Key Factors for Developing Specific Endurance in 100m - 400m Sprinters and Hurdlers

A Conversation with Coach Kebba Tolbert
(Harvard University Associate Head Coach - Women's Sprints, Hurdles, & Horizontal Jumps)

Coach,

This document contains the transcribed conversation I had recently with Kebba Tolbert. Please excuse some of the grammar, as it is not meant to read like a training article. As you know, the topic was on developing specific endurance in sprinters and hurdlers. We covered a great deal of ground. We hope that, in studying it, some of your closely held beliefs about program design will be challenged. Whether immediately or after a period of time, we believe the information contained here will make you a better coach, as well as provide exciting new opportunities, experiences, and successes for all of your sprinters and hurdlers.

Regards,

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Latif Thomas
Owner – Complete Track and Field
Co-Director – Complete Track and Field Clinic

USATF Level II (Sprints, Hurdles, & Relays)
USTFCCCA Event Specialist (Sprints, Hurdles, & Relays)
USTFCCCA Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist
Latif Thomas: Kebba, for both athletes and coaches, one of the worst things we can see in a meet is to watch them get run down late in the race. What do you believe are the primary causes behind sprinters and hurdlers getting run down late in races or failing to be able to make a move late in races?

Kebba Tolbert: I think the primary causes when you see people getting run down late in a race, sprint hurdle races especially, are loss of efficiency. That's one thing. So they were doing something really well and they stopped doing that. So whether they had good mechanics, their feet were underneath them, good posture, good rhythm, good elasticity, good range of motion, usually when you see people run down, some of those qualities become diminished. That's one aspect. And obviously, that's something, you could go into each of those, but that's one area I see something important that's crucial to high level performance for that athlete is diminished in a way that doesn't allow them to maintain velocity to that high level.

Kebba Tolbert: The other thing that I see often is that the distribution of the race was poor, meaning like in a 400, we see it all the time, people just go out too hard. But you see it all the time in the 100. And people, I feel like a lot of people don't appreciate that. And this is the reason why watching, like the USA Championship just ended, listening to the commentary can be very dangerous, because what they count as a good start is not necessarily a good start.

Kebba Tolbert: So a lot of times when I'm watching big meets, I get annoyed and just turn the audio off. And if I'm talking to my kids and we're watching a meet or watching a recording of a big meet, I turn the audio off because I don't want them, because what the commentators say is a good start is who's in front at five meters, who's in front at 10 meters in a 200, who's in front at 50, 60 meters. That may not be the most efficient race for that person at all.

Kebba Tolbert: And I talk about it in the program about the '91 race, but there are lots of other races where we see somebody ahead at 30, 40, 50 meters and they're not the eventual champion in the race. You could just substitute hurdles, the fourth hurdle, the fifth hurdle, the sixth hurdle, same thing. And so if you get to the front of a race inefficiently and you do it in a way that compromises proper distribution mentality, you pay a price. And that price usually is you see someone slowing down or become inefficient in the last 30 to 40 percent of the race.

Kebba Tolbert: Does that make sense?
Latif Thomas: Yes, makes a lot of sense. How do you think coaches misinterpret what they're seeing in the late stages of the sprints and hurdles races? I hear from a lot of coaches, and the feeling tends to be that if they're falling apart late, the cause is something about their conditioning or fitness or something at the end of the race is the problem, but it sounds like what you're saying is it could even be the start that causes them to fall apart at the end of the race.

Kebba Tolbert: Right. A lot of times, if you trace back to the first 20, 30 ... Like I have a girl, a young woman who struggles late in the hurdle race. And as she's become more patient in the beginning, she's been able to finish better. And her 200 hasn't gotten all that much better. She just learned how to distribute her energy.

Kebba Tolbert: The way that Dan Pfaff, when I first heard him describe it back in the mid '90s is a nine volt battery. If you've got nine volts of energy and you use seven volts in the first 30 meters, then you're in trouble in a 100 meter race. And so that analogy speaks to me. I don't know if kids know what nine volt batteries are these days. But you have a certain number of units. It can be three fifths, whatever. If you use three quarters of those units of energy in the first 30, 40 percent of the race, that's a lot to hold onto without much left in the tank.

Kebba Tolbert: And when you say left in the tank, I don't mean aerobic capacity. It's power capacity and speed capacity and technical capacity and elastic capacity. Those are the causes in the sprint hurdle races a lot of times that cause mistakes to happen that allow someone to get caught. So the person that sticks their foot out in front of them in front of the hurdle three inches further than they were at hurdle three is not because they just all of a sudden want to become inefficient, but if they gas up the race and really got hot at the start and weren't efficient and their hitting splits at hurdle two that they're normally hitting at hurdle six, then they haven't trained that way, it's probably going to cause issues.

Kebba Tolbert: And so it's not you need to have better 300 ability or 250 meter ability or 400 meter ability. They need better ability to sprint at a high level and do that for 60 to 70 meters of the race in a 100 hurdle, 110 hurdle, 100 meter dash. In a 200, those critical zones are from like 80 meters to 170 meters. If they can't run that part of the race pretty relaxed, pretty open, pretty smooth, they've got to really gun it, then you're going to pay a price.

Latif Thomas: So you use the word capacity. Could you explain what you mean by capacity? Because we hear about aerobic capacity or speed capacity.
What does capacity mean from a training standpoint or activity selection standpoint?

