

# Lauryn Williams interview

Robin Saunders chats to USA's 100 metres World Champion and Olympic silver medallist Lauryn Williams and her mother, Donna, about her achievements, her influences and her hopes for the future

**Robin Saunders:** Lauryn, who would you say has been the most influential figure in the development of your athletics career?

**Lauryn Williams:** I would have to say my current coach, Amy Deem, who has been by my side since the first day of recruiting in the summer of my junior year at Rochester High School in Pennsylvania. I wasn't highly recruited by the big schools and I was upfront with her about my work ethic, but she didn't back down and when I got to the University of Miami and was trailing way behind the others for the first few weeks she didn't quit then, either.

There were many days when I thought she would be right to send me back home to Pennsylvania, but she stuck with me and today, as a professional, when I can't match her pay as head coach at the university and therefore definitely can't demand her time, she never neglects me. She is up early and staying up late, making sure we are all taken care of. She is on her computer getting her work done for school when we are overseas and doing Sunday workouts for me when her girls are off. She brings a whole new meaning to the word 'dedication'.

**RS:** You're suggesting that you had a poor work ethic at the start of your career. Presumably, things are different now, as you have established yourself at the highest level in winning Olympic silver in Athens in 2004 and World Championship gold in Helsinki in 2005. What brought about the change of attitude?

**LW:** I'd say my work ethic changed because I was so grateful to have had the opportunity to go to school. I wanted to repay the coach for the chance that I may not have gotten otherwise, because of financial reasons. Then, when success came, the work ethic grew on me because I didn't want to lose and, of

course, the work ethic is still growing on me because sprinting is now my job.

**RS:** At what age did you first become interested in sprinting and what do you remember about your early training experiences?

**LW:** I wasn't into track when I first started out, I just got thrown into it. My mother didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to, so I was on and off till seventh grade when I took an interest on my own. I had run around the neighbourhood for as long as I can remember. At some point, I started racing all the boys in the neighbourhood and winning, and one of my friends' older brothers started betting with his friends. Well, being young, I let it slide once or twice, but my business mind quickly set in and I wanted in on the deal. It was nothing major, only like two or three dollars, but that's a lot to a child. My training was running around the neighbourhood and, being a kid, playing whatever sport was the pick for that day.

**Donna Williams:** Lauryn is embarrassed by a dog story I tell, but it's true. She was always running around racing, which is a common childhood play activity. I knew she was fast...I used to race her for fun. Anyway, she had beaten everyone in the neighbourhood including the big kids. They were outside playing and we had this really big dog, a German Shepherd called Ben. He scared folks.

For once he was out of the yard and somehow or other he got into a race with Lauryn, and she beat him! The kids got all excited about it and told me to come outside, as they had something to show me. I thought something was wrong. There was another dog too, a shitz tzu. They took off running, and about four houses later. Lauryn passed the dogs. It is hard to outrun a dog.

Anyhow, Lauryn beat them and even though I knew all along that she could run fast, sometimes when God taps you on the shoulder you need to pay attention! I got on the phone immediately to Parks and Recreation, where I knew the director, and he told me who to call, which I did. Lauryn was on the track the next afternoon. They told her to run as fast as she could for as long as she could round this dinky track.

Well, she ran like 12.2 and the coach was like “wow”. Lauryn made it around the track in a flash and they said she was so good that she could make it to the Olympics. I knew it too when I heard it, and ‘Flash’ is my nickname for her now!

**RS: How old was Lauryn when she started competing?**

**DW:** She was about eleven, and in fifth or sixth grade. At her first meet, the weather was awful and I didn’t have a clue, but Lauryn actually stopped running because she wanted to know why there wasn’t anyone else running with her. That’s how far ahead of everyone she was! She also set a school record the very first time she did the long jump. She had never done it a day in her life. It looked fun. If I remember, she jumped 13 feet or so (around 4m). That was her favourite event, but the stress of jumping eventually affected her hips.

