

T&FN INTERVIEW

by Jeff Hollobaugh

"World's fastest man." There—somebody had to say it. You can talk to Leroy Burrell for an hour and he won't use the words himself. It's very clear—to himself, to others—that he's the man right now, but there's no false modesty involved.

After six years of training at the University of Houston track with the world's best collection of sprinters, Burrell, now 24, knows never to count anyone out. After all, people counted him out when in high school he recorded bests of only 10.43 and 24-2½. And they counted him out as a Houston frosh, when he tore a cruciate ligament in his left knee at the Southwest Conference meet and lost more than a year of competition.

But the Pennsylvania native made up all that lost ground—and much more. In his all-conquering 1990 campaign, he won 19 of 22 century finals, defeated Carl Lewis at the Goodwill Games, and copped his first No. 1 Ranking.

As we spoke with him, he had just returned from a brief indoor season in Europe that saw him take the World Record for 60m.

Now back in Houston training, he's planning a campaign that may see him both sprint and long jump at the World Championships. In telling us how he's finding life at the top, he speaks quietly, sincerely, and laughs frequently. But at no time is he as animated as when he talks about his sister Dawn, the leading hurdler/long jumper in the prep ranks. "I enjoy watching her get the recognition I didn't get in high school," he says.

T&FN: What has changed for you since leaving Houston's team?

Burrell: Nothing really. I still practice with the team, and work with coaches [Tom] Tellez and [Mike] Takaha. Nothing's changed, and that's something I planned. There's just a certain attitude there that I like. I just need to keep working at improving; all of us have seen people go to No. 1 and then not even rank again.

T&FN: How do you feel about your indoor season?

Burrell: I surprised myself. I knew I was in shape to compete, but I didn't think I was in shape to run really fast—and I still don't. I can't complain at all—but I still have a long way to go.

T&FN: Tell us about the day you set the World Record in the 60.

Burrell: I just felt good; I was really confident. All day, from the moment I woke up, I was on. I had a premonition I would get it. I got into the blocks, got ready to start, and I still felt fantastic.

T&FN: Was that the first race or the second?

LEROY BURRELL



ALLSPORT/Tony Duffy

Burrell: There have been a lot of different stories about that. I ran the first race, and some of the officials felt it was questionable; that I had caught a flyer. But I just ran; I did what I was coached to do. I didn't hear a second gun, so I just kept going. Afterwards, there was some discussion and they tried to determine whether there was a flyer or not.

All the while I was just standing around, not knowing what was going on. They didn't call it back, so as far as I was concerned, the race was history. But they kept it up, and I just got upset, because there was going to be doubt about the record. So I said, "You want another race? Let's go. I'll run another race."

T&FN: Which was more sound technically?

Burrell: The first one was the best. It was one of the best I have ever run. Everything felt good. I started really well, I drove out of the blocks. I was out quick, I accelerated—everything was quick.

T&FN: Are you disappointed that in the final analysis, your WR doesn't better Ben Johnson's [drug-aided] 6.41?

Burrell: That's kind of hard to say, because I never really shot at anything, like getting Ben out of the books. So I'd have to say no. I think I was happy to prove that you don't have to be a Ben Johnson to set a record. You don't have to be in a race with Ben Johnson, being towed along to set a record.

T&FN: You lost some ground five years ago when you tore a ligament in your left knee. Does it ever bother you anymore?

Burrell: I don't even think about it. . . But you know, to be honest, I think it does affect me a little bit. My left leg is not as strong as my right. Sometimes when I'm working hard and I'm not in real good shape, I tend to compensate. I think it's had a little bit of an effect.

T&FN: In psychological terms, what's been the effect?

Burrell: It's an added edge. Most guys go through their careers relatively injury-free. I started out on a down note. I had to build myself back up. And I think that once you have seen the lows—and I've seen the lows—you no longer get complacent where another athlete might.

Once you get back up, you tend to cherish it more. Other guys, they're working hard, and I'm still able to compete better than they are. I know that in a tough situation, I am able to get more out of myself; I'll find it somewhere.

