

MUTAZ BARSHIM

Mutaz Essa Barshim is the pride of Qatar – his name, Mutaz, even translates from Arabic as ‘pride’.

The high jumper is the nation’s most successful Olympian; the only Qatari athlete to win more than one Olympic medal and the only to win silver. At 2.43 metres, his personal best stands as the second highest jump of all time.

Aspire Academy’s premier graduate, he has picked up a slew of medals at Asian, World and Olympic competitions since a breakthrough year in 2010.

But it hasn’t always been plain sailing for the 25-year-old, whose 2012 season was plagued by a stress fracture in his lumbar spine. Despite this, he managed bronze on his Olympic debut.

His ability is matched only by his ambition, and Barshim is not content with second best. His sights are set firmly on Olympic gold at Tokyo 2020, as well as topping Javier Sotomayor’s 2.45 metre World Record, which has stood since he was 2 years old.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2016

Won Olympic Silver in Rio de Janeiro

2015

Bronze at the Asian Athletics Championships in Wuhan

2014

Cleared the second highest jump in history (2.43 m) at the Diamond League meet in Brussels

2014

Gold at the World Indoor Championships in Sopot

2014

Gold at the Asian Games in Incheon

2014

Gold at the Asian Indoor Championships in Hangzhou

2013

Won silver at the World Championships in Moscow

2012

Took Bronze at his first Olympic Games, in London

2012

Gold at the Asian Indoor Championships in Hangzhou

2011

Won gold at the Asian Athletics Championships in Kobe

2010

Gold at the Asian Games in Incheon

2010

Gold at the Asian indoor Championships in Tehran

Can you tell us about how you started out in athletics; it’s a big part of your family?

Yes. My father was an athlete and that’s how it started for me. I used to watch him on TV and go to training with him – it was always something I wanted to do too. Seeing your father compete and win awards and be on TV is a big thing for a kid; I was so proud and I also wanted to do that.

And how did you decide on high jump as an event?

I started out in long- and middle-distance running, but I didn’t like it that much, it wasn’t fun and I wasn’t very drawn to it. I used to go to training and see the jumping groups doing fun stuff. When you’re a kid you just want training to be fun, you’re not going there to be



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a professional. They were doing flips on the mats and trampoline work and we were just running around in circles the whole time. I saw that as a kid and thought 'I want to do that, that is fun.' I spoke to the chief of the sports club – Al Rayyan – and he said I could switch. It wasn't specifically high jump at first; I was doing long jump, triple jump and high jump – all the jumps except pole vault. When I was around 14 I stopped doing triple jump as I was getting pain in my knee. I carried on doing long jump and high jump until I was 17. After that I stuck solely to high jump.

That might be considered quite late to specialise solely in one event, do you think it's beneficial for promising young athletes to practise a range of athletic disciplines?

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I think it's a good thing early on. When you are young your body is not adjusted to any one event and you need to try everything to see how your body reacts to it. How you feel doing it is important, you must really feel that you want to dedicate yourself to that event, otherwise you will get fed up very quickly. I think it helps doing multiple events until you are 16 or 17, your body is still growing, a variety of movements and techniques can only be beneficial to this.

The question of 'nature versus nurture has long been discussed in sport, do you think great athletes are born or made?

Both; you might be born with talent, but that's no use if you're not willing to work at it. Some people who make it might not have as much talent as others, but they work harder. Talent isn't always the key, but it definitely helps.

You are the most decorated graduate of the Aspire Academy and must have a good knowledge of the support systems it offers to athletes, can you tell us about your experiences here as a young athlete?

It was amazing. Every young athlete dreams of a place like Aspire. You have the best facilities, the best care, an entire support team behind you – coaches, doctors, teachers, nutritionists – all focused on your success. One of the best things is the culture of combining sports and school, because parents may be concerned that you

should focus on your studies by a certain age. In Aspire they excel in both, but in a way that is extremely flexible. You may have a 2-hour training session then classes, but if you are feeling tired, they will switch it around so you can train later. It's very flexible in that way, to make sure you excel in your studies and your training.

How has sports science and sports medicine helped you get to where you are now, what role has Aspire/Aspetar played in that?

Luckily I didn't suffer many injuries, so I didn't have to spend too much time seeing the medical staff, but I was aware of the big role they played, as they were always present with us at training, even when we were on training camps anywhere in the world. As soon as any of the athletes need medical care Aspetar is only a phone call away and always ready to help, whatever is required. Elite sport demands attention in all areas, you have to eat well, train well, rest well, and this requires round-the-clock support and this is the big role that the staff here play.

You were diagnosed with a stress fracture in one of your lumbar vertebrae in 2012, but still managed to win a Bronze at the London Olympics. Tell us about that injury and the treatment?

