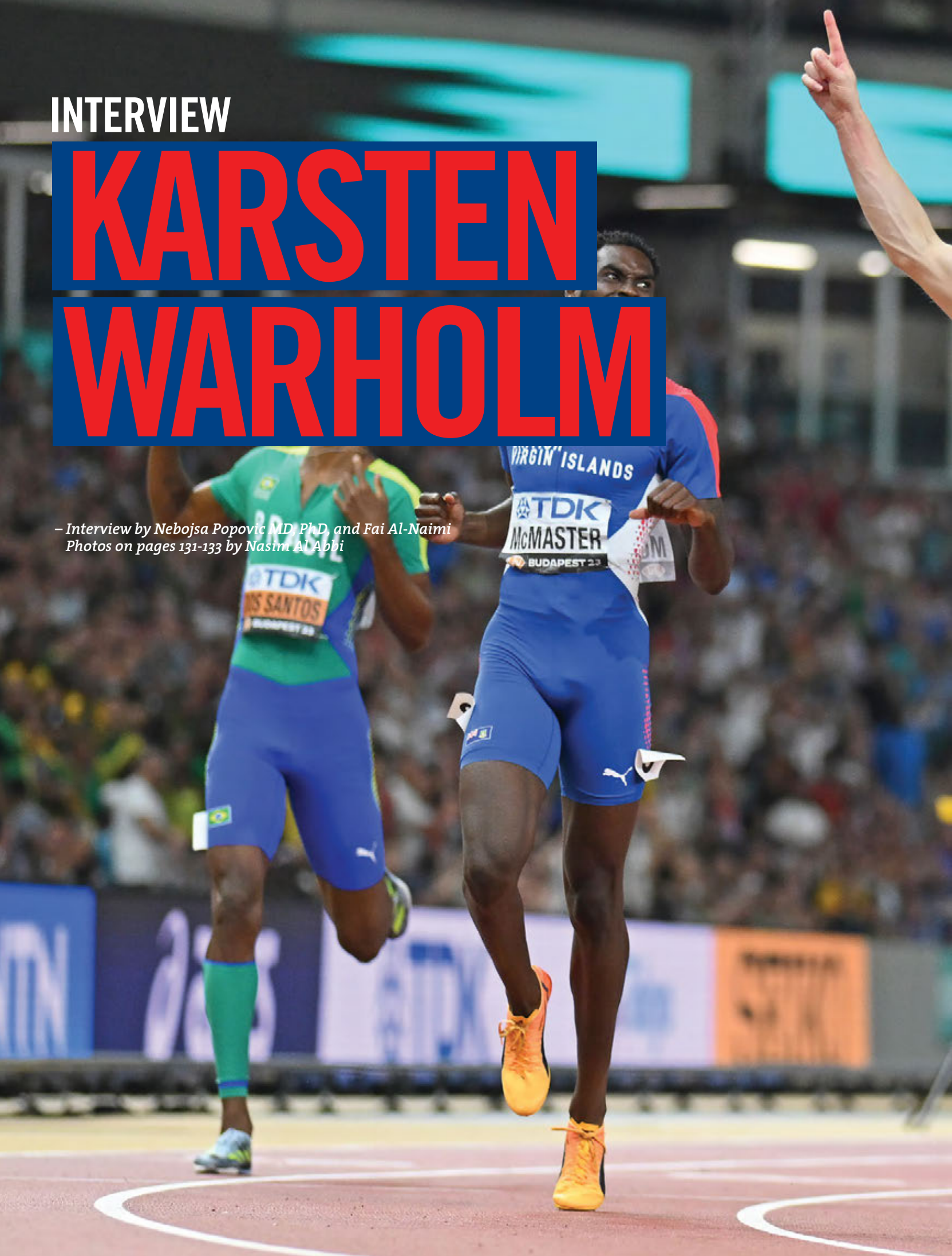


INTERVIEW

KARSTEN WARHOLM

– Interview by Nebojsa Popovic MD, PhD, and Fai Al-Naimi
Photos on pages 131-133 by Nasim Al Abbi





KARSTEN WARHOLM

The Winning Pair from the West Coast: Athlete Karsten Warholm and his Coach Leif Olav Alnes

Exceptional track and field athlete embodying the spirit of a modern Viking warrior on the track. Karsten Warholm is resilient, relentless, and driven by an unyielding desire to conquer all challenges.

