GRIT AND GOOSE FEATHERS

Chasing Medals and Finding Me.

My Olympic Journey Uncovered.

GAIL EMMS MBE

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pitch

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EXIT WOMB, ENTER DRAMA

I WAS born Gail Elizabeth Emms, in Hitchin on 23 July 1977. 'Elizabeth' because it was Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee year. As for 'Gail', well … no one knows. When I asked my parents why they chose it, they genuinely couldn't remember. There were no famous Gails at the time, no gales blowing outside, no long-lost relatives with the name. My best guess? They forgot to stick 'Abi' in front, and I've been stuck with a name more fitting for a middle-aged woman ever since.

I arrived in the world weighing a hefty 9lb 2oz. Considering my mum is only 5ft tall, it's fair to say I didn't exactly glide into existence. There was some birth trauma, and I was rushed straight to the ICU. My parents still laugh, telling the story of how I filled the entire incubator, while all the other babies around me were tiny 3lb or 4lb preemies. Apparently, they were a bit embarrassed to point me out. 'That's ours,' they'd say, as their newborn linebacker took up most of the crib.

Interestingly, I was almost born in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. My parents had the papers and plane tickets to start a new life there, but, with my mum pregnant, she had a change of heart at the last moment. So instead of the wild beauty of Africa, they settled in … Stotfold, Bedfordshire. Practically the same, right?

My mum, Janice Barton, was born in north London in 1951, deep in Arsenal territory. Her dad, my grandad, was a diehard Gooner, as were her older brothers Peter and Ray. Naturally, Mum decided to support Tottenham Hotspur, just to wind them all up. That act of rebellion sparked a lifelong love of football.

Mum grew up during a time when girls weren't allowed to play football. They were banned by the FA in 1921 as they declared it 'unsuitable' for them. But my mum didn't care. She played anyway, kicking a ball around with Ray, her boy cousins, and the local lads. When her family moved from London to Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, she finally saw green fields and threw herself into playing properly. She idolised Spurs striker Jimmy Greaves and spent hours practising her dribbling, pretending to be him. My grandad, despite his allegiances, even took her to watch Spurs games, albeit reluctantly. When she got older, she went by herself, often dressing as a boy to blend in with the crowd.

After England's 1966 World Cup win, there was a spark of interest in women's football again, despite the FA ban still being in place. A few clubs began to form, and one stood out to Mum: Chiltern Valley Ladies in Luton, run by Harry and June Batt. She wrote them a letter, asked for a trial, and was soon banging in goals as their star centre-forward.

(There's a lot more about Mum's incredible football story later in the book in a chapter called 'The Lost Lionesses', but you'll have to keep reading to get there, I'm afraid.)

One of my earliest memories is watching Mum play football. I must have been about four. We were in some fields in Stopsley, Luton. My sister was in a pushchair, my nan and grandad were cheering her on, shouting, 'Go on, Janice!' It felt completely normal to me that Mum played football. But my dad was moaning and grumbling about being 'left with the kids', not exactly thrilled with his wife running around on a football pitch. And shortly after that, Mum gave it up. It just wasn't the 'done thing' in the early '80s, and Dad said it was not the image of a good housewife and mother. Dad expected her at home, not on the scoresheet.

Growing up, I never kicked a ball with Mum. She didn't want me to play football at all. Not because she didn't love the game anymore, but because of the abuse she endured. 'Get back in the kitchen!' was a regular chant from the sidelines for her, and, at the time, when I was a little girl, there were no pathways in football for

girls. No teams. No leagues. So, in my mum's eyes, what was the point of me playing?

She still has a scrapbook filled with clippings and photos from her footballing days, and when she talks about Chiltern Valley Ladies, she lights up. Every Wednesday, my nan and grandad would come over, and I'd sit with them, flicking through the pages as they told stories about the trophies in their house. Visitors would always assume they belonged to the boys. 'Oh no,' my nan would say proudly. 'They're my daughter Janice's.' I *loved* that. I didn't see Mum play again until years later, when my younger brother Adam came along. Then suddenly, she was in the garden, kicking a ball about with him.

My dad, on the other hand, was born on 16 August 1941, in the brilliantly named village of Little Snoring, Norfolk. Incredibly ironic, because he was the loudest snorer known to mankind. It honestly could've been used to calibrate the Richter scale. He only found salvation late in life with a sleep apnoea machine, which probably could have saved a few relationships (and eardrums).

He was born on a farm as an only child. His mum passed away when he was still young, and my dad left school at 14 to start work. He helped out on the farm and then trained as a carpenter. He was brilliant at it … truly. Ask him for a table, and he'd build you a piece of furniture that transformed into a cupboard, a ladder and a bloody spaceship. Any scrap bit of wood lying around, and dad would look at it and say, 'I can make something out of that.' His shed was always full of randomly collected pieces of wood.

Eventually, he set up his own carpentry business, which evolved into a shopfitting and building company. But his true passions were food, drink, and entertaining. He was a fantastic cook, and most of my best memories with him revolve around the kitchen or the barbecue. Meat, more meat and a side of meat. His roast dinners were legendary. Honestly, no one's matched them since. He struggled with his weight, though. He was around 5ft 10 but ballooned to nearly 26st at one point. He'd yo-yo diet, lose loads, then gain it back. One year, he dropped to 13st by taking up running, including marathons, but it didn't last. Most of his life, he hovered around the 20st mark.

My parents met in the most '70s way imaginable. Mum was working as a petrol station attendant (yep, that used to be a job), and Dad kept 'running out of petrol' just to see her. Apparently, she was completely oblivious. I'll let your imagination fill in the rest … petrol, pumps, refuelling … this was 1970s romance, after all. I now feel a bit queasy.

Mum was ten years younger than Dad, so my nan and grandad were wary, but, eventually, they saw he could provide for her. In hindsight, maybe their concerns about his love of partying and drinking weren't so far off the mark, but Mum and Dad married in 1975 and soon after moved from Stotfold to Bedford, a town full of promise.

My sister Lisa was born three years after me, and Adam three years after her. I'll talk more about them later, but let's just say I fully leaned into my role as the bossy eldest sibling, until they got big enough to fight back.

