

RENALDO NEHEMIAH

by Jon Hendershott

For Renaldo Nehemiah, running the high hurdles is an intensely personal endeavor. While he is confident when he speeds over those 42" barriers, Nehemiah has never assumed he knows all there is to know about the intricacies of his event—or of himself.

For the highs are Renaldo Nehemiah and he is the highs.

And as he has shown with startling regularity this winter, there is no better practitioner of the event in the world. His 3 World Indoor Records attest to that—as do such achievements as his historic 12.9 over the 39" high school barriers and his 13.23 over the big hurdles outdoors last year.

That was the fastest of 5 World Junior Records produced by the 19-year-old (3/24/59) sophomore sensation from Maryland during a season which saw him burst to the head of the pack rushing toward Moscow. He was ranked an impressive 1st in the world—in his first full season running the international hurdles.

Last year bolstered the confidence of the talent from Scotch Plains, NJ, but in no way will he rest on his laurels. Nehemiah is an intense, proud man who is constantly striving to find "how"—how he can improve his technique, how he can shave more hundredths off his times, how he can learn, how he can improve.

His determination and maturity belie his 19 years. And his unwillingness to be satisfied testifies to his relentless determination to find out just how good he can become, just how fast he can go in that very personal battle with those hurdles.

T&FN: Why is running the highs well so important to you?

Nehemiah: I've never wanted to be a contender, just one of the crowd. I want to be someone who turns the event around, who goes out and explores new territory. But it's more than that, too. It's so much a part of me. I'm learning each day what I can do and what I have to do.

T&FN: What factors make you the best high hurdler in the world?

Nehemiah: My consistency. In the few short years I've been running, I've learned that it isn't one fast time that's important. Consistency at a high level will make you the victor, rather than having to depend on catching one fast one.

Basically, last year for me was one of learning how to be in control at all
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times—regardless of the meet, who was running, the conditions, what happened in my previous meet. Just establishing that consistency, both physically and mentally.

My biggest hang-up last year was the idea that, "It's a learning year. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain." Deep down inside, I just couldn't accept that. Or people would say, "You lost the race but set a new Junior Record." That was great to them, but to me it was a putdown. I was in there running against the big guys and I wanted to be considered as one of them.

I just had to learn to accept that because it wasn't going to be a crutch for me. If I lost, I lost and it wasn't because I was young. It was my mistake or something I did in the race.

I wanted to go out and do my best and not let anything stop me from doing that. I started indoors by losing at Ali and CYO and then I lost those two big outdoor races to Greg Foster at Pepsi and the NCAA. But regardless of how many times I lost, I wanted to establish that consistency.

T&FN: You obviously take running very seriously. It must play a major role in your life.

Nehemiah: It's very major and very serious. I'm totally serious about doing everything I possibly can to improve and I'm tuned in to finding any way possible to do that. No meet is insignificant or unimportant. I can't go halfway. I have to make a total effort.

That's why my high school coach, Jean Poquette, and I are so close. He has taught me never to rely on my natural ability, to always look for ways to improve. I'm never at perfection. There is always something I can work on to better my technique.

T&FN: You come across as a very proud man. How much of a role did that play in wanting to turn things around against Foster?

Nehemiah: I guess it was more the idea of wanting to redeem myself to myself. I'm really very personal when it

comes to the race. The fans may want to see a World Record every time, but it's not that easy. I have to run for myself; if I lose, it's my loss, not theirs.

Sure I'm out for the good things and winning is the best of them. But I'm also out to better myself and correct my mistakes.

T&FN: You have mentioned competitive consistency frequently, but what do you really want to achieve in the highs?

Nehemiah: To be the best, from the time I start until the time I end. To do whatever I have to do to become the best. And it isn't so much for everyone else to see; it's for me.

Like running under 13.20, breaking the World Record as many times as I can. These are goals of mine. It's all part of bringing out the best in me. I don't know what is my best, so the only way to find out is to try. I'm just not comfortable laying back. I want to go further.

T&FN: Does Renaldo Nehemiah, the man, apply those same powers of determination to other things in his life as Renaldo Nehemiah, the athlete, does to the hurdles?

Nehemiah: Yes, in terms of total dedication to what he is doing. His sole purpose is to please himself and not deprive himself of the very best he can achieve. In anything, I always want to do the very best I can.

After running 12.9 in high school, I know a lot of people expected me to break the World Record right away. But last year, for me, was a transition year from high school to college—and more in academic and total environment than the height of the hurdles.

I used last year as a time to really find out about myself. To decide what I really wanted, to see how I cope with pressure and to find out what kind of athlete I am. I wanted to put things into their proper perspective.