Born in Ulsteinvik, a small coastal town in Norway, his homeland mirrors the ferocity he brings to the 400-meter hurdles demanding strength and precision. Warholm navigated the global seas to compete against the world's best and become an Olympic gold medalist and world record man in the discipline.

Interview with athlete Warholm and his Coach Leif offers a unique dynamic like no other. Together they have crafted a unique synergy that transcends traditional athlete-coach relationships. A man as dedicated as the athlete he trains, Coach Leif plays a pivotal role in guiding his warrior, instilling the physical and mental skills necessary for victory. The Norwegian hurdler views their bond as one that uniquely blends trust, respect, and shared ambition. Together, they stand as a formidable team, achieving feats that once seemed impossible on the world stage.

Despite his immense success and world-class achievements, Warholm's kindness reflects his belief that success is not just about personal achievements but also about fostering friendships and spreading positivity.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2024 Silver medal, Olympic Games, Paris, France (47.06 sec.)

Gold medal, European Athletics Championships, Rome, Italy (46.98 sec.)

2023 Gold medal, World Athletics Championships, Budapest, Hungary (46.89 sec.)

Gold medal, European Indoor Championships, Istanbul, Turkey (45.35 sec.)

2022 Gold medal, European Athletics Championships, Munich, Germany (47.12 sec.)

2021 Gold medal, Olympic Games, Tokyo, Japan (45.94 sec, world record)

World record, Diamond League, Oslo, Norway (46.70 sec.)

2019 Gold medal, World Athletics Championships, Doha, Qatar (47.42 sec.)

Gold medal, European Indoor Athletics Championships, Glasgow, Scotland (45.05 sec.)

2018 Gold medal, European Athletics Championships, Berlin, Germany (47.64 sec.)

2017 Gold medal, World Athletics Championships, London, United Kingdom (48.35 sec.)

Gold medal, European U23 Championships, Bydgoszcz, Poland (45.75 sec.)

2015 Silver medal in the 400m hurdles, European Junior Championships, Eskilstuna, Sweden (46.50 sec.)

2015 Decathlon silver medal, European Junior Championships, Eskilstuna, Sweden (7,764 pts.)

2013 Octathlon gold medal, World Youth Championships, Donetsk, Ukraine (6,451 pts.)



Image: Karsten Warholm and his Coach Leif Olav Alnes during their visit to the Aspeta Sports Medicine Journal offices at Aspeta Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital, posing with the Olympic kit of our Editor-in-Chief, Prof Nebojsa Popovic. December 2024, Doha, Qatar.

Let's begin with your incredible achievement at the Tokyo Olympic Games. Winning a gold medal, breaking a world record, and becoming the first human in history to run the 400m hurdle in under 46 seconds is nothing short of an extraordinary achievement. Could you share your thoughts on this monumental journey and the sacrifices you made along the way?

Athlete: Ever since Coach Leif and I started working together up until the world record, we have trained over 10,000 hours, at least. I would argue that it is not about the hours, it is about the quality of the training hours. The collective work we did as a team was all the right work. To put in the hours, a lot of people can do that type of training, but you need to put in the right hours. You need to do the right thing for all those hours, and that is where we hit the

sweet spot and found the right balance. However, you don't have a guarantee to run a world-record time. But for us, it was about doing the right things over and over again. Consistency is what created such extraordinary results. Many would assume that there was some fancy stuff to it. I think the execution of it is not very fancy. It is fancy because nobody ever thought about the solutions that we did, but the solutions are quite simple, which they need to be as well.

Coach: The main question is always what you choose to focus on. Will that choice make the boat go faster? Is it going to move the "needle"?

