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## Wariner chasing fractions of a second

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MCKINNEY — It turns out one-tenth of a second is actually pretty easy to spot despite its teeniness.

It is the shin parallel to the track.

It is a tiny scuff when the foot hits just a little off mark.

It is a posture line just slightly askew.

U.S. Olympic sprinter and two-time gold medalist Jeremy Wariner spent an hour, at least, Thursday, starting and starting and starting again during a training session at the Michael Johnson Performance Center, in an effort to trim one-tenth of a second off his 400-meter time. It was the same routine every time — a deep squat followed by a down dog, kicking his left leg back before settling his foot into the starting blocks, then his right. He then leaned back, rhythmically wiped his hands on the sides of his shorts, then readied himself.

Probably 25 times he did this, each time exploding from the blocks for 10 or so fluid strides, then immediately walking over to join former Olympian Michael Johnson and Lance Walker, the director at MJPC, at the Dartfish video monitor to study his technique.

They were breaking down his start, much like a golf coach breaks down a swing. The search is for one-tenth of a second, which is not exactly easy because we're talking about one of the fastest men in the world, a guy who screams around the entire track in 43.45 seconds on the power of his roadrunner-ish stride.

"It's a strength when I am running, but it is a weakness in my start," he said. "And one-tenth of a second, in any race right now, is a lot. It is one-tenth closer to the world record for me."

That record is 43.18 seconds. Or .27 faster than Wariner has gone.

Shaving these .28 seconds is on Wariner's to-do list as he approaches next week's U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Ore., and preps for Beijing in August. Because, as Johnson advised him, "If you want to break the record, every time you step on the track your goal has to be to break the record."

"The record" sounds so impersonal considering it is Johnson's 43.18 from 1999 in Seville, Spain, that still stands and it is his mark he is helping Wariner stalk. This is akin to Emmitt Smith coaching whomever is pursuing his NFL rushing record decades from now and almost unheard of in an age when legends are possessive of their legacy.

"I don't consider myself still a track athlete. I'm not the world-record holder or fastest man in the world ... well, maybe, I am still that. I want to keep that one. I like that one," Johnson said, with a hearty laugh. "Some people don't have any goals after they finish. They wake up every day and say, 'Hey, I'm the world-record holder and that makes me feel good about myself.' That is not what makes me feel good about myself. This is what I do."

He gestures to his center where football and hockey and, yes, sprinters, train, guys such as Wariner, guys who have been called the next Michael Johnson.

"Jeremy happens to be one of those athletes," Johnson said. "And it just happens, the record he is trying to break belongs to me."

Johnson is not Wariner's coach. He is a cross between a mentor, an agent and a friend, who only occasionally offers advice and usually keeps it to starts. What he's doing now is helping Wariner find that one-tenth because he understands better than anybody what that means, especially for the Olympian who finds himself on the big, big stage only once every four years.

"I ran a .39 when the world record was 43.29. That was my tenth there and then I had to wait another three years to get to that point again," Johnson said. "So on those days when you are on and the weather is perfect and you are in great shape and you execute the best race you can and you miss it by a tenth of a second, yes, it's huge."

The thing about Johnson is he knows how good Wariner is and how Beijing can springboard him to popularity rarely experienced by a track athlete. Wariner is big-time in track and field circles and his name has traction in Texas.

To be on a first-name basis with the *Today* show crowd, he needs wow factor. He needs to thrust himself alongside swimmer Michael Phelps and the gymnastics pixies.

"My intention is to get on the Wheaties box," Wariner said with a smile. "And you do that by being fast."

And how fast is possible?

"My goal is to run 42 seconds," he said without a touch of irony, failing to realize how crazy fast that sounds to normal folks.

"It sounds crazy to hear," he said. "But to me, it doesn't sound crazy because I know I can."

He knows one-tenth of a second and probably more is out there, waiting for him to dispose of, and he's only 24 with dreams of running through the 2016 Olympics. So eventually, just as Johnson predicted, he will be caught by the really fast, really normal kid from Grand Prairie.

And on that day, everybody will be able to see how easy one-tenth of a second is to spot.