Kebba Tolbert: Right. So let's say that in the weight room, your power clean PR is 100 kilos because that's just an easy number, but that you can only do sets of two at 80 kilos at 80 percent. Well, you don't have much capacity there. You've got to be able to do 12 sets of two at 80 kilos at least, or 14 sets of two. We have kids that can do 12 sets of two. We don't always do it, but they have the capacity if we give them enough time in the weight room to do 12 sets of two at 80 percent. There are some kids that can't do four sets of two at 80 percent, and so they haven't built the capacity to get on a platform and be explosive and powerful 12 times in a one hour session, as an example. Or if you do acceleration work, the capacity is, can you come out and do nine to 12 to 15, depending on the time of year and the intensity, good acceleration runs that are technically sound that have a certain intensity, things like that. That's a capacity.

Kebba Tolbert: If you can't do standing long jump times three, standing triple jump times three, double leg jumps times three, double doubles times three in a series and that just wears you out, there's no power capacity there. So those are the base of being able to run 10 meters a second for women for 30 to 40, 50 meters, 11 plus meters a second for elite men for 30, 40, 50, 60 meters of a race, in a 400, 400 hurdles, being able to run in certain rhythmic units, certain touchdowns from one hurdle to the next over six, seven hurdles, that's the base of being able to express those things in competition and in training, if that makes sense.

Latif Thomas: If you want to be able to develop the ability to do 12 x 2, how do you train that? Because it sounds like you have to constantly be doing higher output activities even if they're lower volumes, whereas I think the tendency is for coaches to believe that the way to get there is to do lower percentages for more reps and then that's how they'll build the capacity to do more specific things later.

Kebba Tolbert: Right. I think that there's some truth to that in that yes, the way that you start, like we don't start out running 10 meters per second with our elite women or when I've had elite men started running 11 1/2, 11.6 meters per second. But, we start slower than that, and I don't want to say buildup, because that's not the right feeling, but we're not running six meters a second.

Kebba Tolbert: We're getting going early.
Kebba Tolbert: And in the weight room, if we look at the power output in our Olympics, the speed of movement is pretty high even when the bar, when the amount of weight on the bar is lower early in the fall. So we’re moving things fast. We’re multi-jumping, standing long jump, standing triple jump, hurdle hops, things like that. Those are powerful, explosive movements. So we’re not doing 10 times any long jump and 10 times any triple jump and 10 times double double. We’re doing four to six of each exercise of four exercises because people can do those really well and keep the quality very high. So the quality matters much, much more than the quantity, but in the early part of the year, there is some consideration given to quantity, but much less so than you see in many traditional programs, if that makes sense.

Latif Thomas: Do you ever get athletes, and also talk to coaches, who have a hard time with what they perceive to be as not doing enough work overall, usually running, and that it's not going to get them "in shape"?

Kebba Tolbert: Yeah. People ask that all the time. It's generally not an issue that I see in our training because I think we train a lot. I think that we, if you look at our beginning of the week until we finish on Saturday, I think that there's a lot of activity not just for activity's sake, but I think there's a lot of things that feed into and build the athlete that we're trying to build to allow them to do the specific work that they need to be successful. And they're tired at the end of the week. And I'm not saying fatigue is the only thing that you consider, but if you ask the athlete, they're not saying, "Man, coach, give us more." They're like, "Man, we're happy to be done with the week," take some rest that Saturday night, that Sunday, and get back to it the next Monday. They're not asking for more.

Kebba Tolbert: So I don't think it's that we're not doing enough. I just think people think that maybe we’re not doing enough running or enough ...

Kebba Tolbert: The biggest thing is that you have to convince sprinters and hurdlers and jumpers to a degree and speed power athletes that the hard days aren't the interval workout days. Those days, they're hard, but you could do those days at least every 48 hours if not every 24 hours when you're doing that six, eight, 10, 200 type stuff. That's just not that hard. There's not enough intensity in it. But you can't come out every day and do flying 30s. They come out every day and do real aggressive hurdling, like three times three hurdles, three times four hurdles, things like that. It's very difficult to do every day. And so when you ask yourself that, you look at it and say ... Because there are a lot of programs across the country that do interval running four to five times a week. Would you say?
Latif Thomas: Oh, absolutely.

Kebba Tolbert: There aren't many programs that come out and sprint very fast four to five times a week. Well, why is that? Because it's a very, very taxing on the body, on the organism, and so you've got to do that when the body is fresh and you need time to recover. And so to me, that probably is the best illustration of the balance you have to have and what things are really hard, because if you can do it every day, then it's probably not that hard. If you've got to take some break and recover, then that's telling me that that's more intense and harder.

Latif Thomas: Would it be fair to say that, generally speaking, our goal is to try to train as close to race pace, and even faster, as often as possible?

Kebba Tolbert: Mostly, I would say. I don't know if I would say as often as possible because maybe I would say as much as necessary. It's a subtle distinction, so I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying that sometimes coaches, "We got to do this three times a week," or, "three times in a cycle," and it might only be necessary to do it twice in a cycle, and that might be enough with whatever else is going on in the cycle with competitions or other things you're doing because sometimes that extra session that you're looking to do is the one that's over the edge and you're sitting on the sideline for a month or two because you went too far. I'm not saying that it's an easy call all the time, but having the idea of as much as possible or as much as necessary can save you.

Latif Thomas: Ok. That's an interesting distinction and something people should think about, and I will, as well.

Latif Thomas: Could you define what you mean by "specific endurance" for the sprints and hurdles? I think many people hear that and maybe their idea about what "specific endurance" is may be different than what you mean it as.

Kebba Tolbert: I would call specific endurance in the sprints and hurdles the zones that you need to operate at to be successful at a high level, whether that's your league meet, your state meet, your junior Olympics, your conference championship, national championship, international championship.

Kebba Tolbert: Here's an example. If you study World Championship Olympic finals and you look at what the difference is between first and third and third and last and people that make the finals and don't, things like that, those kind of differentiations, what I see is and when you study the research is that it's not necessarily that, oh, this person had a better start to 30, although
that's an important, acceleration is an important part of sprinting. What you see is that the people that were able to operate at a high velocity for longer are the people that tend to win medals.

