

Coaching the 300/400 Meter Hurdler

By

Coach Steve Silvey
Championship SSE Products
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There have been numerous articles written on the subject of proper hurdle technique. Many of these articles have never shared the nuts and bolts of actual hurdle workouts and what elite coaches can do to fine tune their athletes as they prepare for record setting performances.

Remember that a great male or female hurdler must spend a lot of time on **flexibility**. *The hurdler should be one of the most flexible athletes on the entire track and field team.* Be prepared to stretch twice a day. Another important component to hurdling is **Dorsi-Flexion** (heel up-toe toe). Dorsi-Flexion will allow the athlete to gain 2-3 inches in additional "lead leg" clearance and 2-3 inches in "trail leg" clearance.

HURDLING STATE OF MIND

For a hurdler to enter the world of the "elite" athlete, he/she will need to have the right state of mind. A highly aggressive nature and the "mind set" of a western "Gunslinger" are characteristics that can benefit the hurdler. He/she will need the toughness and tenacity of a NFL of a linebacker and like the "**Ninja Warrior**" attack hurdles with "**No Fear**".

FLEXIBILITY & THE HURDLER

A great hurdler must spend a lot of time on flexibility. The hurdler is one of the most flexible athletes on a track and field team. Flexibility is so important that I consider it a waste of time to work with hurdlers who are not willing to work on improving their flexibility. Good flexibility decreases the following:

1. Technical errors in hurdling
2. Unwanted contact with the hurdle
3. Balance problems
4. Get to the ground quicker
5. Physical injuries

Working on flexibility means that the athlete must devote another 15-20 minutes a day in his/her workout to flexibility. When they do it is not important except that it follows an activity that warms up their muscles such as, in the morning after a jog, after practice or at home in and after a warm shower. The athlete must be very flexible in their hip rotations, hurdle splits, lower back and hamstrings to be great.

How flexible does the athlete need to be? He/she should be so flexible that he/she can almost do a split! Sitting on the couch watching TV, or sitting on the computer or playing video games won't get them to this level of flexibility. To get where they need to be they will have to be disciplined to stretch twice a day. If the athlete isn't able to discipline himself/herself to do this – then suggest a yoga class.

In 25 years of coaching I have found a direct correlation between hamstring problems and poor lower back flexibility. If you are running into this, address it with stretching and weight room exercises such as "good mornings" and "dead-lifts."

The best item to help the hurdler is the ***STRETCH-RITE*** Belt. It was developed by a track athlete and comes with a color brochure that details which muscle groups each stretch is for. There are 25 sample exercises for the hurdle. This device will allow the athletes to do flexibility work that it would normally take a second person to assist with. This can be found at SSEproducts.com.

Coaching the 300 Intermediate Hurdler

Did you know that the top twenty five 400 meter hurdlers in the world *can use both their right and left legs* when running the 400 meter hurdles? The ability to use either leg as needed in hurdling is not a skill they use regularly but instead have developed it to use as needed in emergency situations such as, fatigue, headwinds, or hitting a previous hurdle. They are so adept with this skill that immediately and instinctively without even a conscious effort they can use the opposite leg and make their race a success. For this reason, I strongly believe in the benefit of learning to use alternate legs and which is why my 300 and hurdlers work on this skill. All of my male hurdlers start learning this skill beginning in the fall. We continue working on it during the winter and early spring by doing many "4" stepping over the women's 100 meter hurdles. This simply means that the athlete is going to "right lead" on one hurdle and then "left lead" on the next hurdle. This will feel uncomfortable and awkward at first but if an athlete is doing 10 x 10 hurdles 3-4 days a week at a low rate of speed in their training shoes during a warm-up or cool-down, they will learn this new skill and become comfortable with using alternate legs for hurdling.

Calvin Davis, a 400 meter runner had never touched a hurdle in his life before 1996 and wasn't sure he wanted to. We made the decision it was in his best interest to convert to hurdling. He ran many of these 10 x 10 hurdles in practice (with the R-L) 4-step drill.

