

# Bershawn Jackson

by Jon Hendershott

*He is known around the world as "Batman." But Bershawn Jackson has used dominating 400 hurdling this season to thrust his true name among those in the forefront of the sport's major stars.*

*The 27-year-old Miami native won 4 of his 6 Diamond League races leading up to the Brussels final. Before that string, Jackson won his fourth U.S. title with a season-pacing 47.32, just 0.02 off the PR that won him the '05 world title.*

*And he has reached world class despite standing just 5-7 (1.70). But first, there is that nickname:*

**T&FN:** So where did "Batman" come from?

**Jackson:** When I was a kid, the other kids said I had big ears and I would fly when I ran. When I first got the nickname, it was kind of like an insult, them saying I was like a bat. But I was an active kid and always into things, so it stuck with me since I was 10 years old.

**T&FN:** Were you doing any sports then?

**Jackson:** I did track from when I was 10; summer track in Miami. Me and Tiffany Ross [now Williams]. I ran the 200 and 400 then. I started running the hurdles when I was 12.

Aladynamed Sylvia McMillan started me on them. She was a real parent-figure for me. She passed away when I was 15, but she got me to try the hurdles. I did crazy stuff anyway, so I did them and I

ended up being pretty good.

**T&FN:** So how tall were you at that time?

**Jackson:** I was pretty small. I'm 5-7 now, but coming out of high school, I might have been 5-6, but probably more like 5-5. And I didn't have very long legs.

The main thing about the hurdles for me was that, being an active kid like I was, they looked fun. You just ran and jumped and I said, "Let me try that." Sylvia said, "Just run, take three steps between them and keep going." I said, "OK, cool." So I did it and I thought it was good.

I started out with the 80-meter hurdles, which were like low-hurdle height. I won the Junior Olympics when I was 12. Then I moved to the 200-meter hurdles when I was 13 and I won at them. But then I hit a time when I didn't win. I don't know if my body was maturing quicker than I could handle or what. But I got a lot of butt-whoopins. From age 13 to about 17, I didn't win a single race.

When I turned 18 as a senior in high school, I caught up with my maturity and I had a phenomenal senior year: 35.39 in the 300 hurdles, which was second-fastest ever at that time. And 50.00 in the 400s, which was the third-fastest ever. I won the Junior nationals and got 3<sup>rd</sup> at the World Juniors.

The next year, '03, I won the U.S. nationals and made the Worlds team. In '04, I got 4<sup>th</sup> in the Trials by 0.06, then in '05 I won the world championship. So that span of four years was amazing. I went from not winning, coming in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, to being world champion.

**T&FN:** Besides the physical maturity, what else do you think was behind your improvement?

**Jackson:** I've always been a hard worker and had a strong work ethic. My senior year, things just turned around for me and went my way.

My college coach George Williams always told me that things would pay off for me. I would say, "Hey, coach, when is all this work going to pay off for me?"

He would answer, "Be patient, it will happen."

**T&FN:** Was it hard to be patient?

**Jackson:** Yeah, it was because the guys I had beat up on when I was 9 and 10 started killing me. Those guys I had always beaten were running so much faster than me.

But to this day, those guys who beat me then have never beaten me again. So I learned patience after a while, because I've always been a competitor.

And I've never made being short a burden. We're all created equal. They might have a little more height, but I have heart. That's how I look at things.

**T&FN:** What has it been like to have great competitors like Kerron Clement and Angelo Taylor to run against throughout your career?

**Jackson:** It's been up and down; a slippery slope for me. My second year as a pro, I won Worlds and ranked No. 1 in '05 and '06. Then things completely turned. I was injured all

## Batman In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Bershawn Dwayne Jackson was born May 8, 1983, in Miami, Florida; 5-7/150 (1.70/68)

•**Schools:** Central HS (Miami) '02; St. Augustine's '06; now represents Nike

•**PRs:** 200—21.03/20.46w ('04). 400—45.06 ('07) (45.41A '10). 400H—47.30 ('05)

•**Coaches:** George Williams (St. Augustine's, pro); Gary Winkler (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 1)GWI '01; 1)GWI, 3)NatSchol, 1)USJr, 3)WJr '02; 1)US, dq-h)WC '03; 1)NCII, 4)OT '04; 2)US, 1)WC '05; 2)US '06; 3sf)WC '07; 1)OT, 3)OG '08; 1)US, 3)WC '09; 1)US '10

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** 10, 3 '03; 3, 1 '04; 1, 1 '05; 2, 1 '06; 5, 3 '07 (also x, 9 in 400); 3, 3 '08; 2, 2 '09

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of '07 and didn't make the final in Osaka. In '08, I was injured and got the bronze medal. Last year, I got hurt just before Berlin and got another bronze medal.

