

T&FN INTERVIEW

Michael Tinsley

by Jon Hendershott

Michael Tinsley has been the top American 400 hurdler since he won the Olympic Trials and then claimed the Games silver medal in '12.

But the 32-year-old Arkansas native first emerged on the U.S. scene in '06 by winning the NCAA and World Ranking No. 10.

The Jackson State grad, who now lives and trains in the Austin, Texas, suburb of Round Rock, enjoys the luxury of having earned Wild Card advancement to this year's World Champs after winning last season's Diamond League title.

That's a sweet reward for Tinsley, who missed the '09 and '11 Worlds teams by a single place before winning the '13 nationals to advance to Moscow, where he again claimed silver:

Tinsley: Yes, this year, I'm lucky enough to have a bye into the Worlds. I've gone from just missing the team to automatically being on the team.

T&FN: That must be such a plus as far as planning your season and training.

Tinsley: Yes, it's a definite plus. It takes away that mental strain, especially at the USAs. The U.S. Trials are tough and our event is one

I don't have to qualify.

Say I go to run just one round: then I can train harder that week, knowing I'll run just one race. I don't have to back off so many days so that my body would be at its freshest to run those three rounds.

T&FN: You opened at Drake, then went to Philly for the birth of your son Titus [with '14 World Indoor 60H champ Nia Ali]. But then you didn't run in Doha. Why was that?

Tinsley: I just wasn't able to get into a good rhythm. After Drake, my son was due to be born on May 11 and I was supposed to leave for Doha on the 12th.

But after Drake, I went with Nia to a couple of doctor appointments and I just missed too many training days. I probably still could have run in Doha, but I just didn't feel ready. I wanted to take in everything about my son being born, but also to get in more training.

T&FN: You ran 52.5 as a high school senior in '02 and then 50.87 as a college frosh in '04, your first serious year in the 400s. So was there a time when you "became" a 400 hurdler, when you realized, "This is my event. I can really make an impact here nationally and internationally"?

Tinsley: I would say it was in '04. I won SWAC with that 50.8 and I figured out, "This can be my money maker. This can propel me to the top and get me to where I can make a living doing this."

I had worked hard that first year, but after I didn't do as well as I wanted at the NCAA; I still was a knucklehead. I still wasn't really serious about training.

I thought, "Man, if I make Nationals and I wasn't doing all the things on the track I was supposed to do, what if I go out there and train really hard and do all the things I'm supposed to do? Imagine what I can do then."

That's when I went to the drawing board and said, "I want to be a professional 400 hurdler. I want to win Nationals; I want to do all of it." That's when it clicked for me.

"I want to win NCAAs; go to the Worlds; go to the Olympic Trials and the Games." All those

Tinsley In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Michael DeLorean Tinsley was born April 21, 1984, in Little Rock, Arkansas; 6-0/170 (1.83/77)
- PRs:** 200—20.66 ('09); 400—46.02i ('06); 110H—13.86 ('04); 400H—47.70 ('13) (13, x A)
- Schools:** Robinson HS (Pulaski, Arkansas) '02; Jackson State '07; now represents adidas
- Coaches:** Todd Eskola (HS); Edmond Donald (Jackson State); Maurice Pierce, Darryl Woodson (pro)
- Major Meets:** 3h)NCAA '04; 3)NCAA, 9)US '05; 1)NCAA, 6)US '06; 7)US '07; 4h)OT '08; 4)US '09; 3)US '10; 4)US '11; 1)OT, 2)OG '12; 1)US, 2)WC '13; 7h)US '14
- World/U.S. Rankings:** x/7 '05; 10/4 '06; x/8 '07; x/5 '09; x/6 '10; 10/4 '11; 4/1 '12; 2/1 '13; 2/1 '14

of the toughest teams to make. It wears on you physically and mentally when you have to run three tough rounds against the best guys in the world.

So not having to go through those three rounds and all that mental strain so early in the overall season, that's such a plus. I can train through that and be ready at the end of August.

T&FN: So having the Wild Card means you don't have to hit one early peak at the USAs in Eugene. You can still run the meet but don't have to peak to try to get one of the top three spots.

Tinsley: I will go to Eugene and run. I might run one or two rounds, or even a different event. Maybe the 400 or the 200. I believe I have to just show fitness at Nationals. But I'll also be able to keep my training at a higher level because





“I want a gold medal. You have to keep your training moving forward to get in the position to be able to get to that top spot.”

things. If I did everything that I was supposed to do, I could have better success.

