

**Winning Olympic gold is the dream of every athlete. It was a dream Kelly Holmes had held since the age of 14, but in 2004, heading into the Athens Olympic Games at 34 years of age, her dream was rapidly slipping away.**

**A career punctuated by untimely injuries had frustrated the British track star, who all too often seemed to be within touching distance of glory, only to have it cruelly snatched away.**

**Despite a stress fracture before her first Olympic Games, a ruptured Achilles tendon at a World Championships and severe injury-induced depression, she had still managed two Commonwealth and European Cup golds, an Olympic bronze and podium finishes at World and European Championships by the time she stepped onto the track in the Greek capital.**

**Holmes was to fulfill her dream at the 2004 Games...twice! Winning gold in the 800m and 1500m, only the third woman ever to achieve this middle distance double. The former army sergeant joined the ranks of Team GB's greatest athletes – only the nation's seventh woman to win an Olympic gold in track and field.**

**Dame Kelly's legacy includes five current British records and a vast amount of charity work, helping to mentor disadvantaged young people and promising youth athletes.**



- 2010** Inducted into the England Athletics Hall of Fame
- 2009** Named president of Commonwealth Games England
- 2008** Founded the Dame Kelly Holmes Legacy Trust to support athletes and young people in the UK
- 2005** Won the Laureus Award for World Sportswoman of the Year
- 2005** Made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for her services to athletics
- 2004** Won double Olympic gold in the 800m and 1500m in Athens
- 2003** 2nd place in the 800m at the World Championships in Paris
- 2002** Won gold in the 1500m at the Commonwealth Games in Manchester
- 2000** Took bronze in the 800m at the Sydney Olympic Games
- 1998** 2nd place in the 1500m at the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur
- 1995** Took silver in the 1500m and bronze in the 800m at the World Championships in Gothenburg
- 1994** Won gold in the 1500m at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria

**You won double Olympic Gold in the 800m and 1500m at the 2004 Olympic Games. What did it take to get you there?**

Athens 2004 was the first year in 7 that I hadn't had an injury that stopped me from reaching my full potential, I think that gave me a lot of confidence and belief that my physical attributes were at their best. During my career it was extremely hard to maintain such a high level of performance in terms of training without breaking down; you never know where that fine line is until you cross it. In 2004 the key was to keep my body in one piece, and there were a number of contributing factors, including physios, doctors, nutritionists and being a bit more meticulous myself, as an athlete, thinking 'this is your last chance to do anything, you have got to do it right.'



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*Getting there, you had to deal with a lot of disappointments. How did you deal with disappointments as an athlete?*

The whole of my career was a rollercoaster ride – I had some really great highs and some really bad lows but, ultimately, a lot of the disappointments actually made me stronger and tougher. A good example was my first Olympic Games, I was 26 years old. When I arrived in our holding camp in Tallahassee I felt a niggle and had a bruise on my leg, I went to the team doctor and had a scan which showed that I had a stress fracture. So I had arrived there in really good shape only to be told that what I thought was a bruise was actually a stress fracture. That was devastating and it makes you lose that pre-competition sharpness. The doctors said to me they thought I should pull out, but I had the choice to run and risk falling



**The doctor should have knowledge and be confident and professional**



**Image:** Kelly Holmes competes in the women's 800 metre final during the Athens 2004 Summer Olympic Games.



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over and breaking it completely or to go home. I decided that I was going to run! I ended up coming fourth in the final and was pipped on the line for a medal. So when I left those Games I was disappointed that I'd had to run at my first Olympic Games with a stress fracture and, yes, I was disappointed with fourth; but to think that I had run three rounds with a stress fracture. I was emotionally drained and in pain from injections into the bone site, but I had come fourth against the best in the world; this drove me to think 'I can do this, I'm good enough.' But that cycle kept being repeated, I would get up there to being among the best in the world and something would happen and stop me from going all the way, but knowing I got so close drove me.

