



THE POWER OF BELIEF

THE
BETH
SHRIEVER
STORY

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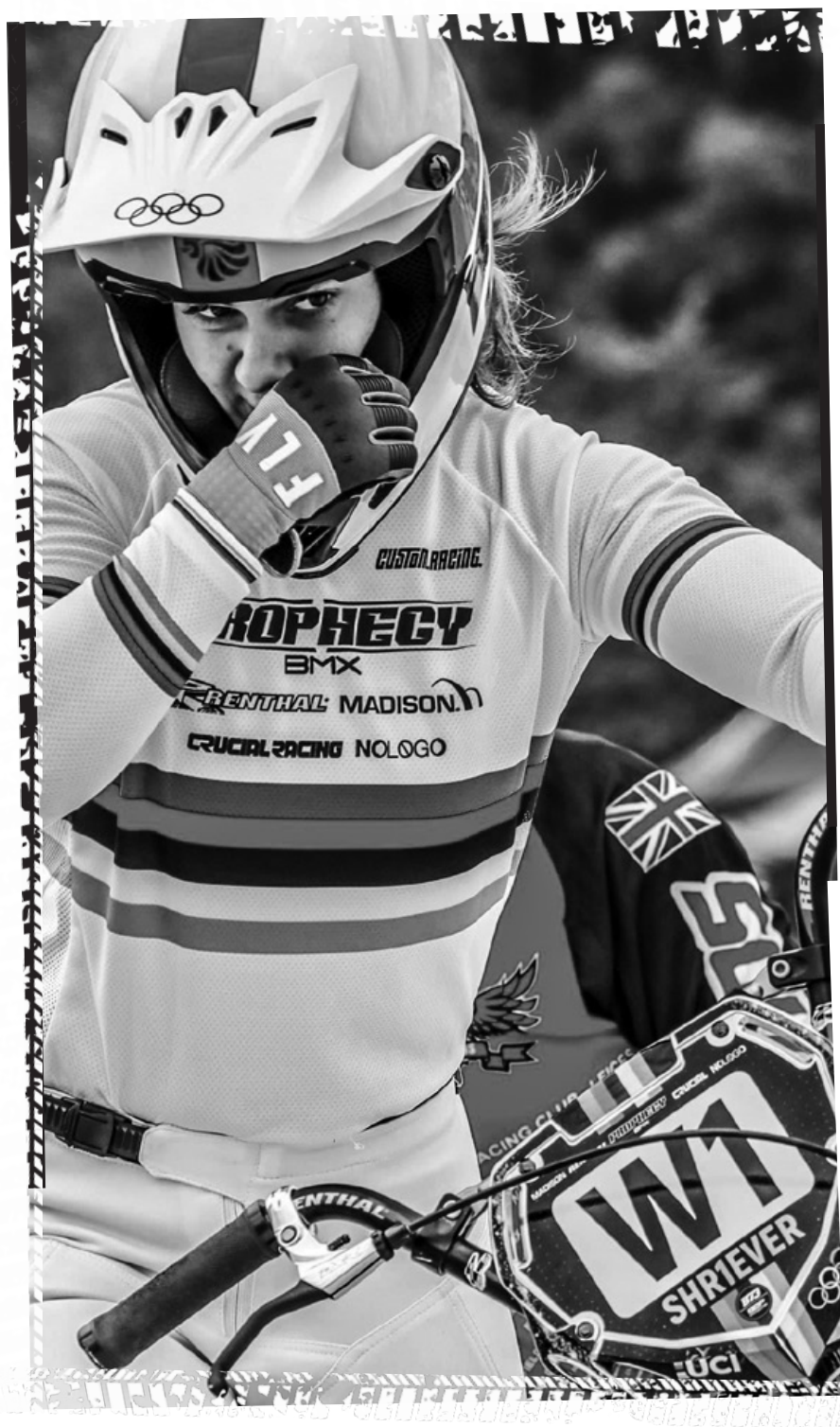
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THE **BETH SHRIEVER** STORY





Where it all Began

MY NAME IS BETHANY SHRIEVER and I am an Olympic gold medallist and World Champion.

