

JAMES WILLSTROP



Interviews

with

Inspiration

Heroes and Icons...
and What Drives Them to Succeed

J A M E S W I L L S T R O P

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Jessica Ennis-Hill

I INTERVIEWED Jess at the EIS in Sheffield, her training base. At London in 2012 she became Olympic Heptathlon Champion under outrageous amounts of scrutiny and pressure. Her time since will have been much less her own, as in subsequent years she found herself assuming the position of the darling of British sport.

Although she must have had her fill of the same old interviews at the time, Jess was engaging and interesting on every question. After our interview she gave her time and patience to a fan who had somehow managed to track her down, even though we had found a quiet corner of the building. This attention is a by-product of her London achievement that she has since had to balance.

JW: Can you explain what made you an Olympic champion?

JEH: It's very hard to say it's one thing. I think there's maybe a certain ability that I was born with, so a slight genetic element, but without having the environment that I had – the upbringing, the coaching the people around me, the facilities – that ability would never have surfaced. They all came together to allow me to bring that talent out. A combination of all that, mixed with previous competitions that I had done,

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championships, disappointments, injuries, all the things that I ever experienced, just fused and I brought them all together for those two days in London.

JW: You had a horrendous low in 2008, having to miss the Beijing Olympics because of a metatarsal injury. Do the setbacks improve you?

JEH: Yes, through injuries and setbacks and those occasions when you feel you're there and you're not quite there, you can learn so much. You have that horrible, disappointed feeling when you're coming away from championships. Those are the moments where you learn more about yourself, through enforced breaks. You're forced to take a step back and work things out from different angles and perspectives. You go away and focus on things that you really need to focus on, and you must find that mental strength to put things back together. I definitely learned a lot from my injury in 2008. It made me appreciate my ability and what I had achieved so far, and also made me more hungry to go on and achieve more.

JW: Can you give me an idea of how much you think that innate talent has got you where you are?

JEH: I don't know whether you can be specific on that. I was a really active child and I loved athletics as soon as I came down to sessions. My coach, Toni [Minichiello], said that he could see that I had natural running ability from a young age. But if I hadn't been put into the right environment, not been coached by him and allowed to develop into the heptathlete that I am, and then worked so hard, I wouldn't have achieved all this. It takes both.

JW: I've heard you talk about how frustrating it is to miss even single sessions. Every session you do is vital, so much work, hour upon hour ...

JEH: You have to have the wherewithal to do those tough sessions and it's been instilled in me from a young age by Toni. You break your body down because that's the foundation that you need when you're competing in the summer. That understanding that it's going to hurt and be painful but that it will make it easier when you come to compete.

JW: Do you have ways of dealing with the toughest sessions you have to do when they are impending?

JEH: Yes, I have to mentally prepare, so if it's a tough 800m session I have to make sure that I know what the session is and start thinking about it beforehand. I hate the pain of running the 800 or those kind of running sessions. I go within myself a little in the lead-up to them. That's my way of dealing with it. I'll never not finish a session and will always give it absolutely everything.

JW: People don't have any idea how hard you had to go to create that performance in August 2012 ...

JEH: No, probably not. You have to kill yourself on the track or the court because you know that your competitors and rivals are doing the same thing.

JW: I loved the description of the Sunday morning session in your book, where you would look at people heading off for their nice day of rest and you would have an horrific session to put yourself through. Those are the tough days.

JEH: It's a big sacrifice and it consumes your whole life for a long time. But it's that short period of time where you have that opportunity and where you have the talent, so why not try giving it absolutely everything? You just get on with it.

JW: Great writers tend to read or will have read the best writers. Great musicians would watch the best musicians to learn. Would you say that watching others has been a big part of your learning?

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JEH: To be honest, as I was growing up I wasn't sport mad. I loved watching athletics. I enjoyed doing it, less so watching. I just wanted to do everything. As I get older, I do enjoy watching some of the great athletes compete, whether it's the heptathlon, pole vault, the long jump ... just seeing someone who can execute their event perfectly is inspiring and gives you goosebumps.

JW: What about all the advisory services that are such a part of sport today? Have you bought into them?

JEH: That part of it is one of the biggest things. It's very important to tap into everything you can. Athletics is an individual sport, and you see the athlete go and perform alone on the track, but the people around me – Alison Rose, Derry Suter, my coaches – they spend so much time on me. They are not the ones competing but they are the ones behind the scenes doing everything so that I can step on the track in the best possible shape. They are a huge part of what I've achieved.

There's been a significant transition over the last three decades. Sport is now not just about a coach and a player, and neither is it about training for hours and hours on end aimlessly and brutally. It's more about seeking the advice from all the different experts who can advise on the complex science of training: psychology, nutrition, coaching, physiotherapy, physiology and more. It becomes about training smartly, sensibly, not for hours and hours on end, but for however long it takes to train optimally. Jess has people working with her of whom she seems proud and grateful, and every time she wins, she knows that small group have facilitated the achievement, and I'm sure Jess would agree to some extent that they own a part of it. They deserve a little of that gold medal.