I went from being No. 1 in the world—dominant and in the 47s every race—to running 48s. But it's a blessing that it happened to me because it helped me appreciate times like now all the more.

**T&FN:** *What were the injuries you had?*

**Jackson:** My hamstrings. I think what caused the injuries was running 47 after 47 in race after race, but I didn't know the responsibility of taking care of my body. My body was just really tired. Running all those 47s felt easy, but it took a toll so I started getting injured. And

during a season, instead of getting treatment and getting healthy, I just started back training with the same injuries. So I kept getting hurt over and over.

**T&FN:** *And since you competed since you were 9 or 10, had you ever really had any time off?*

**Jackson:** No, none. In high school, I ran cross country and then track. Now I understand the importance of rest. Before this season, I took two months off.

I also think the whole Olympic thing really drained me. I worked so hard and what hurt me in Beijing was that I overdid myself. I trained way too hard, so when I got to the big dance, I was really tired. I just needed to stay more relaxed. At the biggest meet, I disap-

pointed myself.

**T&FN:** *Was Beijing the most disappointing race in your career? Or was it the '04 Trials?*

**Jackson:** Beijing was the most disappointing because you don't get many opportunities like that to be an Olympic gold medalist. Every chance I get like that, I take advantage of it. So I was really disturbed to perform like I did.

I mean, I know I'm blessed because only three guys in the world can say they were medalists that day and I was one of them. But overall, I should have left everything I had on the track in that race and I didn't.

I think if I had run with the same attitude I had in Helsinki, or in a Diamond League meet like Prefontaine or adidas... it was just a competition, with the same guys. Just at a bigger meet, but it was the same guys I had met before.

**T&FN:** *Was the Helsinki Worlds win the most pleasing race for you, so far?*

**Jackson:** It was, but it's between that one and the '08 Trials. I won the Trials by going from 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup>. But my ultimate goal for next year is to win the Worlds gold medal. It's been five years and I have to win that gold medal.

Going into this year, I also said I wanted to be No. 1 in the world again. I worked hard towards that and, God willing that I stay healthy, I'm going to rank No. 1.

**T&FN:** *Your tactic seems to be to get out fast over the first 2-3 hurdles. Then you tend to drop back and the other guys get ahead. But starting around No. 7, 150 meters to go, you speed back up. Is that just the Batman style of running?*

**Jackson:** It is. Over the years, I've learned things about running the hurdles, like to get out quick. Kerron and Angelo run 13 strides, but if I tried to keep up with them, I wouldn't have anything to come home with. So I tend to back off a little bit, just to have enough kick to come home.

Other guys might run 20-point for the first five hurdles, but I can't run that fast. Besides, I've always felt it isn't how you start but how you finish. I've always been a great finisher.

**T&FN:** *Does running 15 strides [see p. 24] dictate how you run the race? Or does that consistent stride pattern just fit into your race plan?*

**Jackson:** Definitely and I've been more consistent this year since I went back to 15. I might go through slower than everyone else, but I'm also aggressive. I'm not too far behind. As long

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## Bershawn Jackson

as I'm within striking distance, I feel I can pull it off every time.

**T&FN:** *How do you view your top opponents like Kerron and Angelo? And younger guys like Johnny Dutch and Jehue Gordon? Are they all just motivating forces for you?*

**Jackson:** Every generation is going to have a young guy or guys come up. When I came into the game, Félix Sánchez was on top and I was that young kid trying to come up and take over. A guy like Gordon is amazing, running 48.26 last year at 17 years old. Dutch is barely 21 and he ran 47.63.

So they're amazing and that's why I work hard, because nothing is going to be easy. I think the easiest thing I ever did was win in Helsinki. I've known since then that I would have to work hard for everything I wanted.

