



Olympian Allyson Felix On How Motherhood and the Pandemic Changed Her Outlook On Life

By Michelle Konstantinovsky



She's the only female track and field athlete ever to win six Olympic gold medals, and alongside Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey, she's the most decorated Olympian of all time. But Allyson Felix is no stranger to unforeseen obstacles. She faced a nine-month layoff in 2014 due to a hamstring injury, sustained significant ligament tears after [falling from a pull-up bar](#) in 2016, and was forced to [undergo an emergency C-section](#) in 2018 when she was [diagnosed with severe pre-eclampsia](#). While she and daughter Camryn emerged healthy, her sponsor, Nike, refused to compensate her fairly post-pregnancy and Felix [publicly expressed her disappointment](#) and ultimate decision to cut ties with the powerhouse company.

But that devastating experience — and all the other personal and professional challenges that came before it — unexpectedly helped prepare Felix for the life-altering record-scratch of a year known as 2020.

“I think I was just in the spirit of fighting,” Felix says. “I had been through so much — adversity in my career coming after the birth of my daughter, contract-wise, and the literal fight for my health and my daughter’s health. So when the pandemic hit and then there was the news of the [Olympics being postponed](#), I was already in this mindset of, ‘there is so much to overcome that this is just another thing.’”

That’s not to say 2020 was an easy year for Felix — but knowing she wasn’t alone helped ease some of the uncertainty. “Obviously it was in a different way because the whole world was going through it and everyone was experiencing so much loss, so it did feel like I was going through it with other people,” she says. “But I had some experience with hardship.”

Drawing on the strength that propelled her through the other tough times in her life helped the 35-year-old soldier on, even as her [typical training regimen was turned upside down](#) and she, along with the rest of the world, endured the daily anxiety of the unprecedented global crisis. But there was something else that pushed Felix forward, even on her toughest days. “Gratitude,” she says. “I remember those days and nights [being in the NICU](#) and at that time, obviously competing was the furthest thing from my mind — it was all just about feeling grateful to be alive and grateful that my daughter was here. So in the midst of the disappointment of the games being postponed and things not looking the way I’d imagined, at the end of the day, we were healthy and not everyone was — there’s so much gratitude in those basic things that it really put everything into perspective.”

According to Felix, motherhood helped shift her perspective on just about everything, including the ways women — particularly Black women — are not getting the care they need in this country. In addition to speaking out on maternity rights and the unfair treatment of pregnant athletes, Felix has made it her mission to advocate on behalf of Black women, [who are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications](#) than white women, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“It’s important to me to shine a light on causes like the maternal mortality crisis facing Black women and advocating for women and trying to move toward more equality,” Felix says. “I think about my daughter and the kids in her generation and I don’t want them to have these same fights. As an athlete, it can be scary to speak out because people are mostly interested in you for your performance, so to shift and talk about things that affect myself and my community was something that doesn’t come natural to me. But it was becoming a mother and thinking about this world my daughter will grow up in that prompted me to feel the need to speak out on those things.”

Becoming a mother has also helped Felix cultivate kindness and patience toward herself — something that’s adorably evident in her commercial spot in the upcoming Bridgestone Olympic and Paralympic campaign for Tokyo 2020. The ad shows the unbelievably accomplished athlete just trying to prevent her toddler from flushing her phone down the toilet — a moment many parents can likely relate to.

“Being a mom has shifted my motivation and desire,” Felix says. “I’ve always been really naturally competitive and I’ve always had that desire to win, but now as a parent, the reason why is different. I really want to show my daughter what it’s like to overcome adversity and what hard work is like and how character and integrity are important to anything that you do. So I really look forward to the days when I can tell her about these years and show her pictures of her being at training and all that stuff that has shifted who I am as an athlete.”

Felix has also had to shift her expectations of her body, which has been her ultimate career tool for nearly two decades. “It’s been a really interesting journey,” she says. “Being pregnant was amazing to see what the body can do. I trained throughout my pregnancy and felt strong and it made me really embrace my body. But giving birth and coming back was really challenging because you know what your body did before and you’re constantly comparing it and trying to get back and it’s this really ambitious goal. And for me, it didn’t happen right away. So there were really doubts in my mind, like ‘am I ever going to get back to where I once was? Can I be even better than that?’ I had to just be kind to myself — it’s a really humbling experience. Your body is really capable of such amazing things but it’s about giving it time to do what it needs to do.”

Felix says a big part of learning to love and appreciate her postpartum body has been to opt out of the constant deluge of social media messages targeting women. “We’re in this age of ‘the snapback’ and ‘if you don’t look a certain way two days after giving birth, then what are you doing with your life,’” she says. “It’s about not subscribing to that and even as a professional athlete, having to check myself. ‘Strong’ looks a lot of different ways and it’s not just this one image we have in our minds — there are so many different ways to be strong and it’s about just embracing that.”

One new way Felix has embraced her strength is to integrate Peloton classes into her regular routine, even teaming up with the company to [curate a collection](#) of recommended workouts. “The instructors are so good — I love [Jess](#) and [Robin Tunde](#), and [Alex](#) — I mean you feel like you know them going through all the different rides and runs!” she says. “It was actually my husband who got me onto Peloton — he was really hardcore and was like, ‘I think this can help your training’ because for me, it was always a challenge going for longer runs or getting that extra work in. So it was great with the pandemic, especially with a young daughter — whenever she goes down, I can get an extra ride in, I can get more work in. And I also use it for recovery rides, yoga, stretching — it’s really now incorporated into my actual training plan. It’s very humbling also — it’s like, ‘am I a professional athlete? I’m not sure...’”

While she may modestly admit to huffing and puffing along with the rest of us on those home workouts, Felix is still very much one of the world’s most elite athletes. And after a year-long delay, she has her eye on the ultimate Olympic prize. “I’m feeling good,” she says. “We still have our [Olympic trials](#), and I’m feeling really excited about that and hopefully everything goes smoothly and I can make my fifth Olympic team — I’m just embracing it all. I think this Olympics is going to look different than any other we’ve ever seen and I think it’s going to be bigger than

just sports — to me, that's really cool. This will hopefully be a time of healing for the world and the first big global event of coming together, so I'm just feeling really hopeful right now."

But as she pushes forward after so many setbacks, Felix is clear that in addition to creating a better world for her daughter, her other driving force is now self-compassion — even on the days when motivation is lacking.

"I absolutely have those days — many of those days," she says. "On those days, I try to be kinder to myself, but at the same time, focus on my goals. I know if I want to get to my fifth Olympic games, I have to put in the work and really be disciplined. But I think it's fine to show yourself some grace. Rest days are just as important as days that you go super hard, and I think that's a hard concept to really grasp, but paying attention to your mental health and taking an extra day of recovery — all of these things are so important to be able to perform. We have to take care of ourselves — rest isn't a negative thing or something that makes you weak, but just a necessary part of life."