The next year, I was able to get 3rd in the NCAA, then in '06 I won. So I continued to progress to higher levels, but it was because I took everything more seriously.

T&FN: *So if '04 was your introductory year in the 400 hurdles, was '06 your “breakthrough” year? You won NCAA, made the USA final, World Ranked and generally got your name out there as a young up-and-comer.*

Tinsley: It definitely was. My main goal for '06 was to win NAAs and doing that was like my introduction. I was a guy coming from a small school who ran well [see sidebar], but people probably wondered how far I could take it. When I was able to win, then I think people took me a lot more seriously.

T&FN: *Then you got 4th in the USAs in both '09 and '11 to miss the World Champs team by one place. After you won the Trials in '12, you said, “I didn't want to experience that anymore.” Yet by missing those teams, was it “good” in terms of motivating you to make future teams?*

Tinsley: I think it was. A lot of people and athletes say that 4th is the worst place. They say they would rather not make the final or place last than take 4th.

But I see it that if I get 4th, that means I'm close. I'm right there. But if you don't even make the final, you don't get the chance to try to make a team.

In track, you don't have too many stars who just pop up out of nowhere. Mostly, it's the same group of guys for a few years and then it changes over. But if I'm 4th at Nationals, that means that I'm right on the cusp, very close to making the team. If you're 4th, you're right there. You're doing something right.

If I'm not making a final, or getting last, that means I have a lot of work to do. But if I get 4th, I'm right there and I just have to tweak and work on some things to get to that level of making the team.

T&FN: *Then you won the Trials and USAs and took silvers at the Games and Worlds. So close to the wins, but do those silvers tell you there is a lot of work left to do to get you on top of the podium?*

Tinsley: Exactly. Those medals are great accomplishments and show I've worked hard to get them. But they also are reminders that I want a gold medal. You have to keep your training moving forward to get in the position to be able to get to that top spot.

And when I lost in Moscow, it was so close [0.01]. So that's also a lot of motivation going into this year.

T&FN: *And that 47.70 is your PR. You also got*

A Small School Helped

Michael Tinsley rose to national prominence while at Jackson State in the Southwestern Athletic Conference. He won loop titles outdoors at 200, 400 and in both hurdles.

Even though he didn't compete in a “power conference,” he feels his SWAC experiences prepared him well for moving onto the national and international ranks as a professional:

“I think it did. For me, it was a thing of just going out and running hard and not worrying about what school I went to, or how big the conference was, or how many titles the school had won.

“It was about the person inside the jersey. The school you're affiliated with is just the name on your shirt. I never got caught up with any of that of going to this school or that school.

“I just know that if you do what you're supposed to do—run well and train hard—this is a need sport.

“Anything you do, if you work hard and do what you need to do, your talent is going to reflect that work. Your hard work is going to show, no matter where you went.”

PRs in the '06 NCAA final, the '09 and '11 USA finals, the '12 Trials, two in London including the final, then the '13 Worlds final. So would you class yourself as a “big-meet” guy who responds to the challenge of a major title meet?

Tinsley: I definitely feel I'm a championship runner. I can run well meet-to-meet-to-meet, but the championships are where I feel I definitely strive even more. I'm confident at them because I know I've put in the work.

And one thing about Americans is that we have been running rounds at championship meets almost since high school. All through college, we had to run rounds. So most American athletes are used to them.

I know that I pride myself on being able to run well through rounds and put myself in a position to win a medal. There is a definite art to running rounds.

In London and Moscow, we ran three rounds in four days. But at the USAs, we usually run three rounds in three days. We don't have a break, but I feel that gives us even more of an edge.

T&FN: *Both hurdles races are races of rhythm, especially the 400s combining running a quarter-mile with hurdling, keeping a stride pattern, etc. From when you started the 400s as a college frosh, what was the hardest thing for you to master?*

Tinsley: I think that it was learning and

Tinsley — continued

then running the stride pattern that was best for me. I think everyone wants to be the 13-step king like Edwin Moses and Kevin Young. But the truth is that very few guys are nearly 6-5 [1.96] like Kevin. No matter how strong or fast you are, certain attributes you just don't have.

I knew I wasn't that kind of guy. So I just wanted to find a pattern that worked for me. I tried to alternate; 13-14-13-14. Then once I had some success, I learned how to do 13 strides for part of the race.

But I really wasn't that good at it because I wasn't physically strong enough. Once I got with my strength coach Bruce Johnson, I was able to improve my strength levels in my body in general, I was able to hold that stride pattern a lot better and a lot more efficiently because I had the strength.