She wanted to play basketball, too, but ran too fast even though she was good at stealing the ball, and she played softball but got mad at her team-mates who were afraid of the ball. As she’s a southpaw, a friend of mine got her a right-handed mitt so she could field the ball properly.

**RS: Lauryn, how would you describe the differences in coaching methods between your high school coach, Roger Price, who guided you to several State records in sprints and long jump, and Amy Deem, at the University of Miami, who has since helped you develop into a world-class performer?**

**LW:** Roger was coaching us out of the kindness of his heart. No one wanted to coach the program, so he took on the task and he read up on track and went to coaching clinics to help us however possible. But track in high school was still a joke to me. I enjoyed it, and

knew I was good at it, but had no interest in practicing to become better at it. I often came up with excuses or stories about why I couldn’t practice. I just wanted to compete.

Amy, on the other hand, is an expert in the sport—at least in my opinion. She has eaten, slept and breathed track and field, and particularly the sprints, for at least the past thirteen years. Her knowledge is vast. When I got to college, I was being paid in the form of a scholarship to run around the track, so it was not optional. Nor were excuses acceptable. The program was unreal for me at first, having come from a circumstance where I didn’t have to do that much training. There were plenty of times in the first few months of my first year that I thought she would call me into her office to say she was sending me back home because I was not what she had hoped for but, fortunately, that day never came.

**LAURYN WILLIAMS CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**

- 2005 World Champion, 100m, 4x100m relay
- 2004 Olympic silver medal, 100m
- NCAA Champion, 100m
- 2003 PAN AM Champion, 100m, 4x100m relay
- 2002 World Junior Champion, 100m
- US Junior Champion, 100m



**RS: What qualities, in your view, should a talented athlete look for in a prospective coach?**

**LW:** I think the coach should be driven, but in the same direction as the athlete. It is important to establish common goals before you move on because, if I have seen anything, it is good coaches and good athletes that don't work out because they are not on the same page. It is important that the coach loves what he or she does and is educated about it. For example, I am not a scholar of my sport; I am not capable of running a camp for kids because I am not educated on technique and such, but, as it relates to me competing I depend heavily on my coach for her expertise. If she didn't love this and wasn't constantly expanding her knowledge, how could she get me to do what I need to?

**RS: You grew up as one of a family of eight children. What personal qualities, do you feel, has this experience of childhood bestowed on you?**

**LW:** My childhood has brought me a look at the world

from most sides. I have five sisters and two brothers. I consider myself to have been the oldest, youngest, middle and the only child.

The oldest, because I spent seventh through twelfth grade as just that: the oldest in the house, as the four older than me had moved out already, which left me as the prime influence for my three little sisters in a small town with a school that was eight miles away. I picked them up from school and walked them home. If someone got sick, instead of mom or dad leaving work they called me and I took them home. My personality has never really been to look up to someone, but I understood what it meant when I saw how my sisters wanted to follow me around and do everything I did. This helped with maturity because I knew they were watching my every move.

The feeling of being the youngest comes from when I was living in Detroit with just my oldest sister and my mom. It was only for two or three years, but I remember my sister and I would be fighting constantly because I was the baby and always got everything I



wanted. I think this is where it was instilled in me that I can have anything I want. There is no limit on what you can accomplish if you put your mind to it.

I am the middle one because that is where I fall, pretty much. There are four over me and three under me. And the only child comes from me and my oldest sister being twelve years apart. After the short time we were in Detroit together, she went off to college and it was like I was the only child. ... spoiled rotten!

**RS: What advice would you give to young sprinters who came to you seeking the benefit of your experience?**

**LW:** To young sprinters, I would have to say: "hard work knows no limit. If you work hard, your opportunity will come." One thing I would ask them to take in and apply to every part of their life, not just sports, is not to make excuses about why they can't do something. So often, you see people who try to claim they are victims of the circumstances around them. No one is going to turn their back on someone who is trying their hardest.

I would also say to them: "If your parents can't afford to pay for college and you're working hard to get there, I am sure a door will open for you. If you're finishing behind the same people every time you get on the track, don't take the attitude that you'll never beat them: go home, train harder and start to beat them one by one. You may not ever make it to number one, but I guarantee when you look back from the place you're in to the place you started, you will be proud and you will look at yourself as number one."

