

# PORTRAITS OF POWER

What if you *EXERCISED*  
not just to *TONE UP* and *FEEL GOOD*,  
but to *OUTPERFORM*  
the world's most accomplished athletes?  
Meet *FIVE OLYMPIANS*  
who've dedicated their lives to  
*PUSHING THEIR BODIES*  
to the limits.

TEXT BY CHRISTIAN L. WRIGHT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT MAXWELL

— the —  
*BULLET*

## ALLYSON FELIX

AGE 26

**SPORT** Track and field  
**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS** 2011  
USA Outdoor 400-meter  
champion; 2008 Olympic  
4x400-meter relay gold  
medalist; 2008 and  
2004 Olympic 200-meter  
silver medalist; athlete  
ambassador for Right to  
Play, which uses games  
and sports to help children  
in disadvantaged areas



# Y

*our body does amazing things: It allows you to run, to dance, to bear children and hold them in your arms. But what if your body didn't just get you to work—what if it were the primary instrument involved in actually doing that work? The powerhouse athletes on these pages take “being in touch with your body” to a whole new level.*

## ALLYSON FELIX

“My coach calls me ‘Seabiscuit,’” says Allyson Felix, “because normally, I come from behind. It’s a nice upgrade from ‘Chicken Legs.’” That’s the nickname the sprinter got early on, when she first appeared on the competitive scene. “At the time, it was not funny. I had these long legs and a short torso. I thought I looked so weird and disproportionate. Now I’ve grown into my legs. They enable me to run fast, and I’m very proud of them.”

As she should be: Those long, strong spindles have propelled her to the heights of international track and field (she made the indoor and outdoor world championship teams when she was 17 and won an Olympic silver medal in the 200-meter event at 18). They’ve earned her a contract with Nike and enough frequent-flier miles to circle the globe, repeatedly. Not bad for a girl out of Los Angeles Baptist High School who didn’t even start running track until she was in ninth grade. Felix, who has a smile like a sunbeam, is five feet six inches and weighs 125 pounds—she’s a little sprite in a field of giants. But she is strong (she surprises men in her gym by, say, leg-pressing 700 pounds), and she is fast. The women’s world records in her events are 10.49 seconds in the 100-meter dash (Felix’s personal record is 10.93); 21.34 in the 200-meter (she has clocked 21.81); and 47.60 in the 400-meter (Felix managed 49.59). It’s a cruel sport that measures success by such tiny increments, and nanosecond losses have been known to reduce her to sobs. “But a better gauge is improvement,” says the athlete, who keeps a meticulous training log, “so you’re not measuring yourself against someone else. And actually, when I’m at my fastest, it feels peaceful, almost effortless, not like the crazy fatigue and pain of practice.” In other words, like poetry in motion.

## KERRI WALSH

When Kerri Walsh strides onto the sand, you can almost hear a torrent of Dick Dale surf guitar. She’s the quintessential California girl, with a sun-streaked blond braid, legs approximately eight and a half miles long, and a tiny two-piece bathing suit. “I live my life in a bikini,” the beach volleyball star says from her home in Manhattan Beach. “And it’s not a bad way to live life.” Especially if you’re six feet three inches of tanned sinew. “I’ve got my mom’s heart, but I’m built like my dad,” she says. “He’s long and tall and beautiful.”

Since having two children—Joseph in 2009 and another son, Sundance, in 2010—everything has changed, including the way her gear fits. “I don’t look the same around my hips,” she says. “My breasts were nonexistent before. Now my bikinis fit differently. I have to adjust to the battle wounds of pregnancy.” Just before the babies, she took time off from international competition to build a better physical foundation—and now she feels stronger than ever. Plus, “delivery is very fortifying. Being an athlete, I’ve always known that when I’m tired or hurt, I can push through it. But as a mom, it’s times ten.” Managing two kids and life as a professional athlete definitely takes stamina. It helps that she’s married—cue the surf rock—to a fellow pro beach volleyball player, Casey Jennings, who understands the sport’s demands, helps with the parenting logistics, and joins her in her annual 21-day cleanse. “The hardest thing is finding that balance,” says Walsh. “My husband is amazing, and my teammate, Misty May-Treanor, is so supportive. The older I get, the more I know it takes a village. It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a village to win a gold medal.”