There, I've said it. If I am honest, I still can't believe it. But it's true. On 31 July 2021, almost a year after the Games should have taken place, I won Olympic gold at the Tokyo Olympic Games and, even now, it still seems so surreal, and I find myself questioning if it really did happen. In the back of my mind there is the niggling suspicion that this has all been a figment of my imagination and, when I wake up, I will be back in my bedroom in Essex still dreaming of being a BMX race champion.

But no, I did go to Tokyo and return with a gold medal around my neck. I did make it past the injuries, past the tough times, through the pain of pushing myself to a place where my body didn't want to go. I did get inside my own head and push out the doubts and bad thoughts. And, as I stood on the track with trembling legs, empty energy levels and tears in my eyes, I felt so many conflicting emotions that I am not sure I can ever find the words to describe accurately what those moments really felt like. People talk about life-changing moments, and half standing, half collapsing, half laughing, half crying – that was my life-changing moment.

As the noise in my head began to subside and my breathing started to return to normal, I turned to look at the results board and it was like I was watching a film unfold in front of me. There was my name up in lights, ahead of my idol, the double Olympic gold medallist Mariana Pajon of Colombia, and ahead of my friend and the great Dutch hope, Merel Smulders.

B. Shriever – Great Britain – 44.358

M. Pajon – Colombia – 44.448

M. Smulders – Netherlands – 44.721

The images that were sent around the world sum it all up. I was broken in those moments immediately following the race. I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk, I couldn't process what had just happened. My team-mate Kye Whyte picked me up and carried me off the track because I had nothing – literally nothing – left in the tank, emotionally or physically. Every little bit of me was left on that track in Tokyo.

Two weeks later, after a flurry of homecoming celebrations, wall-to-wall media engagements and a couple of days of rest and relaxation, I was back at it again, this time competing in the World Championships in the Netherlands. As a BMX rider who had not registered a win on the senior circuit for two years, I became Olympic and World Champion within a crazy, emotional and thrilling three-week period.

What follows is my account of my journey to that point. From the first moments I sat on a BMX bike as an eight-year-old child through to now, when I am a seasoned BMX racer, the proud winner of Olympic and World Championship gold medals.

I am not telling the story because I want to bask in my own glory. Mine is a story that can be shared by everyone who has a dream. And that should be everyone, no matter how old or young, no matter what social background, gender or colour. Everyone should have dreams and everyone should be supported as they try to achieve them.

This is about the importance of family support and love, unconditional friendship and unwavering loyalty. It is also about belief – whether that is the belief in you held by those around you; or the self-belief that is so vital if you are to get to the place you want to be.

So here goes: this is my story.

It wasn't so long ago that I was sitting in my bedroom in my parents' house in Essex wondering if I was going to join the long line of people who have had to look back on their life and ask the futile question: 'What if?' Injury, illness, bad timing, plain bad luck; the stories of athletes with potential who just failed to hit the top are endless. For a while back there, I thought that was also going to be my narrative. On my wall was a replica gold medal, made by a pupil at the school where I was working as a teaching assistant. It was there to motivate me to work hard and aim high, and most of the time it did just that. But there were times when I felt as if it was there on the wall mocking me. 'You want to be an Olympic Champion? That doesn't happen to kids like you.'

It is a huge jump from being a kid with a bit of talent and a lot of hunger to becoming an elite athlete. There are a lot of barriers between pedalling the dirt tracks and standing on the podium. Yes, from an early age it was clear I had got ability but was that going to be enough? To be an elite athlete, to be a winner, that takes a lot more than pure ability. Sometimes luck and circumstance play a far bigger role than any of us would like. For every Olympic or World Champion, there are a mountain of people whose dreams were shattered by injury, illness, bad timing or cruel coincidence.

BMX racing starts at an early age. It is a great sport to get into as a youngster because it is fun, there are a lot of technical aspects to learn, and it is competitive. This was the world I entered as an eight-year-old and from the get-go I was hooked – the challenge of learning how to do the tricks; the adrenaline rush when you pushed yourself just that little bit too much and skirted with danger; the camaraderie around the track.