After the biggest achievements in my sporting career, the only thing I wanted to do was thank and share it with those who

helped me most. I wanted them to have some of the adulation. I wouldn't have become world number one without a handful of very special people who run my sessions, be my friend, keep me fit and motivated, and give me their time on a weekly basis. After winning a silver and bronze medal in Glasgow at the 2014 Commonwealth Games, I wanted to literally give my medals to Alison Rose (also Jess's physio). Six weeks prior to the games, a doctor told me I might not play professionally again. My hip was shattered, I needed an operation and Alison worked indefatigably to get me to Glasgow and beyond. I wouldn't have been at those games if it were not for Alison. Forget the medals; I wouldn't have realised the whole experience, which was one of the most enjoyable sporting experiences of my career, made much more so by the threat of not playing. The athlete's existence is somewhat selfish, and they need extremely selfless people around them to enable them to compete and be successful.

JW: People say that it's the hours that you put in, but what about the quality of what you're doing? Is it better to spend less time doing something better?

JEH: I think in previous years it's always been flat out. You've got to put a lot of effort in ... maximum quality.

JW: Two days of solid competing is tough, so you must need to be very intense in training to replicate that sensation ...

JEH: I have to train at a much higher level than I'm competing. I had my injury, though, in 2008 and that made me realise and appreciate how important recovery and rest really is. Before then I was less willing to rest. I wanted to lose no time and would train all the time, making sure I was ready. But now I appreciate that having those days off, especially as I'm getting older, is really important to let the body recover from what it has done. Then you can push harder again. As

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I'm getting older things are changing and Toni and I have to make sure we get good quality sessions and that I'm not getting injured.

JW: So, you try not to worry about getting loads of hours in, more about just getting it right?

JEH: Yes. It's picking up a few points here and there now, not putting 200 to 300 points on my PB unfortunately. So, it's quality we're looking for.

JW: Your relationship with Toni can be quite volatile I've read, but then many coach-player relationships tend to be. Is that sort of conflict likely to be part of any successful process when you're working so hard to achieve at the highest level?

JEH: I think every coach and athlete are different. It's such a unique relationship and you spend so much time together, wanting something so badly, and it's frustrating for me when I don't perform the way I want to in training. It's equally frustrating for Toni at times and we sometimes clash. We might not communicate with each other in the best way, and that's when he might storm off and there might be tears. I think it's part of having success. We've worked hard for all that success! And it makes it exciting.

That success that athletes strive for at high levels rarely seems to be found at the end of a smooth path. People talk about high achievers being difficult to work with. Is this because they were snotty during practice or challenged things in business meetings? Are we describing the Michelin starred chef, the one with high blood pressure on television becoming angry when his chefs overdo the peppercorn?

When there is collaboration it is almost impossible to avoid some form of conflict. If the chef lets the sauce issue go because he doesn't want to be difficult to work with then his product is

not how he wants it and his standard falls short. So he'd rather be difficult to work with but really really good.

When building towards high standards, constant questioning and criticism is necessary and it will probably mean someone might get upset somewhere along the line. When aiming for high levels, there's bound to be a certain ruthlessness required in getting there. As much as Jess and Toni love each other, this relationship naturally has a fractious element. They are constantly trying to overcome challenges and problems together so there is no way that this process could be easy.

When I am training it is, I guess, my work. I try to balance the intensity as much as I can so it is not all completely over-revved and lacking in enjoyment and spontaneity, but undoubtedly there is an element of intensity that I've sometimes struggled to contain because I'm trying so hard. I don't consider myself to be the most endearing person on the training court when working with my coaches, though there are compatriots of mine who from what I've heard and seen could be far worse!

But the training session is the time of the day where I can do something to improve the way I play. I don't want the time to be wasted and I feel like I've sometimes let myself down with regards to my attitude to others, be it coaches or training partners.

I was so keyed up one day that I had a go at someone filming me on a mobile phone. It was a silly and pompous reaction and I regretted it, but I suppose the training court is where the day job unfolds; I'm trying to focus hard on the work and sometimes that difficult side comes out, certainly in the relationships I have with the people who I'm working with. I don't want to waste time practising badly and in the past I would have let nothing come in the way of that. If it meant being a bit rude then I guess I was. With age I've implored myself to lighten up. If something disrupts the session, or I'm not happy with a practice, or god forbid if we all start joking about a bit, then let's embrace that. It's only life. We are all just playing at being kids anyway. It's

only a game and lots of people in the world have real problems. So enjoy it, for crying out loud.

I do recall those sessions which have gone less well, where in the aftermath I talk or argue it through with Malcolm. They often turn in to endless analyses on how to keep improving, how to work things out. The petulance and conduct at times during training I have not been particularly proud of, but then maybe I needed some of this to reach the level I did.

