

T&FN INTERVIEW

Gail Devers

Trying to serve two masters, the world's best combination sprinter/hurdler must balance speed with rhythm

by Jon Hendershott

Honest, Gail Devers never planned to win two Olympic 100s and a World Championships century by a grand total of 0.01 seconds. It just happened that way.

Devers and Merlene Ottey produced identical times in Atlanta, duplicating their same-clocking 1-2 at the '93 Worlds, which came a year after Devers had won the '92 Olympic title by all of 0.01 over Juliet Cuthbert.

Devers' well-chronicled life is the stuff of movies—and was portrayed in a recent made-for-TV film. From hurdling in the Seoul Games, to her illness from and triumph over Graves' disease, to a pair of world 100H titles but no Olympic hurdles medal, to retaining her Olympic 100 title on the same Atlanta night as companion Kenny Harrison won the triple jump (T&FN, October).

But the 29-year-old Los Angeles resident keeps the outlook of a realist, always candidly assessing both triumphs and setbacks before moving on toward new goals:

T&FN: Any idea why you have won your big 100 titles by such tight margins?

Devers: [laughs] I sure didn't plan it! I've never really given it any thought—and being asked now, I can't say why it has happened that way. It's just one of those things; just the way the competition comes out.

T&FN: Bobby had told you that you could become the second woman—after Wyomia Tyus—to win consecutive Olympic 100s. Was that historical aspect important to you?

Devers: It was. Bobby and I had talked about it before and I met Wyomia around '93. I knew of her accomplishments but then actually meeting her, I thought, "I really want to do that, too. I want my name in the record book next to hers."

But I also knew it wasn't going to be easy—especially in the 100, where you do just one thing wrong and go from 1st to 8th. But it was something I really wanted to do. I wanted to make history.

T&FN: We saw three different sprinters named Devers race in Atlanta this year: 6th at the May Grand Prix, 2nd at the Trials and then 1st at the Games. What were the differences in you between those meets?

Devers: First, it was a process of getting myself back into sprinting. I said to Kenny it was amazing how much your body can "for-



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get." Being away from sprinting for two years, I forgot for the most part what it felt like to sprint.

At the GP, I just needed to get out there and run. Nothing else really mattered. It was just seeing where I was, seeing what my body would do and how—and if—it was going to respond at certain points in the race. I needed a point to build from in training. I had to get that first one over with. From there, I could see my mistakes, go back and work on them in training.

The point was to keep progressing. My training always is a progression. My goal wasn't to go into the GP meet and be in tip-top shape. But at that point in my training, it was time for me to run a race.

T&FN: But there was no reason for you to be ready at that time to run, say, a sub-11.

Devers: Yes and especially coming back from the hamstring injury I had last year. Plus, I had strained the hamstring shortly before the

meet, although nobody knew about that. So I wasn't really sure how much I could push myself and not risk injury. An important thing the race told me was that the leg could handle racing at that pace.

