

Sanya Richards-Ross

by Jon Hendershott

It took until her third Olympic 400 final before Sanya Richards-Ross finally struck the ultimate gold.

There had been many good times in her stellar international career (see nutshell), but there also were the not-so-good, including the coping since '07 with what she thought was Behçet's Disease, an auto-immune problem that causes agonizing joint pain and energy-sapping fatigue.

The stars aligned for her this year, though. Through it all, she had the unwavering support of her team: mother Sharon, father Archie, coach Clyde Hart and husband Aaron Ross, now a cornerback for pro football's Jacksonville Jaguars.

Lately, Richards-Ross has been settling into her new home in Florida with her husband (to whom she refers by last name).

T&FN: *With all you have been doing to set up your new home, have you yet been able to put into perspective how important it was to you to finally win that gold?*

SRR: Not totally yet. Those things take time. A lot of times you realize the magnitude of things like that many years after. But from where I sit now, a month and a half after the Olympics, I realize it has by far plugged a massive hole in my résumé.

For athletes, we come to realize that we are valued or appreciated a lot on our hardware. So being No. 1 in the world for however many seasons and the AR holder... all those things were phenomenal and great.

But winning that gold medal was exactly what I needed to kind of put the icing on the cake for all the work I've done in the 400. For me at this point in my career, it *was* very special knowing that was what I needed to fill my résumé.

T&FN: *Had it become a must-win situation for you? You will be 31 in 2016 and you wouldn't have wanted another "oh-so-close" finish.*

SRR: It's one of those things where you hate to say it's a must-win, because I don't want to place all the value of my existence in my sport on one thing. But if I'm very frank, it almost was [laughs].

It would have been another huge

disappointment any other way. I was heavily favored again this time around and I knew I could do it. So if I'm being fair with myself, yes, I would say it was a must-win for me.

T&FN: *What are your feelings now when you are introduced as "the Olympic 400-meter champion?" What do you feel when you hear that?*

SRR: Even when you say it now, my eyes well up a bit. There is just tremendous joy. It's the title I wanted for so long. Even when I went on the track the next day for the 200 heats and I was announced as the Olympic champion, I almost looked around like, "Oh is that really me?!"

Every time I have heard it since then makes me realize that all the hard work and sacrifice, everything I've done and gone through to have that moment, was well worth it. It just gives me tremendous joy.

T&FN: *Did finally winning the world title in '09, considering what had happened the year before in Beijing, somehow add more pressure for this Olympic year?*

SRR: It didn't add any more pressure. What it did do is, I felt I finally figured out how to run a great race and if I could parlay that into the next three years, it would be fantastic.

So in that moment, I didn't see it as 0 added pressure. I saw it as finally figuring it out and using the experience that I drew from that win again in 2012.

I do think that what did put on more pressure was having the injuries in '10 and the illness problems in '11. Those experiences made me feel even more pressure to come back this year and really show I was the best quartermiler.

So I really enjoyed that '09 season. I had a lot of fun and ran really well all year and didn't feel like a pressure-filled season at all.

T&FN: *What was the harder part to put up with in the difficult times, injuries or coping with what you believed was the Behçet's so that you physically couldn't run at your best, or the mental aspects?*

SRR: I will say 100% the mental aspects of not running at my best. I think your body is able to recover a lot sooner than your heart and your mind. In '10, after I suffered the quad

SRR In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Sanya Leanne Richards was born February 26, 1985, in Kingston, Jamaica; married Aaron Ross on February 26, 2010; 5-8/136 (1.73/62)

•**Schools:** St. Thomas Aquinas HS (Ft. Lauderdale, Florida) '02; Texas '03-'04; now represents Nike

•**Coaches:** Bev Kearney (Texas), Clyde Hart (pro)

•**PRs:** 60—7.21i ('04); 100—10.97 ('07); 200—22.09 ('12); 400—48.70 AR ('06); 800—2:10.74 ('10)

•**Major 200s:** 1)USJ, 3)WJ '02; 2)NCi '03; 2)NCi '04; 2)US, 5)WC '07; 7)US '11; 3)OT, 5)OG '12

•**Major 400s:** 1)USJ, 2)WJ '02; 2)NCi, 1)NC, 1)US, 4sf)WC '03; 1)NCi, 3)NC, 2)OT, 6)OG '04; 1)US, 2)WC '05; 1)USi, 4sf)WCi, 1)US '06; 4)US '07; 1)OT, 3)OG '08; 1)US, 1)WC '09; 7)WC '11; 1)USi, 1)WCi, 1)OT, 1)OG '12.

•**Major Relays:** 4x1—2)NC '03. 4x4—1)WJ '02; 1)NCi, 1)NC, 1)WC '03; 1)OG '04; 1)WC '07; 1)OG '08; 1)WC '09; 1)WC '11; 2)WCi, 1)OG '12

•**World/U.S. 200 Ranks:** x/5 '02; x/8 '05; 2/2 '06; 4/3 '07; 6/4 '08; 5/3 '09; x/8 '11; ??/?'12.