Maybe a certain standard in training is necessary and maybe I shouldn't have to apologise for it, if I too have been difficult to work with. Brian Clough definitely wouldn't be apologising, I'm sure. Malcolm Willstrop either. But maybe I am doing, a bit.

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JW: How important is the downtime in what you do?

JEH: It's crucial for me, having the balance. Athletics is a huge part of my life, but I have to have separation and to be able to switch off from it. I like to go home and not talk about athletics. We see friends, have the dog so we take her out, and switch off completely. It was quite hard during Olympic year because of the stress of training and everything going on in the media. I do find that if you've got some separation it helps.

JW: The problem with what you did in London is that you have two specific days on which you have to produce that incredible form and performance. It's one thing being great generally at what you do, but it's another doing it at the right time. Is there a calculated psychological process that you have in order to post that performance at that very particular time, or do you just take the Olympics as any other event?

JEH: Toni would always say in the lead-up that these are the same girls that I've competed against in World and European

championships. It's the Olympics, it's in London, but it's still the same event. Go out and do what you've always done, was the message. It's difficult not to dress the Olympic thing up so much and think you've got to make all these changes and do all these amazing things to be successful. But if you trust in what you do and keep repeating it, then that's the best way.

JW: So, it's just about concentrating on the process rather than the occasion?

JEH: Yes. I didn't think about the occasion. I didn't think about how many people were watching, the whole drama of it all, I just focused on one event at a time.

JW: There was stuff in your book about the illnesses [in the lead-up to London, her brother-in-law visited her house with a cold and Jess wasn't too happy with that]. That tendency towards being obsessive; many athletes will go to all lengths to avoid illness. I find quite a lot of high performers show this side ...

JEH: Well, you make so many sacrifices and particularly in athletics. You have one or two championships that year and it's that one occasion where all that training you've done is for that one specific time ... and something so silly as picking up a cold can completely ruin that. During Olympic year I was so worried. It was kind of out of my control in a way. You can control your training and the things you do but if you go out or a family member comes round with a cold, you can pick it up and it can affect your chances.

JW: They wouldn't even think. In all likelihood they have a job where it doesn't really matter if they pick up a cold.

JEH: Yes. My brother-in-law just came round and said, 'Oh I've got a really awful cold. Sorry, I hope you don't get it!' I was like: 'Thanks a lot!'

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JW: Do you think you could have been very, very good at something else?

JEH: I'm not sure I would. I think I was lucky to fall into athletics. I enjoyed it and was good at it.

JW: But the in-built drive and dedication to succeed might have taken you so far at a lot of things, surely?

JEH: Without a doubt I would have known how to apply myself at whatever I did. I went to university, but athletics was always a priority, so maybe if athletics hadn't been there I would have applied myself more in a different area and done well.

JW: I read about you being very calm when competing and how a few people close to you tried to encourage you to be more outwardly emotional. You stood against that and said it wasn't your way. Athletes are criticised nowadays if they are not showing outward passion, but you, along with athletes like Roger Federer for example, have proved that you can have an inner intensity and perform well. People think that because you're quiet, you don't feel passionate, and that you don't care. Do you think that attitude has been a help on the track?

JEH: Yes. I would have been trying to be someone that I wasn't had I changed. Toni would always say that I didn't look like I was trying, and he asked me to be more aggressive, but that just wouldn't work for me. I'm not the kind of athlete that slaps herself and gets herself fired up like that. I can get myself fired up and be equally as ready as the next person, but I just do it internally. That's what works for me. Carolina Klüft was an amazing athlete and was just the opposite. She would really get herself fired up outwardly, but there's no point in me trying to copy what she did for the sake of it. So, I've always looked calm, but the adrenaline and fire is on the inside. I want it as much as anyone else.

JW: How tough is being a world-class athlete? People see the glamour side of it. But what's it like to dig yourself into the ground on a regular basis. Does the toughness of it get to you at times?

JEH: When you want something so badly you put pressure on yourself and you spend so much time at the track, making all these sacrifices and it does affect the different parts of your life, and sometimes you have those days where you think: 'What am I doing this for? Is it even going to work out? Will I achieve what I want to achieve?' Before the London Olympics I just wanted someone to tell me what was going to happen. But you've just got to keep believing in yourself and get on with it. You're in a unique position that not many people get to realise: having your hobby as a job and career, travelling the world doing all these amazing things. There are difficult times during the process, but then you consider the good times and keep it in perspective. And it's such a short time that you have, where you're nailing your body into the ground. Early thirties and I'll be retired, by which time I hope I can relax and forget the pain of the sessions!

It strikes me how cut-throat sport can be. Jess is certainly an outstanding, world-class athlete, but that Olympic gold was always going to take her to another stratosphere. It would earn her more money, more fame, and she would have achieved the ultimate accolade and could take that and say it for the rest of her life. Is there any wonder she became protective and strung up about catching a cold? Everything has to go right for that day. And if it doesn't go right, then life-changing events don't happen.