Kebba Tolbert: In the hurdles, so people that can do, for the men, like .98 and .97, things like that, for longer, those are the people that win medals. So if we look at the 100 meter data, people that can run over 10 meters a second, 10.3, 10.4 meters a second for the women, for 40 to 50 meters of the race, they tend to be the ones that win medals versus the one that can only hit it once or twice for 20 meter segments. And so in the 400, in the 400 hurdles, if we look at those people that can get to a speed and maintain a certain velocity for a large part of the race, that's specific endurance to me. And so I look at touchdowns and look at rhythmic units. I look at how long people can hold top velocity or near top velocity. You can look at how efficiently they got there and that will give you some clues, but those are the kind of things I look at when I think of specific endurance.

Latif Thomas: We often hear the term Building a base, from the 100 to the marathon. It sounds like what you're saying is that for sprinters and hurdlers, the base, building a base or if they're going to be able to achieve those velocities and maintain those velocities and medal, that they need to build a base of being able to do the types of activities that allow them to endure or sustain those specific velocities or intensities. Is that what you would call building a base for sprinters and hurdlers?

Kebba Tolbert: Yes, definitely. I would say that building the base is you want to build a base of speed and power and technical capacity, because techniques matters, too, that allows you to perform at a high level consistently. So the base is really important, but the base is not aerobic. The base is not running mileage or repeat 400s or 600s or 800s. And I'm not saying none of those things have any place, because they do have a place in your program, but what we generally see is that it's overdone. The density, how often we do it, is done too often, and that the volume is often too high.

Kebba Tolbert: So people say, "Well, can I do this? Can I do that?" The answer is probably you can do almost anything. How often you do it, what the rest intervals are, what the technical capacity of those things are, those are the things that I think get neglected and people just want to throw out volume and do lots of volume of running, and that's not necessarily the base that we want to build.
Latif Thomas: So let me get a little bit more specific going in that direction. You talked about some of the qualities we need or what some of the goals are for being able to achieve success in competition. I've heard you use the term key performance indicators or KPIs. Can you explain what these are in the context of what we've been talking about maybe give an example of one or two of the most important KPIs in terms of developing sprinters and hurdlers so we understand what we should be doing in practice.

Kebba Tolbert: Right. So KPI is what we call a key performance indicator, and it's a concept that I've completely stolen from Dan Pfaff. And it's a business analyzation term like, what are the key performance indicators for this business? But he's taken it and used it in a sporting term, a sporting realm, and I think it's completely applicable.

Kebba Tolbert: And so from a KPI standpoint, we're looking at, what are the things that an athlete needs to do to be successful in their event? And you can have technical KPIs, such as, how much dorsiflexion does an athlete have at touchdown? It could be something as simple as when you're sprinting, where does the wrist stop on the front end in front of the body? It could be, how much does the elbow open? Those are technical things. It could be, what's the quality of the penultimate step in the hurdle coming into the hurdle in the 100 or the 400 hurdles or the 110 hurdles? So those are technical type KPIs. And you can have lots of them and they can be different at different times of the year. So the things you might be emphasizing as key performance indicators, KPIs, in the fall are probably going to be different then what you emphasize later, in specific preparation, in the competition season. But, depending on the time of year and your goals, you're trying to build those KPIs.

Kebba Tolbert: You can have lifestyle KPIs. Dan and I were talking about this a few months ago. So it can be, what's your sleep like? What's your nutrition like? What is your mindfulness like? How good are you at letting things roll off your back? So if you had a bad practice or you had a bad rep, those are psychological slash lifestyle KPIs, nutrition, things like that. You can have biomechanic KPIs.

Kebba Tolbert: So those are just some examples, and you can make up your own area of what you think are key performance indicators for an athlete and what's important. And how you rank them and how you emphasize them will vary throughout the year.

Latif Thomas: You said earlier that there are a lot of programs, probably the majority of programs that are doing tempo work or interval work four or five times a week. Now, I've heard a lot of coaches over the years say that or argue in
defense of this method that some athletes are, at least their athletes, don't have the body type or muscle fiber type to benefit from speed, strength, and power based training. That in order for them to succeed and excel they have to do a lot of running because the kids aren't seeing immediate results under that speed and power work. How do you respond to this idea or line of reasoning from coaches?

Kebba Tolbert: I would say that there might be some truth to it, because I think that athletes are different and that athletes respond to training differently. I think that if you're going to be successful in this, especially in the short sprint hurdles, especially in the short sprint hurdles, that you've got to have certain power indices to be in the game. I think in the longer sprints and hurdles, because there's more of an aerobic condition, that's just a fact, that you can get some different types. So we've seen 400, 800 types be successful in the 400, especially at lower levels, at the high school level, at the conference level. You don't see it nearly as much at the world class level. There have been very, very few ...

Kebba Tolbert: I guess, let me back up a minute. Given that at the world class level there's lots of money involved and lots of motivation and lots of acclaim, if the four eight way was the way to go, you'd have more people doing it, because there's more acclaim. There's more money. There's more to get from it. So I think that ... And that's an event where you see lots of different body types and things like that, so it's not that it's discriminatory but that it's probably through some kind of selection that that's not the way to go. But at the high school level, you see lots of really good four eight people. Even at the college level, especially at the conference level, you see lots of good four eight people.

Kebba Tolbert: But how many people have qualified for nationals in the 400 and 800 at the NCAA Division I level? You see it more at Division III. And I'm a Division III guy, so I'm not trying to ... I went to Division III. I've coached Division III. I'm not trying to say anything. But the diversity of the top people in Division III is greater than it is in Division I, meaning you could have someone like in the 400 that runs 52 in the 400 and that's going to be an outlier, but in Division I, it's more narrow if that makes any sense.