Calvin ran his first race as a hurdler in April of 1996 with a time of 49.29. Later in August in just the 15th race of his life, he won the Olympic Bronze with a personal best of 47.91. Not a bad accomplishment for the man who just a short year before had said “no” to trying the hurdles.

Lowering the Intermediate Hurdle Height – 300 Hurdles

Dropping the intermediate hurdles 3-6 inches will allow the hurdler to be aggressive in practice because he/she will gain confidence that will carry the hurdler through the meet. If you are trying to convert a 400 or 800 meter runner to the 300/400 meter hurdles, you can help them to overcome any fear and “feel” success by dropping the hurdle in practice. I personally like to do this on the hurdles on one or both curves in the 400 meters and on the hurdle on the only curve the 300 hurdler runs. Many times I don’t even tell the young hurdler that I have dropped the hurdle height 3-6 inches. Why? Because it is very important for an athlete to *feel success* in practice....when an athlete feels success that feeling will carry over in to track meets.

Removing Intermediate Hurdles

I often remove a few hurdles in training sessions for two main reasons:

1. Force athletes to use alternate lead legs
2. Improve training performance times to remove psychological barriers

In a workout, I recommend removing the first 2 or 3 hurdles to force the athletes to, first, run the distance and second, use whichever legal leg comes up as the approach that particular hurdle. This forces the hurdler to practice using the opposite leg and become comfortable with doing so. In addition, I emphasize that they must run the distance. Chopping their steps is not an option and should be something they are instructed to *not* consider doing. The rule is simple: Whatever leg comes up is the leg to use!

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| Workout Sample: | 150 Meters (70%) |
| 1 x 8 hurdlers | (Remove hurdles #1 & #2) |

I have also been known to remove the final one, two or three hurdles for the intermediate hurdler. When I do this, my instructions to the hurdler are very simple: your goal is to finish the hurdle interval faster than ever before and you can because you have no hurdles in your way to the finish line! My experience is that this is a great for confidence building exercise particularly for the young hurdler. It gets them into the mindset of covering their race distance in a lifetime best in practice and then they carry that great confident mindset straight into the track meet.

A confident mindset plus the extra adrenalin that naturally occurs prior to a meet means that the athlete's time is now ready to drop a second or two when they are in that big race and ready to compete hard. If an athlete can run fast in practice, I believe it will be easy for them to run fast in those important late season track meets.

During the 2002 season at the University of Oregon, I had the opportunity to coach a young athlete named Brandon Holiday who was a walk-on at Oregon. Brandon was an average practice runner with a personal best of 52.97. In practice Brandon's times improved steadily from 52 to 51 to 50.0. Late in May, Brandon ran a big personal best and became the PAC-10 400 hurdle champion with an electronic time of 50.73. His speed that had remained unchanged increased steadily when I started in mid-season removing one or two hurdles over the final 100 meters of his race and/or lowering the height of the last hurdles. By removing or changing the height of the hurdles, Brandon was able to see and feel success even when he was in his greatest stages of fatigue.

Workout Sample #1: 200 Meters (70%)
1 x 8 hurdles (remove hurdle #6 & #7)
3 x 3 hurdles (at relaxed goal pace)

Workout Sample #2: 1 x 8 hurdles (remove last 2 hurdles & sprint home)=goal pace
2 x 5 hurdles (at relaxed goal pace)

Workout Sample #3: 1 x 9 hurdles "sprint home" remove final hurdle=goal pace
15 minute break
2 x 3 hurdles (at relaxed goal pace)

Hopefully you have found some of this information helpful and will be able to incorporate it into your hurdle program. In addition, these items will help you as a coach:

- World Class Hurdle Training program (Book and DVD) "package"
- Coach Silvey's "Texas Tech" Training Program (Cook Book) Workouts for entire year
- Coach Silvey's "Arkansas" Training program (Cook Book) Workouts for entire year

Check out my website at: SSEproducts.com

Hurdles 101

By

Coach Steve Silvey

Championship SSE Products

Website: SSEproducts.com

Hips Tall position - Where the head, neck, back, and hips are in alignment. When leaving the starting blocks, the hurdler must be in a "Hips Tall" position no later than the 4th or 5th stride to insure proper hurdle clearance on the first barrier.

