

T&FN INTERVIEW

Allyson Felix

by Jon Hendershott

Maybe she enjoys being a bit anonymous as a student at USC, but there's hardly anything ordinary about Allyson Felix. A sprinting wunderkind, the about-to-turn-20 SoCal native has long been making news.

Felix's headlines already make up an impressive book: winning Cal State 100/200 doubles as a prep soph and junior; breaking Marion Jones's half-lap High School Record, then setting a World Junior Record as a senior; deciding to turn pro right out of high school; winning the '04 Trials and taking Olympic silver at age 18; then defending her U.S. title in '05 before rushing to the head of her class with a World Champs victory in Helsinki. And she only turned 20 in mid-November.

A thoughtful, soft-spoken woman off the track, Felix knows full well her career on the oval is just in its early stages. She has learned to cope with crushing expectations. From current mentor Bobby Kersee she is learning patience—together those lessons could produce a long stay at the top.

T&FN: You began running in 9th grade at age 14 and almost from the start, there were great expectations placed on you by fans and the media. "She's going to be the next great one." How have you tried to cope with all that?

Felix: The biggest thing is that I have very high expectations of myself. For all everyone else expected of me, I expected that and more of myself. So I just really focused on those personal goals. My parents really kept me grounded and that was a big help to keep things in perspective.

T&FN: After Athens, you said you were learning to accept the idea of being "the future of U.S. sprinting." There are other young stars like Lauryn Williams and Sanya Richards, but that's still quite the expectation. Do you think much about that aspect of being the "future" star?

Felix: I do now more than before, just because I realize the whole state of the sport and just how much young stars really are needed. We all have to take a responsibility on ourselves to shed a new light on track & field and bring positive outlooks to it.

T&FN: Why did you choose to run the sprints initially? Because your older brother Wes did?

Felix: I've always liked speed and the feeling of running fast. That's a big reason I wanted to stay in the sprints and not move up, because I have a passion for going fast. That's really what it's all about. Also I have no stamina for distances. [Laughs]

T&FN: We have printed quotes from you that you hate to run 400s.

Felix: I think I'm learning to deal with it more, training with Bobby. He trains everyone like a quartermiler, so I'm getting a little more comfortable with it. I don't think I "hate" it

as much.

T&FN: Probably your biggest athletic decision so far was to go from high school straight into the pro ranks after the '03 season. How really difficult a decision was that?

Felix: For me, there really was a lot of anguish. I dreaded making the decision, mainly because I did look forward to going to USC and running for the team, being in the team atmosphere and running collegiate track.

So it was a difficult decision to make, but ultimately I had to focus on what my dream really was. In my situation, I really did make the best decision for me.

T&FN: And your dream was what?

Felix: At that time it was competing in the Olympics the next year. I felt that if I had competed in college, I would have had to focus on too much. And being a team player, I would have done everything I could do to score team points. I just decided that wasn't the best thing in that Olympic year.

T&FN: Even earlier, you made both World Champs in '03, indoors and out. They were your initiation into international-title competition, but what did you learn from them?

Felix: What I learned most from both of them was experience. It wasn't that I performed well in either of them, but those meets were so valuable in terms of what I learned off the track, the people I met and getting an understanding of how international track works.

I think it's necessary to go through meets like that so you'll then be comfortable at things like the Olympics or the next Worlds. And that comes with experience.

T&FN: What were the biggest things you learned from your Olympic experience, just in fact being at the Olympics?

Felix: I really liked what [coach Pat Conolly] taught me about the Olympics—that it just isn't about competing, it's taking in the whole experience. When I got to Athens, I wanted to stay in the Athlete's Village, take part in the Opening Ceremonies and do all the things that an Olympian does. I just really



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enjoyed the experience, yet when it was time to compete, I took it seriously. So I really tried to take away the whole atmosphere of it.

T&FN: Has there been one race in your whole career that has been most satisfying to you so far? Or is it still to come?

Felix: Well, in one way, I hope it's yet to come. But I do think the Olympics still was my



PHOTO: JIM SPELLMAN/GETTY IMAGES

most special, most fulfilling meet so far. I didn't run my fastest, but just that it was the Games.

I worked so hard for that and there had been so many emotional ups and downs that year, that race holds the most for me.

T&FN: *Has there been one race which was most disappointing?*

Felix: Hmmm. I can't name just one, but probably everything before the Trials in '04. There was just so much going on, so much to adjust to.

It was disappointing but something I had to go through, almost to learn that the Olympics weren't going to be easy. That whole season was a struggle for me.

T&FN: *In your website diary, you wrote that you're learning "to let times come to me." What exactly does that mean, just to not force yourself to try to run a particular time?*

Felix: I think that up to this past season, I was so caught up in trying to run a certain time, especially trying to break 22.

In reality, I just need to focus on technique, listen to Bobby to make sure my training is going right and eventually the times are going to come.

I'm still young and there's no need for everything to come right now. Bobby also has really stressed that.

T&FN: *Your running style is so smooth, it sometimes looks as though you're not trying very hard, especially in the first half of a 200. Is the first half something you really could improve on?*

Felix: Last year, Bobby and I didn't really have the time to do all the ballistic speed work we wanted—and I needed—for the 100. Just the all-out speed training to improve that early part of the race.