Latif Thomas: Sure.

Kebba Tolbert: So the lower the level of competitiveness, the more diversity of people you can have that can be successful in an event at that level. So that's why sometimes that you can have those types of people that maybe need to run more be successful in those events and at those lower levels because the 26point person is a conference scorer at a lot of leagues in a
200. The 22.9 guy is a conference score at a lot of leagues in high school. Whereas in college, if you can’t run 20.4, 20.5 minimum, you really don’t have a chance to be a scorer at the NCAA Championship. And at the world level if you can’t break 20, it’s very tough to be a medalist. So it just narrows it down really fast the higher you get.

Kebba Tolbert: And so I do think that there are athletes that need more running or that respond better to more running and more aerobic work, and I have an athlete that’s like that, a 400 hurdler. And there are some 100 meter people that need a little more, but it’s not a lot more. It’s not something that you go out and do six times 500 usually. They might need six times 150 maybe in the middle of the season, but that’s a narrow band. It’s not going out and doing miles. It’s not repeats and 10 times 300. Those are different things to me.

Kebba Tolbert: So if the coach said that to me, "You might have a point, but consider this. If you can get that athlete, your 400, 400 hurdler, 300 hurdler, say you’ve got a guy that runs 23 flat, if you can get him to 22 flat, that opens up a whole new window of opportunity for development in his main event, 300 or 400 hurdles."

Kebba Tolbert: And so I think that so many times because it’s easier to do the longer work and it’s easier to just time it and say, "Okay, you were 43, 43, 44," in your training and it doesn’t take as much attention that coaches will tend to skew that way. And monitoring the quality of sprint work, monitoring quality of acceleration, teaching them how to lift, teaching them how to do multi-jumps, that’s a lot of time and energy investment in a different way.

Kebba Tolbert: And so tempo, I don’t think tempo is the worst thing ever. I think it has a place. But I think that the place that it holds right now in a lot of programs is outsized.

Latif Thomas: And would you say that even at the high school? Because there’s a lot of coaches reading this right now, saying to themselves, "Well, I’m at that younger level and I’m not really confident in teaching foot placement and speed and power mechanics, plyos, Olympic lifts. Am I going to have kids who volume out in their junior year because I haven’t taken the time to teach those skills and qualities? Should I try to find a happy medium? Is it a zero sum game?" What do you say to the coach who is kind of saying, "I’m not sure what direction to go. This makes sense, but I think my kids do need some running, but I don’t want to cut my nose off to spite my face"?
Kebba Tolbert: I would say a couple things. I think one is that probably at the high school level, kids do need some running. I don't think that's controversial. But again, I've been coaching since 1988. I started coaching my brother in 1988. And I see a lot of places where the 100 meter people are doing 500s and 600s. And I see a lot of places where the intervals are making up 60 to 70 percent of the training. There are a lot of places where block starts, state meet is in May and block starts start in April. So we're not skewed that way. We're skewed too much towards the amount of running and things like that.

Kebba Tolbert: So sure. Like if someone said, "Hey, Coach, should 100 meter runners do any intervals?" I'm like, "Yeah, that's fine." To me, that's not controversial. But it's like, should they do them four days a week? I would say probably not. Should they do them three days a week? Probably not. Now, whether it's one or two, that can be an interesting discussion for different training camps and different times of year and depending what your facilities are and things like that. But once you get more than, somebody doing 100 meter, 100 meter hurdle has to do intervals more than twice a week, I'm asking you why.

Kebba Tolbert: But I think some of that is perfectly fine and appropriate at the right volumes at the right intensities with the right breaks and with the right technique. So if your athletes can perform running workouts skillfully, then you're doing a good job.

Latif Thomas: Before I get into specific examples so we can get into a little bit more program design, could you explain to me just a little bit more what you mean by "skillfully"?

Kebba Tolbert: So, we know that there are certain biomechanical concepts that are good for sprinters and hurdlers. So where's their pelvis at? Are their hips underneath them? Are they running with good arm carriage? Are their arms swinging correctly? Is the foot dorsiflexed? Is their foot underneath them? Is there a certain amount of time on the ground? Are they having to do so many intervals that they've got to over push on the ground, getting real high butt kick behind them, and just crash the ground in front? So if they pull the pelvis out of position, then the mechanics are going to suffer.

Kebba Tolbert: If they've got to run 6 x 400 with three minutes break and they're a 100 meter person, good luck. They're just trying to survive as opposed to being efficient because the workout wasn't constructed well for their skill set and for their needs and for their capacity.
Kebba Tolbert: And so those are the types of things that you want to look at. And so, can they do the workout skillfully? Can they do it with good technique with the right rhythms, and can they finish the workout, even though they might be tired, can they do it skillfully? I think that's really important.

Kebba Tolbert: And I've made that mistake, and it's something I really try to fight against because your ego can get involved. You're like, "This is what I wrote on paper. This is what we're going to do. That's one way to look at it, or it's, "This is what I wrote on paper. I made a mistake and I prescribed it poorly, so I'm going to make the adjustment in the middle of the workout and make sure we finish skillfully."

Latif Thomas: What do you mean by make an adjustment and finish skillfully? Because I think we've all been at a place where we wrote a plan for the day and it start to go off the rails and we're looking at it all happen in front of us and saying, "Well, what's the adjustment that I make right now to still salvage the session without on the one hand having kids think that I don't know what I'm doing, on the other hand, not put them in a position to over train or have to sacrifice what we do tomorrow or the next day because I OD'd today?"