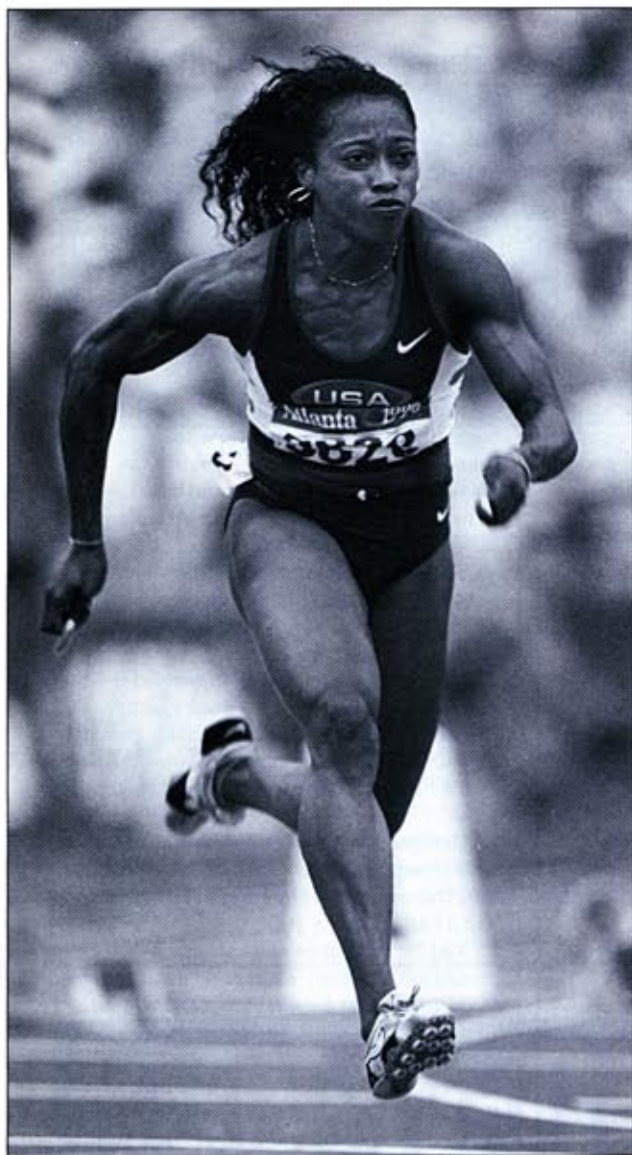
T&FN: And you certainly didn't want a recurrence of the injury that held you only to hurdling in '95.

Devers: Definitely—because a main thing to me is that I really wanted to sprint this year. It's hard to sit out and watch an event you love and not be able to participate in it.

It can be a matter of choice; you decide, "I'm not going to do this." In '95, I wanted to sprint but there was no way I could. So I didn't want that to happen again.

But even though I ran only 11.20, I felt my training was on schedule. Bobby kept telling me that. Regardless of what other people said, we were on our timetable. In our minds, there was no doubt.

T&FN: So a month later you made the team and



in another month you defended your Olympic title. Can you describe your feelings after the finish at the Games? It was another very tight race. Did you feel you'd won?

Devers: I really didn't know. I never know where I am in a race. But it did seem to me that everything about the Olympic 100 played out like in Barcelona—lane assignments, the heats I was in. It just felt like Barcelona again. Bobby felt that destiny was being played out.

So it wasn't a surprise, really. And the times being so close reinforced that it felt like '92: standing, waiting for the announcement of someone's name, but not knowing whose it would be. Yet my first thought was that Bobby was right: it was destiny.

T&FN: In another kind of replay, you weren't able to win a medal in the Olympic hurdles. Was that a disappointment?

Devers: No, it wasn't. Going into this Olympic season, I definitely was aiming at three golds. I felt this would be my year for both the 100 and hurdles. The relay would be an extra, something I really wanted to do in '92 but didn't get the chance to do.

In my first round race in the hurdles, I struggled to get my form back. It's always

difficult for me to go from the sprint to the hurdles, to get back into that rhythm.

By the semis, I felt fine. I did what I was supposed to do: go out for seven hurdles and then shut it off. At the seventh hurdle, I knew the race was mine. I knew I could have moved again, but I didn't. I shut it off because that's what I was supposed to do. I felt like I was ready for the final.

T&FN: And how did the final go?

Devers: I've heard speculation that it was because I was in lane 8 and not among the main people in the race, who were in 3-4-5. I don't say that because it was mainly me: I just didn't get out.

When the gun went off, I didn't. It wasn't that I wasn't ready, or hadn't had a lot of hurdles races during the season. I felt ready to run a fast time. It didn't happen and there was a reason.

I look back to '92: I was ready then but it didn't happen. So that became my motivation for coming back. You have to have a reason for doing something. You always have to set goals and when you reach those goals, then you set new ones. Medaling in the Olympic 100H has been a goal of mine since my first Olympics in '88.

It didn't come out the way I would have liked.

