

The Day The World Stood Still

Helsinki, Finland

August 10th 2005

I was in my room at the Hilton Hotel located inside of the athlete's village in Helsinki, Finland for the IAAF Outdoor World Championships watching my then Coach Caryl Smith Gilbert play in my roommate and former Tennessee Lady Volunteer teammate Dee Dee Trotter's hair. Caryl was telling her that after Dee Dee wins her race the next day a lot would change for her and that she needs to be ready for that. From my European twin bed I looked up from the book I was reading and asked, "what about when I win?" There was a long moment of silence. Coach Caryl finally spoke and a pitiful smile crossed her face as she answered, "TiMad you're not going to win tomorrow, but you need to go out there and take out as many heifers as you can. This is a good experience for you."

I dignified her response with silence as I went back to reading my book. I was seething on the inside. Why did Dee Dee have the confidence of our coach but I didn't? It was true, Dee Dee had made the Olympic team the year before by placing top three in the 400 meter dash at the Olympic trials in Sacramento, where I had placed eighth in the long jump. She also turned professional

The Day The World Stood Still

after that signing with Adidas. I looked up to her for these accomplishments, for her ability to elevate her performance and parlay it into a career that paid out more than tuition dollars and gear if you placed at SEC and NCAA championships. Her former teammates wanted to follow in her footsteps but she settled into the roll of "look at me I've made it" more than mentoring us to get to that same level.

Trotter, as she's often called, and I were extremely close my freshman year. We roomed together at most if not all of our collegiate meets, where our obsessive compulsive tendencies were allowed free reign without judgement. Our snacks, shoes, luggage, and room were organized and kept in pristine and immaculate condition. I followed her around like I was her puppy, I even allowed her to persuade me into going to Atlanta, just a three hour drive from Knoxville, with her over the weekend when Coach had strongly suggested we stay in town. Our disregard of that suggested found us both suspended from the first meet and forced to set up hurdles on the track as punishment. We bought fabulous shoes on our short trip to Atlanta though and Coach Caryl genuinely admired our taste in footwear after she handed down her suspension.

The Day The World Stood Still

Allyson Felix and I were the youngest members of the 2005 USA team. However, by this time Allyson was considered a veteran having made both the 2003 team that competed in the IAAF Outdoor World Championship hosted in Paris, France and the 2004 Olympic Team held in Athens Greece. Caryl was right in one respect, I was the underdog and I was not expected to win by most bloggers's predictions. But she was wrong in that I expected her to believe I could win and most importantly I believed I could win. I kept this thought to myself, and made my way to the athlete hospitality lounge located at the top of the hill in the village.

I spent a good amount of time away from Caryl and Dee Dee when we weren't training in the IAAF hospitality lounge. It was open to international athletes but mostly only a handful of people utilized it. The lounge featured an xbox, a ping pong table, snacks, board games, couches, and bean bag chairs. I was met there by a few friends I had made, younger members of the team, Miles Smith who was a part of the 4x400 meter relay pool, and Mark Jelks who was part of the 4x100 meter relay pool, and occasionally Kevin Hicks who had made his first team and was competing in the 800 meter dash representing FAMU. We were all the same age and being treated as outcasts by the older members

The Day The World Stood Still

of the Team and we found solace spending as much time away from Team USA as possible.

We passed the time making beats with our fists on the cafeteria tables, freestyle rapping, and singing Erykah Badu. Occasionally creating harmonies that could rival any barbershop quartet. I needed the distraction because I was a bundle of nerves about being at the world championships. The other guys had a calming effect on me because they were just happy to be there, none of them was planning to go out and win. Kevin, for example was so overwhelmed that he was content to take last place, and so he did. Miles never got to run, and Mark performed at well below expectations too. You'd think that hanging out with an uninspired group of athletes would be bad for my own motivation but I have always had an uncanny ability to get into the zone only when it's time to. It is exhausting for me to be worked up days and days before the competition.

My intensity switch flips about two days before any competition. Two days out there is a barely perceptible change in the amount of talking I do. I become introspective, I begin to daydream and visualize the upcoming performance. I stop having restful sleep because my brain can't stop going over and over the event. I have Dr. Joe Whitney to thank for my restless brain. He was my

The Day The World Stood Still

Sports psychologist at Tennessee that introduced me to the power of visualization. He had what we called "the egg". It was a giant egg-shaped chair and when you loaded yourself into it you had the sensation that you just slipped into a body conforming speaker. From another area in the room Dr. Whitney would speak to you through a microphone and your body was enveloped by the sound of his voice.