Athlete: I heard somebody say it is not about the pursuit of happiness, it is about the happiness of pursuit. It took many years to achieve astonishing results, and that is also because we have fun. I think you should never underestimate being in an environment



Image: During the interview in Doha, Qatar, December 2024.

you like to be in. Having fun, coming to work every day. It's good. It's nice. It's fun. It took a lot of hours, but I think it comes down to the quality of those hours.

On the final day in Tokyo, knowing that you were well-prepared, did you have any sense or feeling that it was going to be an extraordinary day?

Athlete: Yes. I had a pretty good feeling that this was going to be a special day. The feeling was slowly building. I told myself that this might be my only chance to win a gold medal in the Olympics. You never know. I was so well prepared, and I had broken the world record a month prior. I knew that I was in good shape, so, of course, I was putting everything into it. The level was high as well, so I knew it needed a very good time. It was a very special moment because I did not think the race would be that quick. That is probably what shocked people the most. But we did it, and I think it was because everything was prepared. For me and my team, the stars were aligned that day.

What about breaking the world record?

Athlete: I think you can't plan the record. In 2019 and 2020, we were chasing this record so hard and every time I walked to a race, I was thinking "I am going to break the world record". I never did. In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the atmosphere was just about winning. It took a world record time to win the race. That is what it comes down to. You must ensure that you are in an optimal physical and mental state to be able to win a race, and then eventually, the records will come. But you can't force it. You can't push a record. A record needs to come if your level is there.

Coach: Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't—you might be right in both cases." That attitude is spot on and emphasizes the power of the mindset in determining success or failure. Two years before the Olympics, I said to Karsten that 45 seconds is indeed possible. In the beginning, it sounds like "Are you out of your mind?". Eventually, you get used to the idea once it settles in. The next day in Tokyo when I woke Karsten up, I said, "You know what's next?", he said "What are you talking about?", I said "44". He said, "Can I not enjoy one day?". I said, "No. The Olympics is coming in 3 years and fortunately there is a long way from 45.94 seconds to zero."

Athlete: Coach and I always say, "Well done is always better than well said and in this case, you better run because 44 seconds goes by so fast."

How did you celebrate after achieving such incredible milestones at the Olympics and setting the world record? Was it a moment of grand celebration, or did you keep it simple and reflective?

Athlete: I believe that the best celebration is to sit down and talk through everything that we have done to reach this point. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics was hosted during the pandemic, so, the whole of Tokyo including the Olympic campus was shut down due to mass gathering restrictions. During that time, my team and I went to the hotel room to discuss the night and enjoy a burger. We say it is usually the best celebration when you come back to the hotel room after the race, put your backpack down, look each other in the eyes, do our handshake, and say, "We made it". That is the moment. The party was the race, and then afterward, this was our moment. Some of the best athletes come to realize this. Once you have that gold

medal, you also feel a bit empty. You did it, okay, let's get this out of the system, and as athletes now it is the next goal ahead. If you want to be in the sport for a long time, the passion is about becoming a better athlete every day and enjoying the sport.

Coach: You celebrate with the team. The people that matter. The people that you work with every day. And a team is a lot like sustainability – everyone talks about it, but in reality, it is hard to do right. If I had the chance to live again, I would only go to the pre-party before the real party. That's usually the best part, so I want the atmosphere in training to be more like the pre-party. I also want the championship to be the party you absolutely should go to.

Who makes up your team, and how are decisions typically made within it?

Athlete: My team consists of myself, my Coach, my mother who is the manager and manages the administration side, my grandmother who is accountant, and a member of our team from the Norwegian federation that deals with all the track and field meetings. He was the one who advised me to train with Coach Leif. Additionally, two other girls who train with us run the 400m hurdles as well. So, this is essentially our small team running this business together. We always make big decisions together, particularly Coach and me. We are lucky that we have good people around us that want the best for us, to help us make it easier to perform. I think what is a bit more special about our way of doing it than the others is that we are both very complimentary. Training-wise, he is very smart and experienced and tends to view things from a unique point of view. On the other hand, I am an athlete. The ultimate machine. I require someone who can correct and guide me in the right direction.



