

Nothing But Hurdles

Despite finding obstacles in her way both on and off the track, Melissa Morrison had the busiest of GP seasons

by Kirk Reynolds

Standing behind her blocks and looking down her lane, hurdler Melissa Morrison sees 10 barriers—all evenly spaced and at the same height. If only the burdens in her life were so easy. Morrison, ranked No. 1 in the U.S. for the last two years, attained her highest highs and endured her lowest lows in this past season.

In September the 27-year-old North Carolina native concluded a lavish, extended '98 outdoor season that saw her run a startling 18 GP meets, 2 more than any other athlete on the circuit. Not to mention 6 non-GP affairs.

More noteworthy, the Appalachian State alum dropped her barrier best to 12.53 to become second all-time in the U.S. Morrison ranked No. 3 in the world in '98, after ranking No. 4 the year prior. Along the way, however, she has braved the loss of four family members in the past 2½ years.

"I've had a lot on me," says Morrison, soft-spoken and serious one minute and joyful the next. "But I think it's made me a lot stronger. All the way around it's made me a stronger person."

Did it seem like a long season? "Yes it did!" laughs Morrison. "Running all the meets that I ran in, I did fairly well, so we just decided to continue running the rest of them that I had lined up for me." The "we" includes Morrison's coach for the past two seasons, South Carolina mentor Curtis Frye.

Morrison joined Frye's group of notables in Columbia in the fall of '96, and now trains with the likes of Allen Johnson, Roland McGhee, Tony McCall, Anjanette Kirkland, Monique Hennagan, Calvin Davis and Ayo Atterberry.

Frye explains that the heavy schedule was planned: "That's the way we've done things early with our elite athletes. We try to use competitions as a means of training. Once we get to a real fast phase [of training], they're in high gear and we race the rest of the way. We did that with Allen's early development, and we think it works pretty good."

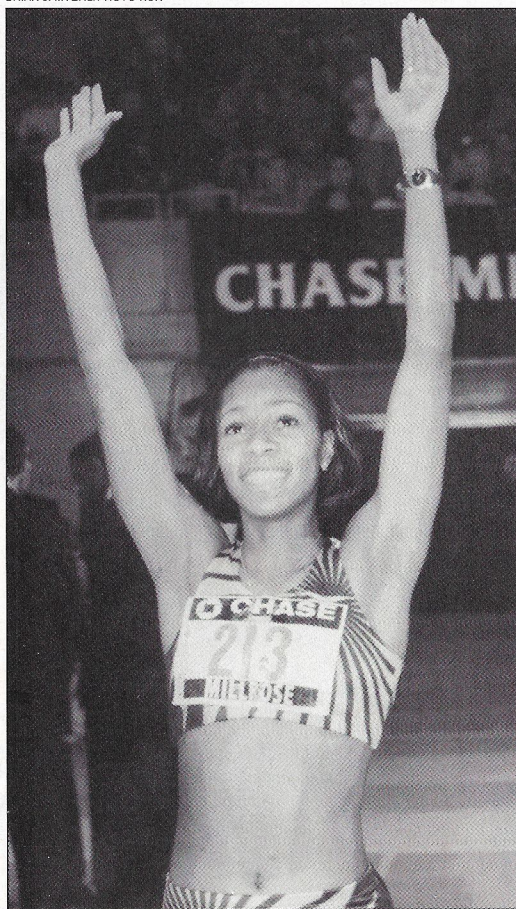
"Last year Melissa had to have cartilage removed from her knee in the fall, so we missed the fall. So we had to use the season a little bit more. I thought maybe we'd use it 15 times. I didn't know we ran 18!"

Within a 2-week span in late July and early August, Morrison clocked the Nos. 3, 5 & 7 U.S. performances of all time. In Paris she equaled her PR at 12.61. In Stockholm she blazed the 12.53 to become the second-best American ever.

And in Monaco she clocked 12.57. Gail Devers' American Record of 12.46 now seems attainable.

"There are a lot of things I've learned and practiced season to season, year to year, that have made me faster," Morrison confidently

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Morrison ran more GP-circuit races than anyone else in '98, no fewer than 18.

explains. "But I'm sure there are a lot more things that I can learn. It is possible for me to run 12.4."

Frye concurs, and adds that there are numerous goals for the two to discuss. Morrison ran 12.92 before moving to train with Frye, and has subsequently dropped her year-end bests to 12.61 and 12.53.

"If we can drop to 12.45, that looks like our next step," Frye asserts. "Hopefully we can go after the American Record on the right day. And get a medal. America has a lot of great hurdlers right now, and there are only three

going to the World Championships."

With her '97 nationals win, Morrison qualified for the Athens Worlds but had to undergo wisdom tooth extraction while at the meet and bowed out in the heats. That difficulty turned out to be minor.

She placed only 4th in the '98 U.S. Championships, but her continuing personal travails go a long way in explaining her performance. While Morrison was at the national meet her sister passed away on the day of the scheduled final in the 100H. Morrison almost didn't compete at the meet.

"I went and saw her in the hospital and I talked to her about it, and I asked if she wanted me to go," Morrison relates. "The decision was all on her, and she told me to go and be strong for her, and I did as well as I could."

Morrison's sister's passing came on the heels of three other unexpected family losses. "My father [Coley Miller] died March 27, and we buried him in April. And my niece passed away a year before that—my sister's daughter, the one who passed away. And my grandmother died December 24, 1996."

"She hasn't gotten dealt a straight hand," says Frye. "She's done a lot of maturing out of necessity, but we're not dwelling on those things at this point. She's a tireless worker. Once she feels like she knows exactly what you want, then she goes at it full-fledged. She will continue to question you until she gets exactly an understanding. She works to perfect whatever it is. So working with a person that likes perfection, I have to be more prepared! She's going to get it right."

The pupil attributes her improvements and success to the stability of being a part of Frye's group, and her growing prowess means she can now even critique Olympic champion Johnson.

"We joke with each other a lot," says Morrison about her and Johnson's training together. "We're able to take a lot of constructive criticism from one another without us getting mad and saying, 'Just because you do it better than me don't mean you can tell me how to do it!' It's really good for all of us to help each other out."

Morrison's goals for the future are simple: to stay healthy and run fast. Does she question her level of success? "I never have doubts in myself," says Morrison. "I knew that I could do it. I just didn't think it would happen this soon."

Frye sums it up: "Basically she's had a lot of obstacles, and she's an example for young kids to understand that the sun comes up tomorrow, and life does go on, and you will survive—and can survive with excellence." □