
Liu Xiang, Dayron Robles, Colin Jackson and Wilhem Belocian

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It's not often that four world record-holders in any given event are in the same room at the same time, but when it happens it is truly an extraordinary experience.

Dayron Robles, Liu Xiang and Colin Jackson – the three former holders of the 110m hurdles world record before it was broken by Aries Merritt in 2012 – were joined by world junior record-holder Wilhem Belocian ahead of the **2014 World Athletics Gala** in Monaco.

The conversation began with Belocian being tested on his knowledge of his fellow sprint hurdlers.

He was unable to guess which of the trio was the one without an Olympic title, and which of them had the fastest top-10 average, but he guessed correctly when asked the question about which of them had the most followers on social media.

For the record, Liu Xiang has more than 32 million followers on Tencent Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

Every one of them will be keen to see the Chinese superstar return in time for next year's IAAF World Championships in Beijing.

“Since winning the 2004 Olympic title, almost all Chinese people know me,” said Liu. “When I go out, everyone knows me and wants pictures with me. My life has changed since that moment. I’m surprised I have that many followers on Tencent Weibo, but it is always very good

to communicate with athletics fans.

“The World Championships in Beijing is of course important to every athlete. I’ve been trying so hard to qualify, but I don’t know yet if I will be there.”

There was a lot of mutual respect between the four hurdlers and a general feeling of regret that they weren’t all competing in the same era.

“I see these two [Robles and Liu] as ballet dancers over the hurdles,” said Jackson. “They are fantastic technically. Luckily I didn’t have to race them too much.”

“When I was very young, I treated Colin and Allen Johnson as my models,” said Liu. “They have had a great influence on my career. Now I’d also like to be a model for the young kids.”

“It’s difficult for me to comment when I have Colin on my right and Liu on my left and the new kid on the block sat there,” Robles said with a laugh. “But I very much look forward to running against Wilhem. I ran against Liu many times, and it’s a pity Colin didn’t last longer so that I could run against him.

“But honestly, jokes apart, the best thing to ever happen in my life is being a part of the world of athletics,” added Robles. “Win or lose, it really has been the highlight of my career.”

When asked which of the three he looked up to, Belocian was unequivocal in his response.

“Dayron was my role model,” he said. “I love the Cuban technique. The lead leg, the trail leg; everything about it. I used to like [2005 world champion Ladjji] Doucoure because I was French, but when I saw Dayron, it was Dayron all the way.”

As is often the case when it comes to the hurdles, talk at times got quite technical.

The quartet was questioned on the transition from the lower junior-height hurdles (99cm) to the higher senior-height barriers (106cm), and all were in agreement with Jackson’s observation.

“When you’re much smaller, the transition takes longer to go from 99cm to 106cm hurdles,” he said. “But when you’re shorter, what you tend to do is use your other assets. So while shorter hurdlers like me have to get used to taking off and landing, we have the advantage of being able to sprint better. Taller guys, on the other hand, have more problems sprinting in between the barriers.”

They also unanimously agreed that it could take a while before the world record for the event enters 12.7 territory after Merritt’s perfect 12.80 performance in Brussels two years ago.

“When we broke the world record, we did it by a tiny margin,” said Robles. “We worked our whole careers for that one hundredth of a second. Only we know how hard we worked to get that. When you work hard, day in and day out, you don’t think about breaking records by big margins. I honestly thought 12.85 wasn’t possible, but now Aries has run 12.80, so who knows?”

“One day we’ll get an athlete who is stronger and has better technique,” continued Robles. “Put all those things together and I’m sure we’ll see 12.7. And I would love for that athlete to look at us as role models and as having been the models of the future because we’ve put so much work into it.”

“Since Renaldo Nehemiah ran 12.93 in 1981, the record has only improved by 0.13 in all those years,” said Jackson. “If we compare that to the men’s 100m over the same period, then we see that maybe we’re very close to the ceiling already in the hurdles. We may get someone who runs 12.78 or 12.79, but right now I couldn’t tell you who that athlete could be. It might be next year or it might be in 25 years.”

Since Robles won the Olympic title in 2008, a different athlete has dominated the event each year.

Merritt, David Oliver, Jason Richardson and Pascal Martinot-Lagarde have each had a year at the top, but none of them have yet been able to maintain their world-beating form for more than one season in succession.

“It’s difficult, because the hurdles is a technical event,” said Jackson. “There are 10 barriers and not everyone can be perfect every time.

“There is such great talent among the top guys at the moment and they are going head to head against each other every other day, so it’s difficult to have the perfect race every time. It makes it wonderful to watch, though.”

As wonderful as watching four athletics greats waxing lyrical about their event.
