

Profile: Gabby Williams, High Jumper **Olympic Trials Youngest Competitor**



Gabby Williams at the 2012 Olympic Track & Field Trials

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By Bob Burns

Immediately after competing in the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Ore., high jumper Gabby Williams had a hard time comprehending what she had just done.

Here's what the 15-year-old did on June 30:

The youngest competitor in the meet cleared a personal-best 6 feet, 2¼ inches to move into a tie for sixth on the all-time high school list. Williams placed a surprising fifth in a high-class field that included a five-time national champion and world silver medalist (Chaunte Lowe), the highest collegiate jumper ever (Brigetta Barrett), and a five-time Olympian (Amy Acuff).

When Williams missed her third and final try at 6-3½, the sellout Hayward Field crowd of 20,791 gave her a standing ovation. When she returned to Reno, about 35 supporters were there to welcome her home.

It was pretty heady stuff for a 15-year-old. But the more Williams thought about her performance, the more it made perfect sense – to her, at least.

“I suppose I was surprised at the time, but now when I look back on it, it wasn’t really surprising. I should have gotten a (personal record). I knew I’d make a PR with that crowd.”

Gabby’s father, former University of Nevada basketball player Matt Williams, is more comfortable talking hoops than he is talking track, but he wasn’t surprised by his prodigal daughter’s showing in Eugene.

“She has an incredible inner drive,” Matt Williams said. “She loves to compete.”

As a sophomore at Reed High School in Sparks, Nev., Gabby established herself as one of the top two-sport stars in the country. She led Reed to a Nevada state title in basketball and then strung together a series of outstanding jumps in the spring, including her first 6-footer at the Del Oro Invitational in Loomis. She improved to 6-1½ in winning the Northern Nevada regional meet.

At the Nevada state championships, she won the high jump (5-11), 100-meter hurdles (14.11) and 300 hurdles (42.85). In her final meet before the Olympic Trials, Williams won the heptathlon at the Great Southwest Invitational with a score of 5029.

While she didn’t take up the high jump until middle school, basketball has been in her blood for as long as she can remember. Matt is an event organizer who runs some of the biggest AAU basketball tournaments in Nevada. She plays the point for her father’s Jam On It club team. Gabby’s older sister, Kayla, plays professionally in Australia. Her two younger brothers are gym rats as well.

“That’s been her bread and butter,” Matt Williams said. “It’s our livelihood. If Gabby’s not playing, she’s working the clock. She’ll take over the business someday.”

Gabby, however, sounds as though she prefers the high jump to jump shots.

“I really like high jumping a lot,” she said. “I could do it every day, but basketball is such a big part of our family. I’ve only been high jumping for two years and already I’ve traveled to more places than I’ve seen playing basketball.”

With two more years of high school competition ahead of her, the 5-foot-10 Williams will have plenty of time to sift through the countless scholarship she’ll receive.

“She’s going to do basketball and track, and she’s going to do both in college,” Matt Williams said. “If it means going to a small school that lets her do both, so be it. Her big goal is to make that Olympic team.”

Gabby originally planned to compete in the National Junior Olympics but is going to rest instead.

“It’s kind of annoying, having to balance the two sports all the time,” she said. “I’ll have August off. I can’t wait.”

During her down time, her thoughts will undoubtedly drift back to that magical day in Oregon, when she rose to the occasion in every way imaginable.

“It was the best experience of my life,” Williams said. “I never felt overwhelmed by it. I just turned on the adrenaline and felt great.”