Despite Mum's football past, it was Dad who introduced me to the game. My first match was Norwich vs Liverpool on 25 August 1984. I was seven, and Dad took me to the season opener. It ended in a 3–3 draw, and all I remember is the noise. It physically hurt my ears. Full-grown men shouting, singing, swearing – it was chaos. And the journey to the ground was pure torture. Back then, the road from Bedford to Norwich was a single carriageway, and I counted something like 37 tractors.

When we finally got home, Mum took one look at my face and pulled me aside. 'It's okay,' she whispered, like she was sharing a secret. 'Come to Spurs.' It felt like a blessing. A calling. A light. And so began my lifelong sentence of supporting Tottenham, a legacy of heartbreak, hope, and an eternal stream of cocky Arsenal fans.

From Rattle to Racket

My family lived around the corner from Bedford and County Tennis and Badminton Club. It was a nice part of Bedford, popular with families and it wasn't too far outside the town centre. Bedford Rugby Club was also nearby, but my parents became members of the tennis

and badminton club, rather than the rugby one. Both were keen at racket sports, my mum especially.

My childhood was spent at the club – 'Bradgate Road' as we affectionately called it, as it was on, yes, you've guessed it, Bradgate Road. I have the fondest memories of being a ball girl on the many grass tennis courts in the summer, and then watching my parents play with friends on club evenings.

The three badminton courts were in a 'tin hut' by the side of the tennis courts (it's a corrugated iron building where grain was stored in World War II and was turned into a community badminton hall after the war). There were 12 grass courts, and four red clay courts alongside the tin hut, and there was also a bar and viewing gallery for the members. I loved it there. I loved the smell of the tennis balls and putting them in the tin boxes, all labelled one to 12 for the courts, and then handing them out to the players as they went to their assigned court. There was a sense of fun, a sense of community. Even if they were not playing that day or evening, members would be there, being social, having a drink, supporting others. The tennis courts and the clubhouse are now gone. Turned into a housing estate. The land was too valuable as it was so close to Bedford town centre. The tin hut is still there, as it is a listed building. It pains me every time I go back to Bedford and see my childhood playground, which is now a residential area.

I remember holding a cut-down badminton racket in my right hand and a plastic shuttlecock in the other. I held the shuttle out in front of me, and I dropped it, expecting it to bounce, just like a tennis ball does. I must have been three or four years old at the time. As I dropped it, of course, the shuttle just landed right at my feet. Margaret Smith, a formidable lady in her 40s, with a huge bosom, who ran the whole club, was standing by my side as this happened. She looked at me, and said, 'Well, of course it doesn't bounce, dear, it's a shuttlecock,' as if I was supposed to know this, even though I had never seen a shuttlecock before in my life.

Eventually, I hit that bloody plastic thing and took every opportunity I could to play badminton with one of the other members.

That's what I love about sport … the first time trying a skill, you fail, but with practice, you start to see the results. You get better. Your confidence soars, and you want more. You want to keep improving.

There were other kids who loved running around the club too, and eventually, I was allowed to join the junior badminton club, when I was about six years old. I used to look forward to Friday evenings and, Sunday mornings, as those times were junior club times, and I was allowed to play. Even thinking about it now, it makes me smile. As the club was only a few minutes' walk from our house, I used to just get my racket and walk there by myself, usually the first one there, waiting for the door to be opened, as I was so eager.

I wore my favourite tracksuit every time – a bright pink number from the C&A in Bedford town. I wore it all the time. I really was a vision from the 1980s, with my blonde bowl haircut, though this did progress to a bob. God, I was trendy. In between practice, my friends and I would walk through the club room, sneak behind the bar and pretend we were serving drinks, then play hide and seek. The changing rooms were always so cold, a little bit creepy even. There was a musty, damp smell, and there were black and white photographs of original members all over the walls. We would listen for the rats scurrying under the floorboards and marvel at the huge spider webs in the corners of the roof, wondering why no one ever cleaned the place.

The advantage badminton has over tennis is that you can play all year round. Damn those rainy days and winter months; if it wasn't for them, I would have been a champion tennis player, she says … The reality was that I just remember playing badminton more. I was also small for my age, and tennis suits the taller ones. Bigger court and all that.

Gail: I always played better mixed doubles. The badminton club had hardly any girls, so I always had to play against boys. I really loved playing against boys.

Steph: Maybe it was a way of showing off for you?

Gail: I think you're beginning to understand me, Steph.

Small, Shouty and Already Competitive

Mum was a good badminton player. In fact, by 1980, she'd already claimed her place on the club championship winners' board as the Ladies Singles champion, while pregnant with my sister – just to rub it in a little more. That cheeky win gave me someone close to look up to and learn from when I discovered my own love for badminton.

I don't remember playing much with Dad, but Mum was always up for a game. She was good enough to try out for the Bedfordshire County team, which was a big deal at the time. I was around seven years old when she turned to me and said, 'Fancy a game?' I was thrilled. I imagined an exciting match, maybe even scoring a few points, but Mum had other ideas, and absolutely destroyed me, 11-0. Shuttles zipped past me with no mercy. That was her coaching style – she never gave me a point. I had to earn it. She was *so* competitive, but I loved it. It became a personal mission: I HAD to win a point against Mum.

I was obsessed. Anyone who visited our house was roped into garden matches so I could practise. I stayed late at the junior club, always looking for extra games. All in the hope that next time I played against Mum, I might win a point.

People often ask if my parents pushed me into sports. The honest answer is no. It came entirely from me. My parents never forced me to practise, never told me to go to the club practice sessions; I chose to every time. They were there in support.

What also helped me thrive were the grassroots volunteers who made the sport accessible; those unsung heroes who gave up their evenings to run junior clubs, mediate shuttlecock-related squabbles and offer a safe place to compete. To the likes of Margaret Smith, Mike Hardy and Brigitte Crossman, thank you. You helped spark my passion.

That competitive fire first truly ignited when I saw a notice at the junior club: 'Bedfordshire Schools U11 Tournament – Entries Now Open.' I begged to enter. Some people were concerned I was too young at the age of just seven, but Dad said, 'Why not?' And off we went.

