

Alise Willoughby Leaves Hurdles in the Dirt

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Alise Willoughby is no stranger to adversity. When the two-time BMX Olympian first started out, the playing field was still largely male-dominated. Time and time again, she would be questioned, challenged and encouraged to quit. But for every cynic who told her she didn't have a future in BMX racing, there was a family member or friend telling her to remain steadfast.

A supportive environment and the desire to persevere led Willoughby to become one of the most decorated BMX racers to ever bless the dirt.

Willoughby's athletic career started when she was six years old in St. Cloud, Minnesota. A naturally gifted athlete, she excelled in gymnastics, dance, and track and field. But come summertime, when Minnesota's icy tundra would thaw, Willoughby would head out to the track with her family to race BMX bikes.

"My family never put limitations on me," says Willoughby. "They always let me dream big and just keep kicking away."

This kicking continued as Willoughby rose the ranks in both gymnastics and on the BMX race track.



Finding herself at a crossroads between the two, Willoughby remembers the time her gymnastics coach tried to dissuade her from pursuing a career in jumps and rollers.

“He would always tell me I had to quit BMX racing because it would never go anywhere for me,” says Willoughby. “So, when it became an Olympic sport in 2008, I remember going back to him and saying, ‘Hey, I’m going to go somewhere with this.’”

Indeed, she did. By age 15, Willoughby had gone pro in BMX and was awarded Rookie Pro of the Year by *BMXer Magazine*. Not only was she the first female to win the title, but she was also the youngest female to hold the National No. 1 Pro Women’s title. She was also one of the youngest BMXers—both male and female—to go pro.

Hurdling Obstacles to Get to the Podium

While certainly accomplished, Willoughby is more than the sum of her accolades. She’s an inspiration who’s had to constantly overcome obstacles to earn her titles.

Just one year before her Olympic debut at the London 2012 Olympic Games, Willoughby endured multiple surgeries including an LCL (lateral collateral ligament), knee and hamstring reconstruction. Even still, she qualified to compete. But when she crashed her bike during the semifinals, many thought it was the end.

Instead, she got up, shook the dirt from her helmet and staggered over the finish line on foot.

Her spirit remained unbroken even after the passing of her mother, Cheryl Post, to late-stage melanoma at the start of 2014. Cheryl had played a large role in Willoughby's decision to enter the sport, always encouraging her to never give up and keep pushing. And so, just 12 weeks before the 2014 World Championships in Rotterdam, Netherlands, when Willoughby suffered a broken tibia plateau, she channeled her mother's energy. Despite all odds, she won silver there, and again at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games — all with "Cheryl Strong" brandished on her helmet.

In addition to her Olympic medal, Willoughby also holds a total of five medals at the World Championship (2 gold, 1 silver, 2 bronze). She's one of the most decorated BMX racers among men and women and continues to push herself thanks to the support of her loved ones.

"Every athlete—every person—goes through a challenge in their life and it can be seemingly impossible to overcome that," says Willoughby. "I think that's what makes the strength you draw from those around you and everything leading up to that moment so important."

"It makes it pretty awesome when it all goes right," she adds.



Helping Others Find Their Momentum

Willoughby excels at turning setbacks into opportunities and hopes to motivate others to push through the roadblocks in their way. With help and support from her family, Willoughby converted an old, vandalized park in St. Cloud into one of the top BMX facilities in the country—Pineview Park BMX. Through the help of local volunteers, Willoughby and her family built a community around the park where riders of all ages have an opportunity to pursue what many told Willoughby was impossible.

“As kids, we just thought it was some piles of dirt and it couldn’t be that hard. But here we are 20-odd years later still doing it,” says Willoughby. “I think it’s good for the kids to see they can do it in their own community. You have to carve the path for people to see that.”

On top of her work at Pineview Park BMX, Willoughby also founded the annual Alise Post MS Race for a Cure at her home track in Minnesota to raise funds for multiple sclerosis. For her, being able to give back to a community that has supported her and her family, was one of the most gratifying experiences and one of the reasons she was so excited to become a Toyota athlete.

“That’s why working with Toyota was a no brainer for me, because their mission—to provide movement for everyone—just aligns with what I’ve always believed in,” she says. “They have the means and the platform to do it on a big scale and change lives.”

As she gears up for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, she reflects on the hurdles she’s soared over and the perseverance that comes from having a village behind you.

“In those moments of pressure and adversity, people can really get their best out of themselves,” says Willoughby. “When you succeed, it’s so sweet because you’re able to give back what everyone else put into your success.”