When I ran 13 strides before, I couldn't hold it for as long because I wasn't strong enough to continue longer with 13 strides. I could run 13 through 5 or 6 hurdles, but I didn't have the strength to carry it on farther. I would use almost everything I had just to get 13 through 5 hurdles.

Once I got stronger in the weightroom and my body got stronger overall from doing base work with my coach, I was able to hold that pattern a lot longer. That really helped me.

T&FN: What is your pattern now?

Tinsley: Usually I go 13 through five, then I switch after the sixth hurdle to alternating. Left to six, then right-left-right-left on home.

I really feel that a stride pattern has a lot to do with energy distribution. Not doing too much or too little, but always running at not quite 100% but around 95-96% throughout the race. And then give it all going home.

That's my style of running. You can't run the race all out because you're going to die. You're going to hit the wall.

Also, I can hurdle about equally well with either leg. There's not a drop-off when I use my right leg. Some guys can't hurdle well with their alternate leg, but I can do just as well with both legs.

T&FN: You mention Moses and Young, but are there past hurdlers that you especially admire?

Tinsley: Absolutely Edwin and Kevin. They were the greats who I definitely learned

about even before I started running track. When I was coming up through high school and college, I looked at guys like James Carter, Felix Sánchez, Angelo Taylor.

Also Bershawn Jackson. Even though we're close to the same age, when I was in college, he was already a pro.

To see him running at that level and the things he was doing, I knew I also wanted to do those things. Those were the guys I watched coming up. Then I got the chance to run against them.

T&FN: How did it feel, once you became a pro yourself, to get in national- and world-level races with guys you had watched on TV not too long before? You became a contemporary with them, so what kind of an adjustment was that for you?

Tinsley: It was a big adjustment because while they had been the guys I looked up to, they also were the ones I wanted to beat. When I became a pro, then we all were fighting for a paycheck.

I got over it pretty quick, but early on, it was a thing where I did watch them: watch them warm up and how they did their hurdling practices. I just took in all that I could see.

But after you're around the guys for a while, you get to know them. They're all pretty nice guys; we would have conversations and they would give me advice on my hurdling from time to time. So it was definitely something new for me, but I also saw it as a positive.

T&FN: Do you think about any "ultimate" time, or a certain goal for each season? Or do you just want win every race and let the times follow?

Tinsley: Each season, I try to run better than last season. So I review the past year's races

Tinsley's first big title came at the '06 NCAA



and see what things I can improve on. I don't try to change every single thing, but just the small things I can work on for the next year.

Each year, my main focus is to try to get better. Being competitive, I wanted to try to win every race I can. The 400 hurdles is a very deep event, so I just want to win as many races as I can. Winning races builds your confidence going into the next race. You know you can run with the guys.

T&FN: In terms of Nationals, what happened last year? You smashed the fifth hurdle in your heat and nearly fell, although you finished.

Tinsley: Just lack of focus, knowing I would run only one round. Not lollygagging, but I just wasn't as locked in as I normally would be. I clipped the hurdle and didn't advance, but I'm just glad I didn't get injured. But in a weird way it all worked out, especially for the younger guys who did advance.

T&FN: If there was a year to have a mishap, it was last year when there was no big team to make.

Tinsley: But now my goal is to win the world championship.

T&FN: The view is best from the top step of the podium.

Tinsley: Exactly. That's the one medal to win this year. I will be very pleased with any medal—but most of all I'm going for gold. □

Finding The Right Event

As a high schooler, Michael Tinsley was an all-around sprinter and hurdler. He mainly ran the 110 hurdles, the 200 and 400, but also tried the 300 barriers:

"I kind of felt like an in-between guy, looking for my best event. I ran a lot of events, but mainly I started as a 110 hurdler. It kind of just spiraled from there.

"At my school, we did a little bit of everything. Some guys specialize at an early age, but when I was coming up I still ran a lot of different events.

"But when you run the 110s in high school, you automatically run the 300 hurdles too. You just automatically run both events in all your meets.

"I took to the 300s pretty well [37.3 best as a senior in '02] and got good coaching early in them. Going to college, I was able to grow and excel in the long hurdles. I also ran the 110s [14.10 best, also in '02], but there you need a lot of technical work.

"In high school, I wasn't the hurdling technician I became in college or that I am now.

"The thing I found about the long hurdles is that I could make little mistakes, but still be in the race. I was able to run well without always being perfect over every hurdle."