

Strategy for the 400m-race

by [Mike Rosenbaum](#) , Updated May 25, 2018

*The following advice on running the [400 meters](#) is based on a presentation by Harvey Glance, a 1976 Olympic 4 x 100-meter gold medalist and long-time track and field coach. Glance has coached for colleges such as Auburn and Alabama, was the U.S. National Team coach at the 2009 World Championships, and as of 2016 was **the personal coach of Olympic 400-meter champion Kirani James**. Glance gave his 400-meter presentation at the 2015 Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association's coaching clinic.*

The 400 Meters Is Classified as a Sprint Race

Even world-class 400-meter runners, however, cannot sprint all-out for [400 meters](#); it's not humanly possible. The question, therefore, is when should a 400-meter runner sprint at full speed, and when should the runner ease up a bit? According to Harvey Glance, the key is to break the race up into 100-meter segments, with the initial segment setting the tone for the remainder of the race.

Glance, who was primarily a 100- and 200-meter runner, but who also competed in the 400, calls the one-lap event "one of the toughest races there is to master," adding, "the big difference in the 400 meters is the fact that you've got to break it down to (learn) how to run this particular race. You can't go out too fast. If you go out too fast, you're going to pay for it in the end. You can't go out too slow, or you're going to be behind and you'll have to catch up. So what we try to do in running 400 meters, is kind of break it down into sections. Whether you're in high school, whether you're in junior college, or whether you're in college or at a world-class level – run each 100 meters in sections."

How Kirani James Runs the 400 Meters

Glance's 400-meter philosophy, in brief, is to run hard out of the blocks and then continue sprinting strongly through the 200-meter mark. The runner can then ease back a bit for the next 100 meters before surging back to full speed for the final 100. To illustrate his point, he described how he's helped James prepare for major international competitions, in terms of workout and race strategy.

"When we go to a track meet, and we're running against [LaShawn Merritt](#)," Glance says, "over a two-week period I'll give (James) workouts to break down each and every aspect of that particular race. I want him to come through the first 100 meters in around 10.9 or 11 seconds. I want to get out of the blocks and be aggressive. So I'll give him maybe six 100-meter (workout repetitions) of 11 seconds (each). At the time I say 'go' and the time he hits 100 meters, there'll be a whistle. And I'll put a little hurdle up, at the 100-meter mark – if he's behind that mark (after 11 seconds), he knows to pick it up. If he's passed that mark, he knows to slow it down. So we give him, in his mind, a little tempo of where we expect him to be at a certain point, at the first 100 meters. Unless you train your athlete to have that rhythm in their mind and their body, then it's hard to achieve.

"When we go to 200 meters ... I always say to him, 'I want you to come through the 200 meters, at a major championship, or in the Diamond League, in 21.1 or 21.2.' That's for him – he's a 43.7 (runner). And how do we do that? I don't worry about running 200 meters in practice at 21 seconds. I only worry about the first 100 meters. Once he comes through 100 meters in 11 seconds, he now knows to keep building or to maintain (his speed). I don't have to see it in practice; I don't have to give him six 200s in 21.2. That first 100 is good because that creates the rhythm. Once you create a rhythm you should be able to maintain that rhythm and motion, of what he's trying to do. He knows if he has to go down another gear

(after 100 meters) then he's too fast. He knows if he's behind that mark, he's got to pick it up. So we establish the 400-meter (strategy) in the first 100 meters."

Glance also notes that 400-meter world record-holder Michael Johnson approached the event in the same way.

Johnson, Glance explains, "basically did what Kirani does in the first 200 meters – he'd come through in about 21.1, 21.2. And Michael would relax pretty much the next 100 meters. He'd reserve (some energy). He did the first 200 meters in about 21.2, 21.1, then he'd back off and try to just glide the next 100 meters, and then he'd take off again the last 100."

The 400 Meters for Younger Runners

Translating his philosophy to a hypothetical, younger, 400-meter athlete – for example, a high school girl who runs the 400 in about 58 seconds – Glance warns coaches not to expect even splits in each 100-meter segment.

"If she is a 58-second 400-meter runner," Glance says, "14 or 15 (seconds) per 100 meters on the front end isn't bad. It's going to set you up for what you've got to do. But you've got to understand, you're not going to get 14 at the end of a race (i.e., the last 100 meters) if she's a 58-second runner. So you may want to go 16 or 17 for the first 100 meters, and then you build on that. So you say, 'Relax down the straightaway – keep it going.' Then you're in position for where you want to be."

In his athletic and coaching career, Glance adds, he's seen 400-meter runners who were capable of running in the mid-44-second range, who would qualify for a major event and then run a second or more slower than their personal bests because they believed they had to change their style when facing the best runners. Instead, Glance advises 400-meter runners at all levels to develop a solid race plan, and then stick to it. "The great ones run the same, each and every time. And they

put themselves in position to compete for titles.”

When competing at a relatively high level – whether it’s for an Olympic medal, or for state or local championships – Glance advises 400-meter runners “to still be poised enough to execute what you’ve practiced. The first 100 meters of a 400-meter race sets up everything. The rhythm, staying in the race, having something left at the end of the race – it’s about execution.”