I vividly remember stepping into Stopsley Leisure Centre in Luton in my pink tracksuit. Everyone else looked so tall, and most were aged ten or 11. I was the tiny one, and they all went, 'Awwww, isn't she cute?' They were right, I was cute – until we got on court. Then I beat them. Word spread, and people started coming over to watch me play. I reached the final and walked away with the girls' singles runner-up trophy. My first one. I was hooked.

I was selected for the Bedfordshire County team and regularly played U11 and U12 matches. At 12, I was even playing for the U16s. I'd grown out of my pink C&A tracksuit by then and upgraded to a blue shell suit with pink balloons on it, with matching scrunchies, of course. Oh, and I fell in love too, I fell in love with my mixed doubles partner, Simon Blundell. Sadly, the feeling wasn't mutual. I suspect the balloon pattern might've had something to do with it. I really wasn't cool enough for him.

But through all the county matches and tournaments, my personal Everest remained: beating Mum. It took five long years. Then, on 26 August 1989, at the grand old age of 12, it finally happened. I'd been creeping up with the scores, pushing her harder and getting closer to the win. That day, the stars aligned. I had match point. Mum looked flustered. I served. We rallied. She lifted the shuttle short, I pounced and smashed it. Winner. Game over.

I did what any 12-year-old would do – I celebrated like I'd just won Olympic gold. I sprinted around the hall yelling, '*Yeeeesssss*!!!' Five years of effort exploded in that moment. Mum, however, was *not* pleased. She threw her racket and stormed to the corner of the tin hut. I, ever the humble champion, strolled over grinning and casually said, 'Wanna play again?'

Her response? 'No. I'm not playing you anymore.'

What? Was she joking?! After all those years of losing, this was *my* time to dominate! But Mum looked at me and explained, 'You're too good for me now. If you keep playing me, you won't get better. You need stronger opponents.'

Looking back, it was very Jedi Master and Padawan, with Yoda passing the lightsaber to young Skywalker. Except we had badminton

rackets, not lightsabers. (And no, I'm *not* calling my mum old, small and green.)

It wasn't the response I expected, but it stuck with me. People assume elite athletes are born to win everything. That's not true. I *lost* far more matches than I ever won, especially early on. After Mum retired from our duels, she set me up with tougher opponents. I got battered. Regularly. And still, she'd whisper to them, 'Don't go easy on her.'

I hated losing. I'd sulk, maybe cry, get it out. But then I'd regroup and start asking, 'How can I win next time? What do I need to do differently?' Losing turned into learning.

That was Mum's parting gift as my badminton partner. By stepping aside, she taught me something far bigger than how to hit a shuttle. She taught me that failure isn't the end, it's just a step toward improvement. These days, they call it 'resilience'.

I just called it 'finally beating Mum at badminton'.

Steph: There aren't many kids who would have been prepared to let their mum beat them time and time again. Most would be utterly demoralised. There was some innate determination that just kept you going.

Gail: I've had a lot of therapy.

I started to play a few national tournaments at this stage too. This was the chance I got to understand the motorway system in the United Kingdom. I had one of those large AA map books on my lap, and it was my job to navigate Dad to the destination sports hall. To this day, I really don't know how we managed to find our way across the country. We often stopped at petrol stations or asked people on the street for directions, but I do think I did a good job overall for someone so young.

Gail: You feel the need to fit in in life. Then there was this wonderful place known as sport, where I could actually be myself. That feeling of being able to be free. Freedom, a clear mind and nothing mattered

except for the result. I was able to be in the present. Just be in the moment. My team-mates need me. I want to win this point.

Steph: It sounds like it was really a form of escapism for you?

Gail: It was a lot better than the real world.

Slammed Doors and Silent Treatment

Gail: I remember I used to check my dad's wardrobe. See if his clothes were still hanging in there.
Steph: Children are very intuitive. You knew something was wrong, and it must have made you anxious. I'm curious to know if you remember having the feeling that you wanted to protect your mum?

Gail: I felt I had to support her and my brother, and my sister.

Steph: You were only ten years old, so looking at it through a child's eyes now, particularly now you have kids yourself, maybe you can appreciate that was really tough?

Gail: I just kept hoping the clothes would still be there, and it would all be fine. And then it wasn't fine. One day, they had gone. It was a strange feeling, just seeing the emptiness staring back at me. I had known it was coming. I closed the door on the wardrobe and went to school as normal.

I remember the shouting in the house, and I didn't like it. We were living in a house on Kimbolton Avenue, still near the badminton club, and in this house, the stairs split into two halfway up. One way was the 'children's area', the other was the 'grown-ups'. There was a square landing bit, before it split off, and I used to sit on that square, and listen to my parents screaming at each other. My brother and sister were usually asleep, but the shouting used to wake me up. Sometimes, stuff, a cup, a plate, was thrown, and I would hear the smash on the floor of broken crockery. The words were muffled behind the closed door, but I could make a lot out about what was happening. There had been an affair on my dad's part.

No one divorced back then … one had heard of these 'split families', but not in our circle, or in our neighbourhood. Definitely

not at my fee-paying school either. Dad's building company had been flourishing with big-money contracts coming in; however, he was loving the flashy lifestyle that came with it, and entertaining clients became dad's favourite hobby. We had a nice five-bedroom house, two new cars on the drive, all reflecting the income coming in. Often, Dad would leave the house on a Friday night and not come home until Monday morning. I remember opening the door to leave for school one morning, and he was there, on the doorstep, in person but not in spirit. He was a mess. Still drunk. Vomit spilled down his shirt, and he had urinated all over himself. It was such a gluttonous sight, taking everything to excess. I ran and hid in the downstairs toilet, spraying perfume that I found in there, Anais Anais, I remember, to get rid of the mix of smells of him, and waited for him to get into the house so I could leave without seeing him again. I hate the smell of that perfume now.

Dad had built an office in our back garden, and I used to love going in and seeing all the architectural drawings. I could visualise the houses, the different rooms, the kitchen designs, all by just looking at the 2D drawings. The interior designers had a board with their vision and all the colour palettes and designs. I loved being in that environment. Sometimes, Dad would take me out on site, especially if it was a house he was building for us to live in, and we would walk around the foundations and he would talk to me about where everything was going, so I could visualise it.

