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CU senior Joe Morris owns the top 100-meter time this season in the Pac-12.

Photo Courtesy: Larry Lawson



Brooks: Morris Working To Couple Speed With Form

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BOULDER – When a sprinter says he has the speed part of his work pretty much down pat, you might wonder just how much is left to work on. The short answer: Plenty.

Such is the case with Colorado's Joe Morris, an engaging, energetic, sometimes too excitable senior who currently owns the best 100-meter time (10.12) in the Pac-12 Conference outdoor season and the conference's second-best 200-meter time (20.52).

He is counting the days – his countdown is at 10 – until the Pac-12 meet (May 11-12) in Los Angeles offers the chance to prove how far he's come as a sprinter and why he believes fractions still can be shaved from those 100- and 200-meter timings.

Morris is a couple of clicks ahead of Southern California's Aaron Brown (10.15) in the 100 and is sandwiched between USC's Bryshon Nellyum (20.37) and Brown (20.58) on the Pac-12's list of top 200 performers.

The conference meet will be run at USC, which puts a gleam in Morris' eye and (he hopes) some pep in his step. He's expecting Nellyum – a 2012 London Olympian – to skip the 200 to concentrate on his specialty, the 400, which potentially positions Morris and Brown in head-to-head duels in their best events.

They've been in that position before and it didn't turn out so well for Morris. "Last year at conference he beat me pretty good," Morris said. "He's fast, and now I'm going to his home turf and I fully expect him to protect it to the max. So we're going there and matching up."

In the 10 days before that happens, Morris and his coach, Drew Morano, have a checklist to work from that each believes will have Morris not only at top speed but his form finely tuned. In reality, their checklist is not that new; it's composed of several items that Morris/Morano already have addressed and have seen benefit his sprinting.

The most noticeable and most recently rewarding adjustment for Morris came from focusing on a full leg extension before he ran last weekend at the Jack Christiansen Invitational in Fort Collins. Morris got it right, running personal best 100 (10.09) and 200 (20.45) times. The differences in those times and those listed by the Pac-12 are for altitude adjustments, but even with the added fractions they are impressive enough to make Morris believe he can make a career of running.

"I'm known to always drop a crazy time at some point in the season," he said. "This was it (last weekend) and it's falling in the order that it's supposed to. I feel like now the (Pac-12) sprinters are saying, 'Uh oh, he's coming for it.' This is that one; he got it right. I'm just excited because I never went into a season with the planning perfectly on, perfectly right – and that's thanks to Drew. We both study the sport seriously. We have notes, we compare and contrast, put it together and see what it looks like."

While he wouldn't be surprised if Morris, who graduates in May with a degree in sociology, furthers his sprinting career, Morano cautions, "He knows this is it for him – his senior year and he's done with college. If he wants to make a career out of this he needs to be making those changes that are going to get him to the next level. Doing the same things he was doing last year are not going to get him there."

Morris, who graduated from Golden High School and spent his freshman year (2009) at Tennessee, says a sprinter's early career is basically devoted to "complete strength and conditioning. You always start to build there and with experience . . . after that you want to learn form and the super fine tuning. We've been doing that."

"I'd been dropping in times each race and we decided after last week to work on one thing only – standing up and getting full leg extension. That changed my whole day. One little thing like that can change it all."

That Morris' races are fast up front – he's literally gone at the gun – is not open for debate. He owns CU's all-time top five times for 60 meters. But success in longer sprints demands more than speed and a running form that can drift toward unorthodox. Morano preaches "patience and discipline," and Morris has struggled with both in past 100- and 200-meter races.

"Anyone who knows Joe Morris from high school knows his form has always been a little touch-and-go, at best," Morano said. "He's a kid with extreme power, a great start, great push and can get himself into a race. But it's always the finish that's his problem. He does fine in the 60 because it's such a short race. But in the 100, with those extra 40 meters, he would struggle."

So in the run-up (no pun intended) to the Pac-12 meet, the Morano/Morris team has re-focused on finishing. Said Morris: "At some point when you build up enough speed, it almost becomes uncontrollable the last ten meters. That's what we're trying to do now – keep that under control. You're moving at a high velocity, but to maintain that is the new goal."

More specifically, it means maintaining speed with the correct form, said Morano: "His form would break down; he didn't know how to finish a race. We've been working on keeping his form together so he can utilize that great start, get into a great run and keep it together – not be decelerating by 60 meters."

"Honestly, he still has some more work to do. (Last) weekend in the 100 he had a really good 80, then in his last 20 he reverted to his old ways. In the 200 he kind of got lost early in the race . . . he's still putting races together. But the fact that he's run this fast already, I'm very excited about it. I think he's ready. Give us two weeks to train him up and I think conference will be great."

A dry-erase board hanging in Morano's office lists each of his sprinter's personal goals for the outdoor season.

Morris has aimed low, targeting 9.95 seconds in the 100 and 19.92 in the 200. Morano encourages setting the bar high, but Morris concedes “to hit those goals means getting as close to perfection as possible . . . it’s gone well so far. I’ve moved from 40th (in the 100) to No. 4 in the nation – all in one day. So, it’s kind of like, you know what, why don’t we just jump those next four guys? I love competition; I say let’s all move faster.”

When I asked Morris how realistic those goals are, he answered, “It’s very realistic because I’m well-known for having odd form. Since day one they said he’s got unorthodox form. He runs kind of crazy. But he’s running fast with that. Before that one technique – the full extension – my last race was 20.45. Imagine the next one and the next one. It’s very realistic and I plan on hitting it.

“I’m done thinking speed, thinking faster. It’s like that’s there. Now you’re working on fine details – arms, how it all flows. No more mind on speed; you have it. We’re in the home stretch now. I’m always a student to the sport. I stay true to that completely – a student first and see what the exam grades look like after.”

But there is another rather large item on the Morris/Morano checklist before they pack for L.A. in two weekends. When Morano tells Morris he wants him to “learn to be a professional at the race,” he’s talking as much about harnessing his emotions as he is finishing those last 20 meters with near-perfect form.

“The main thing now for Joe is he needs to keep going over the next four to six weeks, keep progressing, getting a little better . . . and my main thing with him is, ‘Can we do it on a big stage?’” Morano said. “He’s one of those who gets a little over-excited, a little too pumped for the big races. We have to do things to keep him calm and focused on his execution and not worrying about the environment around him.”

With Morano’s help, Morris apparently gets it. The raw speed has always been there; the form, technique and finer details have been methodically introduced. The finished product lacks only polish.

“It will come down to your execution, your mindset,” Joe Morris said. “It’s a mind game from then on. But it always feels good when you’ve got the recipe.”

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

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