"Your arms are warm and heavy, warm and heavy as you begin to relax"

"When I count to three you are fully relaxed yet aware."

"We are in Helsinki, Finland. The weather is cool, you feel a slight breeze on your face, the stadium is at full capacity but you don't heed them. You are on the runway."

"initiate your jump"

And I would jump, most often I would foul. I always asked him, why would I visualize fouling? He had some canned response for me but I knew the answer, I grew up a screw up according to my mother, I never got things right. Even when I'm in the perfect position to visualize the perfect jump I succumb to nurture and

The Day The World Stood Still

fail. After repeatedly fouling in my visualized jumps Dr. Whitney tried a different approach. After successfully hypnotizing me into my relaxed state, he played R. Kelly's "I Believe I can Fly" when the song finished playing his soothing voice commanded that I "initiate my jump." I did not foul. He had found a way to temporarily override by brain's inferior default setting.

Unbeknownst to Caryl my sessions with Dr. Whitney became about visualizing the win, seeing myself on the podium, preparing for my victory lap. So when Caryl said I wasn't going to win implying that I was simply there for the experience I wrote her off. Completely. There is absolutely no need having a coach who isn't coaching you to win right?

Championship scheduling differs from typical meet timetables in that the long jump takes place over two days. The first day is called "Qualification" in this round each jumper gets three attempts to reach a certain mark, the mark that year was 6.65 meters or about 21 feet and 9 inches. Any jumper that hits that automatic mark is admitted to the final held on the second day of jumping. If you meet or surpass that mark on the first jump you can leave the stadium, if after three attempts you have not made that mark you must wait and see where you fall on the list.

The Day The World Stood Still

In the event that the majority of the jumpers fail to reach that mark, they take the top twelve jumpers. I jumped a personal best of 6.83 meters (22' 4") on my first jump of the qualification round, and the euphoric feeling I had of being able to pack my bag and go while all the other "professional" jumpers worked to reach that automatic mark was incredible.

I ended up having the farthest jump of the day. Only one other person managed to jump the automatic qualifying mark. So according to the rules ten other jumpers were able to join us in the final for the required total of twelve.

The gravity of what had happened hit me when I made it back to my room. I got extremely nervous, I was almost hysterical, in a complete panic. I imagined that the Russian jumper Tatyana Kotova was so pissed at there being a new girl on the block that she was doping up all night and would show up to the track jacked and ready to kick my ass. I wasn't aware that steroid use didn't work like that, I also wasn't aware that she was truly doping until several years later but that's another story. With all of these Rocky versus the Russian daydreams and nightmares playing in HD on the back of my eyelids I did not sleep a wink.

The Day The World Stood Still

The following day the weather was dismal. It rained continuously and the temperature peaked at 40 degrees Fahrenheit. I hardly noticed. My mind was made up that I was going to kick ass and take names. Not surprisingly Caryl was back in my corner and now the discussion was turning into what to do about my collegiate eligibility if I were to win. I was just a sophomore in college at the time, and therefore could not accept any prize money from this meet or I would be in violation of the NCAA's amateur athlete rules. I asked what would happen to the money if I were to earn some. I was told that the money would go to USATF and that they would use it to fund their various grant programs. First place at an IAAF World Championship meet is worth \$60,000. I decided then and there that I was going to block every other competitor from getting that prize. My mentality was, "if I can't have that jackpot, neither can you bitches" I wasn't happy about it going to other people's pockets but at least it would stay in America.

I fouled my first jump. But the farthest jump in the first round was 6.76 meters jumped by the feared Russian Tatyana Kotova. My second round jump was 6.69 meters, I was in third place. I jumped 6.35 meters on my third jump while Tatyana Kotova extended her lead to 6.79 meters. I fouled my fourth jump and shortly after Eunice Barber of France rallied to jump 6.70

The Day The World Stood Still

meters for second place knocking me out of the medals and into fourth place. I got myself pumped as the sky began to pour what seemed like buckets of ice water down on us. I may have been freezing but I didn't care. I had used so much AmPro Gel in my pulled back hair that morning that it created a waterproof barrier that gave me one less thing to fret about. I decided instantly to win the competition on this jump, the foul that I had on my fourth jump was far, and all I had to do was adjust the start of my approach by just a few inches and I'd be perfect on the board and I could make that big jump count. The weather was nothing more than the usual track meet weather I was exposed to throughout high school anyway. Besides, what kind of athlete are you to bitch about weather that everyone else is being affected by especially if there was more money than I have ever seen on the line. I initiated my approach in the same way I had done so repeatedly with Dr. Whitney. I jumped. I knew almost instantly it was the leading jump. I jump 6.89 meters my new personal best, ten centimeters farther than the Russian Tatyana Kotova, in the long jump winning my a few centimeters is common, winning by ten is a beating. But the competition was far from over. I saw Caryl shouting my name from the coaches box but I ignored her, *I got this* I thought. *you can hop off the bandwagon at any time.* Eunice Barber of France fouled, and Tatyana Kotova of Russia choked and jumped 6.59 meters. We were into the sixth