We started working together later in the fall of '04 and my main goal was to win the Worlds

Felix's Big-Name Coaches

As a professional, Allyson Felix has been directed by two renowned coaches, first Pat Connolly and currently Bobby Kersee. What did she learn from each?

"I benefited a lot from Pat. She is extremely intense and very hands-on, which was really good for me in my first pro year. As much as I might have wanted a little more space, I think it was really necessary and it helped me a lot.

"From Pat, I learned a lot in general about the sport, its history. I also learned a lot off the track; she had a lot of wisdom about things. She even helped me with my schoolwork. She taught me a lot about sprinting, the mechanics of it.

"Pat and I tried to come to agreements for the '05 season, but we just couldn't come to terms so we decided it was best to part ways. She moved to the Sacramento area, so I had to really search for a coach. I didn't know my new

coach would be Bobby until later in the year—it was around last October—so it was a late start to working together for '05.

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"I definitely wanted to stay in the LA area, having started college. And I had admired Jackie [Joyner-Kersey] for so long and then seeing who Bobby worked with in the past... it seemed like a really strong group. That was the kind of environment I was looking for.

"Our training group now is Joanna Hayes, Michelle Perry, Sheena Johnson, Brianna Glenn and Eunice Barber. Practices are, uh... fun.

"Bobby's emphasis has been on strength. So I've learned to kinda endure with him. [Laughs] It's a whole new philosophy, so with him I feel I'm right in the beginning stages. Like when I was a little disappointed with the times I was running at a particular point last year, he explained that it's a process which will take a long time and he isn't looking for overnight success. So I've learned patience with him."

at 200. We didn't get to devote enough time to that pure speed work. But next year, with no big championship to point for, the timing will be much better to do that speed training.

T&FN: *You can run a good 100 and a good 400, but it seems like 200 runners sometimes get overlooked when it comes to relays. There was some confusion about including you in the pools the past couple of championships, but have you ever felt shorted on relay opportunities?*

Felix: I just try my best not to take it personally. I've learned not to have high expectations of the whole relay situation. I've just felt that if I get chosen to run on a relay, it's an added bonus. But I do feel that in coming years, it is a goal of mine to be on a relay. I've made that known, participated in relay camps and done the things I need to do.

Probably in future years, I'll have to run the 100 at nationals to secure a spot and not have to go through the whole thing of maybe, maybe not. It was disappointing, sure, but I just tried to focus on my individual event and whatever else happened would be great too.

T&FN: *You said you would have ended up sprinting even if Wes hadn't. Do the sprints somehow reflect Allyson Felix the person, or are you very different off the track from the speed, power and aggression evident in those events?*

Felix: I think they show an aspect of me—my competitiveness and determination. Those aspects. But off the track, I'm much more laid back and relaxed. It's definitely a part of me but not the whole package.

T&FN: *Do people know you and recognize you when you're at school? Or with many great athletes at USC, are you sort of anonymous?*

Felix: That's the thing about USC, there are a lot of

good athletes there. I mean with our football team, everybody is looking for Matt [Leinart] or Reggie [Bush].

I try to not say anything about track when I'm at school. I just try to be regular college student, which is kind of nice actually.

T&FN: *You major in Elementary Education.*

Felix: Yes. I'd like to eventually become a teacher, which both my parents are. I'm not sure when I'll actually be a full-time teacher. I'll probably do my student teaching next year. It's a real goal of mine and it's good that I'll have that choice whenever I want to do it.

T&FN: *On another off-track subject, you and Justin Gatlin have done a lot of public things together, like go to the Emmys after Athens or this year's IAF Gala in Monaco. Are you just friends or is there more to it?*

Felix [laughs]: We're very much just friends. Justin's great. We've gone through many similar things in our careers so far. We just enjoy spending time together and when you're far away from home, it's great having someone like Justin there.

T&FN: *For the future, do you have specific times you'd like to run in all three sprints, or do you just want gradual overall improvement?*

Felix: First, I have to decide which way I'm going to go for next year, either down or up. Other than that, I don't really want any specific times. I'm sure that once I decide, then I will. I'm very competitive, so whatever time it takes to win is what I'll want.

But I'm sure I'll set those times and then see what's realistic, based on my training. I'll always want to challenge myself. In the 200, I always try to set the goals very high, yet I don't want to focus on that too much and get caught up in it. □

— Felix Facts —

- **Personal:** born Los Angeles, California, 11/18/85; 5-6/125 (1.68/57); represents adidas
- **PRs:** 11.06 ('05); 22.11(A) AJR, World Youth Best ('04) (22.18 WJR '04); 51.12 ('05)
- **Schools:** LA Baptist HS (Los Angeles) '03; attends USC but does not run for team
- **Coaches:** Jonathan Patton (LA Baptist); Pat Connolly ('04); Bob Kersee ('05)
- **Major Meets:** 100—1) Cal State, 4) NatSchol, 1) WY '01; 1) State '02; 1) State '03. 200—1) State, 2) NatSchol, 4) USA '01; 1) State, 2) AJ, 5) WJ '02; 1) State, 3) USA, 3) PAG, 5q) WC '03; 1) OT, 2) OG '04; 1) USA, 1) WC, 1) WAF '05
- **World/U.S. Rankings:** 200—7, 2 '03; 2, 1 '04; 1?/1? '05.