

Sprinting to Survival: Novlene Williams-Mills

Every breast cancer patient has a journey. There are some unifiers: the chaos of those immediate days pre- and post- diagnosis when you have so much information coming at you, pondering what this means for your future, and thinking who to tell and when. Do we tell a close few or tell “our world?” But what happens when telling your world means telling *the* world and your journey includes detours most cannot imagine? These are questions Novlene Williams-Mills had to face.



Novlene Williams-Mills is a Jamaican-born, four-time Olympic medaling sprinter who has made her home in the greater Orlando area since 2007. She trained with legendary coaches Tom Jones, at the University of Florida, and Brooks Johnson, at Disney Wide World of Sports. She made her Olympic debut in the 2004 Athens Games, anchoring the Jamaica team, taking bronze in the Women's 4 × 400 meters. At the 2008 Beijing Games, she anchored the team to a silver medal finish.

With the 2012 London Games nearing, Novlene had an annual gynecology exam. “I think I noticed the lump for a while. I would feel it. I mentioned it and the doctor said it’s not big but to be on the safe side he sent me to do a mammogram. He came in and told me they saw the lump. Wasn’t sure it was cancerous as it was so close to my rib cage. He could tell on my face, I wasn’t happy and we had biopsy done to confirm it was cancer for sure.”

Novlene Williams-Mills, at 30, had breast cancer. “The funny part about the Olympics, for a second it didn’t hit me. I got the call Monday then flew to Jamaica that Tuesday [to compete in the Olympic trials]. I still went. It still didn’t register. I didn’t tell nobody at that time. I won. It was crazy,” she said. “Whatever day I got back, I was in the doctor’s office the next day. That’s when I realized this is real and happening, doing the MRI and scheduling surgeries. I lost it when I went outside and called my agent.” Unique to her journey and spirit, Novlene then flew to Paris later that day, winning 2nd in a meet. She worried this was too much and talked to her doctors. With surgery scheduled for three days after the Games, everyone agreed she should go compete and use this as a distraction.

Before a race, Novlene does not get too serious or tense. She says hi to competitors who wish each other luck. Once on the track, “it’s all about that lane,” where she focuses and prays right before the start. At London, “It was hard,” she said. “You really want to tell someone. They see a smile on your face and don’t know the pain behind it. The mountain I’m about to face. Mentally getting on that line was hard. Seven other ladies are thinking of winning a race. I’m thinking how many days before surgery.” With her secret known by a select few, Novlene anchored another bronze victory for Jamaica.

“While standing on that podium, I did not know if I ran my last race as I was about to face my biggest race,” said Williams-Mills. She had a lumpectomy three days after the Olympics, inconspicuously missing the last races of the season, “for more rest.” The results came back inconclusive and she was urged to have a mastectomy. After discussions with her husband, Jameel, she chose to remove as much of the “what if” and have a double mastectomy with reconstruction. Two weeks post-surgery, doctors still questioned Novlene’s margins. After three surgeries in five months, she was cancer free.



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Novlene stopped all training for the 2013 season. As an elite athlete, authorized technicians, “show up at my house for drug testing randomly. I called them and said look, I can’t control what they give me. A month after, I was writing back to say I have another surgery and was told to get doctor’s notes. This is my life. I can’t tiptoe around it. This is not like getting a cut. This is cancer. I have to treat it. For me, the thought of Novlene passed away because she was more focused on track makes no sense. I went to London, put on my shoes, and just ran. After, it was my life.”

Three months after her last surgery, Novlene Williams-Mills ran her next race. “After practice, I was dead tired. Some days the pool was my workout. Some days I couldn’t get out of bed. Some days, I’d run one lap and have to go home.” Nine months after returning to training, she won gold in the Jamaica Women’s 400 meters national championship. After the race, she lay on the track and cried, her hands covering her chest, a reflex that women with scars all know. It was then she told the world.

Novlene ended 2014 ranked Diamond League No. 1 in the world. Success continued at the 2015 World Championships in Beijing, where Jamaica won gold over favored America. Her eyes were set on the 2016 Rio Olympics at which she anchored Jamaica to a silver medal finish.

Novlene firmly believes that every survivor is an inspiration and has a story to tell and that no one needs to hide their scars. “A lot of people with scars don’t think they’re beautiful. You are beautiful.” She lends her time and voice to helping promote breast cancer awareness, screenings and early detection in the United States, where 1 in 8 women are at risk, and in Jamaica, where 1 in 20 women are at risk. “If I can be a motivation to others, being an athlete, it’s good for my country. I know the process, how you want to know and you don’t want to know. It is hard and I understand what they’re going through. It’s scary. I can say, look, I’ve been through it. I get it,” she said.

Novlene has participated in the American Cancer Society’s Orlando Making Strides Breast Cancer Walk since 2012. On October 28th, she will be at Lake Eola, handing out medals to the winners of the earlier morning 5K run before joining 65,000 fellow survivors and walkers, in a sea of pink unity and support.