



# Racing Toward

Success

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH OLYMPIC CHAMPION GAIL DEVERS

**G**ail Devers, now age 37, won her first gold medal in the 100-meter dash at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, and was declared the “World’s Fastest Woman.” In 1993, Devers earned seven championship titles. At the world championships in Stuttgart, Germany, she accomplished a feat that hadn’t been achieved in 45 years—winning both the 100-meter dash and the 100-meter hurdles. At the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, Devers repeated her 1992 performance by winning the gold medal in the 100-meter dash, becoming only the second woman in history to win the prestigious event at two consecutive Olympics. She also was on the gold medal-winning 4x100 meter relay team. ➔

While training for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Devers injured her right Achilles tendon and left hamstring, which sidelined her for nearly two months. She did, however, win the 100-meter hurdles at the U.S. Olympic Trials, lowering her American record with the event's fastest time in eight years. But, her injuries resurfaced in Sydney and she was forced to pull out of the race.

In this exclusive interview, Gail Devers discusses her goals for the 2004 Olympics, shares how she handles life's hurdles and tells what motivates her to keep racing toward success.

### **When did you take up running?**

I was born in Seattle but grew up in a small town near San Diego, so southern California is where I call "home." Since I was a young girl, I've always been a runner. In fact, my brother used to race me and then tease me when I lost. One day I decided I just wasn't going to lose anymore. So I started practicing and it paid off. From then on, running was all that mattered. I had found my stride.

I ran throughout high school and then joined UCLA's track team where the 100-meter dash and 100-meter hurdles became my top events. In fact, I set an American record in the 100-meter hurdles during my senior year in 1988. And I've continued to break my own records—most recently on July 23, 2000.

### **What have been the keys to your success?**

I was raised to believe in myself no matter what others thought about me. I was taught to have a purpose in life, to set goals for myself and then work hard towards achieving those goals. So many people spend their lives trying to live up to others expectations, whether it be in athletics or business or government. I want to discover the talents God gave me when He created me. I am unique and there is no one else that has a blueprint quite like me. I am trying to completely deplete my box of potential, so that when I leave this earth that box will be empty. The success that I have achieved has come from a belief that I can do anything if I am willing to work hard and stay dedicated to my dreams for as long as it may take for me to realize them.

### **How do you define success?**

Success is not just about winning. It doesn't mean that you have to own the company or make the most money. Success is being all you can be and giving 100%, no matter what the goal.

People often judge an Olympian's success by how many medals they have won, but how many people in the world can even make it to the Olympics? And if you make it to the finals, you are one of the eight best in the world. We teach our kids the wrong thing when we say that they have to be the best. All they have to do is give their best effort.

### **What's been the biggest hurdle you've ever faced?**

Despite my athletic success, 1988 was also the year I encountered one of the toughest challenges of my life. While training for the Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, my health began to deteriorate. I suffered migraine headaches, sleeplessness, fainting spells and frequent vision loss. I should have been at my peak performance. Instead, I was constantly exhausted and my body felt out of control.

At first I blamed my condition on the pressures of Olympic training. But I soon found out that I had Graves Disease, a debilitating chronic thyroid disorder. During this time my feet became so blistered and swollen, the skin cracked and bled. The excruciating pain forced me to stop running.

The doctors were sure they'd have to amputate both of my feet. I was devastated. Deep down, I was scared to death that my life as an athlete was over.

I actually went undiagnosed for several months, going from doctor to doctor, feeling like everybody's thinking I'm crazy, or a hypochondriac making it all up. I was depressed at a time when I was supposed to have my whole life and career to look forward to.

### **What finally happened?**

My biggest thrill was being diagnosed. It was a scary point, though, since I still had no clue what this disease was. Even the name is scary, Grave's Disease. The comforting part was that I wasn't washed up as an athlete, which was what I was led to believe.

As I was going through this, it became obvious that I needed God's help, so I turned to Him and dedicated my life to Him. I realized that He had uniquely created me and that the struggle I was going through was a test of my faith to make me stronger, to make me into the person I am now and to develop in me an undying faith. It came to a point where I had to believe that everything happens for a reason, and that God was going to bring me through it.

Now, whenever I'm faced with a challenge, I dig deep within myself and summon my spiritual and physical forces. This gives me the focus, determination, perseverance and the support I need to succeed. There is always something He wants for me that is greater than what I'm



currently experiencing. Now I say to God, “Whatever You will have me do, wherever You will send me, I will go.” God gave me my feet back, so every day I put my feet on the ground and thank Him that I still have them.

#### **At age 37, what motivates you to keep racing?**

I think it’s the goals that I haven’t yet reached, but want to keep pursuing. This gives me purpose, motivation and drive and that’s why I get up in the morning. I guess I’m the oldest sprinter and hurdler still competing at a world-class level, and to me that’s an honor. I feel I can still reach into my box of potential and find more.

I do it for the over 30 crew, too. If it inspires them to walk or just maintain fitness, then I get excited. I want to set my own retirement—I don’t want to be pushed out of the sport. I believe that I am still accomplishing things. My biggest challenge of late is coaching myself and that gives me new inspiration, new motivation. People say that you can’t coach yourself and be successful, but I’ve had my best years in these last three that I’ve coached myself. So I like dispelling myths as well.

**// Now, whenever I’m faced with a challenge, I dig deep within myself and summon my spiritual and physical forces. This gives me the focus, determination, perseverance and the support I need to succeed. //**

#### **What are your goals for the 2004 Olympics in Athens?**

Everyone is expecting me to win the 100-meter hurdles, because that’s the only gold medal I haven’t won. But my expectations are to go out and do my best. If I do that, regardless of the outcome, I can be thrilled.

In the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, I was winning the race and heading for the world record when I hit the last hurdle and ended up crawling across the finish line, tied for fourth. I try to keep that in perspective because I gave it my best. That helps me experience peace in the midst of disappointments. In that race where I felt the Greek girl won. The Greeks had never won a gold medal and now they had won it. It was not my time and if it’s not my time, I can’t be upset. This is how I deal with every aspect of my life—if it’s what God has for me, it will happen.


I would love to win the 100-meter hurdles, but it’s setting a world-record time that really motivates me. That’s the legacy I want to leave because fast times go down in the record books. I think I am third or fourth all-time in the 100-meter hurdles. My goal is to keep racing and get as close as I can to the top spot. I strive to get to the finish line, no matter what the obstacles are. My philosophy of life is that when you are faced with an obstacle you can choose to conquer or be conquered. I choose to conquer by keeping my eye on the finish line. That’s how I keep focused on my goals and racing toward success. 

PHOTO BY GARY HERSHORN / REUTERS 2003