Kebba Tolbert: Right. So I'm going to say a couple things. One is, this is a quote from Dan Pfaff, who I mentioned earlier, obviously. He once said to me ... I called him because I was struggling with something with Blessing, and he said, "Look. I'd rather be a mile short than an inch over." And I think about that all the time.

Kebba Tolbert: And I've made the mistake and I've made it since, but it's something I try to keep in mind, is that look, if you're not 100 percent sharp, like say you're a little bit off a little bit in terms of your sharpness, you could still run pretty fast and you can get to the line, but if you're beat up and banged up and injured and you can't get to the line, well, then you have no chance. So you choose. You go overboard and they get banged up and injured, then that's wasted session, basically.

Kebba Tolbert: And I'm being a little bit dramatic, but it's true. That one extra rep that you're like, "Oh, we got to do it," sometimes it's like, "Go home," and Dan said this, too, sometimes the best generals surrender so they can live to fight another day.

Kebba Tolbert: And I've had to surrender many times. On the paper it says we're going to 12 acceleration runs, and they're looking good through eight, and nine it's a little off. And I'm like, "Hey, what's wrong?"
Kebba Tolbert: "I feel a little tired. This feels a little tight."

Kebba Tolbert: We might stop. We don't always stop, but we might. It's not a big deal to stop and just, "Hey, let's take a break. Let's go to the next thing on the menu." And we might modify what the next thing is. And that allows them to finish the week healthy. Versus I do that one extra run and they're compromised. They're fatigued. They're tired, whatever is going on. They stick their foot out in front. They jack up their hamstring. And now we got two to three weeks of rehab and recovery.

Kebba Tolbert: Did you watch Pulp Fiction?

Latif Thomas: Many times.

Kebba Tolbert: And I know the director is under some heat for the harassment. I'm not trying to support that at all. But the movie has some poignant moments. And one of the things he says when, I think it's Marsellus is trying to get the guy to take a dive in the fight so he can get the money. He said, "Look. You're supposed to go down in the fifth," and he uses more explicit language. And he's like, "That's pride messing with you," basically.

Kebba Tolbert: And your pride can mess with you as a coach. No one is immune to it. Your pride can mess with you. You say, "Well, this is what I wrote and I know when I've had 15 years and I've had Olympians and All Americans. I've had state champions and conference champions. I know how to write a workout." Sure. But you don't know what that kid's life is like. And again, this is ... Every day is like this. Every day is like this. And so you've got to fight against your ego and you have to look skillfully at what's going on in the workout and you have to be willing to say, "You know what? Not today. I'm going to take the L." Come back the next day.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Kebba Tolbert: But you were asking about adjustments, and so that was one example. But another one is, for example, in general prep, it doesn't happen as often I think just because I've got experience, but in season, it happens all the time. So I might write ... Let me think of a workout. Pick an event.

Latif Thomas: How about the 200. That doesn't get any respect.

Kebba Tolbert: The 200. So let's say I have two times 180, two times 160, two times 120. And say they come out and they light up the 180. So let's say we're going to have eight minutes' break between those or six minutes' break, something like that. And then the next 180 is pretty good. And then let's
say they do the 160, and that's a little bit off of what I want. And if I don't feel like it's because they weren't focused and I feel like it's, hey, it just wasn't there, so I may say, "You know what? We're going to scrap the rest of the workout, the 160, 120, 120. Let's maybe just do 90s with the same break. We'll do three times 90." So we got a really good 180, a really good 180, a pretty good 160. I can live with that. I'm happy with that. I don't want to see a bad 160, 120, 120, so I might be like, "Hey, let's cut out something and let's go to 90s." Or maybe I think, "Hey, let's just try and do a 120 and maybe two 90s." So that might be the adjustment.

Kebba Tolbert: Or it might be some other adjustment. But I'm usually not afraid to make an adjustment. Or it might be in the 200 workout, maybe we're doing, again, six times 150 with maybe eight minutes' break, maybe 10 minutes' break, depending on the time of year. Well, if the first two or three are pretty good and I'm talking to them, I see something the last 50 meters of the third one, maybe I switch down to 120s or 110s or 90s. Or maybe we go to straight leg bounds. Maybe say, "Let's just do six times 50 straight leg bounds after the first three." Or we do skips for distance. Let's do six times 50 of that instead. It's still working on enduring capacities. It's still working on the elasticity. It's still working on power output. And so I'm still getting work done.

Kebba Tolbert: So your ego has to put that aside and say, "Oh, well I wrote this, but that's not what we need to do today. Let's get this done this way." And we live to fight another day.

Latif Thomas: So are you making that adjustment because you think it's better psychologically for them? Like they're rolling, and so now I'm going to drop down in distance. I can keep the power output high. Maybe the fatigue won't set in as much and they can stay confident. Or are you just, you're afraid of mechanical issue or you just think that they maybe spent too much of their nine volts on the earlier runs?

Kebba Tolbert: It can be any or all three. So I want to stay healthy, so if I feel like there's something that's going on that I feel like is going to cause them to get injured or banged up, I may make an adjustment. If I feel like the first three ones were maybe a little harder than I expected, I may make an adjustment. Or if I feel like it's not going well, sometimes I'll make the adjustment. Or there's lots of reasons behind why you might make an adjustment in practice, but a lot of times, it's because either things are going well or things are going poorly. So sometimes, you come out and they're feeling good and they role. It's like, "Ooh, I wasn't expecting them to go that
“I've had workouts with a break a set for like 12 to 15 minutes and they crush the first one, the first rep. They might run like 37 seconds for a 300 or something like that for a girl or maybe 34 for a guy, 33. It might be, "Hey, I said 15 minutes. We're going to take a half an hour."

Latif Thomas: Oh, wow.

Kebba Tolbert: You know what I mean? Because they just ran basically a PR in practice. That 12 minutes, that's not in that realm. You better take a longer break.