T&FN: Right now, you're probably in better shape than Ben or Carl. What are your thoughts on the big-money showdown between them, and the fact that they're ap-

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parently leaving behind the No. 1 sprinter?

Burrell: I can't say, "No, I'm not concerned." But I'm not worried. Because they're going to do what they want to do. If they have the race, and I'm not in it, something's wrong. They're trying to create an atmosphere like they had in Seoul. But they're going to have to race me eventually. I'll be there.

T&FN: Even with the Olympics approaching, do you see the health of the sport in a state of decline?

Burrell: It's suffering. Definitely. It's out of step. The athletes are competing in a worldwide arena that occurs in August. Therefore, when you look at our spring meets—there's more competition, more money in the summer. It's more important later on. That's why U.S. track is suffering.

T&FN: In terms of building a fan base, do you think world-class athletes like you should compete at home more?

Burrell: Yes. That's important. I compete in the U.S. in the summer. I think I'll always compete in the New York Games. But as far as running around the U.S. in April and May and competing every weekend, I have to say no. The World Championships are in August. Why should I run in April and June? I don't think that spring meets in the U.S. fit into my program.

But I disagree with what a lot of people are saying. There is potential for the sport in America: look at the Goodwill Games. There were a lot of people there, and they were excited. The sport just has to be marketed.

T&FN: How are you balancing the Worlds and the Olympics in your planning?

Burrell: Of course, the Olympics are a lot more important. But the World Championships is a great springboard. It's a barometer of how you're going to react in

the pressure of the Olympics. It gives you a taste of what is to come. I look at the Worlds as a great graduation to the Olympics.

T&FN: Who do you think your toughest competition for the gold is going to be?

Burrell: Hard to say. I really don't know. You can't count Carl out. He's got more experience than perhaps anyone in history. Mark Witherspoon's tough. He has the ability to get up for the big ones.

I really don't know what Ben's doing. He'll be there; he has the experience. You have to look at all the guys who made it to the finals of the Olympic Games last time. Then you have to look at the guys who weren't there—the unknowns.

T&FN: We have to ask: how good's your sister going to be?

Burrell: I think Dawn's better than I am. I really do. She's got a physique: 5-8 and cut.

T&FN: Do you give her a lot of help?

Burrell: Yeah, I talk to her every three days or so. It's really hard for me to tell her what to do, because I hardly ever get to see her. I think I saw her compete in high school twice. When I'm at home, I try to work with her, but she might not feel like it then. Once she came down to Houston for camp, but I was in Europe.

She's a fierce competitor, more fierce than I am. I'm looking forward to watching her compete in college. I don't think a lot of people know she hasn't made up her mind yet. People ask me what the deal is, and I tell them I don't know.

Dawn—I can't tell her where to go. If I told her to go to U of H, she'd go to. . . [laughs] Northern Idaho! So I just make suggestions: "Here are the pitfalls, here are the good coaches."

That's my role, because I don't want to be responsible if she comes down to Houston and has a bad time. I'd never hear the end of it. □

Leroy Russell Burrell was born February 21, 1967, in Philadelphia and is 6-0/178. He graduated from Penn Wood High School (Lansdowne, Pa) in '85 and competed for the University of Houston through '90. Now represents the Santa Monica TC.

Major meet finishes: 100: '85—4)TAC Jr; '88 5)NC, 6s)OT; '89—5)NC, 1)TAC; '90—1)NC.

LJ: '88—7)NC, 17q)OT; '89—1)NCi, 2)NC; '90—1)NCi, nq)NC, 4)TAC.

His progression (World & U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Yr	Age	100	200	LJ
'85	18	10.43	21.51	24-2 ^{1/2} i
'86	19	10.46	20.94	26-9
'87	20	(dnc—injured)	—	—
'88	21	10.31	20.85	25-8 ^{3/4}
'89	22	9.94 (5, 3)	20.40	27-5 ^{1/2} (A) (x, 7)
'90	23	9.96 (1, 1)	20.14 (5, 3)	27-0i (x, 6)