T&FN: Were there any races last year which turned out to be particularly

valuable learning experiences?

Nehemiah: The NCAA Indoor was probably the biggest lesson I ever learned indoors. I took that race totally for granted. In the heats and semis, I was running very well: 7.11 and 7.13, no pressure and I was running fast.

But at the third hurdle in the final, I realized, 'Hey, you're not only behind, but you're losing,' and there were only two more to go. I snapped out of it, or I probably would have lost it. It was just a matter of realizing it at the right time, in time, and really wanting it.

After every race I always look at my teammate Bob Calhoun and he tells me, you know, thumbs up if I won it. But he had a look on his face that even he couldn't tell. I felt so *bad*, because I knew I had lost the race. Then they announced that I had won and the photo finish showed I had clearly won.

So it was a blessing in disguise, because ever since that day, I've never underestimated the field, regardless of how fast or slow they are capable of running.

The hardest defeat to live with is your own. You can always push the blame off on someone else, but the hardest one to accept is when you

know you were the total cause of it.

T&FN: Was any one race last year, indoors or out, particularly satisfying?

Nehemiah: It would have to be my World Indoor Record at Millrose. There was the setting—back home, New York. Almost everyone from my immediate family was there, so right away I didn't feel I was in it by myself.

I was keyed up but feeling good. I ran a good trial. I couldn't have told you I would break the World Record, but I had that much confidence that I could win the race.

It was a perfect race: I got out good, I didn't hit any hurdles and it was just a matter of listening for the time.

Plus it was the "first time," the first real record. Any athlete will also remember the first one as something special.

T&FN: How about outdoors?

though the second of those two losses had been only a week before. I learned a lot from those losses. I was never convinced he could beat me. The thing that always kept me confident was that, at some point in both of those races, I was winning. Then I made a technical error and lost to him.

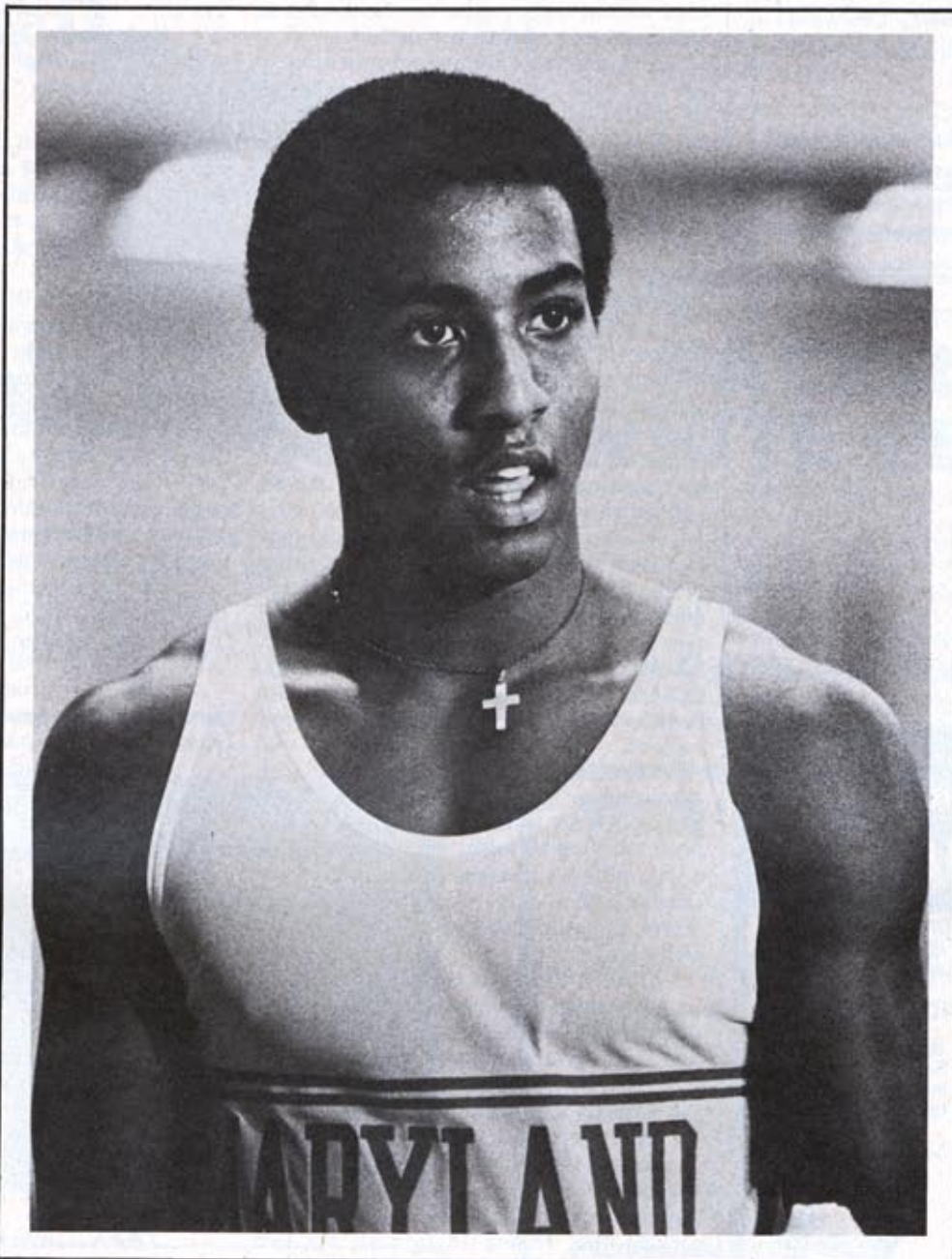
I think if he had beaten me head up, no mistakes, then it might have been a different ball game. But I knew I was winning and he had to come get me and that helped keep me stable.

T&FN: After the AAU, you said a winner doesn't make mistakes. Do you mean mental or physical mistakes, or are they so closely related that one leads to the other?

Nehemiah: I would say a winner doesn't make physical mistakes. He knows what it takes to be in top condition; he knows what he has to do in preparation of his body, the preparation for each race.

The mental mistakes are something that you have control over, depending on the situation. Of course, everyone is different; not everyone can endure pressure. That's where the fine line comes.

With me, I would have to blame an error on a physical mistake, because I'm in control of my mind at



Nehemiah: AAU semi-finals, not so much the final. Beating Greg Foster there. It was a stacked heat with Greg and Charlie Foster. I was coming off that NCAA defeat and pretty much automatically assuming I wouldn't face him in the semis. I just assumed it would be the finals.

It was a do-or-die situation; it was there whether I was ready to accept it or not, so I had to do it. If I were to beat him and be superior at that time, it was then and there. And I rose to the occasion. When I had to dig down and get it, I got it.

I couldn't shortchange myself, even

all times when it comes to running. I know what I'm going to do throughout the race.

Because of the long season I had last year and the number of races I ran, and because of my lack of experience, I didn't know what to expect from myself in the big races.

Then, too, I was running a lot of other races and I couldn't give my full concentration to the hurdles, which is what I obviously wanted to do. Now if anything is going to take away from my hurdles, I won't do it.

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whether American or foreigner, unless I'm at full strength, so I must be.

T&FN: What former greats do you like?

Nehemiah: I base everything I've done, including my style, on Rod Milburn. Our forms are very similar. His strength was his technical ability off the hurdle; once he was over, getting on the ground as efficiently and quickly as possible.

I've compared our progressions at each age and what he did in certain meets: at the Junior nationals, his record was 13.7, I ran 13.89. He ran 13.24 as a best and I'm at twenty-three. I've used his progressions as a guide, not so much that I have to run better than his times, but because I want to better his standards. Those are my goals. People say he was one of the greatest, but I'm going to find out what I can do, too.

I got a lot of confidence from Milburn because he was a small guy compared to the others, and I'm small compared to the others. There was something he had that the others didn't have, technically or physically. That's how I learned that size isn't the main thing; it's what you can do with what you have.

It was phenomenal how he could start out even and almost at will take control of the race. That's what I looked into the most. Not just to outlean someone at the tape or outprint somebody off the last hurdle, but how was it that he could surge like that. That's what caused me to get into hurdling so deeply; I wanted to learn how to do it.

The first race I ever did it was in high school when I ran 13.2 to tie the national record. All my others up to then I had just been stepping through, still running 13.5s, 13.6s. But this one was different—and I've felt that way only two other times, my World Record indoors in '78 and the 13.23 at Zurich.

T&FN: What was the feeling?

Nehemiah: An abnormal feeling, like I was running on the air. I almost had both feet on the ground before they touched.

That's when I know I'm really running the hurdles. It was like a sprint; except for the long movement over the hurdle, I was sprinting. My legs had the chance to be in the sprint form.

I know the feeling when I get it. I was seeking that feeling all through my first year of college. But when I got it, I told my coach that something had been different in my rhythm and he said, "You have finally learned to run the hurdles."

T&FN: Is that the closest to "ideal" you have come?

