

# Strength for life's battles

2018 Scottish Highland games world champion Olivia Tyler doesn't let a health scare keep her from doing what she loves

By Sara Samora  
Photos by Mikala Compton

**N**ew Braunfels resident Olivia Tyler had a thyroidectomy and a tumor removed earlier this year.

This summer, she also participated in the 38th Annual Alaska Scottish Highland Games and competed in the organization's second annual Professional Women's Class.

She won second overall.

"But it was really good, after having surgery," Tyler said. "My throat was still pretty raw so that was a little bit more difficult than I planned."

However, no one would be able to tell she had surgery unless she pointed out the scar.

Tyler said she made the scar more interesting to her daughters.

"Look at mommy's scar! It tells a story," she said. "The one thing I was saying to them, 'Even if I'm

frowning, my neck is always smiling.'"

Then she said, "Watch this."

She makes a face, using many of her face muscles. But the scar, as she said it would, was smiling.

## **NO LONGER A MAN'S WORLD**

Tyler, along with her husband and New Braunfels native, Spencer, are both Highland Game professionals.

When she was attending Texas Tech, she competed in throwing the discus, hammer and indoor weight from 2001 to 2005. When she met Spencer, he introduced her to the highland games, and it came at a time when she was missing the sport.

"A lot of people who do highland games are former college throwers," she said. "And I always say whenever people play sports





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in college, like golf, they can go out play a round of golf on Sunday their whole life. But if you're a thrower, it's really strange to say, 'I'm going to go throw something today!' or whatever."

The games are a Scottish tradition that includes dancing, and many events involve throwing and lifting, including shot put, tug-of-war, caber toss and hammer throw.

The Scottish Highland Games used to be a men-only sport, but now, women are getting to join in and compete.

Tyler participates in throwing the discus, the Scottish hammer and indoor weight. One wins by throwing the farthest, or highest.

In September 2018, Tyler won Women's World Champion at Scottfest in Oklahoma. She also holds the world record for sheaf, a sport in which the participant uses a pitchfork and tosses a heavy burlap bag into the air as high as they can.

### THE NICE WAY OF SAYING 'TUMOR'

About a year ago, Olivia saw a knob on her neck.

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“I remember around the end of last summer, feeling on my neck right here like on my isthmus, and you can move your neck up and down a little bit just like this knot, and I thought, ‘Man that is weird,’” she said. “My mom’s side of the family has thyroid stuff but nobody’s ever had thyroid cancer.”

Because of the highland games, she and her husband had been traveling a lot, and not getting much sleep. She had been feeling run down and thought she had mono.

But it was during the holidays that she noticed the symptoms.

“I was sitting on the couch and all of a sudden I had to sit up real tall to catch my breath because I just couldn’t breathe,” Tyler said. “I kept telling my husband Spencer, ‘Gosh, that’s just so weird, I feel like I’m kind of being choked a little bit.’”

But she had put it off, thinking it was nothing, and also, not wanting to deal with it.

She started getting a sore throat, so she visited a clinic where she got a strep swab. There was a white covering on her tonsils, which is what strep usually looks like.

But she didn’t have it.

She mentioned the knob shape on her neck to the clinician, and the clinician said she needed to get an ultrasound.

Within a couple of days, she did. Immediately after that, she got a needle biopsy.

“They told me there was some sort of mass in there,” Tyler said. “The guy immediately told me while I sat in the lab that it was not a goiter because they thought it might have been some sort of neoplasm — which I think is a fancy word for a tumor.”

However, she said because of her breathing issues, whatever the knob was would have to come out.

The surgery was scheduled immediately, but she told her medical staff that she had plans and things to do.

“I know that there’s some things in the works for Highland Games, like

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they're really trying to bring the women's class to the 21st century," Tyler said. "You know for a long time it was a man's sport.

While many highland game events are predominately men, fans of the sport have begun asking about the women's category.

"It's really a great time to be a woman in the games because I feel like there's a lot of things we can do to be a voice for it, help out and to put on a good show so that it is entertaining and they do want it there," Tyler said.

Doctors removed the mass, and discovered it was Hashimoto thyroiditis. According to the American Thyroid Association, it is the most common cause of hypothyroidism in the United States.

"It is an autoimmune disorder in which antibodies directed

against the thyroid gland lead to chronic inflammation," the ATA says. "Over time, however, this results in impaired ability of the thyroid gland to produce thyroid hormones, leading to gradual decline in function and eventually an underactive thyroid."

#### **MOVING ON TO THE NEXT GAME**

Now that the cancerous tumor and her thyroid were removed, Tyler said she has to do a scan every six months for a few years.

But her main concern is her next highland game event, participating with her friends and competition in women making a bigger presence at the games, and defending her world champion title next year. Tyler was unable to attend this year's competitions due to a family emergency, so she was unable to defend her title in September. However, another competitor,

Nikita Marzano, broke her sheaf record at 36 feet. Tyler's was 35 feet, 3 inches.

"She's a good friend and I'm so happy for her," Tyler said.

She hopes to regain her title next year.

It's what has pushed her to heal and overcome. That, and a positive mindset and outlook, and keeping things in perspective, one step at a time.

"Sadness and drear and gloom and doom and then you're there and you don't even realize it, and then you start putting things in perspective and you're like, 'Oh gosh, I'm just feeling sorry for myself.' You don't want to get started down that path." Tyler said. "This too shall pass and I think it's good. I think a positive outlook never hurt anybody."

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