Image: Karsten talking with Dr Cristiano Eirale, Chief of Sports Medicine at Aspetar.



Image: Karsten Warholm and Leif Olav Alnes during their visit to Aspetar.

Coach: Karsten makes decisions when he is running. Before the competition, we try to list the options. When you approach the hurdle, and there is a problem in reaching the hurdle, you know you are not going to reach the next one, then you have to change the rhythm. We must look at all the options before the race, so Karsten does not end up surprised. So, to make it easier, we always try to think "What can happen?", but he still must make decisions, very important decisions.

Athletics as a sport, what does it mean for you?

Athlete: One of the most fascinating aspects of track and field is that you can push the human limit in a very measurable way. It is very easy in each event to measure who is the best that day. You could argue that during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics final, Karsten was the best, or the American athlete who won in the 2024 Paris Olympics, that day he was the best. The fascination stems from the performance capabilities of the human body, and I think we have taken that far with 45.94 seconds. In the beginning, when I was running for 48 seconds, I almost experienced no pain, and my body always felt good. Then when I pushed it down for 3 seconds, I needed to focus on my body and make sure it didn't break. Now my engine and my muscles had gone so far because I pushed it too much.

How did you come across your running shoes, and what can you share about the technological advancements that make them so unique?

Athlete: Initially, I was very skeptical of all those technological changes because I want sports to be man against man, or woman against woman to truly measure your performance. So, bringing in

another aspect of that was for me a challenging thought. Once we decided we were going to do it, we wanted to make it the best shoe in the world. I heard this rumor that they were making a football shoe together with the Mercedes F1 team with carbon plates and I called our Norwegian friend, and said, “Why are you making a football shoe?”. I said “They don’t need it. Let’s make a track and field shoe.” He said “Okay”. So, this is the shoe that broke the world record during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Firstly, when we started building the shoe a single pair weighed 210 grams. By the time we finished, the weight was reduced to 130 grams. Secondly, there is the foam which is one of the biggest technological changes in the running industry right now because the foam is very responsive and light, purposely integrated to absorb shock. Thirdly, there are the pins that pass through the carbon plate and are very close to the foot to create stability. Furthermore, the full-length carbon plate allows for added stability. Then there is the coaches’ innovation at the end, the claw, designed for additional gripping for maximum force transfer. It gives you more ground contact in the positive face of the running stride, and it is one of the key elements of the shoe. The rest is about the upper face of the shoe, making it light without feeling uncomfortable.

Coach: Integrating technology into running shoes was a big change because a shoe used to be a shoe, but now the shoe has turned into a sophisticated musical instrument, and it must be adapted to you to obey the laws of physics. Pick an instrument that suits you and that enhances your performance. That’s the key thing. Now all the companies have musical instruments. Just make sure you pick the right instrument that works for you.

Athlete: This is the good thing about the shoe development aspect. It is nice to find new passions that are within your sport. At this point, both I and Coach fell in love with shoe making and pushing this process of innovation by bringing technology more into the sport. We shift our focus a bit to the shoes to make it more technical and that also makes us run faster. I think that is a nice mix. We are bringing new aspects in, and the new aspects can also make us better. If for many years you solely think about running, it would be very one-sided.

Would you say that you discovered a new way of attacking the 400m hurdles record?

Athlete: Yes, we found a new way to run the event, and to solve the race. We run the 400-meter hurdles as a sprint all out from the beginning. I run very fast and then try to hold on till the end. For every year, we managed to run a little bit longer before the lactic acid hit, and this is also a reason why we progressed.

Coach: They said, “Karsten is starting too fast”. I said, “You are wrong; he is finishing too slowly”.

You started this journey driven by a passion you had since childhood. In the beginning, was it more about fun rather than competition?

Athlete: I started running when I was 7-8 years old. A friend from school and I randomly met in the city center where a race took place around the community hall. I joined the race in my jeans and t-shirt, and I crushed them. That’s when I started doing Athletics. I had success early on. I started performing well in the Junior



Image: Karsten winning his gold medal in the Men’s 400 metres hurdles at 17th IAAF World Athletics Championships Doha 2019. Khalifa International Stadium, Doha, Qatar.