It was terrible. It was overuse and training overload which caused a stress fracture in my L5 vertebra. I hardly competed that year and my participation at the Olympics was only confirmed 10 days or so



Image: Mutaz Barshim competes in the Men's High Jump final at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.



Image left: Barshim with his coach, Stanisław Szczyrba, at the 2013 IAAF World Athletics Championships in Moscow.

Image below: Mutaz Barshim poses with his medal after winning silver in the Men's High Jump at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

beforehand. It was a bad year, but I stayed patient, did what work I could with my coach and when I had my last check-up with the doctor before the Olympics he said: "okay you can go, but it might be risky, you won't be able to do many jumps, but you can go and see how you feel." I decided I would go anyway. The moment I stepped onto the field was amazing, it had been my dream to make the Olympics and I said to my coach: "whatever happens, I'm, going to jump, even if this is the last competition of my life, I have to go out there and do it." I did, and that bronze medal felt like gold to me.

Being told you have a fracture in your spine must have quite an effect on an athlete, how did it affect you? What is the role of the doctor and medical staff not only in treating your injury but reassuring an athlete?

It's a very important element. I was in good shape, I was totally prepared for the biggest event of my life and then with a few months to go I was in a lot of pain, even unable to walk, and diagnosed with a stress fracture. The doctors were saying I may have to skip the Olympics. Mentally you start to feel down and you can lose motivation, not want to train. I kept myself very closed; I just talked to my parents and my team about it. They did a lot to cheer me up. My coach said, don't worry you are still young, you will have, hopefully, two more Olympics to come after this one, it's not the end of the world. I believe in my coach and my team so much and they kept my spirits high. My mother told me that if it's meant to be, it will be.

Pain and injury are frequent problems for high level athletes? How do you keep yourself going in those difficult moments?

Yes, that's the nature of sport in general. Injury is a big part of sport. If you want to be a sportsperson you must accept that you will be



injured at some point. If you push yourself to the limit, if you train and compete at 110% it is going to affect your body. The key thing is that if you do have to compete with pain you must be sure that this isn't pain that could develop into a bigger problem. Sometimes you have pain, but it's just a reaction of your process, and you can jump with that type of pain, but other times you may have a medical check that identifies something wrong and then it's risky to compete, and that is where the doctor and the rest of my team come in, to help with that decision.

Who makes up your team? How do you make decisions regarding your health and your career? Often nowadays we see many athletes assume the lead role within their support team, and place themselves in charge of making decisions, is this your approach?

My 'inner circle' is my coach, my physio, my doctor and my agent, just the five of us. My physio and coach are always present at training; we usually sit down together each morning and evening to discuss anything. Our decisions are made in collaboration, everything is open to discussion and we always consider everyone's opinion. Sometimes my coach tells me, this is something you need to make a decision on as the athlete. He has the experience, but it has to feel right for me. Nobody knows your body better than you do. I try to keep things transparent between my family and my team, especially with my coach; we have a very open relationship, there is no do or die instruction. I don't have a set training schedule, we have objectives and a basic structure, but the rest is done on feeling, which may be a little different to other athletes?

You mentioned you don't have a set training schedule, can you explain a bit more?

Yes, there is no schedule. My coach hates working on paper, and I agree, we never have anything planned out like that. He is 70 years old, he knows what he is doing, he has been coaching for 55 years. He is a professor of what he does and I have total faith in him. He taught me how to follow my instincts, it won't be perfect every time, but it works overall. He knows how to



structure me as an athlete to prepare me to jump. Then we just follow what my body tells us. If we had a programme that said I have to run 400 m five times today, but I have tightness in my hamstring, why would I follow that? Athletes are not robots, so we structure training sessions in a very flexible way dictated by the body and the mind.

What kind of approach do you prefer from the medical specialists you consult, one whereby they advise you what they think is the best action or where they clarify the situation and give you the options?

A bit of both. It's important to clarify the situation to the athlete, but I don't like a doctor who tells me 'maybe this or maybe that', no,

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Image left: Barshim arches over the bar during qualification at the 2011 IAAF World Championships in Daegu.

Image right: A jubilant Barshim celebrates after winning the Men's High Jump at the Birmingham Diamond League, 2016.



tell it to me how it is. If it's very bad, tell me it's very bad and tell me what you recommend, then I will discuss it with my team and we will make a decision. It can be hard to hear, but it's best to have a clear decision from specialists – I usually see three – then I make a decision with my team based on their clear advice.

What is your relationship like with your coach, what does he have that works for you?