•**World/U.S. 400 Ranks:** x/5 '02; 8/1 '03; 6/3 '04; 1/1 '05; 1/1 '06 (AOY); 1/1 '07; 1/1 '08; 1/1 '09 (AOY); 5/3 '11; 1?/1? '12



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and ankle injuries, I trained really hard in '11 but I think it was more of a mental challenge for me. I was a little naïve in thinking I would have rebounded once I was healthy.

I think that when it wasn't going as I hoped, it was beating me up more and more mentally and that was the hardest part of '11. To go through a whole season where I won only three races total definitely took more of a toll on my outlook, my pride and my spirit than causing any physical toll.

T&FN: *During the down times then, was it your family and Ross and coach Hart—the core group around you—that you relied on?*

SRR: The No. 1 thing for me was my faith. I have a wonderful pastor and he would be added to that circle of people to trust and rely on. Even at my lowest points, I always believed that everything happens for a reason and that God is working everything out for my greater good.

I cried many nights and went through tremendous lows, but I felt it would prepare for me something great in the future. In those times, it was my faith that guided me.

Then I also had such a strong family support system. My mom and dad never lost faith in me. Ross always told me, even when I was running 51 seconds, that I was the best in the world. Also last fall, knowing I had run 49.3 on the 4x4 leadoff at Worlds, I knew I still had it in me. I just had to up everything; up my training, up my focus, up my intensity. Doing that, I knew I could be Olympic champion and having the support of all those people helped me believe I could do that.

T&FN: *You also said that you learned from Beijing to try to relax more and enjoy what you were doing. You said you did that in Berlin in '09 but did you try to carry that approach through to London as well?*

SRR: Yes, I tried to do that as much as possible. In '08, I was so uptight. I looked back and thought it had been silly to deprive myself of so many experiences instead of just letting myself go and having fun. So I did that more this time.

Yet, I don't think I was 100% able to let go because the daunting task ahead of me was so massive that I feel I was still bogged down a little by wanting to accomplish my goal.

T&FN: *Your medical situation, you explained at the Trials, actually wasn't Behçet's Disease. What did it turn out to be and how did the change in treatment affect you in '12?*

SRR: In December of last year, I had one of the worst flareups I had ever experienced. The doctor I was working with had worked really closely with Behçet's patients and in a study he did of hundreds of patients, he found that more than 80 of them had been misdiagnosed with Behçet's.

I was found to have a treatable skin disease; it isn't curable but I'm able to take medications that help me a great deal. The minute I changed my medications to what I use now, I didn't have the joint pains or the fatigue which were side effects of the Behçet's medication I was on. I now take much milder medications.

I still suffer from skin lesions at times, but

SRR Interview — continued:

they're just not as aggressive as they once were. I don't have as much of the side effects as I used to have. So for me, it's a big win.

T&FN: *This year you were consistent—4 sub-50s and another 4 sub-50.50s among your 12 finals. What was behind that, just feeling better physically, coach Hart's training, what?*

SRR: There were multiple things. No. 1 is coach Hart's training methods. When we're on top, we're able to run the same times pretty much week in and week out because of how he is able to train us and peak us and reload. His methods just seem to work year in and year out.

But I also think that I worked so hard in the fall and I trained so intensely that for me it was more about the mental discipline that I brought into this season: "No matter what race I run—regardless if I go out a little bit fast or a little bit slow—I have prepared myself to win."

That's the mentality I had all season: "I've got this. I can do this." I wanted more so to compete this season, as opposed to chasing down fast times. Whoever I lined up against, I wanted to win.

That was the mentality I had, even when I trained against the guys on Baylor's team. I just wanted to beat them every single time. I didn't care what time coach Hart set for me; I just wanted to try to cross that finish line first every time.

T&FN: *Since 2010 when you and Ross got married, it seems like you have done so many off-track things. Your huge wedding was a TV program; a photo shoot here, a glamour session there. Particularly in an Olympic year, how did you balance all those things?*

SRR: That really is the difficult part. When you are an Olympic athlete and you get so many opportunities in and around the Games, it is trying to balance your time. With my

training, traveling for appearances with my sponsors, opportunities on TV and radio, media interviews... I again credit my support group.

My mom and dad do an excellent job of filtering things, as does my marketing manager Lowell Taub at Creative Artists. Then my cousin Yolande Kelly does all my PR.