My dad recognised what we would now call 'stereotypical male characteristics' in me, and if I had been born a boy, he would have taught me everything he knew. Yet he held back – I know he did – as I was a girl. Girls didn't build, in his eyes. He wanted me to be ambitious, no doubt about that, but not in the building trade. He knew I was interested in what he did, but he kept me away, too. It was an incredibly male chauvinistic environment back then. The men wolf-whistling to any female that went past, the Page 3 girls calendar on the walls, the secretaries with the tight skirts and big boobs spilling out of their blouses knowing they weren't hired for their shorthand or typing expertise.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's reign in the 1980s hit my dad hard with the recession that came about. My dad was a stubborn git and thought he could push through when many sold out. He had good deals, he was confident, and the business did the work. There was even a contract to build the holiday chalets at Butlin's, Minehead, but some people couldn't pay after the work had been done. Dad was losing money badly. This had an effect on Mum and Dad's relationship and, in another overheard argument, it was revealed that my dad had remortgaged the house without telling my mum. She was absolutely livid, and rightly so, but Dad kept reassuring her, 'It will be okay. I promise.'

The business was also fitting out Chinese restaurants. Dad was obsessed with Hong Kong after a visit there, and he lent some money (around £250k) to a Chinese businessman for investing. Cue Chinese man disappearing and, later that year, Dad found out he was wanted by the FBI for fraud. There were contacts of his in London, so Dad used to take me to Chinatown, usually on a Friday night before a badminton tournament. We would sit in a random Chinese restaurant waiting for his associates to meet us, and a brown envelope of cash would be passed over the table, between the egg fried rice and Peking duck, as my dad desperately tried to claw back some of his money. I realise now, I was there to make sure there was no trouble, or any fights breaking out. Thanks, Dad. Luckily, there were no unpleasant situations, but eventually the trips stopped as Dad admitted defeat.

Dad moved out of the family home for a while. It was strange to adjust to this new way of life. Even though they were split, there was still arguing, pleading and screaming. It was tense. It all got too much for Mum, and she asked Lisa, Adam and myself if we wanted Dad to come back home. We all said yes, as good children would. Truthfully, we said yes because we had no idea what the hell was going on, and I was sick of all the noise and Mum's friends giving advice.

Dad coming home meant 'a new start', which in our family meant 'a new house', and we moved into a renovation at 177 Kimbolton Road, Bedford. This house, oh my gosh, it was amazing. Originally, it was a Victorian detached house, with four bedrooms and a good-sized

garden (sounding like an estate agent here), but Dad put everything he had into transforming this house and got all his staff working on it, to make it the dream home for us kids and my mum. By the time he had finished, he had put side, loft and back extensions on the house: the back extension had an indoor swimming pool, sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi, gym, huge breakfast room area overlooking the pool, and a massive kitchen. Mum was, and still is, rubbish at cooking, so ironically the kitchen was for Dad really – if he was ever home, that is.

I got to design my bedroom exactly how I wanted. The new cars on the driveway were a Jaguar and a convertible Escort. Yet, for some reason, it never felt like home. It felt cold … too big for us. We used the swimming pool lots at the start, then the appeal wore off, and it was hard to maintain.

Gail: Dad was always building houses, and we'd move every year.

Steph: So you've had quite a transient life.

Gail: My dad was always saying, 'We're going to build this house. Then we're going to build this house!' We were always living on a building site.

Steph: It's interesting that the big house never felt like home. It didn't give you any street cred for having a house with a swimming pool?

Gail: No, I didn't have many mates, to be honest.

The strain of the bigger bills and the impending money problems the business was facing didn't help Mum and Dad's fragile relationship, and the inevitable happened. After a year in that house, they sat us down in the 'posh living room' and told us they were splitting up again. All three of us went, 'Oh, okay.' Then my parents said they would have to sell the house. That's when we cried. Another upheaval, and we knew there was more shouting and screaming coming.

I was 13 years old by now, and it was time to admit to school that my parents were one of just three families in the whole year group that would be split. The divorce word was whispered around.

Dad moved out, the furniture was sold, all to try and keep our heads above water. The house was put up for sale, but the recession had hit house prices hard and 177 Kimbolton Road was going to be sold for way less than it was worth. It broke my dad. I know that his behaviour wasn't the best, but to see all that hard work, the painstaking effort, the design, his dream home being sold for a fraction of what it was worth – let's just say Margaret Thatcher's name was never to be mentioned ever again.

Lisa, Adam and I made the most of the playroom being empty and created weird games. We taped big bean bags to each other and ran into each other with the lights out. To this day, I have no idea how or why we came up with that game, but it seemed to make us laugh and take our minds away from it all.

The stress of the split started to take its toll on Mum. Dad would not be allowed up to the house at this point, and I would have to go to the end of the drive to meet him if he was taking me to a badminton tournament. He moved into a house in Northampton with his new girlfriend, Rachel (who I got on very well with), but Mum couldn't handle him moving on, and there was a lot of resentment. I can see it from her side; she let my dad back in and believed his promises, but he let her down, over and over again. I used to like going away for the weekend for badminton tournaments with Dad – it was like an adventure. It was exciting and I got to meet up with all my badminton friends, but I was never allowed to say that in front of Mum, as she would get angry and upset, so I kept it all to myself.

Lisa, Adam and I saw Dad a hell of a lot more after he and Mum split, because Dad had to put the effort in, though it was hard to entertain three kids of seven, ten and 13. I did not want to go to the cinema to watch kids' films or go ten-pin bowling, but my brother and sister loved that. I got to see Dad at badminton tournaments anyway, so most of the time I left them to it.

Dignity Lost in Translation

I was reaching the quarter-finals of national badminton tournaments, results good enough to make an impact on the English junior

badminton scene. As a result, I was selected to participate in an U14 international tournament in Holland. I was so excited. The minibus left England with a ten-strong squad, and off we set.

It seems that junior tournaments in Holland are run pretty much like they are in this country. There's the obligatory big tournament desk with lots of paper on it, two stressed-out adults trying to fill in results and keep everything on time, while coping with lots of teenagers hanging around.

