

rom failure and rejection to money worries and FOMO, few lifestyles come with as many pressures as those of professional athletes. And yet they're so often bigged up for their single-mindedness and motivation. Their lives are so far removed from those of their supporters and fans that the fact that they might struggle to stay balanced mentally is unthinkable. Except, they're only human. 'I think people have this idea that while athletes have to train for years to be in prime physical shape, they're just born mentally strong,' says Annie Vernon, retired champion rower and author of *Mind Games: An Insider's Guide To The Psychology Of Elite Athletes*. 'The reality is – whether they show it or not – elite athletes feel the same thick terror, debilitating nerves and blind panic as everyone else. But they've had to become better at managing those feelings in order to achieve on the world stage. While serving for the Wimbledon title may seem worlds away from feeling overwhelmed by admin or worrying that your friendships aren't as meaningful as they should be, surprisingly similar techniques can be applied in order to ace them all.'



NIX YOUR NERVES

Team GB skier Rowan Cheshire didn't make it to the 2014 Sochi Olympics after a bad accident in her final practice run. By the time she flew to Pyeongchang for the 2018 Winter Olympics, aged 22, she'd been training for the event for three years, and nerves threatened to overpower her. 'It was my opportunity to prove myself and show the world what I could do, but the pressure of that felt overwhelming,' she tells *WH*. 'It was a very physical experience: my heart rate would increase and my mind raced with thoughts, worries, fears about the challenge ahead.' Rowan managed her nerves by setting herself a routine to comply with religiously. 'I woke up at roughly the same time every day, stretched, then meditated with the Headspace app in the mornings and did visualisation exercises in the evenings before sticking to a set bedtime,' she explains. 'Regularly visualising certain tricks or races from different perspectives takes away a lot of the pressure and nerves because, when I need to perform at my best on race day, I've already seen myself doing it a thousand times.'

Research by Colorado State University – on downhill skiers, coincidentally – found that athletes imagining themselves competing is enough to trigger neural firings in the muscles typically used, suggesting visualisations create a mental blueprint for future performance.

OWN YOUR SPACE

Given they carry the sporting hopes of millions on their shoulders, it's no wonder impostor syndrome can hit athletes hard. Stef Reid, 34, long jump world champion and triple Paralympic medalist, felt its cold creep when competing in the 2008 Beijing Games. Her aspirations to play rugby at a high level were dashed when she lost her right foot in a boating accident as a teenager. In 2008, Beijing was the highest-stakes sporting event she'd ever competed in. 'Arriving as a para-athlete was tough, she recalls. 'I had a crisis of confidence – I felt as though I shouldn't have

been there. Plus, I was used to performing in front of my mum, not 80,000 people in the stadium, plus millions around the world. But when I struggle with confidence, I act how I want to feel – the more I act like I'm confident, the more confident I become.'

Not that you have to be an athlete, or have endured such a trauma, to relate. 'Impostor syndrome is a belief that you're not worthy of success, and you become convinced that you lack ability, skills and competence, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary,' says Dr Jessamy Hibberd, clinical psychologist and author of *The Impostor Cure*. 'To overcome its effects, you need to see that the problem is not you, it's your interpretation of this feeling: such discomfort is a normal reaction and something everyone experiences – not a sign that you're an impostor.' Dr Hibberd recommends writing down your achievements and experience to hammer home this point.

MASTER YOUR MOTIVATION

'Did I want to get straight in the pool on those dark mornings when my alarm went off at 4.45am? Of course not,' laughs former world champion swimmer Karen Pickering, 47. 'But there's no space next to your name on the scoreboard for excuses – no one in sport cares why you didn't win. And as someone whose success definitely comes more from practice than natural talent, I've learned that there's no substitute for hard work; you either force yourself to train or you give up on your goals. That's it.' Snowboarder Almee Fuller's personal circumstances meant that she had to try a different stay-on-track tactic ahead of the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. 'I was physically in the best shape of my life, but mentally I wasn't in a good place,' she tells *WH*. 'I'd broken up with my long-term boyfriend, and my nan, who I'm very close to, had recently been diagnosed with cancer. When my own success wasn't enough to keep me training hard for those four months before the games, I thought about her sitting there in the stands in Pyeongchang, determined to cheer me on. It taught me that motivation can change and evolve – that it doesn't matter who or what your driving force is, so long as it keeps you going.' Find your why, then keep coming back to it.

psychology textbook. 'A few hours after blowing it at the long jump, I had to go back out there for the 200m. I was put in the lane where they place the slow people – basically, it couldn't get any worse. But I found that there's freedom at the bottom, and I decided two things. First, I was going to enjoy the run, because I sure hadn't enjoyed the long jump. Second, I was determined to get a PB. Not only did I shave a second off my best time, I also came away with a bronze medal.' It's the kind of anecdote echoed often by athletes – because if you stake your career on succeeding, you have to get used to failing. 'Sport teaches you to lose,' says Vernon. 'But more crucially, it teaches you how to learn from losing.'

FLOURISH AFTER FAILURE

Whether you're a sporting star or not, no amount of preparation can ensure success – something Stef learned that day in Beijing, during an event she was tipped to win. 'I fouled every jump but one – and that was just a safety jump to register a mark. I went back to the Olympic Village and cried for two hours, so much so that I became dehydrated. There was absolutely no positive spin I could apply – I just bottled it,' she recalls. Her thoughts and actions in the minutes and hours after that moment could have come straight out of a sports