

## JEFFERSON PÉREZ, THE DISCREET CHAMPION

The following article was published on the IAAF website earlier this month. What exciting walks we can expect at this year's Olympics. The greatest walkers of the world will be there and chief amongst them will be Jefferson Perez of Ecuador.



**Perez wins the IAAF World Championship over 20 km in 2003**

Chronologically, Jefferson Pérez was the first champion to be crowned at the "Stade de France" on the morning of Saturday 23 August 2003 at the 9th IAAF World Championships, Paris 2003, Saint-Denis. But the little Ecuadorian's claim to fame wasn't only that. When he crossed the finish line after his 1:17:21 performance in Paris, he also became South America's first World Champion ever, and the first man from his continent to hold a World record since João Carlos de Oliveira broke the Triple Jump top mark with 17.89m in 1975.

Jefferson Pérez is the best athlete Ecuador has produced at any sport, but in spite of being a roll model for many kids in his country, the 29 year-old race walker from Cuenca prefers to maintain a low profile. With perseverance, humbleness and style, Jefferson can put his name among the very best in the history of South American athletics, including Brazil's Adhemar Ferreira da Silva - 2 Olympic Triple Jump Golds in 1952 and 56 - and Joaquim Carvalho Cruz - gold and a silver Olympic medals at 800 metres in 1984 and 88.

An Olympic title in Atlanta '96, two World Cup victories in Podebrady '97 and Torino '02 - all at 20Km - were before last summer Jefferson's biggest achievements, along with a World Junior title at 10000 metres in 1992. But Pérez had something else in sight last summer, and that "something" was obtained on that morning of 23 August 2003.

Now, we wonder, what's next for this 1.74m giant?

### **Has 2003 been the best year of your career?**

Since I came back to the sport in 2001, I set some goals for myself. Those goals were high... I can't say that 2003 has been the best year because I had some major inconveniencies. In February I caught pneumonia, which meant that I couldn't compete at my best at the IAAF Challenge in Mexico, where I finished in 14th place. The training sessions were going well, but that was a setback. If we strictly talk about results, 1996 was a good year, and 1999 was positive too. So, if we only consider performances, then this 2003 has been very good, and I can't complain about it.

### **But in your career you were "missing" only 2 goals, a World title, and a World Record, and you got both in 2003... What does that mean to you?**

In 2002 I won the World Cup, but some people said that I wasn't the best at 20Km, because Francisco Javier Fernández (Spain), who then was the record holder, didn't compete at the event. That left me wondering if I was the best or not.... In 2003 I was able to answer that, and I have to thank Fernández for that. He gave me the chance to compete against him. He is one of the best race walkers in the world, because of his style, his tactics, and his biomechanical preparation. I respect him a lot. Still, I believe records are important, but they are meant to be broken. The one I have now could be

swept away this year, who knows when.... But that victory was special and the record too. Also I think we worked hard and we got the results. It's been a very interesting year, but I know that I got the record because Francisco went out very hard, and he pushed me a great deal. That made the record possible.

**What did you feel when you crossed the finish line at the "Stade de France". You finally got the record and you beat the best in world?**

During the race, I wanted to beat him (Fernández) I thought about that in the 52 weeks of preparation I had. We know he is an aggressive competitor, very confident. In my mind he has always been ahead of me. He is the best. In the race, once I was able to catch him, I said to myself 'I have to put distance now', and then I realised that the record was possible. Finally, I remember pushing hard at the track for the last 120 metres. What I felt then, with the record and the victory, was something nice, but the most important thing for me is to find peace for myself. After Sydney 2000 I had many spiritual and psychological problems, and I'm working on trying to find that peace I lost a few years ago."

**Where do you think you find your best qualities? In the natural conditions you have, or in the mental strength you have developed?**

There are a few things a human being can learn during his life, and the rest come with genetics. I didn't have an easy childhood, and I have to admit that my personality was shaped in the streets. Perhaps that created some kind of shield.... In the sport, I found a way to use all those things in a positive way, because I have to admit, that in my younger years I saw negative things such as criminals, drugs and everything else you can find on the streets. So, I have to thank God, because in athletics I found a way to shape my body, and also a way to find a combative spirit, a warrior's attitude, but without harming anybody. Today in Ecuador, we are trying to work for those kids who are still out there in the streets, and when I talk to them, I tell them that I was in a similar situation to the one they are in. That I was given a chance, and I didn't miss it, so it's up to them to prepare themselves and take that chance, whenever it comes.

**Do you feel like an idol in Ecuador, because you are considered the best sportsman in the history of your country?**

No. I always say that athletes should not be considered idols. They may be examples, but never idols. I try to be discreet in my every day life. I try to be available to everybody, and to give a positive example to the youngsters."

Who has been the athlete who was to biggest influence of your career? I remember several people and moments which have marked my life. One of those was during the 1988 Olympic Games. Right before the 20Km race, there was a commercial during the broadcast showing the image of many champions, and that ad said something like "don't dream about being there friend...dream about being one of them". I still remember it very well. Then, I can mention an athlete like Rolando Vera, a distance runner, also from Cuenca. He was physically very small, like me, but was able to beat everybody, and that showed me that it was possible to succeed."

**And as a race walker, who did you admire?**

There are several walkers. When I was 15 years-old, I was able to go to Mexico to train, and there I saw athletes like Ernesto Canto, Carlos Mercenario, Raúl González who were icons of our discipline.

**What would mean to you to win a second Olympic title?**

I will only know it once I get there. I'm working to win a second title, but I also want to be a great competitor. Someone who gives it all and fights until the end.

**You always mention your family as your greatest support, what can you tell us about them?**

My father was an army officer. He died in an accident when I was 15, and I was already into athletics. My mother had visual problems, and little by little lost her vision, due to a chronicle illness. She used to work at a fruit market she had. She needed assistance, but has always been able to do her work. Still, she wasn't making that much money, so she made a great effort to raise us, and to educate us the way she did. My siblings, 2 brothers and 2 sisters, are my best friends. We trust each other a lot, and we love each other a lot.

**This year you finally completed a 50Km event. How did you feel about it?**

I will do it better next time... It was very interesting. I was a little fearful at the beginning, and now I know how it feels to be able to finish a 50Km race (3:56:04, in 8th place at Naumburg). Next time, I hope to do much better.

**Last year you said you were getting close to the end of your career. How far is that off now?**

Before 2002, my goal was the World Cup. Then my second goal was World Championship in Paris, and now, my goal is Athens. Right now, I feel I want to compete for another 2 or 3 years. I know it could be possible to extend it for another 5 years, because we can see the cases of Korzeniowski and other athletes who achieved great results after 33 years of age. All I can say is that we are going to go step by step. That's my philosophy. We will see what happens after Athens.

**What's the schedule plan for 2004?**

I will make my debut in Mexico, in March, at the IAAF Challenge in Tijuana. I will compete at the World Cup, and then I have to decide if I will also compete in Rio Maior, in Kunshan, or in Sesto San Giovanni. It will be one of them. We

will see.... After that, I will return to Ecuador to prepare the second part of the season. Here I'll be training in the coastal cities of Esmeraldas, Guayaquil and Portoviejo, which are humid, and with a temperature over 30°C. We will also do altitude camps here in Cuenca (2400m), in Loja (2100m), and perhaps in Quito (2800m). All that, in preparation for Athens 2004.