It was time for my first match, and I was keen to make an impression. The Dutch tournament organiser announced me on to court over the PA system, and as my name was said, echoing in the six-badminton-court hall, the Dutch junior players all started laughing hysterically at me. Not quite the reaction I expected, and it caught me off guard.

Luckily, I managed to win the game, and as I came off the badminton court and back to the England players' base, a Dutch player came up to me and asked, in perfect English with a Dutch accent, 'Is your name really Gail?' and laughed again. I replied, 'Yes, it is.'

This is where I have to put in a formal complaint to my parents for not doing their research to see if their new baby daughter's name had any other meaning in a foreign language. It appears there is a Dutch word '*geil*', pronounced like 'Gail', just a bit throatier, and it means 'horny'. At my first international tournament, I was 'Horny Emms'. Still to this day, whenever I go to Holland and say my name, the Dutch have a little giggle.

Navigating Teens and Sport

Dad and I got accustomed to our weekends at badminton tournaments over the coming years. I was there, in the passenger seat, with the now-worn AA road map, the address of where to go, a packed lunch from Mum if I was lucky (cheese and pickle sandwiches which always went soggy), and there was always a fight over the radio station. BBC Radio 1, or Radio 5 on MW to listen to the football. Occasionally, Dad would put his Johnny Cash music cassette on to play, which I

didn't mind, but I never admitted that to him. I drew a line at Dolly Parton, though.

The atmosphere in the car on the drive back home would be dependent on whether I had won or lost. There were many times when I had lost to someone I shouldn't have, and my dad would be fuming. 'Do you want me to say what I think?' he would say, and I'd moodily return, 'No, I don't want to know.'

To be honest, I could tell exactly what he was thinking. His driving said it all. When Dad was angry, he took it out on the speed limit. Driving at 95mph was his way of saying, 'You need to do better.' But when I won, 'Oh my goodness! You were incredible today!' The compliments would flow, and we'd happily talk about the points I had won and the great shots I had played.

It is not easy being a 'sport parent', and I had no appreciation for what my dad gave up for me at the time. There is no financial support for talented kids; there is only 'Bank of Mum and Dad', and a lot of my rackets were donated to me or second-hand. The same with my kit. I am forever thankful to my coaches – Bill Goode, especially, who knew what my dad was going through, and if he was struggling to pay for the coaching sessions, then Bill would waive the cost. My dad was a proud man, and if he had the money, he always gave Bill what he owed.

I had no idea just how much of a struggle it was, and now, being a sports parent to two boys, I realise. And it's not just the money, it was the time given up taking me to sports halls around the country, which really wasn't that exciting. Most of them were cold in temperature, with only a crappy coffee machine that would stop working by 11am. But he did it. He showed up. And I can't say 'thank you' enough. And now it's too late.

It was extremely hard for Mum to adjust to this new life; no husband, no job, three kids and limited money. And it didn't help that I was now in my teenage years – yay, go hormones – and that I am very much like my dad in personality characteristics and body shape. Every time Mum looked at me, she saw him. I am not saying

I looked like a middle-aged man when I was 13 years old, but you know what I mean.

It was so tough, as I could see the glimmer of resentment as she caught me being like my father, so I learned to zone out. She needed an outlet for her pain and frustration, and there was no one there to help or support her. I took a lot of the anger, but I also didn't help matters. I used to wind my mum up constantly with my behaviour, and the way I spoke to her was shocking. I was going to a school (they kept us on with scholarships) that promoted 'girl power', to be independent women that would rule the world, and here was my mum, left with nothing after my dad had left us. The irony of it all. It wasn't her fault, yet my selfishness decided she was the problem. In my mind, she could have studied and gotten a job to get more money for us when we were struggling. I thought it was that easy. I didn't know any better.

Gail: I was angry.

Steph: Where do you think the anger was coming from?

Gail: Because I was like my dad. It was the only way I knew to be at that point. To annoy Mum, I don't know. I just didn't understand what was going on.

Zoning out was easy for me. There were times when I could transport to another place for a few hours, and no matter what was going on around me, I could just be wherever I wanted to be. My imagination would take me to the stage in a theatre, into my favourite film or even running a business.

Sport helped me hugely; when I stepped on to that badminton court or that hockey pitch, nothing else mattered except for being present and in the moment. I had my role to play; I had my job, and that was to win. I could forget the arguments, the money problems, the shouting, the body-image crisis I was going through, because all I wanted was to be the star on that sports team. To feel wanted meant so much at that time. To be picked, to be selected because you were

the best gave me such a rush. I used to feel sad when it was time to go home and back to reality, and I'd often sign up for three or four sports clubs a day, just so I could get my fix of sport and being needed.

Steph: What are the words that you would use to describe how you felt over that period?

Gail: It felt like I just didn't fit in. I was lost, I guess. At least I had sports. You're not really supposed to be sporty as a girl. You're supposed to be this princess, you know? With painted nails – all delicate and sweet. I was anything but. I was made to feel like there was something wrong with me for wanting to run fast and have all this energy and competitiveness.

Steph: Was no one fighting your corner to say you could be proud of who you were?

Gail: No, I just felt like I was the odd one out.

Steph: So you felt alone?

Gail: Yeah.

Steph: Being a hormonal teenager probably didn't help?

Gail: Teenagers can be mean – I was called chunky. The boys wanted the pretty delicate girls, not the one with the big arse from lunging in badminton.

Steph: Maybe this is what drove you even harder towards sport? Because that's where you could fit in and excel?

Gail: Exactly. I was accepted and praised. I was getting all that I wasn't getting at home. The coaches were saying, 'Oh my gosh, that was incredible!' It was acceptable to be me. There were other girls who had muscles like me!

Steph: What a contrast you're painting ... in badminton, you were Gail, and you felt like you belonged.

Gail: Yep.

The next move was to a newish estate, Amberley Gardens in Bedford, and even though my mum's and my relationship was very fragile, I do have some of the best memories from this time. Next door to our house lived a girl called Rosie Garner, who went to my school too, but she was in the school year below. She was also a member of the 'divorced family' club, so we instantly knew the s**t that came with it.