As a kid I was at the centre of all that. A group of us would meet and practise the tricks and then hang around chatting and then go again. In the early days it was just fun. There was no formality to it and that is the beauty of street sports like BMX. You don't need six other people to make a team, like in netball. You don't need an opposition, you don't need a referee. It is self-governed and, in those early days, self-taught. Your peers are your teachers, your judges and your audience. If you are struggling with a trick, an older kid will show you how. If you throw a great 180, your mates will tell you how to make it even better. If you overcome an obstacle that has defeated you every time until now, the feeling as your friends gather round to congratulate you is pure gold. That was my first taste of gold and it probably was as sweet to me then as the real gold medal was 14 years later.

I am the first to admit that my story is only partially lived. I am certainly not someone who has been through the ups and downs of three or four Olympic cycles. I have not reached my 'Steve Redgrave moment', declaring 'I never want to see another boat' – or bike, in my case. I doubt I will be able to emulate Laura Kenny's achievements of four gold medals because that would mean I would be BMXing for 16-plus years and I'm not sure my body will stand that sort of punishment.

What I hope sharing my experiences will achieve is to reach out to that young kid who just wants to see what they can do; how high they can fly if they put their heart and soul into something. When I had a chance to reflect on my Olympic gold medal and what I wanted to do next, I realised that, more than anything else, more than medals and titles and accolades, I just wanted to know that there were kids out there who liked what I did, admired my cycling and looked up to me as a role model – both on and off the track.

I also want to show, through my own experiences, just what a great, fun, inclusive and social sport BMX is. When I started BMX racing, I used a borrowed bike and I joined in with a group of kids at a cycling track in Essex. The coach and the established members of the group were generous enough to welcome me in – a scrap of a girl with her two younger brothers.

They quickly became my other family and many of them are still my good friends today. Since then, time and again, I have learnt that, if people see you are serious in your endeavours, then they will go out of their way to support you – as you will see unfold over the chapters of this book but, for now, I guess my messages to anyone reading this are two very simple ones: if you want to get on your bike and give BMX a go, then just do it, you will find a wealth of support and opportunity out there; and if BMX is not your thing, find out what is, decide what you want to gain from it and just take a step over the precipice to see what is possible. You just won't know until you try. And when you do try, you might just fly.

What you will also discover through the pages of this book is just how much of a family girl I am at heart. I might be travelling the world, I might be living the life of an elite athlete at the home of British Cycling in Manchester, but it is my family back in Essex and my boyfriend Brynley who provide the bedrock to my life. It is to my family home that I retreat when I need sanctuary, or run to when I have something to celebrate. We all need an anchor sometimes and that is where my anchor is well and truly secured.

Although this is my story, I am far from the only character in it. Many people have played huge parts in my journey from the curious kid who first got on a BMX bike to the slightly incredulous 22-year-old who was standing on the podium in Tokyo. And they all continue to play huge roles in the next stages of the Beth Shriever journey. So, it seemed only right to invite them to give their account of the past few years. Their voices are part of the tale of my success and their presence in my life is too important for me not to share these people with you.

I have also liberally scattered facts and tips throughout the book – so if you are inspired to get on a bike, firstly you will know the lingo, secondly you will know the tricks and thirdly you will know the history of this cool sport, including killer facts and stats that will mark you out as a true member of the BMX community.



Prior to trying BMX riding, I had always been into just about every sport going. I played netball, hockey, football, athletics. I also rode a pony every week. My parents had loan of a pony which grazed and was stabled on a neighbouring friend's paddock. As a little kid, I spent my weekends doing those 'horsey things' like cleaning the stable, grooming the pony and riding it. Looking back, that is probably where a lot of my core strength was first developing; not just from balancing on the pony but all the strength that is involved in carrying buckets, shovelling horse dung and generally staying active. It is also where the work ethic originates – no one who has ever been into horse riding can be accused of laziness: there is always a job that needs doing and I was a willing helper.

My brothers and I fell into BMX riding by accident. Luke and Noah are my younger brothers and they were both footballers. They were both pretty good at football and played for a local youth team. Then one day, my parents had dropped me off at school and got talking to someone who coached BMX at a local track. He said that my parents should bring us all along to have a go. So, one Saturday, we turned up and they kitted us out with bikes and safety gear and we all jumped on the bikes and started pedalling.