*That's interesting, because lots of sports doctors would want to force their opinion on the athlete and say 'I think this is what should be done and you will do this'; but you were given the options and you made the final decision. Do you think that is the best way and is it the best way for young athletes? Or do you have to be a mature Olympic athlete to be able to make that decision?*

Getting to a championship is the pinnacle of any year, that's what you are training for, that's the end point; that's the goal. At Olympic level you train because you want to be the best. So by the time I got to an Olympic Games, I might never have got to another one it's a four year cycle, so I decided that it would be **my** choice. I would regret it for the rest of my life if I hadn't run and never made it again. If something had gone wrong, I had made that choice and taken that responsibility away from the doctor. I feel it's right that when an athlete is at that level, you give them the options, you tell them the risks and the pros and cons – but it is their choice. Athletes have a right to decide, if I had messed it up, that would have been my fault.

For young athletes, there is a necessary element of guidance as they don't tend to think about their long-term development. In my opinion, during training periods, when competition is not so important, the advice of the doctor should take precedent, particularly if something could be detrimental to the athlete's health or there could be long-term effects, especially with adolescents. But as an adult you have to make choices in life, particularly for work and sport effectively becomes a job for athletes.

**Image right:** Kelly Holmes celebrates her victory over Tatyana Tomashova during the women's 1500m at the 2004 IAAF World Athletics Final in Monaco.

**Image middle:** Maria de Lourdes Mutola wins gold and Kelly Holmes, silver, in the women's 800m Final at the 9th IAAF World Athletics Championships in 2003.

**Image far right:** Holmes runs the 800 metres at the Amateur Athletics Association's meeting at Birmingham, England.



***Of course you have to trust the team you are working with – the physios, doctors, physiologist, coach etc. in that scenario?***

The most important thing is communication. If an athlete is very successful all of those people has had a part to play in it, but they have to be able to communicate well to achieve that. When I was a younger athlete I had scenarios where the coach would set the training, while the physio advised different training to treat an injury and the nutritionist would come in and say they weren't considering my diet properly. If the team doesn't communicate it can cause friction and at the end of the day the athlete just wants to run fast and stay fit. I learned over time that my whole team needed to know each other and speak to each other to become an integrated team. A mature athlete who is at an Olympic standard has dedicated their life to the sport and they are relying on their team to help them achieve their goals.

***Do you feel the doctor should very much have a performance-focused approach to dealing with the athlete?***

Yes, I think so. Everybody in the team becomes a mentor for the athlete and all that athlete wants is confidence. They want the people around them to have belief in them, even if it's all going horribly wrong. You are already in turmoil as an athlete - you need hope. If an athlete has hope, they will go for it. At high level championships the athlete's mentality is that they are going to go and do it and give it their best shot no matter what; and sometimes

things start to go wrong, but athletes do things that they shouldn't have been capable of. When you are an experienced athlete in race mode, a lot of it is in your head and it doesn't matter what is going on with your body. I therefore like a doctor who will say 'look, there's a chance that something might happen, but you are here to do your best, so let's get out there and we will manage you as well as possible.'

***What do you think the role of the team doctor should be? And what advice would you give young sports doctors?***

The approach of the team doctor should depend on whether they have been working with the team long-term or have been assigned to that team and are new to the athletes. If you are part of the team and you know the athletes, you will know the maintenance programme and the support you need to give. But if you are a doctor going into an environment where you don't know any of the athletes you need to take up a supportive role; they need to know you are there whenever they need you, because if you get a cold two days before you compete they are the person you are going to for advice. The doctor should have knowledge and be confident and professional, when an athlete comes to you; you need to have a plan of action even if it's not a guarantee. You really need to be on the ball, because for the athlete, at that moment in time it is all or nothing and it's devastating if it goes wrong.



