

## The 400 Hurdles? George, Are You Crazy?

### GEORGE, ARE YOU CRAZY?

I did hear that a lot from friends when I told them I intended to run the event. But I felt I had solid reasons to try it. I understood why they asked the question though. After all, the 400 hurdles is considered by many to be the most technically demanding and intensely painful event in track and field. You start with the well-known physical demands of the flat 400, especially the agony of that final straightaway. Toss in ten hurdles, the last two or three of which you have to jump



George Haywood-Medal winner at the Worlds

over with legs that are exhausted from the all-out effort that a fast 400 requires. Then add a distinct possibility that you never have to think about in other races, which is, you might run full speed into a 33 inch-high wooden barrier and trip and fall flat on your face. Then mix it all together and you have the 400 hurdles—tremendous potential for either satisfaction or embarrassment.

So I really was asked quite a bit—George—the 400 hurdles—are you crazy?

Well, maybe. But the challenge was irresistible. And the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that the 400 hurdles offered me the best opportunity to win a medal in an individual event at the outdoor World

Championships. I looked at the results of the last three Worlds, and a 1:05 would have gotten you onto the 400 hurdles winners' stand every time. I had been running the flat 400 for years, ranking between third and seventh in the USA every year. Despite that, I found medals are very hard to come by. I blame my friends for that. Most of the time I am in the same age group as Bill Collins and Horace Grant. (Luckily I am five years younger than Charles Allie, or the congestion on the podium would be even worse). These three are among the nicest guys I have ever known. In addition, they are world-renowned masters runners, with 11 individual world records among them. It is a huge honor and a privilege to run with them as relay teammates (we hold the world record in M55 4 x 400), but competing against them is an exercise in frustration. One reason I so enjoy having meals with them is that it allows me to see their faces, whereas when I race them I only see their backs. And when you throw Steve Peters or David Elderfield, the British champions, into the mix, gaining access to the podium at a World Championship for the flat 400 is almost mission impossible.

Thus the attraction to the 400 hurdles. I felt I could run a 1:05, and that it would earn me a medal. I had consistently been around 56.5 to 57.5 in the flat 400. A hurdler with perfect technique, like my hero Edwin Moses, the greatest of all time, can run the 400H about 6 to 9 % slower than his flat 400. That would put me around 1:01 or 1:02. But I was not a good enough hurdler to be able to expect a 9% differential. I did feel that I could get to a 15% differential, however, even with mediocre hurdling technique, which would get me to 1:05+ and something shiny dangling from my neck. So those were the goals: a 1:05+, and World Championship hardware.

Fortunately, I was not starting from

### 2011 WMA Prelims: M55 400 METER HURDLES

1 Haywood, George	M58 United States	1:06.94Q
2 Cipriani, Alessandro	M55 Italy	1:06.99Q
3 Easley, Ricky	M57 United States	1:10.33Q
4 Cummings, Steve	M55 United States	1:08.87Q
5 Rapaccioni, Claudio	M56 Italy	1:09.44Q
6 Meier, Albert	M58 Switzerland	1:10.79Q
7 Cheadle, Bill	M58 United States	1:09.89Q
8 McNamee, John	M58 United States	1:10.75Q

scratch. I had run the 330 yard intermediate hurdles in high school. My coach was the legendary Brooks Johnson, who was then in his first coaching job, at St.



Brooks Johnson-USATF 2010 Coach of the Year

Albans School in Washington DC in 1967. Brooks would go on to fame as the head coach at Stanford, U.S. Olympic coach in 1984, and USATF coach of the year in 2010 (at age 76). I was very fortunate to learn early on from the best. Brooks and I have stayed in touch over the years. When I told him I intended to start hurdling again, he invited me to come down and train with his group in Orlando, Florida. He is coaching about a dozen world class sprinters and hurdlers there, including Olympic gold medalist Justin Gatlin and David Oliver (ranked #1 in the world in the 110 hurdles in 2010). Needless to say, I accepted Brooks'

invitation.

