

Jason Richardson

by Jon Hendershott

Jason Richardson already knows for certain he is eligible to run at this summer's World Championships in Moscow. As the winner of the 110 hurdles in Daegu in '11, he gets a defending champion's free entry.

Yet having the wild card luxury hasn't changed the approach of the 27-year-old Texas native, who has worked with noted speed coach John Smith since moving to Los Angeles after graduating from South Carolina in '09.

Following up his unexpected '11 gold Richardson took 2nd in both the Trials and Olympics last year and ranked No. 2 in the world. And he became the first ever to run two sub-13s on the same day when he clocked a PR 12.98 in his Trials semi, then another in the final.

Known for his long dreadlocks, ready smile and dry wit, Richardson also has a serious, cerebral side, especially when discussing his craft:

T&FN: With a wild card, what differences has that scenario had for you this year?

Richardson: It can be harder to make the U.S. hurdles team than it is to medal at the championships. But the difference between the training this year and years prior is that there is a patience I can have. There can be a slower curve toward Moscow.

There is no rush on technical aspects, yet there is a tinkering with my season and my technique that I'm allowed. There were some changes we tried indoors—like we did some different things with the blocks.

But they didn't work out. There was no harm or loss, though, because I have enough time to fix things and make sure I'm ready for when it counts, in Moscow. So I earned the patience and am able to make sure that I'm healthy and can just gingerly take myself toward the right form going into Moscow.

T&FN: You and John Smith weren't concerned that the block-work indoors didn't work out?

Richardson: One of the reasons I have had consistent improvement with John as my coach is his willingness to always make changes. That's why I've been able to slowly drop times. I just work on perfecting my form and technique in practice. In this sport, I think that a lot of times we lock on to what works and just try and do it faster as the years go on.

But there is a certain science to it that a

knowledgeable coach, an experienced coach, is willing to explore. John is great friends with [biomechanics expert] Ralph Mann and we definitely take his video analysis seriously. Plus John reads anything that has ink on it regarding track.

T&FN: Besides John's personal approach, his analyzing of things and willingness to change, what else has been his effect as your coach?

Richardson: One of the biggest things is that John just clocks in for track & field. This is work for him. He may not put on Ferragamo shoes and a Calvin Klein suit, but when he coaches, he definitely is going to work.

He expects you to be there on time; he expects you to be prepared for meetings; he expects you to have your expense reports all filled out. So it is definitely a job.

For a sport that favors youth—in talent level as well as genetics—it's really easy to not have the professionalism or the maturity it takes to acknowledge that.

So the major lesson that John teaches is that you have an amazing opportunity but also a small window of time to have a career in which you can really make a lasting impression on the sport. And also set yourself up economically for things to do after the sport.

That professional outlook trickles down into everything: how we train, how we moderate our diet, how we approach meets.

Honestly, that's what has made the biggest impact for me and has helped smooth out that learning curve in making the transition between college and professional athletics.

It can take some athletes a lot longer because they don't have that knowledge—that you have to take it as a job. It isn't college anymore, where life is pretty much a breeze and other people take care of most of the details. You have to put in that work yourself and be a professional about it.

T&FN: Back when you won a World Youth double in '03, you said that you usually trained 2-3 times a week and that you were thinking as much about law school as sports. When would you say you got really serious about hurdling?

Richardson: I know this may sound really crazy considering the amount of success I had early in the sport, but I didn't get really serious about hurdling until I got with John.

I ran in high school really just on natural talent—and also naïveté. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to be running both hurdles, or running fast, or doing it at 6-feet and about zero pounds.

I had difficulties with the South Carolina program in college that made it hard for me to focus on the craft of hurdling and the enjoyment of the sport. So I never really gave full effort.

I did give a fair amount of energy in the '08 season [when he won the NCAA], but there still was an absence of listening and diet changes and those things.

When I came to LA is when I really began to concentrate and make sure I did whatever it took to use this gift I have. So I didn't start to take hurdling really super-seriously until 2010.

