

Jeremy Wariner

by Jon Hendershott

In '04 Jeremy Wariner went from a promising 400 talent in April to Olympic champion in August. He cut the 45.13 PR he took into his soph year at Baylor down to the 44.00 that struck gold in Athens. And all of it at age 20.

The Texas native kept rolling in '05 under the tutelage of coach Clyde Hart. A 43.93 career-low to win the world title made Wariner the undisputed ruler of the 400—at age 21.

The quiet-spoken sprinter admits he loves to stay at home and just relax away from the track, especially now as a professional whose job it is to train and maintain his status as the world's best:

T&FN: *Training with Darold Williamson, being coached by Clyde Hart and having Michael Johnson as your agent, it seems you have what could be called a “perfect storm” of people around you. It's a convergence of brilliant personnel, all of whom have been critical to your success.*

Wariner: Definitely. It's great knowing my training partner runs around the same times as me. And knowing what coach Hart has done in the past, I know his workouts will be successful with me if I do what he tells me and I don't slack off at practice. Show up on time and work my hardest, give 100% every day on the track and in the weightroom.

T&FN: *Michael had that work ethic too.*

Wariner: Michael did the same workouts, so he knows what I'm doing. If I tell him I shouldn't do something because I'm sore, he can tell me, “Remember that I did the same thing. Coach knows what he's doing and he won't overload you so you can't finish the workout or hurt yourself.”

Coach Hart knows that if we're feeling any pain, he won't have us do anything that might cause us to pull something. That's one thing he's always worried about: if you have a little injury he's not going to run you in a meet until you're ready to give your absolute best and not get hurt.

That's what I've always liked about coach Hart: he's worried about his athletes. He doesn't try to run them too much during the season so that they die out at the end. He says that we never peak throughout the season; we always “reload and get better.”

T&FN: *You rested after Worlds and Zürich, then geared back up for the World Athletics Final. But a hip flexor problem flared up in Monaco. Was that basically your first serious injury?*

Wariner: No, not really. My frosh year in college, I strained a hamstring at indoor NCs and was out for more than three weeks. I'm at a different level now, so the hip flexor is something we have to stay on top of. My sacroiliac joint keeps sliding out of alignment. I do exercises to make that area stronger and my physical therapist keeps me aligned.

T&FN: *So far, have you had one victory that was the most satisfying?*

Wariner: It's hard to say. The Olympics, plus the Worlds and Zürich this year, have been the ones I always look back to because I ran great races at those meets.

But I might also say the Trials because I was an underdog at the time. No one really knew who I was. But I was focused the whole meet and listened to what coach Hart said. He believed in me and so did my parents, and Michael also felt I could do it.

T&FN: *After all you achieved in '04 at a young age, fans and media said, “Here's the next Michael Johnson.” Do you ever get tired of hearing that and want to be taken on your own merits?*

Wariner: I'd like to be taken on my own, for who I am, but I realize those comparisons are going to be there just as part of the sport. Everybody wants to see the “next whoever.” No matter what event, you'll hear that.

I don't really mind hearing it because it shows that people think I can do what Michael did and maybe be as successful as he was. It shows me that if I work hard enough, I can get to where he was or even above him.

So I don't mind it, but every once in a while I'd like to hear, “He's Jeremy Wariner” without mentioning Michael Johnson.

T&FN: *You were a 45.1-level guy starting '04, but even by the start of the Games when you had improved all the way to 44.37, did you still kind of sneak up on the world? The Games were your first senior-level international meet, so did it work in your favor not to have a lot expected of you?*

