

Olympians Jessica Long and Allyson Felix show us how “Anything Is Possible”

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- Recognize the value of challenges in our lives and how they present us with opportunities to grow and become stronger
- Learn to become resilient, and understand how to constructively engage challenges and obstacles by defining our purpose in life and living with perseverance
- Appreciate the importance of family support and how families can motivate and empower us to be our best

Primary Virtues / Character Traits

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously despite obstacles and difficulties

Resilience: the ability to recover from or adjust to change and difficulties. Choosing to use setbacks as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Family Support: complete dedication for the well-being of other members of our family, physically, emotionally and spiritually, motivated by love

Secondary Virtues / Character Traits

Courage: the capacity to meet danger and difficult situations without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice.

Love: to freely give of ourselves for the betterment of another person, without expecting anything in return

Purpose: the reason we strive to do something or to accomplish something; the intention for doing something; being determined to do or to achieve something

Leader Introduction:

The Olympics were in Tokyo this August, who watched them and what were some of your favorite events? Today we're going to learn about two champion athletes, one Olympian and one Paralympian who have persevered through and have overcome significant adversity within their lives. The first athlete that we are going to learn about is Jessica Long, who you may recognize from Toyota's 2021 Super Bowl and Olympics commercials that captured the hearts of many people. Let's take a second to look at the commercial and a news segment from this summer highlighting Jessica Long's story:

Link to Video #1 (Jessica Long Superbowl Commercial)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr3jR2keirk>

Link to Video #2 (Jessica Long News Segment)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSBd6wIzQyc>

Leader Introduction to Allyson Felix:

Our second athlete, Allyson Felix. She finished this year's Tokyo Olympics with 11 Olympic medals and became the United State's most decorated track and field runner, which means she has won more Olympic medals than anyone else in our country's history for her sport! But she didn't achieve her success without challenges of her own. Let's watch this video to see why her fifth Olympic games were the most challenging of them all...

Link to Video #3 (Allyson Felix Interview)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNuL38NRppg>

Leader Summary:

In Tokyo, Allyson Felix proved that she can "face anything," winning the bronze medal in the 400 meter race and the gold medal in the 4 X 400 meter relay. Allyson Felix and Jessica Long are amazing stories of athletes rising to overcome significant personal challenges through hard work and a positive attitude—and in the process, achieving Olympic glory. Let's dig deeper into their inspirational stories and see how their lives speak to us.

Discussion Question Options (*discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses or bullet points*)

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions (found in the online lesson as a separate document).

1. How are the Olympics and Paralympics different? After seeing Jessica Long's story, do you want to make a point of watching the Paralympics in future years?
2. What were some of the obstacles and challenges that Jessica Long and Allyson Felix had to overcome to make it to the Olympics?
(Jessica Long - being born with many bones missing from her legs and feet and having to go through 25 surgeries as a child to have them removed, and to then be fit for artificial legs.)

(Allyson Felix having a very difficult surgery with the birth of her child called a cesarean where the baby is surgically removed from a woman's uterus. Because this surgery is so difficult, the recovery time, even for an intense athlete like Felix, is about 8 to 12 weeks before being able to return to normal activities. Felix had only 1 ½ years from her surgery and the birth of her child before having to compete to make it onto the US Olympic team. Many coaches and doctors told Felix it wouldn't be possible for her to recover and train to that level of competition.)

How did both Long and Felix overcome these obstacles and what virtues did they live out in doing so?

(**Resiliency** in accepting their challenges of Long being born with disabled legs and for Felix having a difficult surgery so close to competition, and yet having a strong sense of **purpose** to take on these challenges and to still achieve their goals through **perseverance** and hard work.)

We have seen through the stories of Long and Felix how the virtues of resiliency, purpose and perseverance depend on each other and build on each other. How would you describe this in your own words by completing the statement – “to be resilient and overcome or to adapt to our challenges, we often need to _____?”

(Identify the purpose. Then ask yourself, how do I achieve that purpose? And how do I overcome and persevere through the challenges?)

3. Let's talk about the role that **family** has played in both Long and Felix's journey to the Olympics? First we'll discuss Jessica Long's story. Let's try to place ourselves in the position of Long's adoptive parents. What do you think Mr. and Mrs. Long would have been discussing and considering as they decided whether to adopt Jessica, and what virtues did they live out in making the decision to adopt her?
(**courage** in taking on such a difficult challenge knowing only that Jessica would need a lot of medical care and not knowing the outcome of how she would respond as a child who would have to go through so many surgeries and challenges. **Generosity** and **love** in giving of themselves to this degree for the betterment of another.)

In addition to adopting her and providing for Jessica's medical care, they further supported her in providing for coaching, swim clubs and travel.

Now let's look at Long's story from the perspective of her birth parents in Russia who gave her up for adoption. In 2014 Long traveled to Russia to see them and said of them, “When I first see my Russian family, I want them to know that I'm not angry with them, that I'm not upset that they gave me up for adoption. I think that was really brave, and I don't know what I would have done if I was in her situation, at 16 and having this disabled baby that they knew that they couldn't take care of. I want to tell (my birth mother) that... I have so much love for her because she gave me life.”*

How difficult do you think it would have been for Jessica's birth parents to give her up for adoption, and what do you think motivated them to do this?

(They knew they couldn't provide for her medical needs, and as well likely thought they were too young to be parents, so out of **love** for Jessica they decided to place her in an orphanage and to give her the opportunity to be adopted.)

