



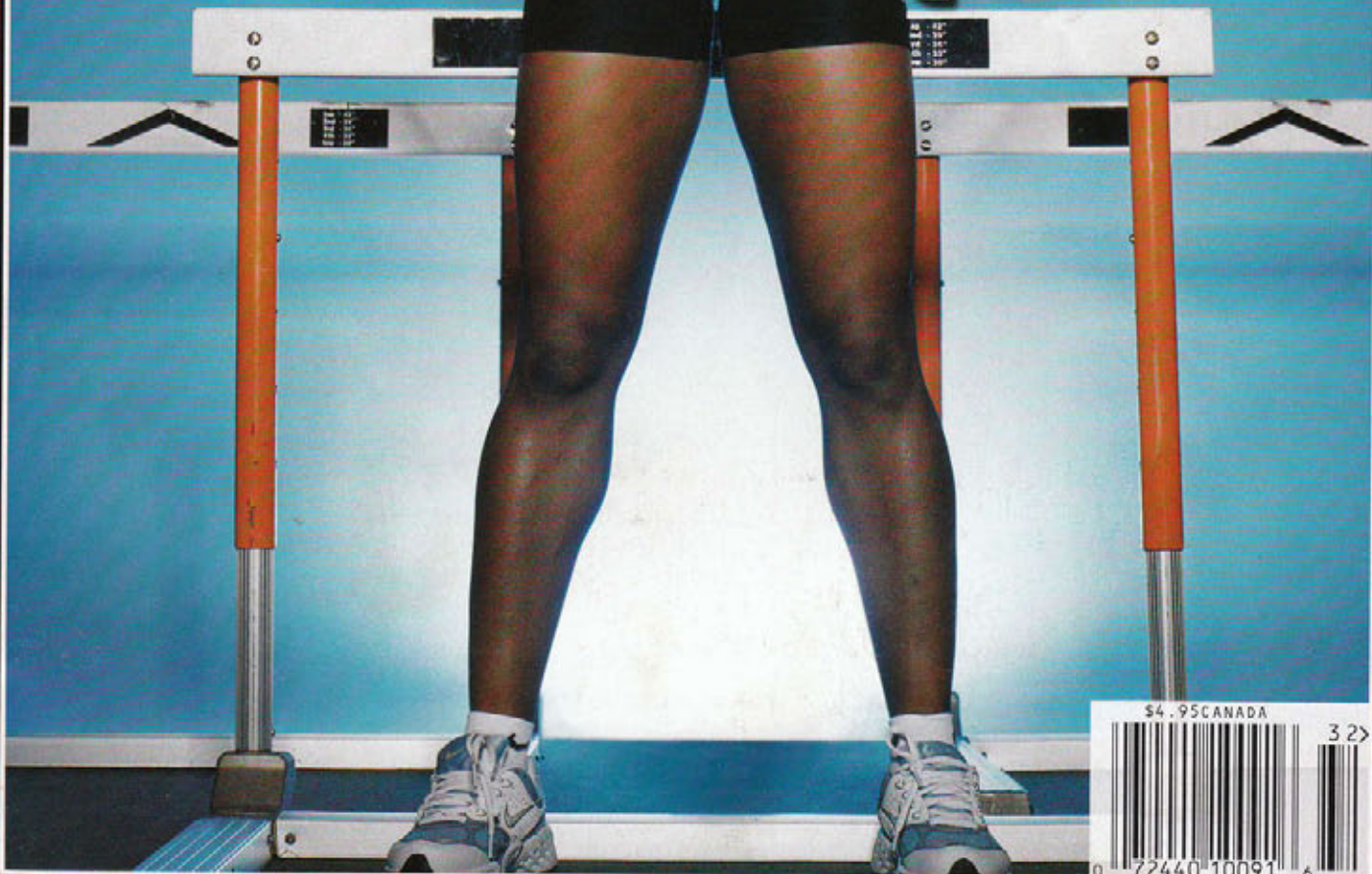
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TIME

After a poor showing in Sydney, the team is pumped for Athens gold

100-m hurdles star
PERDITA FELICIEN

CANADA'S QUEST



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PAUL ELLEDGE FOR TIME

COVER: Photograph for TIME by Paul Elledge



TRACK STAR: Perdita Felicien, 23, is striving for gold in the 100-m hurdles

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Champs canadiens
d'athlétisme 2004

CANADA DRY

2004

PERDITA

100-M HURDLES

FELICIEN

Perdita Felicien was a three-time NCAA champion at the University of Illinois and U.S. collegiate Female Athlete of the Year when she settled into the starting blocks for the 100-m hurdles finals at the 2003 world championships in Paris. In other words, she was a virtual unknown, given track's invisible profile (other than in doping stories). But Felicien figured anonymity might be an advantage. "I hope I can sneak up on people and get into the medals," she said on the eve of the race. She then skimmed over her 10 hurdles in 12.53 sec. and draped herself in a Canadian flag for a victory jog before 60,000 fans, having won gold—and \$60,000 in green. Her grin-flashing, flag-waving photo was splashed over newspapers across the country. No Canadian woman had ever won a gold in the world meet's 20-year history. "I keep laughing at myself," says a still bemused Felicien. "This was so not what the plan was. It's way ahead of schedule."

Next stop, Athens, where gold is scheduled to arrive about 12.5 sec. after the gun sounds in the women's 100-m hurdles finals on Aug. 23. There's a distinct possibility that Felicien could become the first Canadian female since 1928 to win an Olympic track event. However, she can no longer sneak up on her competition, which includes the amazing American Gail Devers, 37. So Felicien, 23, of Pickering, Ont., may just have to run it over.

Felicien followed up last August's world 100-m title by taking the world indoor 60-m crown in Budapest in March. Then she went back to university to take exams, got her kinesiology degree and raced some more. She won gold at the prestigious Grand Prix meet in the Czech Republic in June, and 11 days later ran the fastest 100-m time of the year (12.45 sec.) to win at the Prefontaine in Oregon. By July she was lying low, fine-tuning her technique in Champaign, Illinois, when her university coach, Gary Winckler, told her that the new world rankings put her at No. 1. That was an event in itself, halting Devers' 122-week reign, dating from March 2002. "Every media outlet in the entire country of Canada wants a piece of her. She's a national hero," says her representative, former hurdling star Renaldo Nehemiah. She's now a professional, earning prize money and corporate endorsements. Nehemiah's advice: "Stay humble and stay hungry. She's only as good as her last race. [Fame] can go as quickly as it comes."

The 100-m matchup with the ageless Devers figures to be one of the great races of the Games. In July, Devers qualified for her fifth Olympics, winning the U.S. trials in 12.55 sec. Felicien was 8 years old when Devers competed at her first Olympics in 1988. The pair didn't race at the 2000 Games because Felicien was bounced early in the heats. "Some people say Perdita only got lucky in Paris," says Nehemiah. That's because Devers, a three-time world champion, smashed into a

hurdle in the semis and didn't advance to the finals. But Felicien beat Devers again at March's world indoor meet at 60 m.

Felicien is relishing the matchup in Athens. So is Devers, whose Olympic collection still lacks a hurdling medal. When Felicien was growing up she had a poster of Devers on her bedroom wall. Now she says the duel with her idol is good for everyone. "That's what we live off, head-to-head competition. I don't want to see someone just dominate." Except, of course, herself in Athens.

—By Mary Jollimore

GREAT LEAPER

After her upset world-title win in 2003, Felicien can't rely on surprise at Athens. Her No. 1 rival is American Gail Devers, who long dominated the event

Track and Field
Championships