Images: Karsten posing with a scoreboard showing his new world record time after winning the gold medal in the Men's 400m Hurdles Final at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games (above) and celebrating with his coach Leif Olav Alnes (right).



Championships. I was also the youth world champion in Decathlon, 11 years ago now. Running started just for fun, and it still is fun. Although now, we are chasing medals and winning championships. I started because it was something I was good at and something that I enjoyed. So, I have been running for 20 years now. On the other hand, Coach has been doing it for the past 50 years, providing him with incredible coaching experience.

Many parents dream that their kids become world-class athletes like you. What advice would you give to parents who have such aspirations for their kids?

Athlete: The crucial message I would send to parents would be to sometimes just let the kids play and have fun with it, not putting

pressure in their system too early. I think the problem is that a lot of parents are pushing their kids with their ambitions. A lot of kids now are being pushed into different commitments by parents and coaches way too young. So, whenever they come to the age where they are supposed to be at their best performance, they are already tired and have lost the fun aspect of the journey. Of course, at one point you need to change that. But in this way at least if they don't become professional, they still have a good association with the sport. A place they want to be for the rest of their life. I would tell young aspiring athletes that if you want to perform, you need to be the captain of your ship and build motivation from the inside.

Coach: I would look for a knowledgeable coach with the right moral compass that has the gift of making training interesting and fun.

I would argue that this is so much about taking ownership of the process. People say, “Trust the process”, I say “No. Find a good process and trust it”.

Coach, you said once that common sense is not so common anymore. Could you elaborate further on that statement?

Coach: There are numerous examples of this. I went to a lecture once with a very famous Norwegian football coach. He said, “It is really hard to teach other people what you don’t know”. He then gave us a physiology lecture where most of what he said was wrong and people were very critical. I was quite happy. Even if it was on purpose, he underlined his point. “Don’t teach things you don’t know”.

People have smartwatches that tell them about their lives. They come to the doctor and they say, “I felt great this morning until I looked at my watch and it said I have a problem”. Then the doctor should tell them, “Why are you coming to me?”. You should go to the watchmaker to fix that problem. That’s common sense to me.

You argue that you don’t need a psychologist, and you rely on your Coach to exchange ideas. Could you explain this perspective in greater depth and how it influences your approach to training and competition?

Athlete: Coach and I believe that the two big cornerstones of what we do are common respect and communication. So, we have respect for each other, and we communicate very well. Many create a big distance between the coach and the athlete resulting in the athlete not feeling safe in the environment where they need to perform. Athletes then resort to sports psychologists to accommodate any mental distress. It is very common in sports today that the athlete is very insecure. These problems could be avoided with some open discussion. When the Coach and I discuss our problems, we are not looking for who can win the discussion, instead, we are looking for the best solution. So, we trust each other that there won’t be anyone angry at one other because we are both on the same mission.

Coach: They did a survey in Norway to study who stresses the Olympic athlete the most. Results showed that primarily, the coach imposes immense psychological stress on the athlete. In my opinion, that is actually a very interesting observation.

Athlete: It’s not strange that Olympic athletes require a sports psychologist because they can’t talk to their coach about their problems. If athletes could have better communication within their team, I think a lot of sports psychologists might find themselves with reduced workloads.

As a coach, do you attend lectures on Psychology to enhance your understanding and better support your athlete?

Coach: I often joke that I have forgotten more than most people will ever learn in sports. I read a lot, and I always try to learn from people I meet. The ability to learn from history and other people’s mistakes should be enhanced in humans. I think it is strange that we must make all the mistakes ourselves. Every time you see something you should question it. What is the take-home message? I think you must take ownership of the process. I am still going to make my own mistakes, but I will try to make them only once.