**T&FN:** *What made Helsinki "easy"?*

**Jackson:** I was fresh out of college. I'd had a really great year and I wasn't nervous or scared. I was 22 and on my high horse. So it came really easy—also because I didn't have a doubt in my mind that I would win.

**T&FN:** *It sounds like you don't mind having the target on your back now after your great season this year.*

**Jackson:** No, I don't mind. I'm one of those guys who, when I'm on the track to race, I'm cool. It's good to see everybody and let's go. If I win or lose, I tell everybody congratulations. Some of the guys when they lose, they're kind of grouchy. But I just use a loss as motivation.

**T&FN:** *What is your ultimate goal in the event?*

**Jackson:** The first thing I'd like to do this year is to PR. I just need the right meet. I could have PRed at nationals this year, but there was a strong headwind in the last 100.

But my ultimate goal overall is to run a sub-47. I really think I can run that. I'm a 20.2 200 runner, a 44 quartermiler and I'm confident I can run a sub-1:50 800. So I've got all the tools I need to run sub-47 in the hurdles.

That's my ultimate goal. I'm not talking World Record [46.78] because that's kind of difficult. But who knows what can happen on a good day.

**T&FN:** *You'll run the Continental Cup?*

**Jackson:** Yes. I talked with my best friend Sanya [Richards-Ross] and she ran her 400 PR [a 48.70 AR] at the '06 World Cup in Athens. The Continental Cup is going to be in Split, Croatia, and it's supposed to be nice and warm there. She told me that that's the meet where I could set a PR.

Since she set the American Record at the World Cup, I'm going to go ahead and see if I can do it. It will be my last meet of the season

so I'll give it everything I've got, from start to finish. If I die, I die. But I'm still going to go for it.

**T&FN:** *Finally, almost since you first emerged nationally, you have worn a headband in races and inside it you have written a name.*

**Jackson:** My uncle, Richard Jackson, died of cancer in '99 and he was a huge booster for me. He had always been there, telling me I had a lot of talent. So I wear the headband in memory of him. I feel that every time I run, he is with me. He isn't here to physically see me run, but he's watching me from above and he sees me be successful.

**T&FN:** *His memory is another huge motivator—*

## Jackson's Magic Number: 15

A big key to his dominating summer, Bershawn Jackson says, was his switch back to running 15 strides the entire race, using his natural left-leg lead. rather than 14 strides and alternate leads.

He explains, "I was struggling doing 14 early in the year, so when I went to U.S. nationals, I told coach Williams, 'I don't want to do it. I'm going back to 15 the whole way.'

"In the first round, I went 15 and jogged 49.58. Then in the semis, I did 48.36 jogging. I told George, 'I'm ready.' That's what I needed to do, go back to 15 steps. So I ran 47.32 in the final [0.02 off his PR], then 47.62 in Lausanne, 47.78 in Monaco and 47.65 in Stockholm.

"So I've run 47s consistently, like I used to. Going back to 15 steps was the key. I mean, I'm short, but when I tried to do 14, I really had to stretch my stride and it took away from my speed."

Jackson's former coach, Gary Winckler of Illinois, thought he should try to run 14s. Jackson says, "He analyzed my races in Beijing and he felt I took almost 30 more steps than everyone else. His thing was to minimize my steps, which worked. Gary is a hurdles technician. I was really good at doing it with Gary and it worked out pretty well.

"But then Gary retired and I went back with coach Williams in Raleigh. I didn't work on 14 steps half as much with him as I did with Gary. So I got kind of rusty. Also, since I ran the 400 indoors this winter, I didn't have a lot of time to work on the hurdles.

"I struggled, so I told coach that it might be a good idea to go back to 15. He agreed and the heats at nationals was the first time I did it. Ever since then, I have run very well."

Has Jackson ever tried to manage 13 strides between barriers, like many of his taller rivals do? "I tried to run 13 one time in practice," he laughs. "I got to my 13<sup>th</sup> step and the hurdle was still so far away. I just couldn't make it."

*as are your two daughters.*

**Jackson:** Yes, especially the oldest Shawnte, who is five. If I don't wave at her after a race, she will say, "Daddy, you didn't say hi to me." She likes to run too; she's always crying to run. So I took her to a meet and she ran a 100 with kids age 9 and under and took 2<sup>nd</sup>. She was really fast. □