Kebba Tolbert: And sometimes we'll just change the workout. We might've had three times something or a breakdown or a step down. I've had times where they come out and the first rep they just, they're feeling good and maybe they're excited, maybe they had a great day at school or with a significant other, anything, anything, and the first rep's flying. It might be, "Okay, change your shoes. We're going to go in flats and just finish up and get some general capacity. Instead of going 90 percent plus, we're going to go 80, 85 percent and just finish up just so you feel good and that first rep is enough. It tells me you're in shape, so I don't need to do more."

Latif Thomas: When you plan training or you observe training and make modifications that the skillfulness, the power output, the intensity is what drives your decisions? As opposed to trying to achieve certain volume goals.

Kebba Tolbert: Generally, yes. Most of the time, yes. But there are times of the year where I do care about volume, and so if I have to make an adjustment on the workout, then I'll ... Like let's make up a ... Like six times 300. That's not something I would normally do, but let's just say that's 1800 meters. So I want to get 1800 meters done. So volume does matter because you've got to train and you've got to build some capacity. But I'm not tied to any particular approach. So there are times where I want volume and then I'll make changes to get the volume that I want, but generally speaking, I'm more concerned about power, power output, posture, and skillfulness.

Latif Thomas: Interesting.

Kebba Tolbert: But on like a nine to one ratio.

Latif Thomas: No, that makes sense. And I think it's food for thought for a lot of coaches, especially in the high school level.

Latif Thomas: So let me take a hard left here and get a little more specific.
Kebba Tolbert: Okay.

Latif Thomas: Most of the coaches reading this right now, they're high school coaches. And I'm a high school coach, too. I live in the Northeast. I don't have an indoor track. I don't have great facilities. But more specifically, we don't have the luxury of that spaced out collegiate schedule. For many of us, myself included, our entire season from day one of practice, where I am from, we start the Monday after Thanksgiving, and if you can make it to the state championship, that's for us, 12 weeks.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: That's our biggest meet of the season. And we already had lesser championships before that.

Latif Thomas: So if you only had, say, 12 or 13 weeks from day one to State Championship, would that change your approach to progressing your specific endurance workout routines? If not, why? And if yes, how?

Kebba Tolbert: Yeah. It would change in that you wouldn't have as long for prep cycles. So whereas we have the luxury of having a big general prep, we have two general prep cycles and two special prep cycles and things like that, obviously, with only 13 weeks, that would have to shift because you'd have to truncate things down. You may only have two weeks of general prep, maybe. And maybe you have four weeks of specific prep, so that puts you halfway through your season and the rest you're in true competitive phase. So if I was coaching a 12, 13 week season, then the first few weeks would be part of my special specific prep. I would use them as training. And so those are the types of overall modifications I would make.

Kebba Tolbert: And so you wouldn't do as much specific endurance, but a lot of times, too, in high school, there's two meets a week. And so you can use those meets as specific endurance training. I would think that it's almost ... I think that it's a big mistake not to. So when you're budgeting out, "Okay, we have this much time for this and this much time for that," I was actually having a conversation with a high school coach about this earlier today, that you've got to use your meets to accomplish many of your goals because the intensity of the meet is higher than practice.

Kebba Tolbert: And so your meet might be speed development, so you're doing the 100 and the four by one or the 55 and the 55 hurdles or whatever. You might get some speed and speed endurance and specific endurance, so the 55 hurdles and the 200. So you accomplished something there. You might
run the four by one and a four by four on that day. And so depending on what you did in your meet, you got to say, "Okay, what did we accomplish? Now, what else do I need to get done this week?" It might be rest and recovery for the Saturday meet after the Wednesday meet.

Kebba Tolbert: So if you've got two meets in a week every week, one of the things you might have to do is distribute your quality, so distributed property type of thing. So maybe if every week you're going to do acceleration because that's good, steady diet, like a good multivitamin. So then, you may say, "This week ..." If you have one, two, three, four training days, let's say, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, assuming the meets are on Wednesday and Saturday, in week one, you might do acceleration on Monday. You got the meet on Wednesday and the meet on Saturday. Depending on what you do those weeks, then maybe you're not doing any other really true speed and power work that week, maybe. There are some thoughts about how you could do that. Maybe you do it Monday and Friday as part of your pre-meet.

Kebba Tolbert: But then the next week, maybe you're doing acceleration and you're doing a speed development workout. Then maybe the next week, you're doing acceleration and a specific endurance workout. And maybe you're only doing specific endurance and training once every 10 to 14 days. And your meets have to accomplish your specific endurance. So maybe you're running the 200 and a four by four. You're 300 hurdles and a four by four. Or you're running ... Things like that can be used for specific endurance training, too.

Latif Thomas: What about your quote unquote general prep work? Because I'm trying to think about high school coaches that are reading this and what they're thinking right now. And what they're thinking is, for example, my entire 18 year career coaching high school, we have always had meets starting within the first 14 days of the season.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: So, what coaches want to know is, well, when we have the meets ... when do I get them in shape? If you have Wednesday, Saturday meet, and then the next week you have, say, one meet on Saturday, especially when ... I've heard you say that meets are like super efforts. They're 100 percent plus.

Kebba Tolbert: Right, right.
Latif Thomas: So that's going to take a little bit longer to recover from before you can go high intensity.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: When are we going to get "in shape"? When are we going to "train"? You're saying that even with a 12, 13 week season, you would basically truncate your season into what the meet schedule says as opposed to just, "Well, no. It's cycle two in my college program is just fall training, but cycle two of my high school program, well, now we're full blown mid season, so I'm not going to just treat it like it's college. We're going to treat it like it's special prep because that's what it is."

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: Regardless, a lot of coaches are thinking right now, "Ok. But when do we get in shape?"