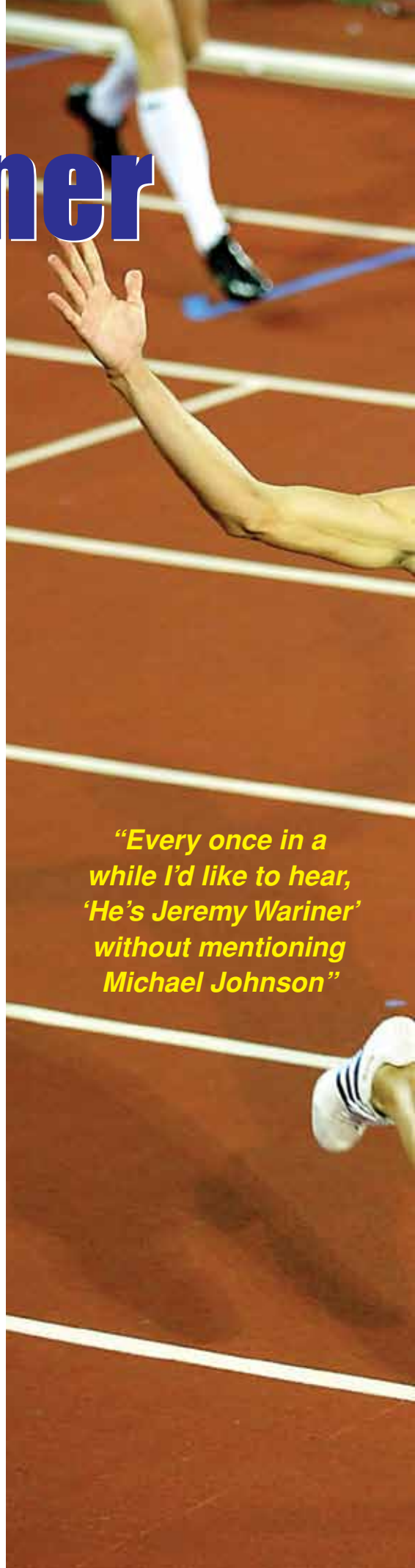
Wariner: I definitely didn't have pressure on me. It seemed like people were focused on Alleyne Francique and Derrick Brew because they had the experience and I didn't. But I felt comfortable going in; I knew what I could do. I knew what my goal was and I just stayed focused. Without any pressure on me, I was just there running.

Just being in the Olympics, let alone winning the gold medal, can be a lifelong goal. When I started running track, that was my

— Wariner Facts —

- Personal: born Irving, Texas; 1/31/84; 61/150 (1.85/68); represents adidas
- PRs: 200—20.59 ('04) (20.41w '03); 400—43.93 '05.
- Schools: Lamar HS (Arlington, Texas) '02; competed for Baylor '03-'04; still attends Baylor but does not run for team
- Coaches: Mike Nelson (Lamar HS), Clyde Hart (Baylor)
- Major Meets: 200—1) Texas State, 4) GWI '02. 400—1) Texas State, 2) GWI, 4) USJ '02; 7) NCI, 2) USJ, 2) PAJ '03; 1) NCAA, 1) OT, 1) OG '04; 1) USA, 1) WC '05
- World/U.S. Rankings: 400—1, 1 '04; 1?/1? '05.

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MARK SHEARMAN

own goal—but I was shooting for 2008. Yet as the '04 season went on, I felt more and more confident that I could do it that year.

T&FN: How did both coach Hart and Michael help you adjust to what happened as '04 went on?

Wariner: Coach Hart has been in the sport long enough that he knew how things went. One thing we didn't do was change our routine in getting ready for the Olympic races. I'd warm up at the same time, do the same drills at exactly the same time with the same amount of rest between each, so we would have the same amount of time before going to the check-in area.

Michael said to just go out and do what I knew to do. Don't worry about anybody else on the track and if I ran my race, I'd be able to win. I talked with him before I went to check in and he said he thought I would win.

Coach Hart said the same thing; I was ready to win. I was in a lot better shape than at either the NCAA or Trials, so I just knew it was time for me to run. I just thought about what I needed to do—just run my race, really.

T&FN: Was that the biggest lesson of all from '04, that you were ready to step up to that level?

Wariner: It definitely was. I just knew that my confidence was building with each meet. The mental part of my race was there. So the only thing I needed to do was step up and run my race, not worry about anybody else and just go have fun, really. Coach Hart knows how to get you ready for that kind of situation and he knew I was ready and we were going to come out on top.

T&FN: Then what were the lessons of the '05 season? Partly just learning to accommodate to being the Olympic champion?

Wariner: Yes, trying to stay focused when you are considered No. 1 going into Worlds. All eyes are on you and there were a lot of great runners at Worlds. You have to learn to stay focused and not worry about pressure.

That's the thing about coach Hart and his workouts: he makes sure you're ready mentally. Going into the final, I knew my mental aspect was great. I hadn't worried about what other people did through the rounds. I knew how I felt—and another thing I learned was how to stay healthy throughout the season; what I needed to focus on with my body

to make sure I didn't get injured.

T&FN: Do you have any ultimate times you'd like to run—in both the 200 and 400—or don't you think in those terms?

Wariner: In the 200, I would love to break 20-flat. Some people say I don't have the speed or strength to do that. But I believe I can do it, and coach Hart does too. I'm not going to jump in it right now, though. Just use the 200 to get me better for the 400. The more 200s I run, the better my 400 should be. But I'd like to go under 20 one day.