Yet I can't be that disappointed, especially this time. People told me, "How can you not be disappointed?" First, I try to keep everything in perspective, and in Atlanta I finished higher than I did in '92—and I finished on my feet. Plus, I was able to come back and win another gold medal in the relay.

T&FN: That must have been a tremendously rewarding win.

Devers: For me, it was very exciting to be a part of a team. Track is such an individual sport, but in the relay you're working with three other athletes you compete against all the time. It's four individuals coming together as a team; working together for one common cause. That was a great feeling.

T&FN: Bobby has called the 100 a "ballistic" event, while the hurdles is a "rhythm" event. Can you explain how tough the transition is for you between the two?

Devers: For me, the 100 is all-out speed, power and quickness. At the Trials, I struggled in the first couple of rounds of the hurdles, coming back from the 100. At the practice track, Jackie

came over to me once and said, "Gail, you can't run 10.90 speed in the hurdles. You have to settle down and get back into your hurdles rhythm."

If I'm running 11.20 pace, I still have to get the rhythm set: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Then I can pick it up, once I can control the rhythm. That's the problem I have: because I have so much speed, I blast out of the blocks.

So we changed my block starts between the 100 and the hurdles. Now I have two different settings for the starts. If I still use a sprint start for the hurdles, I'm up on top of the hurdles too fast. And I end up very close to the hurdle anyway, later on in the race when I utilize my speed. The biggest problem I have is being too close on the first hurdle.

T&FN: Some observers claim that your height of 5-4...

Devers: I usually tell people I'm six-foot four, but actually I'm 5-3.

T&FN: Aha! Well some feel your flat speed—which is so much greater than any other world-class hurdler—even things out so your height doesn't become a disadvantage. What do you think of all those analyses?

Devers: I've heard different comments, too. As far as my height, when I do step-overs of hurdles in practice, I have to lower them to 30 inches. And I'm still on my toes to make sure I clear the hurdles.

I see it this way: if I were taller and still had the same amount of speed, I'd plow right through the hurdles. I'm only "short" because my torso is very small. I've got long legs, but I

DEVERS IN A NUTSHELL

Yolanda Gail Devers was born November 19, 1966, in Seattle, and is 5-3/120. Graduated from Sweetwater High School (National City, California) in '84 and UCLA in '88.

Major meets: 100—2)US Jr, 3)PAm Jr ('84); 6)NCAA ('85); dnc)NCAA, 5)US ('86); 2)NCAA, 4)US, 1)OF, 1)PAm G ('87); 1)NCAA, dnc)OT ('88); 2)OT, 1)OG ('92); 1)US, 1)OF, 1)WC ('93); 1)US ('94); 2)OT, 1)OG ('96).

200—6)NCAA ('85); 5s)US ('87).
100H—6s)US Jr ('84); 6)NCAA ('85); 4)NCAA ('86); 3)NCAA, 2)OT, 8s)OG ('88); 1)US, 2)WC ('91); 1)OT, 5)OG ('92); 2)US, 1)OF, 1)WC ('93); 1)US, 1)WC ('95); 1)OT, 4)OG ('96).

LJ—nq)NCAA ('85); 2)NCAA ('86); 2)NCAA ('88).

PRs: 100—10.82 ('92 & '93) (=7, x W; =4, =9 A); 200—22.71 ('87); 400—52.66 ('87); 800—2:11.07 ('82); 100H—12.46 AR ('93) (12, x W); 400H—59.26 ('85); LJ—22-2 1/2 (6.77) ('88); TJ—42-6 3/4 (12.97) ('86).

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

Year	Age	Affil	100	100H
'83	16	Calif HS	11.69	—
'84	17	Calif HS	11.51	14.32
'85	18	UCLA Fr	11.19	13.16
'86	19	UCLA So	11.12 (x, 7)	13.08 (x, 7)
'87	20	UCLA Jr	10.98 (7, 2)	13.28
'88	21	UCLA Sr	10.97 (x, 6)	12.61 (x, 2)
'89-'90		(did not compete)	—	—
'91	24	W Class AC	11.29 (x, 9)	12.48 (2, 1)
'92	25	W Class AC	10.82 (3, 2)	12.55 (1, 1)
'93	26	Nike	10.82 (1, 1)	12.46 (1, 1)
'94	27	Nike	11.12 (10, 5)	—
'95	28	Nike	11.04 (x, 10)	12.61 (1, 1)
'96	29	Nike	10.83	12.62

GAIL DEVERS

guess they're not long enough. Bobby teases me, "If your upper body matched your lower body, you'd be 6-4. If your lower body matched your upper body, you'd be 4-2."

On the disadvantage side, because I get up on them so fast, I feel like I'm jumping the hurdles instead of hurdling them. But speed is an advantage because my footspeed will get me through even if my mechanics aren't the best they could be. Improving my hurdle mechanics is something I want to work on next year, while still keeping my speed and even getting faster.

T&FN: *Something else media observers have talked about are supposed rivalries between athletes. Are those "rivalries" just manufactured by the media?*

Devers: I always feel that talk about any supposed rivalry should be confined only to the track. I don't see a problem with the idea of "Gail and Gwen are rivals—on the track." We're all rivals as far as good, head-to-head competition. Anytime we all step on the track, there's going to be great competition. That's the bottom line, what the sport is about.

But to take that rivalry aspect to a personal level, to say one person doesn't like another person, I would disagree. There's not one athlete I dislike—I can find something good in

everyone and that's just how I am. On the track, that's my job and I'm there to take care of business. Once the race is over, it's over and I'm back to me as a normal person. Competition stays on the track.

T&FN: *Of your three Olympic titles, is any one most satisfying? Or are they equal to you?*

Devers: They have equal importance. The '92 gold was my first Olympic medal and first in the 100. I remember standing on the victory stand and, because of my illness in previous years, feeling so thankful to be able to do it, knowing all I had come through.

On the victory stand this year, one of my biggest realizations was when the flags were raised and the national anthem was being played. I thought back to '92 and how I was the Lone Ranger up there. But in Atlanta, there were two American flags up there.

That's why I just smiled and smiled. It was such a great feeling that there were two of us up there. Who knows, in 2000 maybe there'll be three American flags.

When you see the flag being raised is when you feel you've done it for your country. You feel so proud, and I felt especially proud in Atlanta because there were two American flags.

T&FN: *Then there was the team aspect for the relay.*

Devers: Yes, it was a total team effort, it was something I really wanted to do—and it was fun. There were four of us on the stand and we had a ball.

T&FN: *It could be said that you have a lot of possibilities for future goals: go for a third straight world title in the hurdles next year; win a third Olympic 100 in 2000. But, in fact, what future goals do you have, either timewise or honors?*

Devers: I don't set goals for honors, other than at the Olympics this year where I really wanted to come back and defend my 100 title. Mainly, my No. 1 goal is just to stay healthy. I just wanted to end my season being healthy, then come back and run the indoor season.

T&FN: *Now the big question: when was the last time you filed your nails?*

Devers: [laughs] I just brush them. I have coats of polish on them. There might be four or five different layers of color.

T&FN: *How long have they been growing?*

Devers: Two years and three months. This is the longest I've ever let them grow. My mother always had long nails and I was jealous of her. I even told her when I was a child, "I want long nails like yours." She would say, "Well, if you keep them out of your mouth, maybe they'll grow."

T&FN: *Valerie Brisco didn't have long nails, but Flojo did. So is it required that a Bob Kersee-coached Olympic 100 champ have long nails?*

Devers: [laughs] I came out of high school with long nails. The first time Bobby met me, he said, "Oh no, not another one!" But he also told me from the beginning, "If they ever get in the way, you will cut them—or I will cut them for you." But they've never bothered me.

The only change I've ever had to make because of my nails is with my start. I put my knuckles down. People have asked if that throws me off. But for me, starting that way is fine. □

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