

Published October 25th, 2023

Olivia Williams: Fully fueled after 'Running on Empty'

By Jon Kingdon



Olivia Williams Photo provided

Olivia Williams, a senior cross-country runner, has gone through a lot these past two years.

On Nov. 11 2021, for all to see, Williams, then a sophomore, was on top of the athletic world as a cross country runner and water polo player. Having just won the North Coast Section Division IV cross-country championship and breaking the meet record, Williams hopped into a car with her parents and drove 3 1/2 hours down to the Cal Poly area to compete with her Acalanes teammates for the NCS girls water polo championship. Yet, for all that success, there were issues that Williams would soon have to confront.

Williams was suffering from anorexia (an eating disorder characterized by relentless drive for thinness) and orthorexia (an obsession with eating foods that one considers healthy). At the start of her sophomore season, Williams weighed 105 pounds and by the end of the season, she was down to 95 pounds. "There was a fixation on what I saw as healthy eating which was no fast foods or takeout foods, processed things and deserts," Williams said. "I would stick to whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and starches so I had a really limited diet. Because a lot of those foods were high in fiber, which tend to make you feel more full for longer, that made it really difficult to figure out what my energy needs were because I wasn't feeling hungry all the time. I was purposely choosing those foods that I saw were healthier, though not calorically dense, instead of foods that are great for athletes like peanut butter, desserts, protein bars and smoothies."

After the NCS victory in 2021, Williams was

someone who did not look for adulation from her accomplishments and was not comfortable with it: "During that season, it was a real shock to me at how successful I was. I don't think I was really prepared for how much attention I was getting. It wasn't just everybody's expectations of me and the standards that they had for me because I tend to put a lot of pressure on myself, but a lot of people around me had really high expectations and I was really worried about disappointing them," Williams said.

The National Eating Disorders Association estimates that 30 million people in the United States suffer from an eating disorder. Research indicates that up to 47% of elite female athletes in "leanness sports" - ones that emphasize size - have experienced eating disorders as compared to 21% of a randomly selected control group of women who are not elite athletes.

Signs that something was wrong were becoming readily apparent to Williams: "I first noticed was that I felt cold all the time. I was still doing water polo and there were a couple of practices where I was so cold that I had to get out of the water and leave early. My hair started falling out. I had a vitamin deficiency, which I didn't know at the time, but I started getting a really serious rash on my hands. Instead of taking the signs and symptoms that I was feeling seriously, like that low energy and lack of rest and listening to my body, I decided that I needed to push harder and that I just wasn't working hard enough. If you'd asked my coaches or teammates, I don't think they would have noticed significant red flags because I was constantly eating, but I wasn't eating enough compared to what I was doing in training and with exercise. I did a really good job of masking it because I was having such successful results running in school and I was pretty positive because of that. But I think that my parents began to pick up on some of my old habits so they began to weigh me in the morning, and my mom began to notice that I began wearing sweaters and drinking a lot of water before my being weighed."

In retrospect, Williams realizes she was taking cues from the wrong people. "Being in a sport where you're always searching for more, always searching for a better time or the next personal record, can be really toxic. And I think going to Footlocker and seeing other cross-country runners with similar issues made it feel like it was okay to have an eating disorder and doing what I felt I needed to do to get to that level."

It was during the spring track season of Williams' sophomore year that it became evident to her coaches that things were not right. "It wasn't really noticeable in the cross-country season. It was more noticeable in the track season in the spring," Coach Eric Morlan said. "She explained the rash on her hands was just an allergic reaction that she got from some cream or soap that she had started using."

When Williams's weight had dropped to 90 pounds, her doctors decided that she had to stop running immediately and had to address her eating disorders. Williams was still in denial when she was forced to stop working out. "Having that season cut short left me feeling really, really angry. I had a lot of anger towards my providers and my parents because I felt like they were being unfair because I didn't see myself as being unhealthy," Williams said. "I was reluctant to go into treatment and I didn't feel like trying to

accomplish a doctor's goals. I eventually went on home Hospital, which meant that I didn't attend school. When I went to this treatment center, they told me I would have to reach a minimum of 125 pounds in order to be able to start training again."

□ Williams would not compete in cross-country her junior year as she began an inpatient program at the Healthy Teen Project in Los Altos, California (www.healthyteenproject.com) over that summer and went to the outpatient program once school began in the fall.

□ "The treatment program was very challenging," Williams said. "Besides the amount of weight I had to put on and the discomfort that comes with that, it was really challenging having to do that and having to step away from running when I felt I was in my prime and in great shape. They used a lot of experiential therapy such as eating your meals in a group setting, trying new foods with the staff of nutritionists and psychologists monitoring you. We would make the meals ourselves or get food from outside, just learning how to eat and behave normally around food again. I had been uncomfortable with eating out, so we got a lot of take-out meals. We practiced a lot of trying different ways to add calorically dense foods like ice cream or spreads and then we did a lot of mixing and matching with snacks because snacking for athletes is super important. We just tried to cater my appetite and meals around what would be realistic once I began running and going back to school."