T&FN: Because you were a great athlete at the Youth and high school levels and you thought that was just going to carry you through?

Richardson: Yes. It was the eventual wakeup call. It's funny how the sport can sometimes grab you by the shoulders and shake you up. The biggest wakeup call is that natural talent runs out. Natural talent has to be paired with hard work.

And athletes who do that usually are successful. What they all have in common is that they will do everything it takes to maximize and squeeze every bit they can out of their gift.

T&FN: How did you get into track and hurdling in the first place?

Richardson: Funnily enough, I don't come from an athletically-based family. I come from an

Richardson In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Jason Alexander Richardson was born April 4, 1986, in Houston, Texas; 6-2/170 (1.88/77)

•**PRs:** 200—21.13 ('03); 400—46.96 ('12); 110H—12.98 ('12) (=13, x W; =9, x US); 400H—49.79 ('04)

•**Schools:** Cedar Hill (Texas) HS '04; South Carolina '08; now represents Nike

•**Coaches:** Sandra Mitchell (HS), Curtis Frye (South Carolina), John Smith (professional)

•**Major Meets:** 1)WY '03; dnf) USJ '04; 3)NC '05; 3)NC, 6sf) US '06; 1)NC, dnf-h)OT '08; 2) NC, 5)US '09; 8)US '10; 3)US, 1)WC '11; 2)OT, 2)OG '12

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** x, 7 '08; 10, 6 '09; x, 6 '10; 2, 1 '11; 2, 2 '12





KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

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academic family. Because my family was ridiculously smart, I thought about college even in middle school. It was clear that if I wanted to go to Harvard, I was athletically talented enough to have that paid for.

I played soccer when I was young; it’s very big in Texas and it was something athletic to do. I started running track in middle school, but of course never thought it would necessarily become a career. It was just something I was natural at. I’ve always hurdled; I think from the first year I started. So I haven’t really done anything else.

T&FN: Writers in London last year laughed when you said you “embraced” a relaxed Jamaican outlook on life. You had grown your dreads, but what brought about that change in life attitude?

Richardson: [laughs] To be honest, I have a peanut head, a really small head. You try to find yourself when you’re in college. When you’re an athlete, you try to find yourself even more because you are treated differently for being an athlete. But you also need the wherewithal to realize that you’re not going to be an athlete forever. That’s why you try to find out who you are outside of athletics, but also who you are inside the sport. With that comes, you know, things like the hair stuff.

One day, I just decided to start growing my hair out a little longer. I had a fair amount of hair before I had it twisted into the eventual dreads. The same week, I also got my ear pierced. I don’t know if it was some identity crisis or what, but I’m glad it worked out because I like myself better with hair.

T&FN: You still train over 39-inch hurdles?

Richardson: It’s just a thing that me and my coach made a decision to do. I can really focus on hurdle clearance and staying low because I can tend to get high over them sometimes.

And a plus for me is that I’m really good at adapting in the race. If I hit a hurdle, life’s not over. In a lot of my PR races, there have been *major* technical points to improve. When I make a mistake, I just clean it up. So we try to deal with that by creating different scenarios that really force cleaner hurdles. And we use 39s a lot for that.

T&FN: We have talked before that in the 110s, all the top hurdlers meet often and that moves the event forward. What special traits do you feel that you bring to the line, in every race but especially championships races?

Richardson: If I was in a position of other hurdlers to see me, first, I would hope they would be fearful [laughs]. I think hurdlers know I have a light-switch type progression when it comes to being ready. I’m an athlete that you know when the championship comes, I will be there and I *will* perform. I’m going to find a way to scrape and crawl my way onto the podium.

Also, it doesn’t matter what race it is. I’m out there to give it my all. I may make jokes all the way until the starter says, “Take your marks.” But the second he says that, I

Richardson — continued

turn into the eye of the tiger and am ready to rip people's heads off. That's the switch I turn.

When it's all said and done, there are a lot of money issues in the sport, as far as who gets paid and who doesn't, what events get paid and so on. But what is never debatable are the tangible medals that you have. I don't have to be the highest-paid hurdler, but at the end, I want to have the medal count because that says I made a mark on hurdling.

I just hope that those I compete against respect that. I was able to do a good back-to-back medal double and I have every intention of walking away with another medal this year.

T&FN: *You have said you feed off other competitors and like to line up right in the middle of the field. Has that always been the case?*

Richardson: Always. I never want to be in an outside lane. If possible, I'd even like to be in the same lane as somebody else. Just because I want it known that I will never run from anyone.

One of the things I love best about competing is snapping off the hurdle before the guy next to you, or really surging off that last hurdle to try to beat him. That's what racing is all about and that's a big thing I love about competing.

T&FN: *Not that you ever lack for motivation, but does the '12 season—getting 2nd in major races—provide you with extra motivation for '13?*

Richardson: I couldn't have gotten to where I am now without using everything as a lesson: lessons of what to do and especially what not to do.

But 2012 still keeps me hungry and I've always had an appetite for winning. For every high in my career, I have a competing low, so I'm still hungry for a season that from start to finish just has a great feel to it, great success. A storybook season. I haven't had it, but I

still have been able to make an impact on the circuit and the event. I know that when that year comes, it's going to be amazing.

T&FN: *Is fact, is there an "ultimate" time you'd like to run? Aries showed where it can go and what could be next—maybe a sub-12.80. Or do you just want to run the best you can?*

like to push it into the 70s, the 60s—heck, why not run the same times as Sally Pearson? A 12.3.

But most of all, I want to have fun and just trip every metal detector in the airport with all my medals.

Just get the hardware; when the record comes, it will come. Times will come when

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KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT

Richardson: I don't worry about the times because I can't obsess over the World Record or other times. Also I think what keeps me afloat in the sport is that I am *not* track & field.

I participate in it. You go to work but realize that you also have a family and hobbies and a life. The same with track; I have so many other things in my life (see sidebar).

Sure, I would like the World Record; I would

they do but I can also honestly say that in 2012, I may not have had a lot of wins but I had so much fun. I had great fun at the Olympics. I think it's most important that you enjoy the sport and enjoy yourself.

It's such a pleasure to be a pro athlete and live what we called a "pipe dream" in college. Just acknowledge that, live it to the fullest and retire with no regrets. □

Working On A Bucket List

Jason Richardson admits, "My brain is always going somewhere. I'm sure I would never be described as boring."

He has said he wants to learn to do a back flip someday; open a business; start a scholarship program—and that's just a start. His hopes and aims do span a wide spectrum of life:

"I haven't learned to do a back flip—yet. The only thing about a lot of my hobbies and bucket list items is that they're very off-season-based. Nobody wants to do a back flip during the season and land wrong.

"I have a bucket list of things I've always wanted to do to be a better person—but

maybe a crazy person in a sense, too.

"One is going to a tennis Grand Slam with my sister. I'm going to take up photography this year, because I think it's an injustice that there are so many visuals I see when I'm traveling but I'm not making a log of them.

"I'm getting back to reading the Bible to try to finish it. Some people say the Bible is their favorite book, but they haven't finished it. So reading the Bible twice is my goal.

"Just a lot of different things. There are so many things I have on my plate that I'm trying to take little bites of here and there. When I retire, I can have an amazing career behind me, but also have some amazing opportunities to walk into in front of me.

"There is the Met Ball, which is a big high-

fashion event in New York. I want to have courtside seats for the NBA playoffs, but then have to miss a game to go to the Met Ball. Exclusive, important events like that: Oscars, Grammys. Wherever people are celebrated and creativity is rewarded.

"As far as owning a business: it may not make a million dollars but just having one out there is so amazing to me, chiefly because in the sport, we athletes don't control a lot.

"People think what I do as an athlete is crazy and amazing, but I think that what they do is equally amazing. I think that's how networking develops—you end up in some of the craziest and best situations in life just by sharing your story, because you never know where it will take you."