



As the shine rubs off

Over the past decade or so British athletes were beaming from the medal podiums at international sporting events. But what happens afterwards?

BY GUY KELLY

1 Over the past decade or so, we have grown accustomed to the sight of British athletes beaming from the medal podiums at
5 international sporting events. It occurred with an almost embarrassing frequency at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. The same happened at the London Games,
10 where they won a total of 65 medals, 29 of them gold. To the casual observer, it might look like those medallists are set for life: that at the pinnacle of their chosen
15 disciplines, they will simply live off

the glory forever. As Gail Emms revealed recently, though, that couldn't be further from reality. In a remarkably honest blog post,
20 Emms, who won a silver medal in the badminton mixed doubles competition at the 2004 Athens Olympics, spoke of her battle attempting to re-enter the working
25 world after her sporting success faded. Nine years on from retiring, she admitted, she is still unable to find another job.

Emms wrote, 'I have just
30 turned 40 years old. I have no

qualifications other than a sports science degree completed in 1998. I haven't had any experience in any organisation or company. I feel
35 ashamed; it's a massive dent in my pride to admit that an Olympic medallist is struggling.' A day after publishing the article, Emms received more than a thousand
40 messages of support, ranging from well-wishers to job offers and, notably, other athletes thanking her for shining a light on an all-too-common problem. 'It hasn't
45 been the reaction I was expecting

at all. It was just therapeutic for me to write it down, because I've reached a breaking point. Now I'm overwhelmed with amazing responses.'

Nowhere to turn

Like a lot of would-be professional athletes, Emms trained almost full-time from childhood to become a world-class badminton player, and scarcely ever paused to think about what she might do afterwards. On court, her hard work paid off: in addition to an Olympic silver, her trophy cabinet at home in Milton Keynes contains five Commonwealth medals and two European Championship golds. But when she retired after the Beijing Olympics in 2008, there was nowhere to turn.

'I was offered three months of athlete services from UK Sport – things like physio, some lifestyle advice – but in reality all retired athletes want to do is get drunk and eat burgers for a while. And when the three months is gone, then what? You just assume you will be fine because you have a medal.' Not knowing what career she would be suited for, Emms wrote out a CV, which consisted of little more than 'played badminton'. She did her best to explain how those shuttlecock-thwacking skills were transferable to the working world, but, she concedes, 'It's quite obvious you're just blagging.'

Depressing

Quickly, depression hit, relieved by starting a family with her partner in 2009. They now have two children, Harry, seven, and four-year-old Oliver, which gives her the bit of purpose she needs. Aside from the odd well-paid motivational speaking gig, though, she has never been able to find a solid second career, despite interviewing for various marketing or sports roles. 'I have a worse car now than I did when I was 20. I sell things on eBay – fortunately not my medals just yet – and I have to watch my kids' friends go on holiday when we can only put a paddling pool in the garden,' she says.

'I was very lucky to have my career, but I'm a sportswoman who relies on ego. We get used to winning. When I meet employers, I could say that I'm amazing at badminton but who cares?' Emms' story may have gone viral, but it's far from unique. The big names in athletics have it made, of course, with advertisers rushing to sign them up. But for those who are not household names, it's a different story. Last year, for instance, Zoe Smith, a weightlifting gold medallist for Great Britain in 2014, revealed she's now working in a coffee shop. Some countries treat their athletes better: Singapore offered a cash bonus of £578,000 per gold last year. That isn't to say Olympians' struggles don't exist abroad. Team USA's Ronda Rousey won bronze in judo in Beijing 2008, but spoke of living out of her Honda Accord by the end of that year, while working as a cocktail waitress.

On your own

'Winning a medal can open some doors, but even winning gold doesn't give you enough of a platform to do something with it,' says Tim Baillie, who won gold in the canoe slalom at London 2012. Baillie retired in 2014, aged 34, realising his heart wasn't in it. 'You stop and you're mid-thirties, with no pension, nothing. I really wasn't very well set up financially. I realised I would have to find a job and work forever.' Fortunately, Baillie, 38, had a degree in mechanical engineering and an aptitude for computers, meaning he could ask for work experience at a company in Nottingham. He is now a full-time web developer.

Ironically, Emms argues, Team GB's success is part of the problem. 'The Olympics is like a cult,' she says. 'We're second in the medal table, yes, but we have so many athletes. And they aren't going to get the rewards they think they'll get for winning.' Anthony Ogogo, 28, was another hero of 2012, winning a bronze in middleweight boxing. 'I was the most well-known boxer of all the medallists for a period and predicted to have the

biggest professional career. But then injuries struck,' he says. Life outside of the Olympic set-up hit hard. 'It can be really lonely. The Team GB set-up is very good. You are part of this one huge team, so you have doctors, physios, all this support around you. But when you're out of that, you're out on your own.'

Preparation

Leon Lloyd, a former England rugby player and now a director at a social enterprise providing support and workshops for athletes, sees the problem. 'It's the classic invincible mentality. People come in with their arms crossed, all ego and unable to accept the issue. Regardless of success and salary, everyone has the same problem,' he says. 'You can plan and you should. There's a lot of downtime in sport, so if they use that to pick up some work experience, they will be so thankful for it. We need to get them to see that preparation during their playing careers pays off when they retire, too. That's the challenge.'

It's something Emms could have done with. She will now pause, she says, assess her options, and try to restart her life. Hopefully, somewhere in those thousand replies is her dream job. 'I don't know what that is, but I'm OK with not knowing. I just want to sink my teeth into something and get back on my feet. I think I'm really good. I hope I can show that.' <<