4. Now let's look at Allyson Felix's story, and the factors that motivated her to work so hard to again compete and to medal in her 5th Olympics. Felix was told by doctors and coaches that with only 1 ½ years between the delivery of her baby and her surgery until the 2020 Olympic trials, she would not be able to attain the level of athletic performance to even make it onto the US Olympic team. In addition, her primary sponsor, Nike, cut her sponsorship pay by 50% after they learned she would be having a baby. Despite all of this negativity, Felix decided to push forward and to train and compete for a spot on the US Olympic team. How did Felix's family play a role in motivating her to go for it despite so many doubting her?

(Felix spoke in the video about how her daughter became a big part of her inspiration in that she wanted her daughter to see her as an example of working hard to achieve goals. Felix stated, “I think that my motivation is different now, you know, I think about doing things so that my daughter can see them so that she can have a great example... and it just makes me feel really tough. You know that if I’ve gotten through this—sleepless nights end everything—that I can face anything.”)

5. Another factor that inspired Felix is her belief that her speed is a gift from God, stating, “For me, my faith is the reason I run. I definitely feel I have this amazing gift that God has blessed me with, and it’s all about using it to the best of my ability.”**

Each of us may or may not believe in God, but do you believe that we each have gifts that are unique to us, and do you agree that we should use our gifts to the best of our ability?

6. Long faced difficult emotional challenges in addition to her physical challenges. Long stated, “My childhood was hard and painful. There are spots of my childhood I don’t remember because I was going in and out of surgery so much... (and) there was no one that could tell me why. Why I was born without my legs, why I was adopted, or even the fact that my birthday was on a leap year!”* In addition, after the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, Long felt she didn’t perform as well as she should have and became so sad that she stopped training for the next Olympics. She eventually came back with a renewed sense of purpose to continue her training and to compete. What was that renewed sense of **purpose** that Long discussed at the end of her interview?

(Long defined a renewed sense of purpose in her life of working to inspire the next generation of Paralympians, stating “I hope that by what I’m doing now and what I have done in the past with growing the Paralympic movement for the next generation, I’m so excited about what’s in store for them, and if I was a small part of that then that’s enough for me.”)

Do you think that by defining your own purpose in life it can help motivate you to work to overcome challenges and obstacles?

7. Jessica Long said in her interview, “Quitting is just not an option...The only disability in life is a negative attitude.” Do you agree with this statement?

In addition to having a positive attitude, what else helps us to overcome disabilities and challenges? (The help and support of others.)

8. Prior to making it to the Tokyo Olympics and winning two medals, Allyson Felix said, “If I can’t make a fifth Olympic team, I’m gonna know that I fought, that I was determined, and that I gave it my absolute all...If it doesn’t end up the way I imagined in my head, it’ll be OK. I just have to go for it, because that’s just simply who we are now.”**

Let’s share some stories of times in our lives, and they can be very small events or big ones, where we were very tempted to quit something and then didn’t? During these times, what motivated us and enabled us to keep going? Did other people such as

coaches, a teacher, friend or family member also help us?

(For each of their stories, encourage students to also discuss how they felt about their effort afterwards. Did trying give them a sense of satisfaction regardless of the outcome?) (This question is also a journal writing option)

9. In the SwimSam podcast, Long said “I literally only got into swimming because I was a very angry child! It was where I let out my anger and frustration, but it was also where I felt really free and capable.”* What are some good and positive ways for us to deal with our own anger and frustration?

Why is it important for us to have a constructive outlet for our difficult emotions?
(This question is also a journal writing option)

Journal Writing Options

1. In SwimSam podcast, Long said “I literally only got into swimming because I was a very angry child! It was where I let out my anger and frustration, but it was also where I felt really free and capable.”* What are some good and positive ways for us to deal with our own anger and frustration? Why is it important for us to have an outlet for our difficult emotions?
2. We learned about both Long and Felix’s strong sense of purpose in striving for their Olympic dreams. Why do you think it is important for us to live our lives with a sense of purpose and intention? Write about your own sense of purpose, what motivates you to want to work toward a specific goal?
3. Felix spoke about how she believes she has the gift of speed and “it’s all about using it to the best of my ability.” Write about a gift, a talent that you have and specifically how you want to develop that gift and to use it to the best of your ability.
4. Write about a time in your life when you were tempted to quit something and didn’t? What motivated you and enabled you to keep going? Did others help you as well? Whether you succeeded or not, how did you feel about continuing to try?

Extended Activity:

1. Organize students into groups of 3-4 and have them brainstorm situations when they have been courageous and/or persevered in engaging a challenge. Each group will choose one situation to act out for the class and then explain the challenge that was faced, how they persevered, what purpose they had in working to overcome the difficult situation and the good that came out of it.
2. Organize students into groups of 2-3 and have students identify someone in their community or who is famous from sports or other endeavors who are an example of being resilient, living with purpose and persevering to overcome or adjust to a challenge. Each team member should participate in outlining the person’s life in general, the challenge they faced, the purpose that motivated them to keep going and how they persevered.

*quotes from:

<https://olympics.com/en/featured-news/siberia-to-swimming-stardom-paralympic-jessica-long-amazing-story> | **quotes from: <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/allyson-felix>

Character Action Media

Connecting Virtues to Our World

www.characteractionmedia.com

Current Links in Education