It grabbed all three of us straight away: the thrill of riding at speed on the track, having a go at little jumps, learning cool new tricks. That first evening at the track was a real revelation and, while it wasn't an epiphany, I knew that I wanted to keep riding and get good enough to start racing against others. I didn't recognise it at the time, but that was when my parents saw that I was going to be a competitive person, in whatever I was doing. For my dad, who is a keen cyclist, the fact that I wanted to do a sport that involved cycling was a real delight to him. Little did he know how much stress it would eventually put him and my mum through!

We joined the local Braintree club after that first experience and started going to Saturday morning and Wednesday evening sessions at the track. Noah stopped after a while and went back to football, but Luke and I kept going and it was not long before we were racing locally.

I think it was a year before we had convinced Mum and Dad that we were serious about BMX riding and we got our own bikes and kit. I think it's fair to say that Mum was pleased that she was finally able to stop feeding and looking after the pony.

Of all the sports I was doing, BMX was the one that I was best at. I had good pedal coordination, which was a good start. By the age of ten I was doing jumps that no other girls in the club could do. But it was mainly training with boys, particularly my brothers, that truly spurred me on. At that time, not many girls were doing BMX at all, particularly girls the same age as me.

From my point of view, BMX riding had all the elements I was craving in a sport. There was the adrenaline created when going as fast as I could; there was the technical challenge of learning tricks and there was the camaraderie of a sporting community where everyone had similar aims and ambitions. Of course, when you are just nine years old none of this is on your mind, you just know that it's something you love doing.

I learnt and picked up BMX skills quite quickly. I was surrounded by boys who would be practising BMX skills all the time. So I would watch them and then have a go. I would also just practise with Luke and his mates when we were at home. The pavements outside the house became our obstacles to jump over and passers-by had to be extra vigilant for little kids whizzing around with their front wheels off the ground as they tried to outdo each other.

When you are that age, things click quite quickly. I would watch Luke or one of the other boys do a jump (jumping upwards by lifting first the front wheel, then the rear wheel and landing both simultaneously) and I would try and copy what he did. I think I just tried to do the skills without fear of failure or fear of injury and when you don't have those inhibitions, then picking up skills is easier. There is a certain amount of strength needed to lift the front wheel off the ground and then your legs work hard to keep the bike balanced on the back wheel, but I had honed my muscles as a pony rider and it wasn't difficult to transition between the two activities.

I quickly learnt that it is all about being confident enough to have a go. The skills can be refined later. This is where street sports like BMX and skateboarding are so different to the traditional sports that get taught in schools. For netball, hockey, tennis and sports like that, the traditional way of teaching is to learn a progression of skills, and then play small games where you practise them. Eventually you will have been taught a whole range of skills and then you graduate to the full game. In BMX, you just learn as you go along, but the key to getting better is to just get out and give it a go. To get kids – of any age – enthralled and engaged in sport then it has to be fun. For me, and all the kids I used to hang out with, the fun in BMX was getting out there and trying the most daring tricks we could.

Doing jumps and manuals is the fun side of riding. As kids, we would be sitting around with our bikes and someone would do a jump, then we would all have a go. Once you master a skill then you get a real feel-good vibe and all your mates are totally happy for you. Even now, when we are just messing around, the lads can't resist throwing up a challenge and I can't resist giving it a go. I think that sort of fun-filled environment is one of the reasons that I can't see me stepping away from the sport for a long time yet. There are always new things to learn, or skills that you already possess but that can be done better or quicker.

While I can still find that sort of challenge within the sport, then it doesn't matter how many medals I win, the urge to keep going will still be really strong. Take, for example, one of the first tricks a kid will try to master – doing a manual.

For me, doing a number of manuals in a row has always been difficult. A manual followed by a jump is fine but doing a series of manuals is so difficult. The boys can just do it without thinking about it, but for me, keeping the bike on the back wheel is particularly challenging. It's all about technique and confidence. For some reason not many females can do it, but it is not about body strength, it is about technique and having the confidence to get your bike wheel in the air and keep it there.

