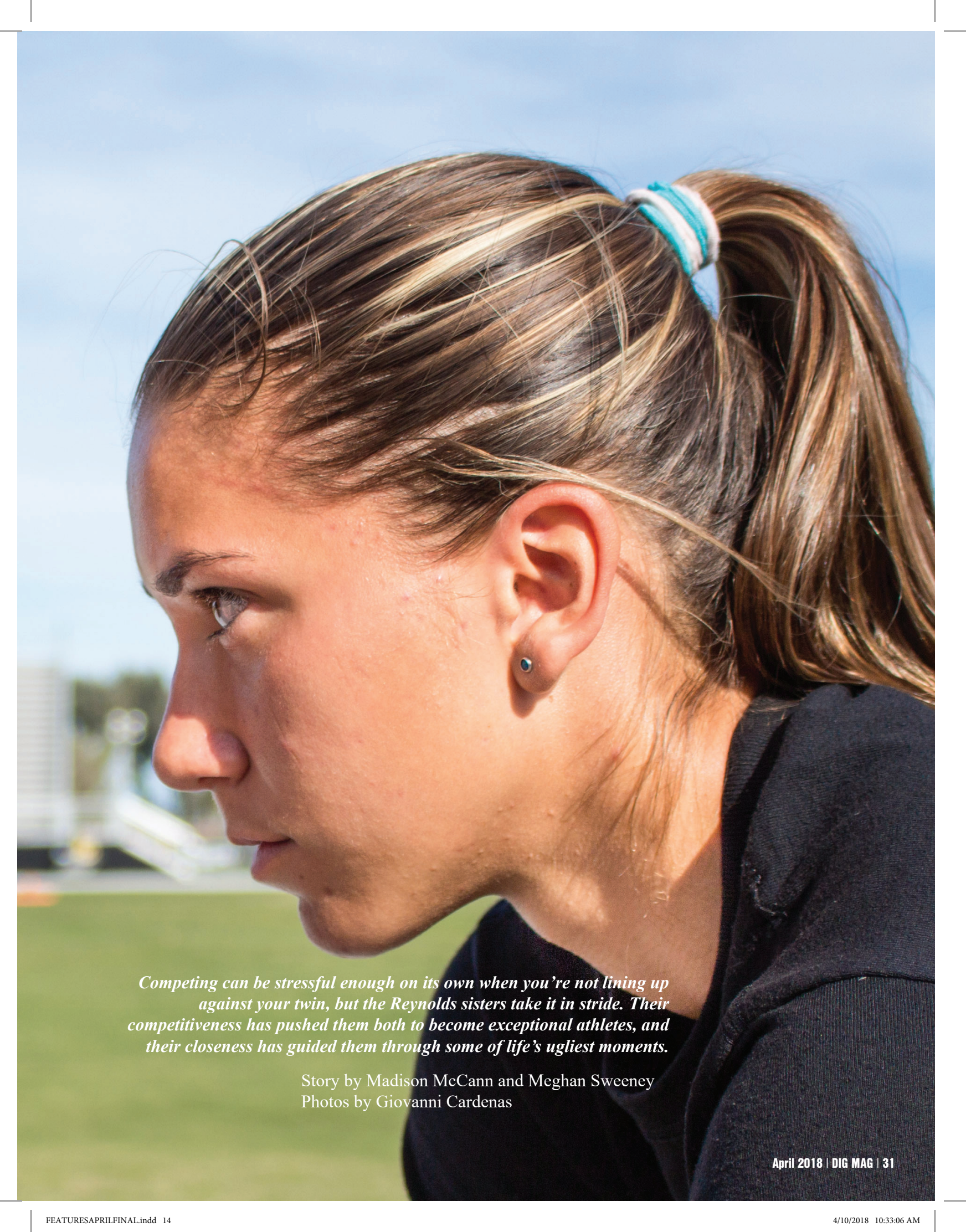


No Hurdle²
High



Competing can be stressful enough on its own when you're not lining up against your twin, but the Reynolds sisters take it in stride. Their competitiveness has pushed them both to become exceptional athletes, and their closeness has guided them through some of life's ugliest moments.

Story by Madison McCann and Meghan Sweeney
Photos by Giovanni Cardenas

If you happened to walk past them on campus, you would likely stare in awe at twin sisters Shalee and Shyann Reynolds. Standing at 5-foot-9, their physical presence catches the eye. Chiseled from years competing in track and field, they look like machines. Many might even feel a twinge of envy, wondering, “Why can’t I be like those girls?”

And certainly, the Reynolds twins are worthy of admiration. Top high school athletes, the freshmen are now running for the Long Beach State track and field team, setting records and running new personal bests. What’s more, their deep bond is clear to anyone who encounters them.

But the image they present to the world is only a fraction of the story. What’s even more remarkable about Shalee and Shyann Reynolds is that they managed all of it despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles life has thrown their way. In their 19 years on earth, they have proven to themselves, and everyone else who knows them, that there is no hurdle too high.

Raised in the suburbs of Glendora, California, Shalee and Shyann grew up playing tee ball, racing their friends in the neighborhood, and loving competition. They participated in volleyball and also enjoyed art.

“Our mom wanted us to be more girly, but we just wanted to play sports,” Shalee says.

In elementary school they fell in love with running track, and when the duo hit high school, they got serious about competing, eventually earning the attention of college coaches.