In the 400, of course I'd like to break Michael's record [43.18]. Also if I'm fortunate, work at it hard enough and get where I need to be, maybe be the first to go under 43.

T&FN: You've said that you want to dominate the 400, which must mean winning titles. Michael always stressed that in his career. So winning championships takes far greater precedence for you than reaching a certain time?

Wariner: Definitely. Just win all the big races and get to the point where, when I'm on the track, people know they're running for 2nd because I'm going to win. If I run my race, I know that's possible—not just time-wise but mainly in terms of championships. Michael said he always believed everyone else ran for 2nd and 3rd. Yet he consistently ran in the low-44s and high 43s. I want to get to the kind of level he was during his career.

T&FN: In races, you appear very relaxed, even in the homestretch when many others look to be really working. Is that natural with you, or an outcome of all the training or something else?

Wariner: It's both mental and an effect of the training. We know how to do it; we know what we can do; we know that when we kick, we just need to stay relaxed.

We don't want to tighten up because when you do, you lose stride length and slow down. So the more relaxed you are, the better your stride will be. You won't overstride or understride.

T&FN: Is the strength Baylor guys seem to have at the end of races another outcome of the training and running the race the way coach Hart wants you to run it?

Wariner: Everything we do at practice, we use in a meet. We do a lot of overdistance so that when we run a 400, it seems a little easier at the end. For us, "overdistance" is anything over a 400: 450s, 475s, 500s. Around the start of the outdoor season, we'll run some 500s but then we'll go back to 450s and 475s. A 450 is the lowest we'll go for overdistance and we'll stay there most of the season.

He has us not really pick it up in the last 50 of a 450, but just work our arms. We've run 400 but there's that extra 50m left. That's like going from 350 to 400 in a race; it's working the last 50m of a race. We work the last 50 of a 450 in practice like we work the last 50 of a race 400. It's the "run beyond the finish" idea.

T&FN: As a kid, you played soccer. But when did you get into running?

Wariner: In my soph year of high school I did spring football and the head track coach, Mike Nelson, also coached defensive backs. I

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Jeremy Wariner

played receiver and he saw me run past all the defenders. I played baseball, too, and he said that with my speed, I should try track and see what I could do.

A lot of my friends ran track and they told me I should try it. I wasn't doing much in baseball so I decided to go out for track. I enjoyed it and had success, so I stuck with it. I was serious about track from when I started, but especially by my senior year when my coach was telling me that I could be more than just a collegiate athlete; I could go farther than that.

T&FN: In high school, did you consider yourself equally a 200 and 400 guy, or did you look ahead that the 400 would be your prime race?

Wariner: Some part of me thought I could be equally successful in both. But I had one of the fastest 400 times in the country as a senior and I also realized the 400 probably would be my race for the future.

I love the 200, I still want to run it and I feel I can be successful in it. But I realized the 400 was really my event.

T&FN: And you have said that you'll never run the 800.

Wariner: Yes, it's too far for me. A lot of people talk about me running it, and some think I could run a great time. But all of us know I'm more of a sprinter/400 guy. I don't

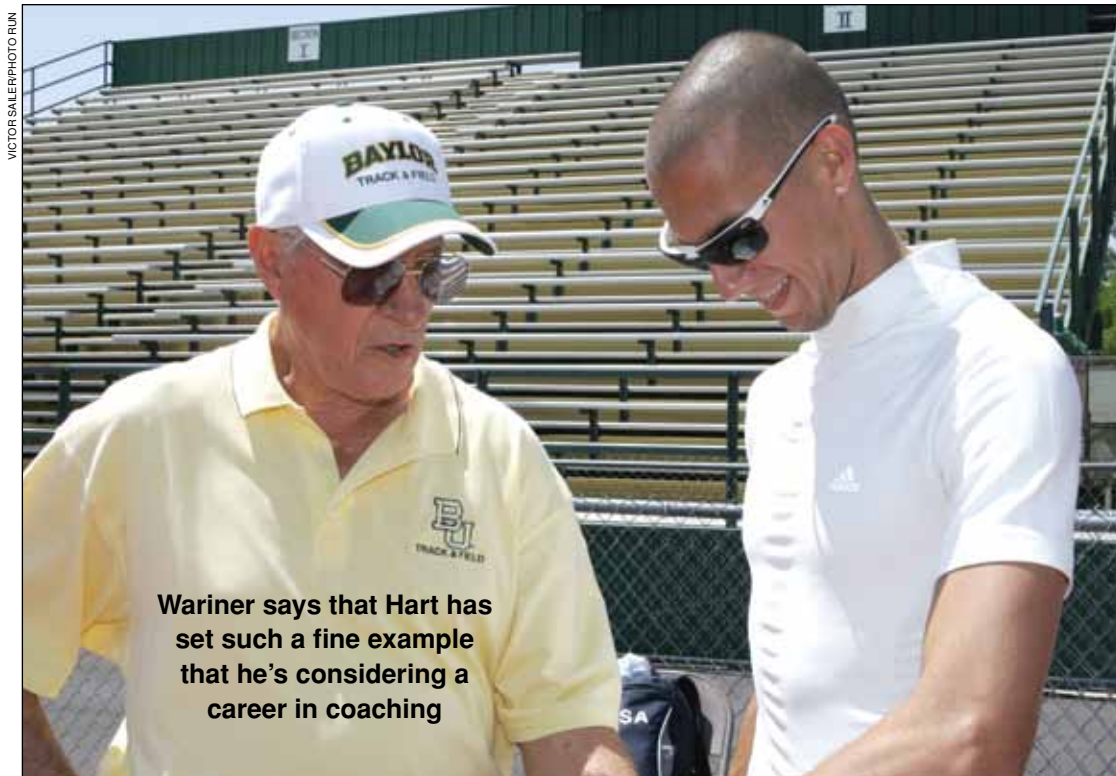
really have the endurance to run the 800.