The great thing about hurdling is that it's like riding a bicycle. The technique is difficult to master at first, but once you learn it you don't lose it. I had not hurdled for forty years, but when I decided to take it up again two years ago at age 56, the technique was still there. Throw yourself at the hurdle...there are various descriptions of the right way to think about running full speed and smoothly over a 33-inch high barrier. But the first time you run full speed at a hurdle, your inclination is to slow down as you approach it, or at least to leap high up over it to make sure you clear it without tripping. Think about it—over millions of years of evolution, we naturally developed an instinct to run full speed away from something, or maybe around something. The idea of running full speed directly at something goes against our natural instinct. These instincts are wrong for hurdling. Learning to overcome them takes a lot of practice and determination.

Fortunately I had put in the necessary amount of practice when I was young. I remember Brooks telling me in high school, “Haywood, if you want to learn to do this right, you need to do at least a hundred hurdles a day, and it's going to take a while”. A 16 year-old body can do hundreds of hurdles a week without breaking down. I soon learned that a 56 year-old body (at least this one) could not even come close to that.

I often work out at Georgetown University's track. Shelia Burrell, fourth in the Athens Olympics in the heptath-

lon, was one of the coaches there. One day in 2009 I said “Hey Shelia, I'm thinking about doing the 400 hurdles this year—can you check out my form and tell me if I'm crazy?” She watched me do a few hurdles, and pronounced my technique solid. I was very encouraged. She said I needed to work on my steps between hurdles, and my takeoff point. In my enthusiasm, I probably did 30 hurdles that day—very light work compared to what I was used to. Except the problem was, I was used to that 40 years ago. Mentally I was accustomed to the idea of doing hundreds of reps over the hurdles, but physically? The next day I was reminded that I was no longer 16, and that the pounding your lead leg and foot take when they go over the hurdle is considerable, especially if you sometimes land wrong because your technique is still rusty. I also have the disadvantage of being a right-leg-lead-only hurdler. When I was young I had never practiced going over with the left leg leading. So in my enthusiastic return to hurdling after a forty year layoff, all the pounding was concentrated on the right side. I developed a calf injury which I could not shake the rest of the summer. The dream was dead, or at least deferred until the next season. And I couldn't run the flat 400 either, so the season was truly wrecked. I thought about what a fellow masters runner once told me: “It's harder to make it to the starting line than it is to make it to the finish line.”

The next season, 2010, I vowed to run smarter. I would limit myself to 12 hurdles in a day, and never hurdle two

#### 2011 WMA Finals: M55 400 METER HURDLES

1 Cipriani, Alessandro	M55 Italy	1:03.94
2 Haywood, George	M58 United States	1:05.13
3 Cummings, Steve	M55 United States	1:06.40
4 Rapaccioni, Claudio	M56 Italy	1:08.53
5 Easley, Ricky	M57 United States	1:08.84
6 Meier, Albert	M58 Switzerland	1:09.21
7 Cheadle, Bill	M58 United States	1:09.99
8 McNamee, John	M58 United States	1:11.07

days in a row. I stuck with this plan, and succeeded in making it to the starting line. It was a local meet. I was nervous—this would be the first time in my life I had ever tried to run 400 meters over hurdles, and the first hurdle race of any kind I had run in 40 years. My heart was pounding hard. It always does that before a 400 race, in anticipation of the imminent effort, pain, and exhaustion. And this race would have an added feature—all of the above, plus ten barriers to clear, and lots of doubts to run through.

My clearest memories from that maiden 400H voyage are of how sloppy my technique was over the last four hurdles, and how much it hurt in the final straightaway. I also remember how high I popped up in clearing the last few hurdles. Very amateurish, I remember thinking even as I did it. My time was 1:08.42. Not what I had hoped for, but at least I finished without hitting any hurdles. It was about 11 seconds slower than I could do a flat 400. I had hoped for a differential of closer to 9 seconds (about 16%). Oh well, it's only my first try, I thought, but I can see that this hurdling business is going to be even tougher than I expected. I was pleased that although my time was not what I had hoped for, I was ranked #2 in the USA at that point in

*Horace Grant, Charles Allie, George Haywood and Toney Mulhollan-Gold Medal winners in the 4 x 400 relay, 2009 Indoor Masters Championship in Baltimore, Maryland.*







400 Hurdle Finals—Picture L to R: John McNamee, Rick Easley, Claudio Rapaccioni, Alessandro Cipriani, George Haywood and Steve Cummings

the season. (I finished with a #5 ranking for 2010).