“We had to make a really difficult decision,” Shalee says.





“We decided together, that even though we loved volleyball, we were better at track and we really loved to run.”

Their decision paid off. After being recruited by coaches across the country, the twins chose to join Long Beach State’s track and field team. Sprints and hurdles are their main events, and they have a laundry list of accolades in their track career thus far.

At Glendora High School they were named most inspirational in 2015 and athletes of the year in 2017. They both hold school records for the 400-meter relay and mile relay. Individually, Shalee holds records for the 100-meter hurdles, 300-meter hurdles, 400-meter hurdles, and 400-meter sprint. Shyann is in the number two spot in the same events, just a step behind her sister.

But things weren’t always about trophies and medals.

When Shalee and Shyann were five years old, their biological father left the family, forcing their mother to raise twin girls alone. To support a family of three, she held two jobs and worked long hours while the girls were in school.

Eventually she began dating the man who would become their stepdad, and by the time Shyann and Shalee were six years old, he was watching them after school while their mom worked. And, the twins say, that’s when their stepdad began sexually abusing them.

During those years, they relied on each other to persevere. “I wouldn’t be alive if I didn’t have my sister with me. I know he would have killed me,” Shyann says.

Their secret came out when their mother took them to out to eat after having a fight with their



stepfather. The twins' mom asked what the girls thought of him. They both sat quietly, unable to speak, and escaped to the bathroom before they responded. They didn't say a word to each other, but in those moments of silence, they could feel it.

They knew they needed to tell her.

Returning to the table, Shyann spoke first. She said seven short words that took years to say, but would change their lives forever:

"I don't like how he touches us."

The following months were a blur. Their stepdad was charged with child molestation, and the girls endured court date after court date, constantly repeating the story and reliving the nightmare that had become their life. In the end, a jury convicted their stepdad on eight felony counts, and he was sentenced to 15 years to life for each one. He won't be eligible for parole until 2035.

No one knew, and they didn't talk about it. They kept their secret at baseball practice, track meets and volleyball games. While their friends had normal childhoods, Shalee and Shyann didn't have one at all.

But they did have each other. The twins were forced to grow up quickly, but they did it together, and their bond

grew even stronger. It served them well through middle school, when they were bullied relentlessly.

"I remember one day very clearly," Shalee says. "These girls came in a pack to fight Shyann after school. They cornered her and started hitting her, and I couldn't let that happen. I jumped in to help my sister."

In the midst of the abuse trials and bullying, Shalee and Shyann's biological father returned to the family to make amends. Even that good news came with a blow: He informed them he was fighting cancer, a battle he lost in

2012.

They were grateful they were able to reunite with him. "When he was going through cancer is when we finally got to know him," Shyann said. "It was awesome. We forgave him for not being there. We pretty much had to. It's just not good to hold all that stuff in."

Today, Shalee and Shyann are in a good place. With their

heads held high, they are not looking back. They walk in sync, laugh at the same things, and share looks only they can understand.

Still, their personalities are very different. Shalee is more quiet and reserved, sometimes bottling up her feelings. Shyann is her sister's complement. She speaks her mind, is generally more outgoing, and doesn't hold anything back. "When Shalee doesn't speak up because she's quiet, I always know something is wrong with her," Shyann says.

The twins say they never fight. When asked to name something her sister does that annoys her, Shalee laughs. "That one is really hard. It's hard to find something you don't like about your best friend. But watch, she'll come in here with a big ol' list!"

However, they can both agree that being separated never feels quite right, explaining their natural way of gravitating to each other in a crowd. "If anyone ever sits between us, they feel so uncomfortable that they ask us to switch seats," Shalee says. "It's like an extra sense between us." Almost as if the universe is out of whack when the twins are not together.

Off the track, the duo may be attached at the hip, but on the track, during competition, they aim to stay far away from each other. One may think that running with a sister



would be fun, but Shalee and Shyann say they hate it.

As Shalee explains it, they are mirror-image twins, leading with different legs in hurdles, which can ruin the rhythm of the other. “If her count is wrong or I make a mistake, we completely throw each other off,” Shalee says. “It’s hard running with Shyann, because the only feet I can hear are my sister’s.”

The twins agree they make a great team, until it comes to friendly competition. When they are partners for any games or sport-related events just meant for fun, they “end up yelling at each other or blaming the other one when we make a mistake,” Shyann says. “It’s actually really funny.”

After college, their main goal is to compete in the Olympics. Beyond that, it’s up in the air. They would love to run a business focused on their passions aside from sports — Shalee loves art, and Shyann enjoys crystals and meditation. They hope to somehow combine what they each love into a successful entrepreneurship, and maybe even model for Nike, if the opportunity is presented.

As athletes and in life, Shyann and Shalee know that it’s not always the best start, but rather the entire race, that determines the winner. They may not have gotten a head start in the race of life, but these days, it looks like they’re ahead of the pack, on their way to a strong finish.

“There are going to be a few hurdles in life,” Shalee says. “But it’s on you to figure out how to get over them.”



By sharing their story, Shalee and Shyann hope to bring awareness about the issue of sexual and physical assault. If you are

a survivor of abuse, you can call the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673), where you’ll be connected to a trained staff member from a

sexual assault service provider in your area. You can also get help online 24/7 at online.rainn.org.