Rosie and I started to hang out together, and generally just be stupid, bringing along a boy named Mat Aram. Mat (one t, not two) lived around the corner. They were my best mates, and I absolutely adored Mat. I was completely in love with him, but I was too shy to say anything. Every time I had the opportunity to do so, I bottled it. Mat and Rosie were boyfriend and girlfriend for a while, and it broke my heart.

I always struggled to fit in with the other girls. I didn't quite know how to be the kind of girl I was apparently supposed to be. I was sporty, strong, stocky and muscular, and that meant I didn't match the typical 'girly girl' mould. I wasn't petite or dainty. My legs, especially, stood out. I had calves like a powerlifter and thighs that belonged on a shot-putter. Thanks, Dad.

I had puppy fat clinging to me, and although I loved fashion and wanted to go out with boys like everyone else, I also loved living in tracksuits and trainers. I was stuck in the middle, constantly conflicted. I wasn't one thing or the other.

I loved chatting with everyone, regardless of whether they were cool, nerdy, goth or somewhere in between. But with girls, it didn't work like that. You had to pick a clique and stay in it. That was the problem: I didn't have one. I didn't fit into any category. I tried to be cool (a disaster), dabbled with goth (blonde hair and minimal make-up didn't help), and eventually just floated around aimlessly. If I got invited somewhere, great. More often than not, I didn't.

And then I began to resent my body. I couldn't understand why I wasn't skinny like the others. Sport made me constantly hungry, but I seemed to gain weight just by *looking* at food. It became a lifelong frustration with that stubborn fat gene I inherited. No matter what

I wore or ate, I couldn't escape the fact that this was just how my body was built.

I began to feel like something was wrong with me – like I was a freak, even. Mum didn't understand either. She was small and slim, and had no idea what to say other than 'maybe stop eating so much.' What made me strong in sport – my powerful build – made me feel like an outsider in teenage life.

Fortunately, I had two things in my favour: I had boobs and waist-length blonde hair. So, I leaned in with that. Armed with a padded Topshop bra and some strategic cleavage, I created a temporary solution to help me feel like I belonged. Even if it was only skin deep.

I hope Mum didn't hate me during those times … but I felt this anger about why she had been left in this position. There were many women in those days who weren't allowed a career, or society expected that they would stay at home and look after the house and kitchen; then, when the man leaves, they are left on their own, almost helpless.

My mum would have made an awesome PE teacher, but she was left to get jobs as a dinner lady or after-school care assistant, as that was all she was qualified to do. I hated the injustice of it all, and I vowed that I would never be in her position. I would never be so dependent on a man that if he left, I would have nothing. It is important to note here that I was seeing this situation through the eyes of a schoolgirl who was excelling in sports, going to an independent school that encouraged me to be strong-willed, and listening to a *lot* of Spice Girls. I feel differently now, and I wish there had been more support and help for Mum. Mental health wasn't a thing back then, you just got on with it, but it was a 'thing', and it wasn't a great time for her.

Sport was my escape … I still didn't have many close friends, so I used to play sport every lunchtime, as at least then I didn't have to sit on my own or walk around school to see if anyone would talk with me. I used to sit in the PE changing rooms on my own lots, just because no one else would hang out with me. I wasn't a nasty person, I just didn't have the ability to connect with one person intensely like a lot of girls can do so easily. They used to pick a 'best friend' and it

was like a pact for life. I was genuinely interested in everyone, but that wasn't playing by the rules.

If school sport was cancelled at lunchtime, it meant that I was on my own again, and I would have to find somewhere to be until lessons started again. I wish there had been honest conversations back then. I have the self-awareness now to understand that my personality was difficult for many of the girls to manage. They weren't nasty to my face, I wasn't bullied, but I was often left out on purpose. When it came to giving out Christmas presents or birthday gifts, it became obvious I wasn't included. It hurt, I'll admit, and I will always remember a lovely, kind girl called Marianna Stango sticking up for me and buying me a little something when the others didn't want her to.

I did the typical teenager thing, and hung out by the river in Bedford, drinking some cider, trying a cigarette, standard coming-of-age in the early 1990s, as there wasn't much else to do. The first time I got *very* drunk, and I mean *very*, was on a family holiday to the Greek island of Rhodes. Dad and his girlfriend Rachel had taken us in the school holidays, as Dad had found a new job working for a mate of his from his building days, and had saved up enough to take us away. It was a few days before my 15th birthday, and I had made some awesome friends of the same age.

One of the boys, Matt, had bought a bottle of vodka and a packet of Benson & Hedges cigarettes from the shop in the hotel. We started drinking on the beach, before finding our way to a disco nearby, where I discovered a taste for brandy and chocolate milk. I had been more used to cheap cider – Thunderbird, White Lightning – not vodka and brandy. I could usually stop drinking when I felt too drunk, but this time I went too far. The end result was me thinking I was physically dying and begging to go to the hospital in Rhodes to get my stomach pumped. I was throwing up so much, retching bile, horrible to think about it now.

Dad was fuming, so I acted all innocent, telling him I had never had alcohol before and I had been corrupted. My dad stormed up to Matt the next day, got him by the neck and pinned him up against

the wall, telling him to stay away from me. He scared the living s**t out of him. I did apologise to Matt: it was all me, and not Matt.

Looking back, it was all a cry for help. I was looking for affection that was not attached to winning a trophy. I was looking for friendship because it was me as a person, not because I could play hockey well. I tried to make people laugh, tried to be cool, all to please everyone and make them like me. It didn't work, but I still had sport, and I was popular in this space.

Gail: I know now, weird people produce extraordinary results. You cannot be spectacular and fit in at the same time. If I could go back and tell my younger self this, I would.

Steph: 'Weird' is still how you choose to describe yourself? If you described this scenario, but it was about a good friend, I wonder how you would describe them?

Gail: I would probably focus on the spectacular bit.

Born to Annoy and Occasionally Adore

Lisa

Lisa is the middle child … and I could leave it there, because we all know the stereotypes. But let's give her the credit she deserves.