Nehemiah: Yes, it is. I was never satisfied all last year because I wanted to find that feeling. When I did, I got a whole different attitude. When it came down to one-on-one hurdling, I had the right attitude. I was ready.

T&FN: When did you first run the hurdles?

Nehemiah: The first time I ever even tried to run track was in 7th grade in 1971.

It was introduced to me as building endurance, putting in mileage, and I quit. I wasn't part of that at all.

I didn't go out again until 9th grade. I didn't have much speed, but I couldn't take losing in the 100 because I wanted to be a sprinter. So I tried the hurdles for something different. I guess that was my crutch.

My parents asked, "Why hurdling?" and I said, "Because it's different. It's more than just running." I got my nicks and bruises.

I ran 15.6 in 9th grade and broke school records and all that. That was the first time I thought that I might develop one day. My 9th-grade coach told me that I might become good and win a scholarship to college.

So I ran in 10th grade in high school and pulled a hamstring. I was out for pretty much a year. I wasn't winning all my races, but I liked hurdling and wanted to do it more.

I ran a little the indoor season of my junior year, but the leg wasn't fully healed yet. I was impatient but my coach said to wait until outdoors and then I could surprise people. Sure enough, early in the outdoor season, I ran 13.6.

The next year, as I got stronger, I ran 13.2 and then 12.9. It really all started my junior year because I had to start all over when my leg was hurt.

T&FN: So your junior year was the first chance for you to learn that you had some extraordinary talent over the hurdles?

Nehemiah: Right; and my senior year was the first time we could say, "Hey, we're going to find out what you're made of." And we did—I developed into a hurdler.

T&FN: What do you think of your own talent?

Nehemiah (chuckling): I really don't know. I don't know what I can do. I won't stop until I find out.

Obviously, my main goal right now is Moscow '80. As things progress, I can feel myself get a lot stronger; I can feel my body changing. Last year I had to be in really tip-top shape every time out. This year, I think it's more controlling everything. It's not all-or-nothing, a wild emotion.

T&FN: Where did you get the nickname "Skeets"?

Nehemiah: It's just an expression I've had since I was a toddler. About the way I crawled. Corny, but that's what I've been told.

T&FN: What does your family think of all this recognition?

Nehemiah: I'm a very low-key type. I don't talk about myself; if I'm as great as people say, they can talk about me. I'm not one who has to sit back and blow my own horn.

My parents are typical parents—they get all emotional and excited. I even shy away from my parents sometimes. My parents and my brother and sister were at

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the Eastern States when I set the record and they were at Millrose last year when I set the indoor record. But the most they got out of it was a smile.

I just shied away. It's not shyness. . . I'm just one who has always admired poise. Like when I broke the World Record last year, I was tickled pink inside, but I see my image as just observing all this.

T&FN: What do you like off the track—music, movies, food?

Nehemiah: Hey, when it comes to food, I'm your average junk man. I definitely don't worry about a special diet or any of that.

As far as music goes, I can pretty much relate to anything—at least I try to.

I like to talk to people, to relate to people. I like to find out about people. That's what I'm more into now, developing a well-rounded personality and anyone does that by communicating.

I'm finding out more about myself every day—through meets, through school—different parts of me that I didn't know before.

T&FN: How would you say the off-track Renaldo Nehemiah compares with the on-track Renaldo Nehemiah?

Nehemiah: Well, I try to keep the two separate, whether socially or in school. When I meet people off the track, they never know I run unless somebody else brings it up.

I deal with track when I'm on the track. It's all track. When I'm off, that's my leisure. That's my vacation, my time to get away.

The two don't mix. My whole personality isn't track. It is a major part of me, but I always want to be able to be on the other side.

I pretty much evolve around other people, getting involved with them.

T&FN: Any final thoughts?

Nehemiah: I just feel very confident about this year, more than ever. What I've done and what I'm doing helps my confidence. I'm just going to let things take their course, not rush. But I'm looking forward to it all.

T&FN: Jean made the comment that he thought it might be good for you if you lost a few times this year; not get in the habit of winning too soon before '80.

Nehemiah: Yeah, I agree. But my way of losing is like the Florida Relays last year when I lost to Greg Robertson, my teammate. Low-key losses.

It can be a real blow when you haven't lost for a long time, like when I was in high school. It was a real blow to lose my first two indoor meets last year. My folks were there and they wanted to know why I was losing. That's a lot of pressure.

It took them a while to learn that it was a whole different ballgame from high school, when I was winning by a hurdle or more. It was a photo finish and that's how it's going to be from now on. This is the big leagues—and they're the best because that's where the greatest challenges are. □