**iPad Extra:**  
View interviews with each of the athletes in our iPad edition. Available from the App Store.

— the —  
CALIFORNIAN

## KERRI WALSH

AGE 33

**SPORT** Beach volleyball  
**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**  
With Misty May-Treanor, half of the winningest team in the history of beach volleyball; two-time Olympic gold medalist (2008 and 2004); founder of the Chase the Stars Foundation, which helps kids through partnerships with organizations like the Boys & Girls Clubs of America



— the —  
**SPARK PLUG**

**BRENDA VILLA**

AGE 32

SPORT Water polo  
CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2011 Pan American Games gold medalist; captain of the silver-medal-winning squad at 2008 Olympics in Beijing; competed on medal-winning 2004 and 2000 Olympic teams; founder of Project 2020, which brings swimming and water polo to Bay Area kids



— the —  
**LOOKER**

**TAMIKA CATCHING**

AGE 32

SPORT Basketball  
CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2011 WNBA MVP; 2008 and 2004 U.S. Olympic gold medalist; founder of Catch the Stars Foundation, which promotes literacy and fitness for at-risk youth



## BRENDA VILLA

At last, Brenda Villa can do a pull-up. Even while her 16 teammates were “bustin’ ’em out,” as she puts it, Villa just could not lift her sturdy body by the strength of her arms. There’s no doubt about her fitness; Villa’s been playing competitive water polo since high school in California, when she had to join the boys’ team because a girls’ one didn’t exist. When Villa played at Stanford, she recalls, “women’s water polo was just becoming an NCAA sport.” But in her lifetime (and partly on her significant shoulders), the women’s game has become a recognized Olympic event. And yet, that pull-up. “Surprisingly, I’m more fit now than I was four years ago,” Villa says. Lately, she’s adjusted her diet—avoiding carbohydrates, adding vegetables—and lo, “I feel I am stronger.”

The truth is, Villa’s a spark plug in a game of pistons. She’s five feet four inches—at least three inches shorter than the average attacker—and she’s wide. “I know people have a perception of what an Olympian should look like, but I like changing people’s minds,” she says. Indeed, this daughter of Mexican immigrants has become the “Saint of Water Polo,” in the words of the Women’s Sports Foundation. She’s announced she’ll retire after the London games; having had a few heartbreaking misses, a gold medal could be the ultimate going-away present.

## TAMIKA CATCHINGS

With a name like Catchings, Tamika was born to play a sport with a ball. Being partially deaf, though, she was unlikely to become a star on the basketball court. An All-American with the Lady Volunteers at the University of Tennessee, she went on to be Rookie of the Year in her first season with the WNBA’s Indiana Fever, for whom she’s played for a decade. But when she was growing up, she was the odd duck. She looked funny with her hearing aids; she talked funny on account of the sounds she couldn’t hear; and she was taller than most of the boys. “I always got made fun of,” says Catchings. She found refuge on the playing field: soccer, softball, and, ultimately, basketball. “As I got better in sports, people could make fun of me for the way I looked or sounded, but it was like, ‘Eight times out of ten, I’m still going to beat you.’” And her hearing impairment turned out to be an on-court asset: Outside of sports, she was always looking around, nervous that she wouldn’t hear someone who was talking to her; as a result, “I’m always looking around on the court,” she says. That awareness has translated into record-busting numbers across the stats sheet and one of the highest salaries in the league.

These days, no one calls the six-foot-two-inch forward funny-looking. In fact, she gets compliments on her arms. “People say, ‘Oh my god, those are like guy’s arms,’” she says. “It’s genetic and also from working out. Sometimes I’m self-conscious about them.” Almost 33 and on the eve of her third (and likely last) Olympic Games, Catchings has learned to balance the years of pounding on the court with other forms of exercise—namely swimming and martial arts—to fight the effects of age. “My thighs,” she laughs, “they’re starting to jiggle a little bit!”

## NATALIE COUGHLIN

Poised to become the most decorated American female swimmer in Olympic history, Natalie Coughlin counts among her heroes... Alice Waters, the chef and owner of Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, California. Coughlin trains with the UC Berkeley swim team, whose facilities are minutes from Waters’ restaurant, the one that blazed the local-sustainable trail that’s so well traveled today. Coughlin and Waters are close in philosophy, too. In 2004, they joined forces to help abolish soda at public schools in the state.

A California native, Coughlin grew up playing in her grandparents’ garden, so green living comes as naturally to her as, well, the backstroke. “I like that my job requires me to take really good care of my body,” she says. She and her husband, swim coach Ethan Hall, have even turned their sloping backyard into a terraced vegetable garden, growing salad greens, herbs, carrots, beets, snap peas, and more. At the top of the hill, she keeps five chickens. “I’m not a vegetarian, but I do have a very plant-based diet,” she says. “You have more energy when you’re eating a ton of fruits and vegetables. Having them in your backyard makes it easy.” Healthy living is paying dividends—in the pool, obviously, but also in some interesting extracurriculars: She was photographed for the 2012 Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition in nothing but body paint. Coughlin has a classic swimmer’s physique—she’s five feet eight inches, with broad shoulders, a long torso, shorter legs, big hands, and flexible feet and ankles, which help with her powerful kick. “I’ve spent my entire life covered by a tiny piece of fabric,” she says, “so I’m comfortable with my body.”

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— the —  
WAVE STUNNER

## NATALIE COUGHLIN

AGE 29

SPORT Swimming  
CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Two-time Olympic gold medalist in 100-meter backstroke (2008 and 2004); winner of six medals at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing; board member of MOVE, which fights childhood obesity and encourages wellness