The Day The World Stood Still

and final round now, Tatyana jumped another sub par jump pf 6.53 meters. This is not unusual. This is a tell tale sign of a jumper trying to force something to happen, that makes you tense and tight and ultimately causes you to jump worse. But that's hard to control when you were comfortably in the gold medal position for most of the event only to have it snatched from you with one round to go by a little black girl with nothing going for her except for ridiculous speeds on the runway. Eunice Barber of France rallied to jump her farthest jump of the competition stretching the measuring tape to 6.76 meters, good for the third position. I fouled my last jump but it didn't matter. I was the world champion, at nineteen years old.

No one expected me to win, so no one was nearby with an American Flag as I did my victory lap. A hard core American track and field fan ran from the top of the stands to the first row and handed me a flag they brought from home for me to carry. Whoever you are thank you. I stopped momentarily to give Caryl a hug, I was still disappointed in her from two days ago but she was my coach and deserved to enjoy the victory as much as I did. The victory lap was long and I was cold and wet but was quickly hustled off the field and into hair and makeup. Like I said, my hair was packed down so tight there was nothing anyone could do but leave it alone. I was thrilled at this little known secret

The Day The World Stood Still

about championships as makeup artists evened my complexion, sculpted my cheekbones with a rosy blush and applied lip gloss.

The three of us walked to the podium in our medal stand outfits (see, I brought mine because I expected to win). When they announced my name and I waved and took the step up to the number one spot on the podium I had two thoughts, the first: I should try to conjure up some tears, that's usually expected. The second: I'm fucked now. All at once I realized nothing would be the same for me. College track wouldn't be the same, hell my college experience wouldn't be the same and as I sang the national anthem that sinking feeling only got worse and worse.

There's a tradition on Team USA when you when a medal. You come back to the team hotel and the entire team toasts you with champagne (if you are indeed old enough to drink). I was looking forward to this ceremony. There were fierce rumors about the older teammates hazing the younger ones and I wanted to show that I wasn't just your average nineteen year old punk. I went out there and won. I'd be damned to get hazed by a teammate that hadn't medaled, that's got "who the fuck are you?" written all over it.

The Day The World Stood Still

I never made it to my ceremony. My coaches J.J. Clark and Caryl Smith Gilbert hustled me away from the stadium and we walked the streets back to their hotel. I was allowed to stop and get McDonald's fries along the way. Besides the few congratulatory greetings I got on the streets by spectators who saw me competing the high of winning was gone. I knew that I was one of the youngest ever to win the long jump, and I knew it had been at least a decade since an American won the title back, but there I was being dragged farther away from my teammates to go have a sit down with my coaches.

Coach Clark immediately skyped my parents who didn't think to come to Helsinki most likely because they were probably told I was a long shot to win and they could save their money. They had followed the results and were excited when I got on the phone and said hello. People always ask, "well, how does it feel?" The answer is, it doesn't feel like anything. One: because I had rehearsed it so much with my psychologist the only one that wasn't surprised by the outcome was me, that's why I was neither overjoyed, or tearful I came to do something and I did it. Check the box. Moving on. Two: my coaches successfully ruined any type of celebration by keeping me away from my own medal ceremony back at the team hotel.

The Day The World Stood Still

Coach Clark immediately began to discuss my future.

"We must consider what's next for Tianna. We believe she can benefit from remaining on the team at Tennessee, but we wanted you to know there will be talk of her turning pro now that she's won World's"

"Okay," my mother said. "How do we go about this?"

"Well honestly, these things have to be done under the table so as not to affect her collegiate eligibility. I'll reach out to my contacts and see what the word is surrounding what she's worth and we'll go from there. But I assure you there is nothing more valuable than the college experience."

"We understand"

I sat miserably in the background staring at my medal with my name engraved on its back. It was a beautiful object, shaped somewhat like a rhombus with rounded edges the medal featured a clear globe in its center with a streak of material inside. The material, I'd later learn were remnants of the medals awarded at the very first IAAF World Championships in 1983 also held in Helsinki. The ribbon attached to the medal was a durable

The Day The World Stood Still

tricolored material in gradient shades of blue. I loved everything about the way it looked. I hated everything it represented.