Every time we go to training, we sit down first. We have a coffee, and discuss what we are going to do today. I ask Karsten, “How do you feel?”, and we repeat that every evening on the telephone. My



Image: Men's 400m Hurdles Round 1 at the Olympic Games Paris 2024.

wife says, “How can you speak so much? What is different than yesterday?”. I say, “We have done 8 hours of training since yesterday”. In the evening, I want to know how does his body feel? Is it okay? Is he tired? Is he ready for tomorrow? What are his muscles like? Communication is super important. We must keep the vehicle on the narrow and curvy road because there are ditches on both sides, so you constantly have to change the direction to stay on the road. There are dangers everywhere.

What qualities do you believe a sports medicine doctor should possess to effectively work with athletes?

Athlete: The more I delve deeper into my athletic career, the more I understand the relevance of sports medicine physicians. I am very lucky that my Coach also understands some of the training and education aspects of sports medicine. I think some coaches don’t want to understand or don’t try to understand the field. They send the athlete to the doctor or physio, then the physio just sends them back to the coach. There should be open communication, and all individuals involved should try to understand each other. The doctor and the physio should understand the job the coach and athlete are doing, and the coach and athlete should try to understand a little bit more about what the doctors and physios are doing as well. In that way, you have the problem, you go somewhere to fix the problem and come back to train a little bit, and then a new problem arises.

Image: Karsten with Nafissatou Thiam (interview: ASMJ Vol 8, TT19), Mutaz Essa Barshim (interview: ASMJ Vol 6, TT12), and Yulimar Rojas, posing with their trophy after being awarded during the International Association of Athletics Federations IAAF Athletics Awards 2017 in Monaco.



I think it is about understanding how we can now train so that we don't encounter these obstacles and prevent them in the future. I believe that sports medicine physicians and coaches can be even better at working together to make sure that firstly, you don't get that many problems, and secondly, you fix the problem so that when you come back on track, you can perform exceptionally well. I also believe that the doctor who is treating high-level athletes should have a passion for sports. If we are going to fix the problem, the people who are going to help us fix the problem, including sports medicine physicians, must also have a passion for it. They must have a passion for performance, our way of working, and for sports in general. This is one of the things that they have done well at Aspetar Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital. A lot of the people working here are very interested in sports and they have worked for many years in sports-related industries.

Coach: An athlete's brain is always worried of an injury. The most important thing for the athlete is that he receives a clear response from the doctor. If the previous injury has healed, it's crucial to explain that now nothing is wrong with you.

How has your journey been in Aspetar and more broadly Qatar?

Athlete: The reason why we came to Qatar was because of a little injury that I had called proximal hamstring tendinopathy which I was running with all summer. There was a hamstring seminar at Aspetar just before we arrived, with the Norwegian physio that we use, and also one of the Norwegian doctors Prof. Roald Bahr attending. I've been to Doha twice before and have seen all the equipment and facilities that this place has to offer. I knew some of the athletes, Mutaz Barshim as well as Abderrahman Samba, and I thought that this was a nice place for the moment to also go to for training camp. In Norway, it is very cold, and you have all the equipment here and the sun. This time around, I got to know more people working in Aspetar, whom I have never met before,

and a lot of good people who are very knowledgeable. It is a very international environment with men and women from all over the world who know a lot about sports and are very interested in sports in general. I think that is also a good mix, and Coach has also enjoyed his stay here. We have had a good training camp. Now I am back to training normally.

Is there something I did not ask you that you would like to add?

Coach: I would say the quality and the depth of the equipment in this little area of Aspetar is not to be believed. Every imaginable thing is here. There was one thing that we thought was not available. So, we quietly asked, and they said, "Yeah we have 4 of those". So, if it exists, it's in Aspetar. If it doesn't exist, they will make it.

Athlete: Today I was running on the alterG treadmill, and I asked a guy "Why is it not going faster than 19.3 km/h?". He said to me "We have another machine that goes up to 29 km/h," and I said, "Okay, problem solved!". Everything is here. This time, we were able to stay for a bit longer to have a real experience in the city and to talk to a lot of sports people in Aspetar and Aspire, I enjoyed that, and the people here were kind to us.

Nebojsa Popovic MD, PhD

Fai Al-Naimi

Photos on pages 131-133 by Nasim Al Abbi