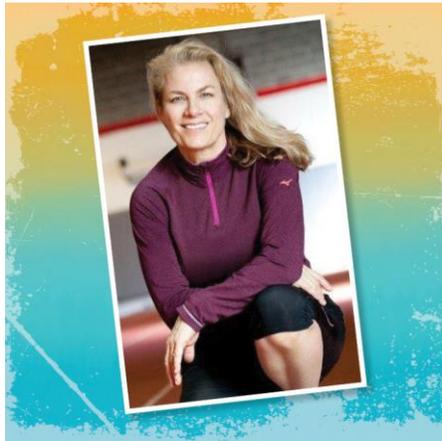




Featured Athlete Julia Curran-Villarreal - Track and Field



Bounding Back after a 35-Year Break

Julia Curran-Villarreal is a three-time USA Track & Field masters national champion in the high jump, a 2016 USA Masters Games champion in the event, and the top-ranked U.S. woman for her age group.

But what is her biggest challenge?

Balance.

With two middle school boys, Curran-Villarreal works hard to juggle being a national champion, a small business owner and a wife and mom. Curran-Villarreal said it took her a few years to

figure out that she's a mom first, and an athlete second.

Curran-Villarreal may be a masters champion, but she's fairly new to masters competition. Before winning the first competition she entered at age 53, she had taken a 35-year break from high jumping.

"When I started jumping again, I won meet after meet after meet, and I thought, How can I be doing this?" Curran-Villarreal says. "I think it helped that I didn't have years of injuries. I basically had fresh legs."

Finding a coach is a challenge, too, she says. "I think a lot of people are concerned about coaching a 56-year-old who is flying backward over a bar, five feet in the air."

So for now, Curran-Villarreal coaches herself. She relies on videos, tips and advice from other masters athletes, and a personal trainer who is helping her build and maintain her strength and flexibility.

A love that never left

Curran-Villarreal started competing in the high jump as a high school freshman. Her sister was a member of the track team and she wanted to join too, she says. One of the team's coaches learned that Curran-Villarreal had done gymnastics when she was younger, and suggested she try high jumping.

Curran-Villarreal jumped all through high school, but decided to focus on academics when she went to college. After college, she traveled abroad extensively as a model before returning to the United States and marrying her husband Juan at age 40.

She gave birth to her sons when she was 42 and 45. "I guess I'm a late bloomer," says Curran-Villarreal.

As her sons grew more independent, Curran-Villarreal felt the urge to jump again. An internet search for "track meets for grownups" led her to pages of information. She convinced her husband and children to go to a meet near their home in Atlanta, "Just to watch," she says.

“This came about because, when I turned 50, I thought, if there’s anything you want to try, you better get out there and get at it!” she says.

She ended up competing in the high jump, and won the event.

Competing with Olympians

Curran-Villarreal competes in 10 to 12 masters events a year, she says. High jumping has taken her as far away as Costa Rica and France, where she represented the United States as a member of the 2015 USA World Masters Athletics team.

Many of the athletes who compete at that level are former Olympians or collegiate track stars. Others are “moms like me, who took a step off the precipice and said, ‘Let’s do this!’” Curran-Villarreal says.

“The masters track and field community is supportive and accepting of people of all abilities,” she says.

She is as surprised as anyone that she has been so successful, so quickly, at the masters level. But it’s not without commitment. She spends hours each week working on her strength and flexibility.

She balances her love of her sport with her responsibilities as a mother and her work as a photographer and freelance writer. She also volunteers as a track coach, sings in a choir and is active with her local government.

“My husband Juan is incredibly supportive,” she says. “Winning gold medals doesn’t just happen. It takes lots of planning and a village of support.”

With everything she has going on, Curran-Villarreal has no plans to stop jumping. The camaraderie with other athletes and her friends on the Atlanta Track Club Elite team keeps her enthusiastic about her sport, and offers her the opportunity to encourage others to try something new.

“I plan to do this forever,” she says.