Lisa, my lovely little sister, is everything I'm not. She's gentle, kind and naturally nurturing. As a child, she adored playing with dolls, looked perfectly at home in pastel colours and always had a close-knit circle of friends. Physically, she's tall and slim with soft, natural curls in her light brown hair, a sprinkle of freckles across her nose that wouldn't look out of place on a catwalk. But despite all that, Lisa has always struggled with self-confidence, and that's something that has always tugged at my heart.

From a young age, she showed a quiet determination. At primary school, she learned how to study well and apply herself, and when we moved on to the girls' school, she really began to shine in science. Sport was also on her radar – she wasn't chasing the glory like her big sister, but she was always the trusted team-mate. Often made captain,

Lisa was the steady and dependable one. Honestly, if triathlon had been more of a thing in the '90s, she would have nailed it. But with Dad busy taking me to badminton tournaments and Mum focused on football with our brother Adam, I think Lisa missed out on the chance to find her own sporting passion.

I noticed early on that Mum and Dad were gentler with her. The way they spoke about her was different. I'd often hear things like, 'Lisa needs more help,' or 'she's not like you,' and 'Lisa needs more looking after.' Meanwhile, I was mostly left to figure things out myself. I can't recall a single 'talk' with either of them about boys, sex, relationships or make-up. I had to learn as I went and then pass it all down to Lisa. Not exactly textbook parenting, but I'd like to think I did a half-decent job as a big sister.

Of course, I wasn't always the angelic older sibling. I teased her relentlessly growing up and, let's be honest, I still do. One of my favourites (which still makes me laugh) is from when she was about three and suddenly stopped breathing through her nose for no apparent reason. She'd just follow me around the house, wheezing loudly through her mouth like a tiny, wheezy Darth Vader. To make things even more surreal, she used to twist her hair into tight knots, so this matted-haired, heavy-breathing shadow would trail behind me.

And then there were the matching outfits Mum used to dress us in. Mortifying. The idea of trying that now, with our completely different body types and complexions, is enough to make anyone laugh – or cry. We looked nothing like each other, and our personalities couldn't have been more different. The family used to joke that Lisa had been left under a bush and we were just waiting for her real parents to show up.

But perhaps the quirkiest thing about Lisa, and she will *hate* that I'm telling you this, is her absolute phobia of holes in clothes. Yes, holes. That tiny tear in your favourite jumper that you barely notice? For Lisa, it was full-blown horror. This irrational fear brought me years of entertainment. I'd chase her around the house with a sock that had the smallest hole in it while she screamed, cried and, once,

even threw up. Did I stop? Of course not! That's what big sisters are for. To this day, she still has that phobia. And while I no longer throw holey socks at her (public disclaimer: I do not condone this behaviour), it remains one of the many wonderfully bonkers things about my brilliant, beautiful, sensitive sister. I wouldn't change her for the world.

Adam

Finally … a boy for Dad! I still remember the celebrations like they were yesterday. The day my brother was born felt like a national holiday in our house. Apparently, having four daughters (counting my two half-sisters in this) wasn't quite enough and, *finally*, the Emms name had an heir. Classic Dad: no half measures, especially when it came to celebrating. The party lasted for days. Always nice to hear when you're one of the daughters …

Adam and I share a lot in common, especially our fiery competitiveness as kids. From the moment he could walk, Mum had him out in the garden kicking a football. He was constantly in a football kit, usually the latest England strip. Mum tried her best to nudge him toward supporting Spurs, while Dad quietly pitched the virtues of Norwich City. In the end, Adam went rogue and chose Liverpool. Cue the bedroom walls plastered with posters, and two very disappointed parents.

When Adam was still small for his age but full of skill, he was offered a trial at Luton Town. It was a big moment; unfortunately, the reality of playing against much bigger, more physical boys hit hard, literally and figuratively. To their credit, Luton were honest with him: come back when you've grown a bit. But as life would have it, by the time Adam grew into his frame he'd also discovered the joys of drinking and smoking, as many teens do. Let's just say that the return trial never quite happened.

Despite that, Adam's talents shine in so many ways. He's one of those people I don't need to see or speak to regularly, but we can be in the same room for hours, barely say a word, and still have a great time. He's incredibly gifted musically, having taught himself guitar

purely by ear, just by listening to songs on the radio. His artwork is genuinely impressive, he's sharp as anything (straight As at A level), and he's got the biggest heart – he works for a charity in Bedford, giving so much of himself to help others.

He's also in a band, and I absolutely love watching him perform. I always think I should make more time to go and see him. If there's anyone who deserves a bit more luck in this world, it's Adam.

Surviving School

I was clever. I like to think I still am clever, but I was a very bright child. Mum was adamant that her children would get a good education, as she had failed her 11+ exam, and always regretted not trying harder. Dad left school at 14 and went straight to work, so private schooling was what they wanted for us.

It was clear from the start that I found lessons easy. I would finish the school exercises set on the board and ask for extra ones. Yes, I was that show-off. When I was younger, I never understood why people took so long to do what I thought were simple maths problems. Being good was normal for me. School was the perfect fit for me to shout, 'Look at me, look at me!'

I attended Walmsley House, which was a private primary school in Bedford, and then I passed the entrance exam at seven years old to go to Dame Alice Harpur School for Girls. I remember the uniform. I had a bowler hat.

I set out my intentions as soon as I arrived. I wanted to be the best. I would come home from the Dame Alice preparatory (or prep) department with a 95 per cent score on a test, glowing with pride, but, often, Mum and Dad would say, 'Why did you not get 96 or 97 per cent?' Being in that environment of competitive girls just made me more ambitious than ever.

There was money everywhere – most of the mothers didn't work. The cars parked in the school car park were all high-end. The mothers would dress smartly to pick the children up. Some girls had nannies to pick them up. At the weekends, most of my classmates would be at ballet recitals, or gymkhanas with their ponies. I wasn't

allowed a tutu. Mum said ballet wasn't a sport, and I didn't really want to go on a horse, as everyone at one point seemed to fall off them and break a bone.

'Show and Tell' became a battleground for medals and rosettes. The girls were constantly eyeing each other to see who was the 'best'. I loved 'Show and Tell' and bringing anything and everything I won at badminton into class.

I did feel that living in the 1980s was all about the 'show', all about the money, and living that yuppie lifestyle. *Dynasty* or *Dallas* were the TV programmes that influenced women's fashion and introduced shoulder pads in blouses.

