

STRONG ^{WH} MIND



the
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issue

Mind games

Elite athletes sink or swim on the strength of their resilience, so who better to advise us regular folk on building mental fortitude? Time to learn from the women at the top of the leaderboards

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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 hack 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.'

FLLOURISH 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





FACE OFF FOMO

Commit to the life of a pro athlete and you'll wave goodbye to drinks with mates, family weddings and rite-of-passage gap year travels. 'I've been training since my early teens, so I missed a lot of those defining moments growing up,' remembers Rowan. 'All my school friends would hang out in a big group, and when I wasn't training and *could* join in, they had inside jokes and shared memories that I wasn't part of. I've got much better at dealing with it, but even now – with all the travel and opportunities I have – I find myself envious of my peers' more consistent lives. They have regular jobs and plan their time, whereas I can't even commit to a one-day music festival because I don't know my schedule in advance.' Aimee also struggled with the disconnect from home. 'I was in New Zealand for training, going up a windy, freezing mountain. It was summer at home and seeing a picture of my friends on a night out or my family having a barbecue would make me long to be there,' she explains. How does she deal? 'I remind myself that I care about my sport so much that I'm prepared to miss out; that my snowboarding peers are my family away from home and catching up with everyone in the UK will be all the sweeter when I return.' For Rowan, honing in on a few key relationships has been a game changer. 'Focusing on my five best friends rather than different big groups helps me be more present when I'm away.' Whether work's keeping you busy or money worries are making you miss out, keep coming back to what's important to you and be more engaged with what you *are* doing – rather than what you're not.



FIGHT REJECTION WITH RESILIENCE

Not being picked: one of the most universally stinging experiences a person can go through, whether that's smarting after learning via Instagram stories that your friends are out for dinner without you, or missing out on a spot in the squad. 'If you're not picked to represent your team, or as the person a brand wants to sponsor, there's no hiding from the very real sense that you are substandard,' Rowan says. 'I used to be so annoyed when someone in my team got an opportunity instead of me,' she says. Now? 'I've learned that not being chosen doesn't make me any less of a person.' Andy Lane, professor of sport psychology at the University of Wolverhampton, rates her response. 'Rejection is all part of being in a competitive environment, but when athletes invest all their self-esteem in their sport, this can devastate them,' he says. And it's just as true when people do the same with jobs or relationships. 'You can be an elite athlete, but it shouldn't be your only "thing",' adds Professor Lane. You might be a daughter, a friend, someone who, say, likes going to galleries or gigs on a Friday night. You are worth more than your competitive success. **WU 12**

THE SPORT PSYCH'S GUIDE TO LIFE

Dr Peter Olusoga, senior lecturer in sports psychology and coaching at Sheffield Hallam University, on handling setbacks like a champ

SCENARIO

You trained for 12 weeks to get a half marathon PB, only to miss it by minutes

PSYCH

Be angry or miserable if you need to be – but with a time limit. Once you're ready to get back to work, analyse your performance to work out what happened. Can you alter your nutrition, hydration or pacing? Use your conclusions to inform your new strategy. Noting your successes during the race is useful for confidence, too – maybe your mental strategy worked well, or you maintained form during that killer hill.

SCENARIO

You're forever setting goals, but lose motivation weeks in

PSYCH

The problem may be that your ambition is scattered; focus on two or three goals instead. They need to be flexible, too. Injuries, illness, work – life happens. You may also need to switch the way you frame them. Outcomes aren't always within your control – you could ace a job interview, but a more experienced candidate lands the role. Reflect on what you value and commit to actions that move you closer to that.

SCENARIO

You've been made redundant

PSYCH

Reflect on your identity outside this role. Regularly taking stock of who you are and what you bring outside of your job is essential psychological maintenance. Who are you in the eyes of your family? What's your role in your local community? Just as an athlete is much more than their job, so are you. Yes, there are bills to pay. But, invest in your own interests alongside looking for a new job and you'll be in a better place to handle it.