When we have skill sessions we focus on techniques like that, but when it is coming into a race season I concentrate on race techniques and being fast. In the winter, we dedicate a session a week to skills but I still haven't mastered doing successive manuals. Even as an Olympic Champion there is still a lot to master.

WHY BMX IS THE COOLEST SPORT AROUND

BMX is exciting, challenging and suitable for all ages and abilities. It can be picked up by anyone: boy or girl, toddler to grandparent, rich or poor, any social and ethnic background. It is not a sport that is dominated by 16–30-year-old middle-class people. You don't even need a bike – you can borrow or hire one.

All you need is safety gear: a helmet, some protective gear for the knees and elbows, and you are off.





The cool thing about BMX, particularly in a world where everyone is time-poor, is that you don't need to commit to BMX to the detriment of everything else. If you have time, you can head down to the track; if you are busy, that's no problem. You can race if you want to, but if you are not feeling it, then don't.

The other cool thing about BMX is that it keeps you fit and active and you don't even realise you are working out. BMX is a full-body workout without setting foot in a gym. It gives you a cardio workout, combined with strength training. It calls for great core stability and flexibility, while getting your fast twitch fibres working as you try to gain maximum speed. It keeps your brain working hard as you learn new skills. And, when it comes to the mental wellness of being social – well, just hang out with a group of BMXers for a few minutes and you will know what camaraderie and a supportive environment look like.

I hope that my BMX story will keep going. When I had completed that crazy few weeks of Olympic and World Championship competition, I met up with my coach Marcus Bloomfield and the sports psychologist Rich Hampson. We all sat down to discuss what happens next and I think, for a while, they were concerned that I would call a stop to my BMX career.

I can see why they would think that. As elite athletes we train really hard all year round. I rarely take holidays and my entire life is scheduled around preparing for the season's big races. That can be tough. It is certainly tough on your family and your relationships. I am very lucky because I have parents who are always there for me. My cycling life is in Manchester. That is where I train with all the other Team GB cyclists, but it is intense. To escape that and to give my mind and body a rest, I go home to Essex regularly. I would say it has almost become part of my preparations and routine and if I cannot get home to see my parents, then my training can suffer.

My boyfriend Brynley Savage is also a BMX rider, so that is a massive help and support to me because he understands exactly what is happening at any time. If I come off the track and say that my times are down, he doesn't try to tell me it will all be okay; he understands why that is causing me worry and I can talk to him about it objectively. At other times, if my head is not quite in the right place, he knows when to be supportive and when to back off and give me space. I know this makes me sound a bit high-maintenance but it is simply about understanding each other and helping each other to be as good as we can be at any given time.

With that support network in place and with the team back at Manchester, it didn't take me long to decide that now was not a time to leave the sport. I won Olympic gold and the World Championships before I had reached my peak, and I think both Marcus and Rich were excited at what we could achieve together if we pushed the boundaries a bit. So I had a break and when I returned to training in January 2022 it was all systems go. As you will learn through the pages of this book, I am now training smarter, working harder and,

with confidence levels enhanced by those two wins, I am a different athlete on the start line.

My journey to this point has been a gallop up a hill, with a few obstacles along the way. However, as I reached the summit of the hill and looked out over the horizon, I realised that I was sitting at the top of a fake summit and there is another part of the adventure before I can say I have reached the true peak.

To the point where I was lining up at the start of the Olympic final, I hadn't enjoyed much success at senior international level. I think that makes the support and belief that my family and my coaching team gave to me in the years leading up to the Tokyo Olympic Games even more remarkable. I hope that my gold medal was vindication for that belief and I hope that now they can relax a little and enjoy the next stages of the journey with me.

At that post-Olympic Games meeting, I said to Rich and Marcus that I had two goals: I wanted to be the best female BMX rider in the world; and I wanted to be a role model for my sport. Those were two big ambitions but, now I am Olympic and World Champion, I feel as if I am ready to dig deep and start the next part of that trip to the summit. The difference now is that I am racing as a winner and a champion and that is a very different feeling.