**RS: What is the best piece of advice you have received as an athlete?**

**LW:** To be honest, I don't think there is one piece of advice that has been the best. I have received lots of advice, either based on a situation or circumstance or just for my own interest, and almost all of it has been beneficial to me. Taking in what a person says, evaluating it and using it either to better yourself or to make sure you don't go that same rugged path is what advice is all about. I think so many people being so open with me and caring about me enough to give me advice gives me maturity that I might not have yet, otherwise.

**RS: What aspect of your training do you most enjoy?**

**LW:** My favourite part of training is lifting weights. I love being strong and trying to compete with the football players of the University of Miami. The atmosphere in the weights room is unreal, it just keeps you so motivated. I don't actually work out with the football players but sometimes at the same time, and my weight coach is also the football weight coach so the workout is similar.

**RS: What part of your training do you most dislike?**

**LW:** I hate any workout that has a short amount of recovery. There is one in particular where we do 200 metres then sit ups, followed by 200 metres then sit ups, then 200 metres and body weight squats. It is the worst workout in all of fall training. I like workouts where you can catch your breath and then go strong again.

**RS: You won a gold medal in the 100 metres at the World Junior Championships in Kingston, Jamaica in 2002. How did this achievement differ psychologically from becoming World Champion in Helsinki in 2005?**

**LW:** The major difference between the World Juniors and the World Championships was the way I wanted to win. At the WJ's, I wanted to win so that I could say I was the fastest Under-20 athlete in the world. I wanted to show that I was capable of winning, not just to others but to myself. I didn't believe in myself as much at the WJ's.

At the World's, it was about the hype that comes with the win - and I don't mean endorsements or money, but just the fuss that people make over you. This might be bad, but I didn't get the same feeling from the Olympics as I did from winning the World Championships - and I don't think it is because I didn't win the Olympics. There is just something about the atmosphere at the World Championships, such as the calibre of the people watching, who are true track fans that really care about every person on the track that makes it such an exciting experience.

**RS: You also won a 4x100 metres relay gold in Helsinki. How much does this mean to you, compared with the individual gold?**

**LW:** The individual gold meant a lot to me, of course. I guess the best part about it was not having expected it. Some people train for the Olympics their entire lives and never make it, but for me to have spent the whole year training for the NCAA 100m and have it pay off to the point where I not only won that, but also had the second fastest time in the world (10.97) and instantly became a US Olympic hopeful was amazing! Having made it to the Olympics and medalling was the icing on the cake, but there is always something else to achieve. So, when the World Championships came around, I knew I couldn't come home with less than gold for the sake of legitimizing myself to people and showing myself that I am really good at this, that it wasn't just luck or some weird circumstance but a gift that can take me as far as I want to go with hard training and dedication.

The 4x100m was a touchy one for me last year. I was probably more nervous for that race than for the 100 metres because of the incident at the Olympics. The 4x100m relay is important because it is the true team part of track and field and it shows how we can come together and be great as one. It felt great to win the relay gold medal in Helsinki and to have gotten the stick around the track. Earlier in the year, at the Penn Relays, I had dropped the stick and I started to think I might be cursed. I am glad it worked out and me and three other people who got gold

**RS: Your disastrous baton change with Marion Jones in the Olympic relay final in Athens, where you had seemed certain to break the world record, was a major controversy of the Games. Who was to blame for the mix-up, do you think, and how did the relay team react to it?**

**LW:** We were very supportive of one another and I have never watched the race over, so I can not say for sure what happened. I blamed myself, but all three assured me that I could not carry the blame alone. We are a team and if one fails, all four do... so that is that. I have put it in the past and let it go. I never plan to look at it.