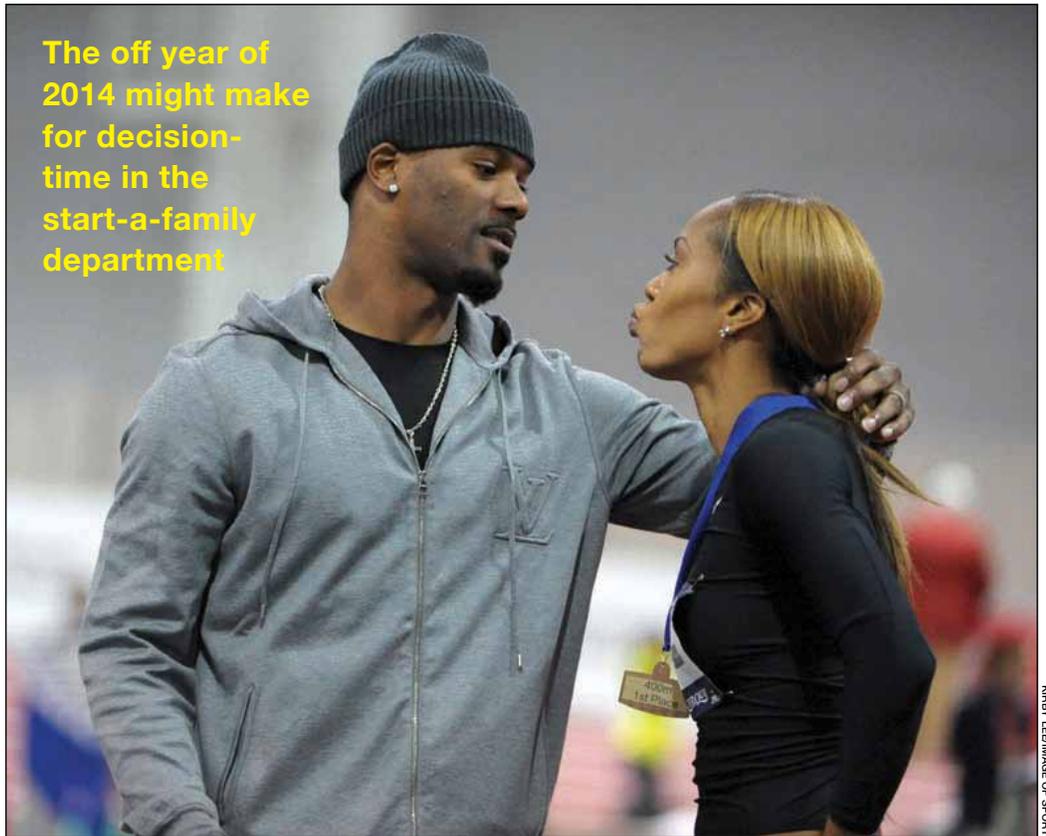
So I have a great team. They filter things

But it is hard sometimes because I do love TV and appearances. I could do that all day, but I also know hard work got me where I am today.

T&FN: *Now you have that coveted Olympic title that you wanted for so long, plus your Worlds titles indoors and out. So what remain as your goals: beat your AR, run faster in the 200, what?*

SRR: Yes, now my main goal is to continue

The off year of 2014 might make for decision-time in the start-a-family department



KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES

6 Straight Days Of Racing

Doubling back in the 200 after winning the 400, with the 4x4 still to come meant that Sanya Richards-Ross ran 6 straight days in London:

"It really wasn't too bad. I actually enjoyed that experience a lot and learned a lot from it. It is something I think I would like to attempt in the future. There are some tweaks we would make for me to have a more successful outing, but it was actually pretty fun.

"I stayed with my family a lot in London; they rented a house near the Olympic Village. I went there after the 400 and we stayed up until about 2:00 a.m. People kept saying, 'You've got to go to bed.' I barely slept; I was so excited. But I felt pretty good in the heats and pretty much the entire time.

"For me, the adjustment was more mental than physical. I was so caught up in winning the 400;

for me and many things never cross my path because they know, "No, that's going to be too much." I trust them in their roles and the things they bring to me that I feel I can do, and I'm honest with them too.

I wanted to do that more than anything. So in my training, we focused 100% on that.

"For the 200, the medalists were the sprinter types, so they do a lot of speed work. A lot of stuff in spikes and turn running. I didn't focus on those things so much because I didn't want to take anything away from my 400.

"So if I opt to double again in the future, I think I would put more pure speedwork in my training to prepare me for the level of turnover I would need. But it was a wonderful experience, I learned a lot about myself. Of course, it will depend on what the future holds but I would consider doing it again. And I enjoyed being on the track every day in London.

"The double was something I always wanted to do. So working with someone like coach Hart—who had accomplished it with an athlete like Michael Johnson—was a huge draw for me to work with him. I don't think we're done yet; maybe it's still in the cards for me."

to lower my American Record and to see how close I can get to the World Record [47.60 by Marita Koch in '85]. It's not something that I think is impossible.

I've won basically every title there is for me to win, so now I want to see just how fast I can go. I want to chip my way down on that all-time list in the 400.

Honestly, I don't see myself retiring any time soon. So I would tell people that I want to go all the way to Rio and then possibly transit into the next phase of my life and career, whatever those may look like.

But I fully intend to do a full season in '13. I'm not sure if I'll attempt the double or just concentrate on the 400. That will all depend on what coach Hart, myself and my dad decide.

Then if Ross wants to start a family... we go back and forth if an off-year like '14 is the perfect time or just go four more years straight. It's a discussion we constantly have. □