd. Oleg Tverdokhlebs was the only other really top hurdler in the race.

But the 48.06 felt so easy, I couldn’t believe it. It really was inspiring. I told myself that in my next race I would run 47—and in my next meet in Linz, I PRed.

T&FN: You had a nice string going: a 48.31 PR in Bratislava in early June, then your first U.S. title. Then the easy-feeling Lucerne race before Linz. And you followed up with sub-48s in Lausanne and Lille.

Adkins: That was a very important week in my season. I ran the 47.7 and beat Winthrop Graham, but I think some people were wondering, “He hasn’t raced Samuel Matete or Stéphane Diagana yet. Let’s see what he does against them.” So I felt hard-pressed to repeat what I had done in Linz, but it all worked out well.

T&FN: Lucerne and Linz seemed to lay the foundation for your great stretch of nine victories, up to Monaco. It did turn out to be a long season, but what was the biggest lesson you learned from it? Perhaps that you have to develop more strength to carry you through a long year?

Adkins: When I went to Europe after nationals, my goal was to run under 48.3 every time I stepped on the track. That would put me under my old PR.

I wasn’t looking to run just one fast time. I really admire athletes who are consistent, so I wanted to see if I could run a near-PR every race. I was very excited to achieve that goal.

But something else also happened: when I did get that one fast time, I felt... happy. I think I got too happy. You’ve really got to have a mindset of being hungry to win races.

When I came home after the July meets, I still trained hard, but the mentality wasn’t there. I was pleased; I was patting myself on the back after exceeding my expectations.

So I think the biggest thing I learned was not to start congratulating myself until the season is finished and I’ve gotten what I really want to get out of it.

Plus I know the goals now will be of a much higher level than just running under 48.3 a bunch of times. The goals will be things like the World Record. Until I do that, I shouldn’t be happy.

T&FN: Kevin Young always talks about stride patterns, different rhythms, changedowns and

technical stuff like that. Does all that go through your head in a race, or do you try to make the running as instinctive as possible?

Adkins: I wish it was instinctive. It would be nice if it was. But I have to concentrate on it. When I don’t concentrate on it, I fall—like at the New York Games last year or the ‘92 NCs.

I guess at times like those, I felt I had practiced so much, the running had become instinctive. I stopped thinking about, “How many steps am I supposed to take now? What leg am I supposed to lead with now? What hurdle am I at?” I just ran the race, but it didn’t work out that well.

I really have to know: “Alright, this is the seventh hurdle coming up; I have to switch to my right leg; I have to take 14 steps. Then the eighth hurdle comes up, so I have to switch to my left leg and still take 14 steps.”

It’s a tremendous advantage for hurdlers like Edwin or Kevin, because when you don’t have to switch legs, you don’t have to think as much. You don’t have to face as much difficulty at the end of the race.

T&FN: So do all those technical elements, which aren’t present in the high hurdles, make the 400H so difficult to master?

Adkins: Definitely. Integrating all those elements makes it a very difficult event to master. In the high hurdles, there may be just as much concentration and technique going on, but the fatigue factor isn’t there.

You don’t have to think at the same time you’re dead tired. When you’re tired and your legs are getting heavy and you wonder if you can get your legs up and over the last two hurdles, you still have to think about technique and all those elements.

T&FN: Your coach, Grover Hinsdale, felt ‘94 also was important because, as he put it, you “cleaned out a lot of mental garbage.” Is that a reference to those times in the past when you fell in big races?

Adkins: Yes, I think so. Coach Hinsdale always has had more confidence in me than I’ve had in myself. But I also proved to myself this past year that I could get beyond things like that.

T&FN: How do the hurdles exemplify who Derrick Adkins is, as a person?

Adkins: When I first started doing the 400H, everybody always talked about how difficult the race was. On TV, they always said it was the most grueling event in track. That in itself made me want to do it.

That’s the type of person I am—I like to be counted on to do something that’s real hard. My guidance counselors in high school said engineering was tough; students flunked out of Georgia Tech’s program all the time. So I said, “Let me do that.” I love a challenge.

T&FN: Then once you get into a new area, whether engineering or the hurdles, you are presented with a whole set of new challenges.

Adkins: You also have to find the

new challenges. Then once you accomplish goals, you immediately set new ones because you want to always keep rising.

T&FN: So after your ‘94 season, how do you see yourself in the event—do you still have to prove yourself?

Adkins: I do feel like I still have to prove myself. Even though I was one of the top hurdlers in the world this past year, ‘94 wasn’t an Olympic or World Championships year. People could say, “Kevin Young took it easy. Danny Harris was just getting reinstated and wasn’t in his best shape. That’s the only reason Adkins won.”

T&FN: Is that a limited viewpoint, since you earned your position with your performances?

Adkins: It may be a somewhat narrow view, but I also give credit to views like that. Even though I ranked No. 2 in the world this year, I still look up to athletes who have medals from the Worlds and Olympics. I still envy them because I want to be a medalist at those meets, too. I feel it’s imperative to prove myself in those seasons.

T&FN: That’s what you did in ‘94, prove you deserve recognition among the very best.

Adkins: Another thing about the ‘94 season: it was based on consistency. It centered around athletes being able to repeat. Like Dennis Mitchell got a lot of respect because he kept coming out and running 9.9s in the 100.

In ‘95 and ‘96, the way you look at the sport won’t be based on consistency on the circuit, but on doing well in one race. So you have to put the next two seasons in a totally different perspective and adjust yourself toward that outlook.

T&FN: Winning championship medals is a big goal, but how about time goals? Is the World Record a viable goal for you?

Adkins: Actually, I haven’t thought at all about time goals. I just know I want to run much faster than previous years. I’m thinking more in terms of place goals—I want to get the gold at the World Championships.

ADKINS IN A NUTSHELL

Derrick Ralph Adkins was born July 2, 1970, in Brooklyn, New York, and is 6-2/170. Graduated from Malverne High School in New York in ‘88.

PRs(with all-time list positions in parentheses): 100—10.48; 110H—13.69; 400H—47.70 (10, x W; 5, x A).

Major Meets: 400H—4)US Jr (‘88); 5)NCAA, 1)US Jr, 1)Pan Am Jr (‘89); 6)NCAA, 7)US, 1)OF (‘90); 2)NCAA, 3)US, 1)WUG, 6)WC (‘91); 8)NCAA, 4)OT (‘92); 2)US, 1)WUG, 7)WC (‘93); 1)US (‘94).

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

Year	Age	Affiliation	110H	400H
‘87	16/16	NYHS Jr	—	52.65
‘88	17/18	NYHS Sr	14.05	50.71
‘89	18/19	GaT Fr	14.27	50.25
‘90	19/20	GaT So	—	49.53 (x, 9)
‘91	20/21	GaT Jr	13.86	48.60 (7, 4)
‘92	21/22	GaT Sr	13.69	48.64 (9, 4)
‘93	22/23	Reeb	—	48.39 (7, 2)
‘94	23/24	Reeb	—	47.70 (2, 1)