□ It took about three to four months for Williams to get her weight up to the prescribed 125 pounds and she was eventually allowed to resume her training. "It took a lot longer than I wanted it to and that was off of doing no activities, but often times after a period of not eating enough to meet my body's needs," Williams said. "Once you start eating again, your body can go into hypermetabolism, so even though I wasn't running, I had weeks where I would need 3,000 to 4,000 calories a day to keep up with that faster metabolism."

□ As a self-described Type A, competitive perfectionist, Williams also had to adjust her lifestyle, beyond eating more, like learning how to rest. "I think just learning to be able to do nothing was really important for me. I had not been the kind of person to just sit and watch television with my family or relaxing. I just had to be constantly active and in motion, either running or working out or doing homework. So, I just really worked on learning how to sit and have a conversation, learning how to watch a movie and just be able to enjoy it, playing puzzles and board games. Just figuring out ways to make my life a little more balanced so it wasn't just this constant working cycle."

□ As a senior, with the additional weight, returning to running has been a bit of an adjustment for Williams. "Getting over that initial hump, I've been able to embrace it a lot more and I'm definitely a lot stronger," Williams said. "I started incorporating weights and weightlifting so that definitely helped me build back strength and speed. I've finally gotten to that point where I feel normal running again. I don't know if I'm back to the shape that I was my sophomore season just because I haven't had as long to build up my training, but I would say I'm definitely a lot closer to where I was two years ago, which is really exciting. I would say that I am definitely in a great place now. I try to meet with my providers about once a month now and I'll go in for weight and vitals checks to make sure that all of that looks good and I still definitely have a bit of a sensitive and quicker metabolism, so I still eat more than the average person for my size and height."

□ Williams also discovered a balanced way to approach running distances. "I just realized how toxic and detrimental my mentality was and how much stress it had been causing [myself]. Being able to take a step back and look at the big picture and realizing that everything is going to be okay and stay the same even if I don't win, helped me realize that this was going to be a lot less stressful for me if I just learn to enjoy it instead of trying to win all the time. It's still a work in progress but I'm definitely enjoying running a lot more, trying to stop and enjoy the moment and appreciate being back to racing no matter what my time is and soaking it all in."

□ Williams also came to a new understanding and appreciation about her teammates. "Looking back now, they were always there for me and super supportive no matter what I was going through and I'm really grateful I have the team and that support system," Williams said. "My goal for the season is just to have fun. I think a successful season for me would be just enjoying the whole process and the limited time that I have left with my teammates."

□ The change has been apparent to Coach Morlan: "Olivia looks healthier, and she has grown two inches in the last six months. She is still driven and wants to succeed, and I kept reminding her to have patience with the process and six months later, she's back winning races again."

□ "Running on Empty" video

□ Williams and Eric Morford, the photography and video productions teacher at Acalanes, discussed the idea of making a YouTube video about her experiences the past year but it was something that Williams was not ready to do. "I was still in treatment and feeling those strong emotions and resentments, so we waited to film it until I was done and ready and coming into this cross-country season feeling good and healthy," Williams said. "We decided it was the right time to do it and share it so that, hopefully, it can help anybody else who is struggling with similar issues."

□ Morford, also a runner, was one of Williams' cross-country coaches who had worked for a time at MileSplit, a running website. "I brought up the idea of doing the video 'Running on Empty' months ago," Morford said. "I knew that Olivia had a very inspiring story and how strong a person she is and said that I wouldn't ask her do a story about this unless I thought that this would be an opportunity for her to make a difference in other people's lives. I also wanted Olivia's parents (Chris and Laura) to be sure that Olivia was in a good place. Even though her story continues, there is some type of conclusion that she has to get over in terms of her comfortability."

□ It's a story I think that people can find something that they have in common with her, even if it's not an eating disorder."

□ Williams' goal is to reach other young athletes to have them understand when they are ignoring signs that things are not right with their bodies. "When those sacrifices impede your body's natural development, like missing a menstrual cycle or not growing, then that should be a serious red flag that you've left the territory of being a driven and dedicated athlete and you're entering a world of reckless habits," Williams

said. "Although sacrifices have to be made, if certain things aren't happening that need to in order for you to grow and develop, then the sacrifices aren't worth it."

□ In just the first few weeks, "Running on Empty" has had over 25,000 views and the numbers are increasing exponentially. "I'm happy that the time that Olivia has taken and the vulnerability that she's shown is going to help, not defining her story, but that she can be a part of that message for so many others in terms of putting their physical health first," Morford said.

□ Williams has received a lot of feedback as well: "I've gotten a lot of messages off the video which has been super rewarding, thanking me for getting the message out and sharing their similar experience, so that has been really cool to see."

□ The next step for Williams will be deciding where she wants to attend college and continuing to compete as a runner. "It's a mix between some East Coast and West Coast schools," Williams said. "I am looking for somewhere where the coach, staff and the team are going to be really supportive and continue to allow me to balance my physical and mental health where they have a positive relationship with that and where I can be academically and athletically challenged. At some point, I would love to try my hand at the marathons and longer distances but no matter where I am, I want to be able to run for as long as I can, even if it's not super-fast."

□ It's still an ongoing process for Williams, but one she looks back on with pride: "I would say that I am a much stronger person after that. Overcoming something like that is really challenging and hard for a lot of people to go through. I think that it has just made me a lot more resilient and allowed me to realize that I can get through whatever else can come my way and I'm really glad that I dealt with it when I did."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA