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A Lewisville spinal implant maker helps Olympic gold medalist get back in the game at age 43

Mom of four Laura Wilkinson heals from major surgery — just in time to try and win a diving team spot for the Tokyo Olympics.



Laura Wilkinson, who won an Olympic gold medal in 2000, practices a series of dives at the Conroe Independent School District Natatorium. The 43-year-old diver is attempting an Olympic comeback after recovering from spinal surgery.

By Morgan Gonzales 6:00 AM on Jun 5, 2021 CDT



Laura Wilkinson is used to high-stakes choices.

In 2000, the Texas diver famously gutted her way to an Olympic gold medal with a foot injury that would have sidelined other competitors.

Then 17 years later, the mother of four children decided retirement wasn't for her and it was time for a comeback. That's when her choice got scarier.

A spinal injury from years of hitting the water at 35 mph headfirst from three stories high threatened to not only derail her diving career but also her ability to be a mom. A major surgery loomed.

"We saw multiple doctors and they all said, 'No, you need to have this [surgery] just to be a mom, because a small car accident or trip down the stairs could make you a quadriplegic,'" said Wilkinson, who lives in the Houston suburb of Spring.

Enter Lewisville-based Orthofix, a maker of spinal implants that Wilkinson credits with getting her back on the platform. She'll compete in the U.S. Olympic Trials, scheduled June 6 to 13 in Indianapolis, in her bid to win a spot on the diving team that will compete in next month's Tokyo Olympics.



Laura Wilkinson discusses her journey in a TV interview while training at the Conroe Independent School District Natatorium.



Laura Wilkinson was back in the water 13 weeks after her spinal surgery.

At age 43, Wilkinson's return to the pool is as much about medical advances as resilience.

A year after her return to the sport, Wilkinson said she began to feel what she thought was normal wear and tear on her tricep — the primary muscle used to straighten your arm.

"I was just weak, but yet my muscles felt strong. I didn't understand what was happening," she said.

Her chiropractor recommended an MRI of her neck. "Sure enough, that's the area that was impinging on the nerves that go right through your shoulder, your tricep," she said.

That discovery sparked a specific fear for Wilkinson: She would have to choose either "this major crazy spine surgery to dive" or retire for good. But after hearing from multiple doctors that the surgery was necessary regardless of her plans with her diving career, Wilkinson went in for the procedure the day after Christmas in 2018.

Wilkinson said she asked her neurosurgeon, Peter Shedden, "8 million questions," including one about bone stimulator technology that she heard could help her heal faster.

Orthofix sells a device, worn around the neck, that emits a low-level electromagnetic field to stimulate bone healing. The company boasts the device, called the CervicalStim, has an 84% success rate and increases fusion surgery success by 22%.

"When we actually connected with Orthofix, way after I was better, I found out that the stuff that he used inside my neck, both the titanium plate and the device that helped the bones fuse, are also Orthofix products," Wilkinson said. "So I kind of feel like they healed me inside and out."

Orthofix is now financially backing Wilkinson's Olympic bid. The company's global sales totaled more than \$407 million last year.

"We saw an opportunity to support someone that has come back from essentially an athletic career-ending injury, and who wanted to come back at a competitive level," Orthofix CEO Jon Serbousek said. "It was very inspiring."

Before and after her surgery, Wilkinson posted videos to her YouTube channel that captured her fears and detailed her progress. She also created online courses on confidence and hosts a podcast called The Pursuit of Gold. It took only 13 weeks before she was back in the water.

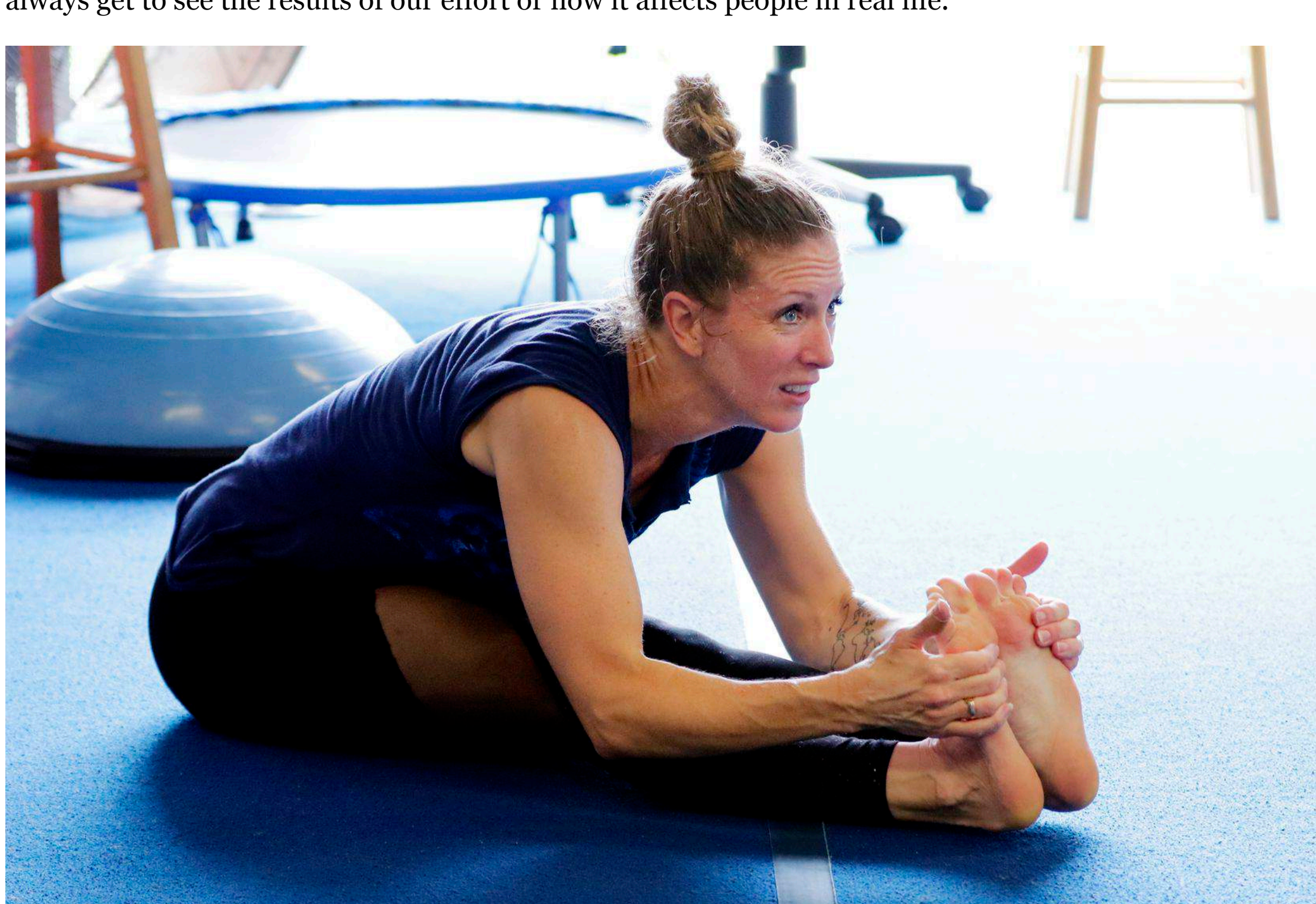
"When you have a trusted voice of someone like Laura Wilkinson, an Olympic Gold medalist, who's then returning to the same caliber of athletic competition as the Tokyo Olympics, that speaks volumes to build confidence in other people out there contemplating having surgery," Serbousek said.

Along with the CervicalStim device Wilkinson wore while recovering, two Orthofix devices were used in Wilkinson's surgery: a cervical plate system to stabilize her spine and a tissue graft to aid in bone fusion.

"But our technology is meant for one thing: It's meant to improve the lives of people ... enabling them to get back to their active lives," Serbousek said.

Wilkinson visited the company's headquarters in 2019, posing for photos with anyone who wanted one and placing her gold medal around the necks of employees.

"It was really cool to meet the people who created this amazing technology," she said. "They were so appreciative of me being there and telling them my story. They said, 'We do all these things, but we don't always get to see the results of our effort or how it affects people in real life.'"



Laura Wilkinson stretches before a dryland training session at The Woodlands Diving Academy.

Wilkinson has been training six days a week to prepare for the Olympic trials, yet she also helped her husband, Erik Hulseman, homeschool their children — ages 5, 7, 9 and 10 — during the pandemic. Her social media followers praise her for giving them the inspiration to face difficult choices.

Wilkinson has a message for moms.

"The impact I'd like to have is to show moms that your life isn't over when you become a mom," she said. "While that's a beautiful thing ... you don't have to stop dreaming, or stop having big goals and doing cool things. Just bring your kids along and let them watch and be part of your journey."



Morgan Gonzales, Staff writer. Morgan Gonzales is a business reporter covering health care and medical topics. She is a master's student in the Health and Medical Journalism program at Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

@MorganGonzales



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