**RS: There are some impressive young sprinters developing in the USA, including the current world junior 100m champion Ashley Owens, who seems set to join performers such as Allyson Felix and yourself in a new, 'clean' generation of athletes that overturns all the decay from the BALCO issue and problems in Europe and revitalises track and field through integrity and a true Olympic spirit of fair play. Is this how you see things, Lauryn?**

**LW:** I am very excited about the new generation and a changing of the guard in track and field. It seems a switch in generation couldn't have come at a better time, because new faces, I believe, will paint a new picture. And we are lucky in that, it seems as if me and the others don't mind cleaning up someone else's mess if it is for the good of the sport. In addition to teaming up with USATF on a drugs-free promotion, I have taken the initiative and will wear an "I Am Clean" tattoo to my races, along with my own logo. I am very excited about getting the word out that a new generation is here and ready to stand proud and represent our sport.

**RS: Your US teammate, Me`Lisa Barber has made a huge impact on the current indoor season and, even though you shared the fastest time of the year with her in 7.01 and improved your PB by 0.10 seconds, which is a phenomenal achievement at your level of performance, her win in the World Indoor 60m final in Moscow, where you took silver, was her fourth win in a row over you in recent competition. In fact, her apparent domination of you seems to have eclipsed even the rivalry that exists between you and Veronica Campbell (Jamaica). How has Me`Lisa's sudden rise to prominence affected your self-belief, and your attitude towards your own performances?**

**LW:** I think Lisa's performances have been good for me. You are right in that, when the year began it was Lauryn and Veronica in the eyes of the media but, the truth is, I hadn't put Lisa out of the picture. I was looking at it as Lisa, my American competition and Veronica, my international competition, although I knew we all would be together in many races. I must



admit that I had set high goals going into the indoor season. I figured that, two years ago my PB for 100m was 11.15. This went down to 10.96 and then 10.88. As my last 60m time two years ago was 7.22, I felt I should easily break the world record in 60m by the end of the season. I was a little naive. Getting beaten the first time gave me the eye opener that maybe indoor competition was not going to be handed to me. Then the next few losses started to take their toll. I don't have a quitting spirit, but I was frustrated. I had to figure out how to pull my start and actually my whole race together in competition the same way I was doing it at practice and quickly. Turns out the key to doing that was relaxing. You are always super nervous when you get on the start-line, but I had to channel the nervousness into positive energy and luckily I figured it out at the World Indoors just in the nick of time. Lisa has also got me motivated for the outdoor season. My goal for this year was dominance and I have yet to start that trend. Now I know for sure the competition will be fierce. Nothing comes easy and I am prepared to work for my dominance outdoors.

**RS: What does Lauryn Williams do with her life when she's away from the track?**

**LW:** When I'm away from the track, I am trying to make the world a better place and find what my calling in life is. I volunteer at Arcola elementary school here in Florida in a class of seven students who sign. I am learning sign language, so I volunteer there and also take a class on Wednesday nights. On Tuesdays, I have a tutor who is teaching me Spanish. I have three Great Dane dogs, so I spend a lot of time caring for them, walking them and so on. I enjoy the movies, bowling and a television show called 'Law and Order'.

**DW:** Did you know, she collects Mickey Mouse stuff, and she has a pretty extensive key chain collection too.

**RS: You seem happy with the way your daughter has turned out, Donna.**

**DW:** It has been pretty awesome to see Lauryn become a world-class athlete and realise how her decisions at an early age had a positive impact on her life. It does a parent good when we realise somewhere we were able to call one right. At one time, I used to freelance write regularly and I wrote about the things around me. Lauryn asked me one day why I hadn't written about her, so I started on 'TAK' (which stands for 'Totally Awesome Kid') when she was nine. It remains a work in progress, with additions along the way written to her. She was totally awesome then, and is more so now.

**RS: Thank you for taking time out to chat to me.**

**LW:** Thanks, Robin, it's been good.

**DW:** Thank you for writing about my child, I hope she has a good season.

● *Robin Saunders is a British Athletics Federation Senior Coach (UKA Level 4) in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay. He is based at the University of East Anglia in Norwich and is presently working with developing sprinters and athletes returning to sport following a long absence.*