

T&FN INTERVIEW

Gwen Torrence



Doug Wallis/Des Moines Register

by Sieg Lindstrom

The Gwen Torrence of 1990 ran about as fast (11.28/22.82) as the college junior Gwen Torrence of 1986, a far cry from the 10.91/22.02 Olympian she had been in 1988.

Ever since she had given birth on November 25, 1989, and started a return to sprinting, abdominal weakness related to maternity had played havoc with her form, and the 1991 World Championships were fast drawing near.

For an athlete without a support system, regaining championship fitness might have been a tall order. Torrence, though, had a husband, former 10.26 sprinter Manley Waller, who was willing to rise each morning at 5:30 to train with her, plus a mother and a mother-in-law willing to assist with tiring infant care.

Additionally, she took strength from a group of athletes—none of them of world class—with whom she trains in Atlanta and technical advice from coach Loren Seagrave. The result in Tokyo was a silver medal in each sprint.

An engaging conversationalist who grew up

in Atlanta housing projects, Torrence says she once cared only for clothing, hairstyles and nightclubbing with her girlfriends. Now, she says, track means something as well:

T&FN: What do you have to say about those two silver medals in Tokyo?

Torrence: One of them was expected. The other wasn't. In the 100, I really felt like I was going to win. I thought I was going to get a gold medal. I wasn't disappointed about the silver, but I worked to get that gold medal in the 100.

T&FN: Why were you surprised about the 200? After all, you were 5th in that event in the '87 World Championships.

Torrence: I just hadn't run many 200s and I just wasn't prepared for it like I was in '87, '88. In '87, I was coming off my collegiate season, where I had run some 200s. In '88, it was Grand Prix and I had run it more. I just wasn't as focused on it because it wasn't Grand Prix this time.

T&FN: Did you feel you had a shot all along in the Tokyo 100 or only as the rounds progressed?

Torrence: I had trained for the World Championships and I felt like that was when I was going to be ready. I did a lot of strength work and no speed work so I felt like the races I was running were off strength and that where my speed was going to kick in was at the World Championships.

T&FN: Yet Merlene Ottey was a huge favorite.

Torrence: I felt like if anybody had a chance to beat Merlene it would be through rounds. When you run rounds, that doesn't give anybody an edge; it's anybody's race, and I felt like it was going to be my race when I got through those rounds.

I just happened to pull her each round, and I got closer and closer to her. And I wasn't all out. I just wanted her to know my presence was there, and it worked. She looked over twice, in both races, to see where I really was. I was shutting down 10, 13, 14, 15 meters before the finish line and I knew I had a chance to win.

T&FN: Did you feel bad that Krabbe beat you?

Torrence: I never feel bad about losing because it's a sport and I am a very good sportsperson. If I win or if I lose, I know within myself that I have worked hard.

T&FN: How was Tokyo different from your first World Championships experience in Rome?

Torrence: In 1987, I was there as a relay alternate. Evelyn got hurt so that moved me up to run [the 200]. All I remember was being in Rome and having a chance to run in front of so many people. When I finished 5th, I was very happy. I had PRs, I was happy; I didn't know what was going on.

I forgot I was there. I think I saw it in the paper. I was like, "I wasn't in the World Championships in '87." I just totally forgot because I didn't know the significance behind World Championships.

T&FN: You were unhappy to be left off the 4 x 100 team in Seoul. Didn't you also take issue with the order?

Torrence: In Seoul, Evelyn was getting out good, but when it came time for them to run, Flo ran completely over her. Experience didn't pay off with that. I felt like that was my reward. Even though they won, it was a very slow time.

If East Germany didn't put Göhr on anchor leg and put Heike on anchor, they would have won. Göhr didn't make it to

the final; she only ran 11.13. If we were in any reach of her, she was going to be walked.

And the same thing probably would have happened in Tokyo. I didn't like the relay order, but that was the order. If Merlene was within 10m of anybody that didn't finish in the top of those finals, she was going to walk them.

That's the message to our American team: they've got to change the legs. They've got to stop giving people legs that have always had those legs and they've got to give them to the best four people that are ready at that time.

T&FN: *How would you describe your temperament?*

Torrence: I think a lot of my competitors take me lightly because I'm not a temperamental person. I don't think they have much respect for me because I'm always laughing, I'm always talking, I'm always joking. If you saw me, you would say, "This girl is not serious about track." It's something I do for 10 seconds, 11 seconds, 22 seconds.

T&FN: *You spend a lot of time training.*

Torrence: Yes, but after the race is over, it is over. There's no need to hold a grudge because some person beat me; there's no reason to gloat because I won. If I can have a victory lap, after that victory lap is over, the race is over and I'm back to that normal person where I want to be. I can room with my competitors and say, "Girl, that was a good race and your butt got out." I can have a normal conversation with them.

T&FN: *Some sprinters rise to world class levels very quickly. Your progression has been more slow but steady. Why is that?*

Torrence: I think it's just a matter of progression over time. A lot of people feel that when people have immediate success like that, it's drug related. I also have a belief in that. When people just burst onto the scene and there's not a progression, I closely relate it to drugs.

T&FN: *Do you think the sport is being cleaned up?*

Torrence: No. It could never be. No matter how each governing body tries to put it, it is not. And I'm on the inside, so I would know more than someone on the outside. They're going to think that it is; I'm not saying that the governing bodies are not putting forth the effort, because they are, but where there's a will there is a way. There are athletes that have to cheat; there's no way around it.

I don't think people are taking steroids anymore because that's the most de-

tectable thing; they'd be stupid if they did. The other thing that they're taking does not register on the testing yet.

T&FN: *Do you mean human growth hormone?*

Torrence: Yes. It's something else plus the human growth hormone pills,

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and there are a lot of people still taking it. And I'm not going to just point at the Europeans, because there are some Americans who are cheating also.

You just wait until the Olympic Trials come around and people who've been off the scene for three and four years, they come back in '92 and... boom! They're out there and I don't trust them as far as I can throw them.

T&FN: *How do you feel about that?*

Torrence: It makes me mad but I know what it takes to win. It takes a lot of hard work, and I've just got to keep working harder and harder and harder. I feel like a clean person can win. You just don't need drugs to win. You might need drugs to break World Records but not to win.

T&FN: *What is your biggest motivation?*

Torrence: I guess time. I don't think I can break the World Record [10.49], and that's not putting myself down. I would like to run 10.7. These days 10.7 might get you 2nd but that's a goal of mine. I think 10.7 is realistic. I think 10.6 would come with age. But at my age I think 10.7 is a goal and 10.6 is approachable. High 10.6, not low 10.6.

T&FN: *Is there anything else that keeps your interest up?*

Torrence: I think what keeps me going is that I'm a survivor for my mother and some of my family members, and it feels good to finally give them something back since I didn't have anything.

Track is a way for me to survive—I grew up in the projects and now I have my own house and my own car—and as long as I can stay in the top, or at least halfway in the top, I'm going to do it.

T&FN: *Do you think you can hang in as long as Ashford has?*

Torrence: God! Every time we think it's time for her to go, she pops right back up that next year. I'm going to try. I feel like if Evelyn can do it, everybody else can do it. It takes a strong-minded person to get out there on that track for as many years as she has done this.

T&FN: *How do you stay mentally engaged in training?*

Torrence: My family situation is excellent, which makes me train better. I read something where Sergey Bubka said that he needed to live in a calmer atmosphere than in the Soviet Union so that he could train harder. That's where it starts and that's been excellent for me.

We don't have to worry about the financial woes of child care because my mom doesn't charge me, my mother-in-law doesn't charge. They are very supportive of me.

T&FN: *Did you have any role models when you were growing up?*

Torrence: Other than my mother, I never saw anybody I said, "I want to be like that person." My mother had good values, and I didn't understand where she came from until I got grown—I was about 20, 21 years old.

I just demanded a lot of things from her when she couldn't give them to me, and she had to go all out of her way to give things to me. I appreciate that a lot more now. But I always said I wanted to be something or do something. I've always wanted to. Even when I was in the projects. So I really didn't have anybody to look up to because I didn't know what was out there. I just knew something was out there for me.

Gwendolyn Lena Torrence was born June 12, 1965, in Atlanta, Georgia, and is 5-7/125. She graduated from Columbia HS (Decatur, Ga) in '83 and competed at Georgia from '84-'87. She competed for Nike South for most of the '91 season, and now has signed with Mizuno.

Major meet finishes: 100: '84—8)NC; '85—2)NC, 7)TAC; '86—2)NC, 7)TAC, 2)OF; '87—1)NC, 5)TAC, 1)WUG; '88—3)OT, 5)OG, '91—2)TAC, 2)WC.

200: '84—4h)NC; '85—3h)NC, 5)TAC, 4)OF; '86—2)NC, 7)TAC, 2)OF; '87—1)NC, 7)TAC, 1)WUG, 1)PAG, 5)WC; '88—3)OT, 6)OG; '90—7)TAC, '91—1)TAC, 2)WC.

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

Yr	Age	100	200	400
'82	16/17	—	24.2	—
'83	17/18	11.92	24.34	—
'84	18/19	11.41	23.54	—
'85	19/20	11.40 (x, 9)	22.96 (x, 7)	—
'86	20/21	11.30 (x, 8)	22.53 (x, 4)	53.1r
'87	21/22	11.09 (x, 5)	22.40 (5, 3)	51.60
'88	22/23	10.91 (4, 3)	22.02 (6, 2)	51.1
'89	23/24	11.12 (x, 10)	—	—
'90	24/25	11.28 (x, 5)	22.82 (x, 5)	—
'91	25/26	10.96 (3, 1)	22.07 (3, 1)	51.65 (x, 9)