Kebba Tolbert: So, one answer is ... There's a couple different answers depending on a coach's scenario. So, if you have a gym class at your class and kids can enroll in that, that's one way to start helping them come into the start of official training in better shape than they would be if they didn't do anything. And some coaches will have that option.

Kebba Tolbert: Another option is if you have captains' practices. You have a good leader and they develop good leadership on your team and the captains with some guidance or input run practice for four to six weeks before you officially start, that's another option that I think is responsible. And you've got to give them things that they can do skillfully and not get injured or not get hurt, things like that.

Kebba Tolbert: But even if you don't have those two options, some coaches say, "Well, I can't do that," and that's okay, so then when you start your training, whatever that day is after Thanksgiving or whenever you can start, you've got to start getting in shape then. And from day one to when you're finished you're getting in shape. And that first meet 14 days from your first practice is part of the getting in shape process. And so yeah, you might have to make some hard choices or some things that you might not do if you had a longer time to prepare for your first meet, but if you're going to go to the first meet in 14 days, you might have to introduce block starts earlier than you would like to or even hurdles earlier than you would like to. But you also have to understand, if you go all out really soon in that stuff in practice, you're giving up something later. And so you have to balance that out to me.
Latif Thomas: Interesting.

Kebba Tolbert: So I think that's how I would approach it.

Latif Thomas: For me, in a sense, and it took me a while in my coaching career to get here, where I began, say with our indoor season, is I started to factor in the sport that the kid did in the fall. The way I'm going to treat a kid who comes in from soccer is different than the way I'm going to treat a kid who comes in from football because the qualities of those sports are totally different. So in a sense, I could use their fall sport as their whole general prep. So they're not coming in from zero. They just did a three month season.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: So is that ... Can you approach the start of the season by looking at the demands of the sport in their previous season and then, design training to, for lack of a better term, fill in the gaps."

Kebba Tolbert: Right. I think that's a responsible approach. So I think that the coaches have to examine what was done before the kid got there, before the student athlete got there, and then you got to do some fill in as you're going through your season. And so they're coming from football or basketball or soccer. They've been training. They've been doing work. Now, maybe there are some things that they need to do that they haven't done, but there are some things that have been accomplished, and you have to budget that appropriately.

Kebba Tolbert: I think that if we look at, for example, what happens in college, kids get accepted to college and then they enroll. But what courses you take, what courses you're allowed to take and what courses you get placed into is completely dependent on what you did before you got there. And so a kid that's coming from a high level math class at Phillips Academy may, or Newton North or something like that, in comparison to a kid who is coming from a different school where maybe they didn't offer AP math, is going to be in different courses. Now, they're still going to graduate with a degree and that doesn't mean either one of those kids are smarter than the other, but their background and preparation is different. And if we don't account for that, then you're setting one kid up for failure. And so I think the same thing has to happen in track and field.

Latif Thomas: That's an interesting analogy. I like that.
Latif Thomas: Switching gears again. How do you approach setting up training phases when you're running separate indoor and outdoor seasons, in particular where the majority of your athletes do both seasons? So you at the collegiate level, you have your indoor season. I would assume, and again, correct me if I'm wrong, you, quote on quote, you peak for indoor major meets, and then you transition, and then you gear back up for outdoor.

Kebba Tolbert: Right.

Latif Thomas: Plus, I know it's different in different parts of the country. Where I live, we have a distinct indoor season and a distinct outdoor season. And for my best kids who are going to go into New England's or nationals, they have, if they're going to nationals, Friday, Saturday, nationals, Monday spring track. How do you transition from indoor to outdoor running a double peak season? When the spring comes, do you start back over with general prep, like beginning of the season? Do you do a mixture, modify the way you transition those phases? What's the process there for those kids?

Kebba Tolbert: The thing that I think is important is to go back and review, but I think that, and Boo has said this many times, that most people go back too far. And so you just finished a season. You had pretty high intensities. They were rolling, PRing, and so to go all the way back is just doing that slow, short recovery type stuff is like you're going ... They're accustomed to high intensities. You spent that whole season getting them to be accustomed to high intensities. Now, if you go back too far, now you're just in a whole different realm.

Kebba Tolbert: So our intensity really doesn't drop very much. It drops a little bit, but it doesn't drop nearly as much as most people would think. So you can perform at a pretty high level for a long period of time. And so we will go back to work. So there are a couple of weeks in March and early April that are kind of tough training-wise for us, but it's not like September, October. It's more like November to January. And it's not really quite like November to January, but it's more close to November to January than it is September, October. It's kind of like half of November to January and half of in season because, at the college level especially, and even at the high school level for kids that go to New Balance Nationals, a lot of times, they have meets the week after outdoors. And so we finish nationals indoor in mid-March. Texas Relays, Florida Relays, Texas Relays are a few weeks later. And if you don't come to Texas Relays ready to go, you just get embarrassed and don't make the final.
Kebba Tolbert: And I don't think that you can go back and start doing lots of slow stuff. We don't do lots of slow stuff anyway, but that fall general prep stuff is slightly different than the specific prep than the Comp season. So we're kind of in the mix. We go back to work after our last indoor meet, whether it's a conference meet or a national meet depending on the athlete, then we're going to mix of competitive and a mix of special prep. It doesn't mean there aren't any general prep elements, but general prep and special prep are pretty close, so there's some of that in there, but we're still in competitive phase because you got to get ready for meets, and for the college level, conference meet is mid May, so you got six weeks, six to eight weeks. It's not that long, and you got to come out ready to go. And certain meets have qualifying marks, too.

