

ALLISON FELIX

SHE TOOK
THE BATON
AND BROKE
THROUGH
BARRIERS

as told to CHARIS DIETZ photograph by DJENEBA ADUAYOM

It is an eerie feeling to run in the dark, to sprint like your life depends on it when you can only see 5 to 10 meters in front of your feet. But you'll do almost anything when you're afraid you might lose everything—and I was carrying a secret.

I was several months pregnant, and as a professional athlete, I was terrified to be seen out training in daylight hours, fearful that someone would take a photo and leak the news to my sponsor, who might then decide to drop me. Just like that. It didn't matter how many Olympic medals or world championships I already had under my belt. No female athlete was immune to the sports industry's double standard: Empower young women with the message that they can do anything, but then penalize or end their careers if they decide to start a family during competitive years—which are also very often their child-bearing years.

So I hid to postpone the inevitable, waking up at 4 in the morning to train alone on an unlit high school track. For nearly three months, I ran in isolation. And I ran afraid. Afraid I would be forced to choose between two things I felt born to do—use my feet to fly and use my heart to mother.

Track stars are often pretty young when their talent is discovered and begins to be developed. But it wasn't until I joined my high school track team that I began to find that my long skinny legs—the ones some kids taunted as “chicken legs”—could cover ground fast. They could take me places. And the more I ran, the more I began to understand what kind of gift I actually had been given.

In college, running became something beautiful to me, a passion, art in motion. Running was when I felt most alive. And it showed on the track. At age 18, I ran in my first Olympics, and I never looked back...until the moment I realized the career I had worked so hard to build could be ended by other people in a moment.

They call it the “kiss of death” when a professional track and field athlete becomes pregnant, the signal that a career is about to end. But this little life inside of me was a beginning I'd always dreamed about, even as a young kid. Motherhood comes to women in so many different ways. Sometimes unexpectedly. All I knew was that I'd always loved children and I wanted to be a mother. And even as my body was changing in scary and unfamiliar ways, I knew I wanted to be a mother who could run.

The day came when I could no longer delay the conversation with my athletic sponsor, one of the biggest names in the business. I negotiated for a clause in my contract that would protect my rate of pay for 12 months after giving birth. They agreed.

I should've felt relieved. But something wasn't sitting right. It hit me that I was the only woman who this clause protected. It wouldn't apply to any of the other female athletes racing beside me, much less the ones who would come up after us. And I couldn't stop thinking of all the female champions who'd paved the way before me. The sisterhood. The ones who had used their moment to push the path open a little wider for me to get to do what I loved. It was my time now; I was holding the baton. How would I use my moment?

I'm not someone who naturally rattles cages. It's so far out of my comfort zone to raise my voice, to embrace conflict for the sake of change. But there was a new fierceness growing inside me that was beginning to replace



the fear. And her name was Camryn Grace. My daughter was coming. And I was going to do everything in my power so that one day my little girl wouldn't have to hide, wouldn't have to train in the dark for what she was born to do.

I used my platform to publicly call out athletic sponsors like mine at the time, holding them accountable and urging them to provide maternity protection for all professional female athletes. Many have responded. Change isn't always swift, but it's beginning to happen across the industry.

Two years after my daughter was born, I won gold and bronze medals at the Tokyo Olympics, wearing shoes designed for women by women at a company I founded. At age 3, Camryn is still a little too young to understand all that's happened in my story. Her story. But one day I'll tell her. I'll say, “You can't even imagine what's possible when you find the courage to stand up for what you believe in, when you decide it's time to step out into the light.”

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Olympian and world champion runner Allyson Felix is the most decorated U.S. track and field athlete in history. She is also the proud mother of a 3-year-old daughter, Camryn.

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