One's children doing well in private education and sport was an extension of gloating and having one-up on your friends. 'Our Gail has achieved this', 'Gail has got into *all* the sports teams', 'Gail achieved distinction'; I heard all of this said to other adults around. My 'golden child' achievements were a perfect accompaniment to Dad's rising status in the building world.

I am not going to lie; I relished it all. I knew my role – to achieve greatness – but it started, inevitably, to become a vicious cycle. I soon only got praise when I achieved something: a medal, a top test result or a distinction, and so this fuelled my need to be competitive. EVERYTHING became a competition. Even at an early age, I had associated praise with coming only when I won.

The teachers at school were also part of that competitive spirit. All our results were compared against the three other private schools in Bedford. Almost all of the teachers at my school were female and incredibly passionate about girls' education. After schooling, they wanted us to go out in the world and create more opportunities in the workplace that had not been available for women not that long ago. There was a sense of 'women taking over the world', and one headmistress even had the motto for us 'Busy girls are happy girls, and happy girls are busy girls!'

Gail: Even my exams were a way of showing off. Everything was a competition

Steph: I think that is absolutely fascinating, that it is a natural part of you, that you're such a highly competitive spirit underneath it all.

Gail: Even getting changed for PE. I had to be first. No one else was in this competition. It was just me thinking, 'I could be first here.' French vocabulary tests were a great example. I was always finished first in them. I used to look around all smug, seeing everyone else still working. Same for the dinner queue. Had to be first.

Steph: (Laughing) Maybe you were just hungry?

Jolly Hockey Sticks

Along came school sport – hockey, netball, rounders, athletics, cross country, swimming – you name it, I was in the team. Badminton wasn't played much at the school; for Dame Alice Harpur School, it was all about hockey. I did love hockey, and I was pretty good at it. I had a good hit on me, surprisingly. Probably a bit too good, as I walloped Angela Sampson's nose one time, and I can still hear the bone crunch as my stick connected with her face. Angela has since told me that she had to have four operations to fix it. Sorry, Angela.

I preferred indoor hockey; it was faster. And indoors. I wasn't a fan of playing sports in British weather. Though if you think it is any safer playing indoor hockey than outdoor hockey, my team-mate Megan Parkhouse went in for a tackle on me, just as I went to flick the ball for the goal. The ball connected with her forehead. Ten stitches were needed. There was so much blood. It took days to clean the sports hall floor as Megan's blood had soaked into the fibres. I was traumatised, but not as traumatised as Megan, obviously.

Megan was our hockey captain. A great hockey player and feisty as hell. I remember her on the coach home from a big tournament that we had just won. Tina Turner was blaring out on the speakers, and we were all singing 'Simply the Best' as loudly as we could. Another team-mate, Hazel Knight, was going up and down the aisle with Megan, both doing their best Tina impressions. 'I call ya when I need ya, my heart's on fire …' It was the best time and a moment I will remember forever. The camaraderie, the team spirit; you can't beat school sport memories.

I had been doing well in badminton tournaments at this point in my life, and hockey and badminton were on a level par in terms of what I was achieving. I knew that if I wanted to excel at hockey, I would have to go and join a club and get coaching. The good thing with the sport of badminton was the fact that I knew exactly where I ranked. That's the beauty of an individual sport; if you play against somebody and beat them, you know you are better than them. I had trouble understanding where I ranked in a team sport. How did I know I was better than another player who played in my position? It is a subjective opinion, a manager's or coach's decision. In hockey, I was one of a squad of many, and one of 11 on the pitch.

As we were singing and dancing, Megan stopped the music on the tape player, looked us all in the eye, and she screamed, 'I LOVE YOU GUYS! I WOULD DIE FOR YOU!' It was at this point that I realised I was a badminton player. Don't get me wrong, I liked the other girls on the coach, but I wasn't sure I'd die for them.

I told this story to legendary England rugby player and World Cup-winning captain Martin Johnson when explaining why I chose badminton and not hockey. He looked at me in utter disgust.

Gail: I like showing off, and I like the attention, and I didn't get that with hockey. I didn't get the gratification or the validation in hockey. It wasn't all about me.

Steph: Bearing in mind that you found social situations and making friends quite difficult, maybe you couldn't cope with all the issues around the team dynamics, particularly the politics of who was being picked. You picked the safe option for you. The one you could control.

I decided to concentrate on badminton from that point on. It was the summer of 1992, and the Barcelona Olympic Games had started. Badminton was in the Olympics for the first time, as a test event. Everyone was excited that our sport could be integrated into the Olympic programme.

Despite that, it was another sport that had a huge impact on me that year. Growing up, I don't remember seeing many sportswomen on TV. Athletics and tennis were the only sports I could think of that would have had female representation. The Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992 came at the perfect time for me. For the first time in my life, I saw that there were people like me. Girls and women who had muscles, females who loved winning medals, females being celebrated for being strong and fast, rather than teased or mocked.

On 6 August 1992, Sally Gunnell, representing Team GB in the 400m hurdles, won the gold medal. I had never done 400m hurdles in my life, but it didn't matter. I screamed at that TV, willing her to run so fast. I loved how she looked so powerful, so determined, and cheered loudly when she crossed that line first. And as Sally stood on the podium, the Olympic gold medal around her neck, with the British national anthem playing, I cried along with many other people watching. Sally Gunnell was my new hero. I wanted to be Sally. I wanted to be an Olympian.

It was as if a lightbulb had switched on in my head. Everything I did, from that moment on, was all about the Olympic Games. I walked into school and told the teachers, 'I'm going to be an Olympian,' and they just laughed. 'Don't be silly, dear, you can't do sport as a career. You can only be a professional sports*man*, with cricket, football and rugby. You can't be a professional sports*woman*.' Annoyingly, they were about right. In 1992, there was no such thing as a professional sportswoman – with the only exception probably being tennis; I would have to see my Olympic badminton journey as a 'hobby'.

I always say that something needs to 'click' with girls and sport. This was my 'click'. Badminton was an Olympic sport; it passed the test. I could make my mark. This dream fuelled me. I trained harder.