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**How did you balance health and performance issues? Apart from at your first Olympic Games, did you ever feel pressured to train or compete while ill or injured?**

Athletes often put pressure on themselves; you think that if you don't train you won't reach your goals. It's important to understand that training isn't just one thing, there are lots of options on how to train. I learned throughout my career that there's no such thing as no training, you just have to train smart. If I couldn't run because I was injured, there was no point in trying to run, because I wouldn't recover, but I could work really hard in the pool and keep my fitness up or I could go in the gym, on the bike, on the stepper. Sometimes it worked out better that way, because it works the things that you tend to neglect as a runner, like your core stability and functional strength. I never felt pressured to train, but I knew that I could train because I had worked out other ways of doing it.

I suppose you sometimes lose your way and you get scared of not training which can push the limits of your health; I suffered from anaemia, asthma, hay fever, terrible stomach pains after training, but you end up just coping with it, because you know it's not long-term, otherwise you would have to give up on it all. I wouldn't have been running at all if I had listened to every little thing like that, but at the same time, you have to be sensible as well.



**Image top:** Holmes in her hometown Tonbridge, Kent, in September 2004, after winning double Olympic Gold.

**Image left:** Dame Kelly Holmes in Qatar for the 2015 National Sports Day, giving the prize for the Men's 5km winner at Losail Circuit, Doha.

**Image right:** Dame Kelly Holmes attends the Laureus Future Champs Project visit in 2010 in Cape Town, South Africa.



***Do you think your army career prepared you well to adapt your training and cope with that pain and hardship?***

As a physical training instructor in the army I did a lot of cross-training and circuit training and other exercises which kept me very strong. My first four years as an international athlete I was still full-time with the military, so I was actually at my strongest then. After leaving the army, I started having more problems with fitness. As soon as I became a runner, I was doing lots of repetitions of one thing and I think I became weaker, I was doing so much less strength and core training.

In terms of adapting my training, this came from my knowledge of physical training, knowing what circuits I could do, knowing how much I could push my body. There's a difference between feeling it's tough and actually working hard and I think I had the ability to know the level of training that I needed to be successful. The army

prepared me well in terms of discipline, pushing against the odds, fighting for what you want and knowing how to train hard.

***Do you think young athletes' lives are too easy? And how important is it to suffer a bit to gain that extra advantage?***

If you get everything handed to you on a plate you will never know what you can really achieve. If you work hard for your success, it is more satisfying and if things are too easy you can lose your hunger to achieve something. If you win one race or run one fast time you can't switch off or act like a champion because you are only as good as your last race. If you don't replicate it you are back to where you were before. I have seen many talented athletes who won one really good race and everyone starts pampering them like they are the best thing going and it goes to their head and they don't focus. Whereas if someone has had to struggle to achieve they will feel proud of



***A mature athlete who is at an Olympic standard has dedicated their life to the sport and are relying on their team to help them achieve their goals***



**Image right:** Dame Kelly Holmes at Buckingham Palace, after receiving her Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire from HM The Queen Elizabeth II, in 2005.

**Image bottom right:** Holmes in the women's 1500m at the 6th World Athletics Championships in Athens, in 1997.

**Image far right:** Dame Kelly Holmes poses with the torch during the London 2012 Olympic Torch Relay.

themselves but will also be willing to do it again. As much as my journey to being Olympic champion was hellish, I'm pleased I went through all the ups and downs because when I crossed that line in Athens it was the best feeling. I'd done it despite all of the issues.

***You have done a huge amount of charity work for women and young people in sport, including mentoring young endurance athletes through your 'On Camp with Kelly' programme. Why is it important for women to participate in sport, particularly in the context of the Middle East? And what more can we do to help women's participation?***

I don't have much experience of the Middle East from a sporting perspective, but for women generally, I think it's really important to feel good about yourself. If you do that then you will be a better wife, a better mother and a better person at work, more communicative and just feel good generally. I do feel that having an active, healthy lifestyle is important and potentially getting involved in sport is just a bonus. From a health perspective, it's really nice to feel fit, you can really get a buzz out of it, but equally if you are a woman whose family life is really important, being active with your kids is important. Equally, having a stronger body can even help with things such as preventing problems during child birth.