Dorsi-Flexion - Heel up/toe up at all times when running. Thru the use of "Dorsi-Flexion" the hurdler will gain 2-3 inches in ***lead leg*** clearance and ***trail leg*** clearance.

Flexibility - Flexibility is *key* to being a successful hurdler. The hurdler must be extremely flexible in the hip and groin area due to the physical demands of the event. The reality is the hurdler should be one of the most flexible athletes on the team.

Tunnel vision - Tunnel vision must be used by the hurdler for the entire race in order to not let distractions or other athletes interfere with his concentration & performance.

Neutral Head position - A "neutral" head position is the position your head is in when you are walking. A neutral head position must be used at all times.

Stretching - Stretching is vital to hurdling success - Elite Hurdlers stretch twice a day.

Maintain a level head position - The height of the hurdler's head position should never deviate whether they are on or off of the hurdle. There is no up & down motion. The head maintains a straight level line throughout the race.

Lead Arm Thumb Up - Arm movement is front to back with no side movement. By having the hurdler keeping his *lead arm thumb up* at all times much of the Unnecessary arm motion or "airplaning" will be decreased.

Core Strength -The hurdler must have a great abdominal muscles or "Core Strength". A good core will help the athlete to fight off fatigue late in the race and to maintain proper technique.

Alternate Leg - The *alternate leg skill* is the ability to use either the left or right leg to clear the upcoming hurdle. All elite intermediate hurdlers must learn how to use both the right and left lead leg automatically as needed without thinking about it.

Learning How to Alternate Lead Legs in the 300/400 Hurdles

by

Coach Steve Silvey
Sprints/Hurdles/Relays
Texas Tech University

The top 25 hurdlers in the world know how to alternate their lead legs when needed. Top athletes may not *want* to switch legs during a race but are able to do so in an emergency situation. They have done the work necessary to be prepared to meet this challenge when the wrong leg inevitably comes up prior to a hurdle. Every athlete favors using a certain leg when hurdling but having the ability and confidence to use the opposite leg enables the athlete to run a great race when any one of the following occurs:

1. They start out too fast
2. They are running into strong headwind
3. They hit the previous hurdle

As a coach who had the opportunity to coach the 1991 World Champion for the 400 meter hurdles and both the Olympic Silver and Bronze Medalists in the 400 meter hurdles at the 1996 Olympic Games, I am a firm believer that the 300/400 meter hurdler will never become a great intermediate hurdler unless he/she can master using both legs.

The following is a very simple drill to help athletes become great in the 300/400 hurdles:

Men: Set hurdles up on the women's 100 meter hurdles marks (8.5 Meters apart). The athlete may wear either their spikes or training flats. The athlete will now use four strides between each hurdle. This means they will use their right leg on one hurdle and their left leg on their next hurdle. The goal is to do this 10 times x 10 hurdles. The height of the hurdle should start at 30 inches and may go higher and higher as the hurdler masters the drill. Do this drill either at the beginning of the workout or at end of the workout. Do this drill 2-3 times a week and watch the hurdler master both legs in only a few weeks.

Women: Do the same drill as above, but place the hurdles at either 7.0 or 7.5 meters apart. This will allow the women hurdlers to alternate right/left leg on every other hurdle. Be sure to set these hurdles at 30 inches in height, to start with and raise the hurdles as they improve.

I taught Calvin Davis (a non-hurdler) to do this drill and in a period of only 8 months, in only his 15th race of his life, he won the Olympic Bronze Medal at the 1996 Olympic Games. If the 300/400 hurdler can learn to use both legs automatically without thinking, they never have to worry about having a bad race

as they will be able to adjust to the obstacles that often can occur in this grueling race. Best of luck!

ATTENTION

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