

Track and Field



Olympic Hurdles



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Another Barrier to Victory

Take the already exciting sprints, add an extra dash of danger and uncertainty, and you have the hurdles. There are two hurdles events for men on the Olympic calendar, at 110 and 400 meters, while the women content themselves with one race over 100 meters. Originally, when the hurdles first were introduced for the women in 1932, they were contested at 80 meters, but the distance was increased in 1972.

To be successful at the hurdles, an athlete must possess good sprinting speed and be able to clear the hurdles with as little break as possible in the running motion. There are 10 barriers spaced an equal distance apart, 3 1/2 feet high for 100 meters (2 1/2 feet for women) and three feet for the 400-meter race.

The basic difference between the shorter and longer races is that in the 400 the competitor has to remember to save something for the finish, and so shouldn't be sprinting at the start. Assuming a person leads with his left leg as he approaches a hurdle in the shorter race, the right leg is delayed somewhat after leaving the ground until the left leg starts down the other side, then follows through

with the knee clearing the top bar and the foot following behind the knee. Once the hurdle is cleared, the right leg should be poised to continue into the next stride without any pause.

In clearing the high hurdles, the upper body leans far forward, almost touching the upper left leg. For the 110-meters, the normal approach is eight strides and over on the ninth, with three strides taken between hurdles. In the 400, there can be 22 strides for the approach and 15 between hurdles. Always critical are arm action to maintain balance and a smooth form with a continuity of motion.

Starting with 1896, U.S. men won the 110 meters on 16 of 19 occasions, including Rod Milburn's record time of 13.2 seconds in 1976. However, Guy Drut of France was the 1976 winner in 13.3. Similarly, Americans have taken the 400 meters 12 times, including a world record performance of 47.64 by Edwin Moses in 1976. Babe Didrikson won the first 80-meter hurdles for women in 1932, but that was the only American success. Johanna Schaller of East Germany took the 100 meters at Montreal in 12.7.