

# WEEKEND WARRIORS: HOW 55-YEAR-OLD SPRINTER DAPHNE SLUYS BECAME A WORLD CHAMPION



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Daphne Sluys is a math instructor at Western Washington University. She teaches undergrads about calculus and linear algebra, equations and applications, processes and results. She has a logical mind.

But it was leading her astray in her other life -- that of a world-class masters sprinter. She was training too much, and suffering injury after injury.

After yet another season of disappointment, Sluys, 55, hired Steve Kemp, a former Canadian Olympic trials decathlon champion, to coach her. He immediately told her to spend less time running.

"[He] streamlined my training and made it really specific to my sprinting events, the 100, 200 and the 400," says Sluys, who lives in Bellingham, Washington. "So I ended up actually doing less training but more higher-quality training. [He] helped me develop more efficient sprinting mechanics so my training was safer so I didn't have as many injuries."

They found a winning formula, and Sluys excelled. She went on to win three age-group national championships in the 100, 200 and 400 meters, then went to the World Masters Track and Field Outdoor Championships at Lyon, France, in August and came home with two gold medals and a silver. She won the 400 meters in the 55-59 age bracket (in 67.32), and helped the U.S. win gold in the 4x400 relay and silver in the 4x100.

Sluys -- an athlete since she ran high school track while growing up in Zimbabwe -- has always been active. Through college, teaching and a busy family life with four sons and a stepdaughter, she's done martial arts, aerobics, hiking, kayaking, rock climbing, running and "the odd triathlon." But at 46 she wanted something new and remembered how much fun she had running as a teen. So, she went to a local all-comers track meet and had a blast. The next year she was running masters track.

Immediately, she loved the masters athletes and the way they overcame age and injuries. "They work around the challenges," she says. "They might learn to run in a different way, they might throw in a different way. They might do javelin instead of shot put if they injure themselves ... or they might just decide to take up the hurdles. There's a lot of creative ways they can get around their injuries."

Now she's one of the best sprinters in the world in her age group, with many lessons learned along the way. She shared her best advice, straight from her world championship training plan.

## **Take the time to warm up, and don't discount drills.**

The first hour of every one of Sluys' track workouts in the lead-up to worlds was devoted to warm-ups, stretching and drills. Through drills like high knees and stride lengthening, she improved her form and increased her efficiency while lessening her likelihood of injury.

## **Focus on form too.**

In the 400-meter final at worlds, Sluys planned to go out fast, go into cruise mode and then kick home over the last 150 meters. But when her rival from France went out faster than expected and had the lead with about 250 meters to go, Sluys had to adapt. "I had to turn my kick on sooner," she says. She pulled even with about 150 meters left, then "found some more" power and pulled away for the win. "All I was focused on was my arms," she says. "That maintained my form, which maintained my efficiency."

The form drill that had helped her arms carry her to the finish? "Stand in front of a mirror holding two-pound weights in each hand and begin running in place so the arm movement coordinates with the leg movements," Kemp says. "Relax your shoulders, tighten the core and lead with the elbows. Do 60-second sets and don't break form. Those are the cues to focus on ... Eventually they will translate into a habit that becomes unconscious."

## **Tweak the training to how you're feeling.**

Kemp believes strongly in rest and recovery. "He [is] very flexible and he adapted the training day by day, literally ... depending on what shape my body was in, what was weak. He would find weak spots and then improve the weak spots," says Sluys. If she was stressed from work, he downgraded the workout. He emphasized quality of work over quantity.

## **Prepare your mind as much as your body.**

Sluys says Kemp prepared her mentally, constantly discussing how she needed to develop toughness and resiliency to win a world championship title. She visualized situations and responses. "He'd say, 'OK, this is it, you're running the last 100 meters of that 400 meters. What do you do with it?' It was competition rehearsal."

## **And don't forget diet and sleep.**

Sluys eats four to five smaller meals a day and avoids gluten because it makes her sick. She stays away from processed sugar. She eats a high-protein, high-fat diet with lot of fruits and vegetables, and snacks when she's hungry.

She also makes sure to get plenty of z's. "I like eight and a half (hours), nine if I can get it," she says, laughing. "Sleep is really important.

## **Finally, juggling it all can pay off.**

Sluys says it's tough balancing work, training and family, but she loves the results of training. "For me to stay ahead of math students at college, I really like training because it sharpens by brain," she says. "It sharpens my focus and I notice I actually have more energy."