I began plotting how to take three seconds off my time. I was pretty sure that a 1:05+ would win Nationals. Injury had kept me from going to Worlds in Lahti, Finland in 2009, but a gold medal at 2010 Nationals would be a great consolation. Unfortunately, my high hopes were dashed once again. Despite sticking to my 12 hurdles a day limit, I developed plantar fasciitis. It was in the right heel of course, the one I land on coming off the hurdle. Treatment, therapy, rest, all to no avail. I had to cancel the trip to Sacramento for 2010 Nationals, which was very disheartening, even depressing. “It’s harder to make it to the starting line than it is to make it to the finish line.”

That became my mantra for 2011. The World Championships were scheduled for Sacramento. Another chance to achieve those elusive, injury-postponed goals. In order to have any chance at success, I HAVE TO MAKE IT TO THE STARTING LINE!

I was determined to focus on injury prevention. I bought a measuring wheel so I could put some hurdles on soft grass and mark off the 45 meters to the first hurdle, and 35 meters in between hurdles. Soft grass was a much better surface for 58 year old feet and ankles and calves. Brooks gave me a tip—put a hurdle at the edge of the sandy landing pit for the long jump. Now you can practice running at it full speed and land safely. MAKE IT TO

## THE STARTING LINE.

I entered the same local meet as the year before, but I decided to approach the race differently this time. All my caution in practice would be for naught if I injured myself in the adrenaline-fueled all-out effort of a race, with the pounding that could give to the previously coddled joints and muscles. Should I risk it? But I needed to get more experience in the

400 meter hurdles. I had only done it once in my life, the previous year—how could I go to the Worlds without getting some more racing experience under my belt? Compromise: I’ll do the race but I’ll wear my fat, cushiony jogging shoes, the ones with the thick heels that would absorb the blow if I landed wrong

coming off the hurdle. Spikes are faster, but they have no cushion in the heel. You are not supposed to land on your heel, but it can happen. One false step in flying over the hurdle might revive the plantar fasciitis—and I didn’t want to deal with that again.

So I put on the clunky shoes and did a few practice runs over the hurdles just before the race. But that presented another problem. Wearing heavier shoes that had less traction threw off my steps, and steps are key to hurdling. There are two aspects to hurdling technique: how you go over the hurdle, and how you run between the hurdles. The two aspects are separate, but interrelated. To go over the hurdle with maximum speed and efficiency, you have to take off from the right distance in front of the hurdle,

about six feet in my case. If your steps are off, you will approach the hurdle and find you are too far away, or too close. In either case you have about one second, while running as fast as you can, to adjust so that you can take off at your optimal takeoff point. The adjustment process usually involves stutter-stepping, which destroys your speed and rhythm. So keeping the same stride length is very important in hurdling. For example, the distance to the first hurdle is 45 meters. I normally take 23 steps. But if something affects your steps by just 2% while you run those 45 meters, you will miss your takeoff point by a full 3 feet—a disaster.

The clunky shoes had at least a 2% effect, and I could feel that right away. I had to change my race plan. I would take 25 steps to the first hurdle, and 19 steps between hurdles instead of my usual 17. I executed the plan with some difficulty, but finished in 1:08.64. Given the shoes and the short steps, I was not unhappy to run basically the same time as the year before when I ran in spikes, but I knew I had to go much faster at Worlds.