I could have gone on to compete on the professional circuit that summer, being the reigning world champion opened many doors for me, but I opted to go home. I needed to have a tonsillectomy. Throughout the year I was plagued with recurring bouts of strep throat. We didn't realize until the last bout (right before NCAA regionals) that my tonsils were the culprit, they were quite large and harboring the infection. I spent the week leading up to the NCAA regional meet on intravenous drips and antibiotics, while my coaches and I prayed that I'd be healthy enough to qualify for nationals.

I returned home to a welcome surprise. My family was waiting for me in the baggage claim at the Knoxville airport in shirts with my face printed on them and the words "world champion" airbrushed on its front. This is a typical African-American thing to do. They (and I say they because I would never do this) get shirts airbrushed to commemorate almost any occasion good or bad: graduation, a death, state records, family reunions, you name it.

The Day The World Stood Still

I don't exactly remember what happened next or the order it happened in. I remember learning via Facebook that I left town with a boyfriend, Tennessee football star Jonathan Wade, and came home single as he had a new girlfriend a less than attractive Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority girl. I didn't take this well. Who would, how messed up is that anyway? I was overseas for less than three weeks! I came home to a voicemail from the manager of TJ Maxx offering me a part-time job, I had almost forgotten that I applied for it online from Finland during a lapse of self-confidence.

Then there was my tonsillectomy to be scheduled. I went in a few days after I returned home. My mom stayed behind, and maybe my sister was there too, I'm not sure. But I remember returning home from the hospital with powerful drugs. My mom made me mac and cheese. I remember it being tasteless, that's probably not her fault to be fair, my mouth couldn't exactly be trusted after a procedure like that. I assured her or them that I was fine and they returned to Ohio. But I was not fine. A few days later I began to vomit, and not the "cant-keep-the-food-down" variety. This was scabs, and blood, and God knows what else. I called my trainer Amanda in a panic, she called my doctor. The doctor assured us both that this was normal because during the procedure I swallowed copious amounts of blood and that blood

The Day The World Stood Still

would probably come up over the next couple days. The doctor also said the same for the scabbing. Then I ran out of Promethazine, the pain killer I was subscribed and I suddenly became aware that something was wrong with my jaw. I called Amanda again, who called the doctor, who called us back to say, "oh, we had to dislocate her jaw to get in there."

"Thanks for the heads up. Douche." I still have problems with my jaw, sometimes it gets "off track" and causes me headaches as it protrudes out near my temple. This is called Temporomandibular Joint Disorder (or TMJ). I get it adjusted periodically by pulling it back into place with my hands, or by seeing my chiropractor.

The anxiety attacks came soon after. Feeling like I was going to die alone in my off campus apartment with no boyfriend, and teammates who had no idea how to relate to me any longer, and parents seven hours drive away in Ohio I couldn't see the point. What good had that world championship title brought me? Nothing but stress. Coaches asking me daily if I was going to stay on the team or take the money and run, parents asking the same, teammates pretending I didn't exist, meanwhile the campus going crazy because I put Tennessee on the map in a global way.

The Day The World Stood Still

Sports Illustrated had a publication out at this time called Sports Illustrated on Campus. They wanted to do a shoot and an article about me. They were declaring me athlete of the year amongst all of the colleges. I was thrilled. I was also to be featured with a bunch of other top athletes and it was to be called the A list. Shooting was fun, I wore my boyshort one piece Lady Vol uniform and we took several pictures on the track. I did a somewhat lengthy interview, much longer than I was used to and was excited about seeing the finished result.

A few weeks later to my horror the magazine hit campuses all over the United States. As I flipped through its pages I realized that I was not declared "athlete of the year". I was declared "Female Hottie of the Year." Honestly, had I known that that was what I was posing for I would have declined. To make matters worse the interview talked only about how I had a lot of guy friends on the football team, which wasn't true. It read as if I was the team's pretty but cool homegirl that could talk sports, play Madden, and kick it like a boy. Ok, I can talk sports, I was playing Madden (but not with the football team) and I could kick it like a boy but I wasn't doing it with the FOOTBALL TEAM for goodness sakes.

The Day The World Stood Still

As I would wait for the T (the campus bus) I would feel the eyeballs of my peers, and hear the whispers, that's her that's the "female hottie of the year." Little did they know how serious of a problem this was for me. Those words. That phrase echoed words I'd never forget from the lips of a perverted boy I met on a fated day in gym class my freshman year of high school.