Latif Thomas: Kebba, you've covered a lot of ground and given sprints and hurdles coaches of all levels quite a bit to think about, whether they come from a distance background and they're suffering severe cognitive dissonance right now or they're totally on board and want to learn more specifically how to apply it. What advice do you have for coaches who do want to transition into more speed power based system but, like I said, struggle to overcome their innate tendency to want to run kids into shape? How do they begin the transition out of that role and into the more specific model of training?

Kebba Tolbert: I think you got to just jump in, meaning that ... But I'll tell you one thing I did. I think you got to jump in and just say, "You know what? I'm going to take the leap of faith and give it a try." It doesn't mean you've got to cut everything out that you've done, because obviously, if you've been a successful coach, something you're doing is working, even if it's just building good relationships with athletes and that's why they're running well. And that's a big component. So there are a lot of reasons why different coaches are successful.

Kebba Tolbert: Having said that, when I first met Tony Wells, we talked about doing strength endurance work and not doing as much running and things like that, what I did is I took ... At that point, we were running two days a week with our group. And I took one of the running days out completely and we did straight leg bound kind of stuff. And two things happened. Later that fall, maybe six weeks into the training, I said, "Well, normally I would do this kind of running workout on this day. Let me see ... Let me just try it and see where they're at." And they knocked it out of the park. So I thought, "Okay. I don't need to do that. They're doing better than what I would have done if I had done the regular progression." And the other thing is we did our specific endurance testing in the fall, like a 300 or a 45 second test. They crushed it. These are 100 meter people type
people. And I was like, "Okay." So I was convinced from then on, and so that's my story. That's my testimony.

Kebba Tolbert: So I think that people will generally be surprised, people that I've mentored and worked with and helped and tutored. They've generally gotten reviews that, "Wow, Coach. That worked way better than I thought it would."

Kebba Tolbert: So it's a hard thing to let go of because it feels like you're giving away a lot and your kids aren't going to be ready, and then it's like, "Oh, wow. They ran well. They can run rounds. And they ran well at the end of the year, too." And so I think that, because of the mythology out there about how much running needs to be done, it's a hard transition to make, but the people that have made it, myself included, enjoy the benefits. And the kids are happier, too.

Latif Thomas: Right. The impact of athlete's enjoying the style of training alongside the results, that's an interesting topic. Unfortunately, it's another conversation for another time, but especially with your sprinters, hurdlers who hate death marches and garbage runs and basically running, if they can run fast times without having to do the types of things that they don't enjoy, that's a great program builder. That's a great confidence builder.

Kebba Tolbert: True, true.

Latif Thomas: A final question, Kebba, kind of going the opposite direction of my previous one. There's coaches reading this right now who are sold on the idea, kind of ...

Latif Thomas: I'll speak for myself. When I went to USTFCCCA Event Specialist School, which I know you are one of the lead instructors now, I had been trending toward this idea of intensity over volume, and when I do faster stuff and focus on mechanics and technique, I'm getting better results. But I came from a volume high school program, a volume college program. And then I heard Vince Anderson and Gary Winckler, Tommy Badon, who were the instructors, all preaching what you've been saying here today. One thing that hit me was when Vince said, 'if it looks like crap, it's crap. Stop doing it. When you free yourself from volume concerns, everything changes.' It liberated me to not feel self conscious about going in that direction because so much of the literature said, "Volume, volume. Get them in shape," all that stuff.
Latif Thomas: Now, that said, there's going to be a lot of coaches who are reading this and hear about this, and they're all about it, but they're not necessarily that experienced in running this type of system. So what advice do you have for them so they don't get too far in terms of overloading with intensity as opposed to volume considering the number of steps they take in a session or a micro cycle is so much fewer than it would be otherwise that you can greedy in terms of the reps? Because more is better. We're only doing this amount of volume. Let's do another one. Let's do extra. Let's do more plyos. Let's do more lifts. Let's do more stuff more often.

Kebba Tolbert: You'll break your athletes. Don't do it.

Kebba Tolbert: Again, you've got to fight the temptation of, "Oh, that last rep was really good." You got to fight the one more ism. And a lot of times, people think because the athletes aren't laying on the ground or they're not puking or they're not splayed out that that stuff is not taxing to the athlete. So you have to appreciate how violent and how intense sprinting, hurdling, jumping, throwing, lifting is. And so when you appreciate that intensity, then you budget appropriately.

Kebba Tolbert: And it's always better to err on the side of caution. So if you read the literature and it says, "Oh, do 20 times 20 meter for acceleration for your sprinters," I'd question that. Look at the volumes and look at the ranges that people are suggesting that you trust, and then err on the shorter side to start out with and then see what happens. You don't have to do 100 percent volume. You can do the lower end of stuff and be perfectly okay and that kind of stuff that Henk Kraaijenhof wrote about minimum effective dose. What's the minimum we need to do to be successful? Not, what's the most you need to do?

Kebba Tolbert: And I think that's where if you're new to the speed power training and the speed power world, you've got to divorce yourself from in aerobic stuff more is better maybe, whereas in the speed power stuff, the quality is the key driver. So if you've done several runs or several jumps or lifts and the quality is good and you feel good with that, you got to say, "You know what? That's enough."

Latif Thomas: Absolutely. I think I heard once something to the effect of if you think you can do one more, you may have already done one too many.

Kebba Tolbert: Right, right.

Latif Thomas: So I think that's a good approach to take.
Latif Thomas: Well, Coach Tolbert, appreciate your time. You've given us all a lot to think about.

Latif Thomas: Coach, I hope as you are reading this right now and thinking about your own program and what you're currently doing and maybe realizing some of the holes in your program and thinking about some of the things Coach Tolbert has talked about that you now have some ideas, tools, and even permission to move toward a more specific speed and power based approach.

Latif Thomas: Coach Tolbert, thank you for your time.

Kebba Tolbert: Appreciate it.

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