## 2011 W.M.A. CHAMPIONSHIPS SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Well, I’m here. 4500 athletes from 93 countries are gathered in Sacramento. I am on the track for the qualifying heats of the 400 hurdles. I made it to the starting line. This is what I trained for—two years of hard practice, strategizing, fighting doubts, battling injuries. But I’m at the starting line, which means I have a chance. A thought flashes through my head. In the 400, a one-lap race, the starting line IS the finish line. There must be some profound meaning in that, I thought, but I’ll have to ponder that later. Right now I have a race to run. I have my

*“The idea of running full speed directly at something goes against our natural instinct. These instincts are wrong for hurdling. Learning to overcome them takes a lot of practice and determination.”*





400 Hurdle Finals—Picture L to R: Steve Cummings, George Haywood, (Cipriani-Lane 5), Claudio Rapaccioni, Rick Easley and John McNamee

spikes on—running fast is the objective now. I do have some gel inserts in the heels though—injury prevention is not totally forgotten. I practice some starts and calibrate my steps over a couple of hurdles. I feel good, and my steps are perfect. This bodes well, I think. The gun goes off and I focus on smoothness and rhythm. It works. I have a big lead entering the final straightaway, so I relax to save for the final. Happiness—a 1:06.94, a personal best, the fastest qualifying time, and it felt easy. I know I can go faster in the final, and I know I will have to.

Learning about your competitors in masters track is not difficult. Most of them have been running for years, and a bit of research on the web turns up lots of data. Two of my fellow Americans, Steve Cummings and Ricky Easley, had been consistent 400 hurdlers for years, and seemed likely to present a tough challenge. But one competitor particularly stood out. Alessandro Cipriani from Italy had run 1:01.91, 1:01.99, and 1:01.95 in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively. He was remarkably consistent, very fast, and had just turned 55. I figured him to be the favorite. He was the second-fastest qualifier for the finals, in 1:06.99. One thing I had noted from seeing his results over the years was that he usually dropped about three seconds from the heats to the finals. So I was not overly confident about the final just because I was the fastest qualifier.

## THE FINALS

The hardest part is over. I made it to the starting line. Now I just have to make it over ten hurdles while running as fast as I can. No more worrying about injuries, no more asking myself whether I was crazy to run this event, no time left for doubts. I fought through an awful lot to get to here, and right now I only have 400 meters to go. The work is done. It is time to have some fun.

What happens after the gun sounds is a blur. I enjoy the smoothness I feel through the first five hurdles, flying down the backstretch faster than I ever have. I hear someone shouting out the split time as we go through the 200 turn—30 seconds. We are out fast, maybe too fast. I say to myself, “he who best fights fatigue from here on will win.” It is so damn hard to keep your steps while running the turn! As my legs start to get heavy, I have to switch to 19 steps—I am tiring and I know I cannot reach the next takeoff point in 17 steps. I can see Cipriani pulling away on my right in lane 5. Not surprising—the research was right. But Steve Cummings on my left in lane 3 is passing me. He is running a strong race, better than I expected. “Don’t panic”, I tell myself, “From here on in is where this race is decided.” I push as hard as I possibly can while trying to maintain form. We are entering the final straightaway—90 meters and two hurdles to go. I’ve got some gas left in my tank. I start to gain on Cummings, and then pass him. At-

tack the hurdle! ... but do not let it trip you. Now one hurdle to go. Cipriani is way ahead, maybe 12 meters. Lots of adrenaline. Attack! I clear the last barrier cleanly. 40 more meters to go. I’m gaining on Cipriani...but his lead is too large. Now it’s over—I made it to the finish line. I look up at the scoreboard: Cipriani 1:03.94...Haywood 1:05.13...Cummings 1:06.40.

Cipriani did what I thought he would, running three seconds faster than he did in the heats. But I had accomplished what I thought I could do, and, standing there, hunched over gasping for oxygen as the other runners cross the line, I feel tremendously happy and proud. It had been a two year journey, but I finally made it to the finish line. I straighten up, gazing at the scoreboard, making sure I hadn’t misread it in my total exhaustion. The gaze confirms the first glance—I am the silver medalist in the 400 meter hurdles at the 2011 World Championships. I congratulate Cipriani first, then my other competitors. There is relief that it is finally over. The feeling as we exchange handshakes and hugs is no longer of competition. That has been replaced by camaraderie and respect. We all realize that each of us had a journey to get his 55 to 59 year old body to this spot a few meters past the finish line of the finals. It feels like a real honor to be in the company of the survivors of the journey.



—George Haywood

Email: [gwhaywood642@msn.com](mailto:gwhaywood642@msn.com)