***What do you think Jo Pavey's achievements at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games and the European Championships last year meant to her and for women in sport, especially older women in sport?***

What Jo Pavey did over those two weeks, winning bronze in the 5000m at the Commonwealth Games, then gold in the 10,000m at the European Championships is just the biggest inspiration women can have, for various reasons. She was 40 years old at the time and had given birth to her second child only 10 months prior! She is another athlete who always seemed to have had a problem or injury holding her back and may have never fulfilled her potential; she could have easily given up many times. But she has been committed for years and to see somebody who has that resolve winning and enjoying her sport is great. She was a talented junior athlete, she gave up athletics and went travelling for a year with her husband and came back in 1997 and came fourth in the 1500m race in which I broke the British record. That's how we became friends; she is one of the nicest people you will ever meet. She has a natural ability and trains and runs very hard. To see her do that at the end of her career is inspirational to everyone, including me.



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***How important is it for elite athletes to think of a career after professional sport? Do they get enough appropriate support and what can be done to improve that?***

I think, certainly now, athletes should be given guidance and think about what they might do when they retire. I've been through it myself and also been involved with many athletes who have retired and are now working with my Trust. A lot of them find it extremely hard to end a 10, 12, 15-year career, that has been their focus, has been who they are, has driven them to everything they have achieved. For that to come to an end is very hard to deal with. The very top athletes might have so many other opportunities open to them that they don't have to think about it, but let's face it 99% of athletes won't have that opportunity. As a full-time athlete, you don't think about what happens after that. Your focus is on the here and now. Personally, I never once thought past my dream of becoming Olympic champion, I never thought about retiring, so when I came to the end of my career and people said 'I assume you're retiring now?' I didn't really know what I was going to do. The English Institute of Sport have set up a strategy to start helping with career development so some of the younger athletes and lower tier athletes are getting advice, but when they then move up to that top level, that advice often goes out of the window. I would like

to see support from the time you retire for perhaps 6 months to a year afterwards with a rehabilitation-type package. In the armed forces when you leave you get a year of support when you can go on courses to help you reintegrate. They should do something similar with elites sportspeople; they invest so much in getting them to the top and they want them to represent their country and bring glory, but after that there is very little else. I would like to see them help people transition at the end of their career and that is part of the reason I started my trust.

***Eating disorders are an increasing problem among young female, and in fact male, athletes. What is your advice on eating healthily and weight management for young athletes?***

It comes down to energy availability. When you are pushing your body you need to have the energy available to do it and think about the recovery mechanisms. I think sometimes the nutrition advice can become slightly more advanced than necessary for the level of the athlete. Most athletes just want to know what they need to do to have enough fuel in their body to push themselves to their limits when they are training and preparing; also which are the best foods to aid recovery, and when and why do they need to eat them? All



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athletes know they have to eat well and drink enough fluids but sometimes you don't know if you are really doing it right. That is where the guidance and personalised advice is needed.

In terms of eating disorders, I have done a lot of work around the female athlete triad, relating to energy availability and bone health. For those young female athletes it is often about lifestyle. Situations can create peer pressure and peer groups will often contain some members who are very sporty and some who aren't, if you are a young person with a sporting talent you have to try and balance that. You can find yourself neglecting your athlete side in order to fit in, which is detrimental when you go back to training. It's a tough situation and I'm not sure if anyone can actually resolve it, but we can certainly give really good advice and emphasise the link between health and performance. So often during the cross-country season, there are a couple of girls who fly around the track because they have lost so much weight. Everybody looks at them and thinks they are great, but 5 months later in the summer season they are nowhere to be seen, because they have broken down; you can't sustain that through the heavy winter training period if you aren't thinking about your food and health.

Paul Dijkstra, M.D.