T&FN: You've also said you'd consider doing a 200/400 double at a major championship. Do you have any timetable for that?

Wariner: No. It's just something coach Hart and I will just see about. See how I do

want to win titles in the 400 and not possibly jeopardize that by trying to double.

T&FN: As '04 went on and you really started to improve, did you ever consider what the term "Olympic champion" meant? Did you ever think of it in terms of yourself?



Wariner says that Hart has set such a fine example that he's considering a career in coaching

Coch Hart Stresses The Early Part Of The Race

Clyde Hart places great importance on his quartermilers running at a stiff pace right from the gun, as Jeremy Wariner explains:

"The big thing he stresses is getting out hard the first 50-60m. A lot of people get out well for the first 30m or so, but then they don't maintain the same speed and end up working the backstretch harder.

"He wants us to get out harder, basically so we can see where we are coming off the first turn. Then we don't have to work the backstretch as hard as everyone else. We're already ahead of where we need to be and it sets us up in a good position for the last 200.

"He wants us at a certain split and he also wants us to develop a mental clock. All Baylor quartermilers have that mental clock in their heads, somehow.

It's from the way we practice; we get it in our head and we know how fast we're running or if we need to slow down any. It also helps that we've done the first 50-60m like we do, so

throughout the years. It will depend on how I do in the 200. A double is something I could do mainly for training, rather than at major championships like Michael did. I mean, I

then we don't have to put in as much effort on the backstretch.

"Coach Hart has what he called the '4 Ps': push, pace, position, press.' We push the first 50-60m, getting out real hard. When we get to the 100, we then pace ourselves down the backstretch to get where we want to be.

"Then we position ourselves on the curve; we work the turn because a lot of runners slow down to save some energy for their kick. But we don't kick; we just work our arms because the more you work your arms, the better your kick should be. Then we press the last 150 or 125, depending on where you want to start your kick.

"It wasn't that hard [a strategy] for me to learn because that's how we do our practices. Everything we do in practice, coach Hart wants us to get out hard the first 50m.

Get to the 200 mark on time, then work the turn. The 200 is usually set a little slower than what we would come through at 400 when the training distance is 450.

"It makes us work the turn, so we'll get back on the pace we need to be on. The more we practice it in training, the easier it's going to be in races."

Wariner: Going into the season, no. I got hurt my frosh year and I didn't know where I was physically. But as the '04 season went on I felt it was possible for me to do what I wanted.

Both Darold and me were running 44s consistently during the collegiate season and we both felt that maybe this was the time for us to make the team. But at the beginning of the season, it was hardly even at the back of my mind.

My main goals were to stay healthy all season, make the NCAA final and try to win, then help the 4x4 to try to win.

T&FN: You're still in school at Baylor?

Wariner: Yes, I'm working to get my degree in the next couple of years. I'm studying outdoor recreation and I might minor in communications. That's in the back of my mind right now.

After I'm done running, I'd like to coach. I watch coach Hart at practice and see how he enjoys it every day. He loves what he does. He's 73 right now and he's still out there enjoying himself. I'd love to be a coach like coach Hart, just enjoying myself being out there when I get older. It's something to look forward to and when the time comes, if I'm ready I'll coach. □