He has quality, he has his mind, his intuition and above all experience. Computers can't do everything for an athlete. He has trained thousands of athletes, including those who have won Olympic medals, World Championships medals, European medals, everything. You can probably say I will be his last athlete and all that experience from his many years in the sport is what he can offer me. He knows exactly what to do, he doesn't need help from computers. Just like a doctor, there are some things that can't be taught. You can graduate from your medical degree, but to learn some things you have to go and practice as a doctor and learn on the job. Anybody can read about how to do the high jump in a book, but not everyone would be able to do it in real life, in the field. It's about transforming that information into something valuable and that's what my coach knows how to do.

Can you describe your feelings at your first Olympic Games in London?

I was living the dream. It had always been my ambition to compete at the Olympics. In the Olympic village you can walk around and meet all the stars, it was surprise to me. It is really something special. I was calling my friends telling them who I met and who was staying next door to me, who I sat with at the food court. It gives you so much energy and inspiration to see the stars you dreamed

about meeting when you were younger and to be staying at the same place as them. I remember the stadium was completely full, not a spare seat. I was in some pain at the time but I remember thinking 'I don't care; today I am jumping, just to experience this.' I loved it, the atmosphere was fantastic.

Was there any difference at your second Olympic Games in Rio?

Yes, it was different. In London I was just happy to be there, but at Rio I wanted gold. I didn't stay in the athlete's village; I stayed by myself outside, because I wanted to be focused. I had already lived that experience in the village, this time round my targets were higher. The first Olympics, I was happy to make it to the final and it was a valuable experience, I learned what to do and what not to do, how to handle the media. I came to the Rio Games more prepared. I would have been very upset if I hadn't won a medal

Do you think that in reality the true experience of the Olympic Games is a once in a lifetime experience the first time you go. Afterwards it becomes more like work?

It is a job, sport is my job. I am just fortunate that I love what I do. There is a joy in it, but of course, when I step out on the field it's a job, I am there to fight. But I don't really see it like a job, because I love what I do and I have a target, having that target doesn't make it seem like work.

High jumpers have quite a specialised body type; they must be light but also able to generate a lot of power. Tell us about what type of training you do and your training schedule?

Yes high jump is a very specialist event. I think high jump is an art, it's like a puzzle – there are many pieces you need to put together. You need speed, but not too much or you won't take off properly. You



need power, but not too much muscle or you will be too heavy – you can't just go to the gym and start pumping iron because you will gain weight and lose flexibility. You need to be flexible to arch over the bar, but not so flexible that you aren't explosive. It is a little bit of everything, and a little bit different for each jumper depending on their body. Different people react differently to the same training, one coach might have three or four jumpers but for a given exercise, one might do it five times, another two times and another not at all. In terms of types of training, we do speed training, some strength in the gym, a lot of bounding-type exercises and jumps, a little bit of endurance work – even though it's not needed for my event, good endurance is important for recovering faster and helps when you have to travel around a lot for different competitions, sometimes I might have to be in four countries in 1 week. So it really is a little bit of everything.

Do you do any injury prevention training?

Yes, I do a lot. For me core stability is very important because I have to strengthen my back since the stress fracture in my spine, so I can hold the right postures. I also had quite a few problems with my ankle before, so I do prevention training for that too, like work in the pool or with elastic bands.

And what about nutrition, is that important for you?

It's very important. For high jumpers it is one of the most important things. You don't directly use any equipment in high jump, only your body. One kilogram of extra weight is a disaster and one kilogram too light is also a disaster, so it is important to identify the right weight for each jumper and try to maintain it – it is very hard!

What about during Ramadan, how does that affect your training and nutrition, particularly if you are training in Europe, where the summer days are longer than here in Qatar?

For me it can actually help! As a high jumper I have to keep my weight down and fasting can make this easy and I can still eat whatever I like in the evenings. I just make sure to drink a lot of fluids so I don't get dehydrated. But also, if I have a period of intense training or I am competing, then I don't fast, I will do it later when I come home after a competition.

You have won bronze and silver at the previous two Olympic Games, can we expect you to continue the trend and win gold at the Tokyo Games in 2020?

Of course! That is definitely the aim. When you step onto the field you always want to do your best. What has happened in the past



Image left: Mutaz Barshim celebrates with his fellow medalists after winning bronze at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

Image: Barshim clears a jump during the final of the Men's High Jump at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

has happened; all you can do is fight to be the best where you are now.

Do you think it's important to have a goal like that to work towards as an athlete?

A very important thing for an athlete is how you keep doing what you're doing and stay on track. A young upcoming athlete who wins one or two competitions and has already sacrificed so much for their sport – how do they make sure they continue to do this. The more success you have the harder it is to continue in the same way, there are a lot of distractions. Lots of people want you to go and do lots of different things, there's a lot of money involved, it's very easy to slip up and lose focus on your training. Even if you think you are training well but your mind is elsewhere it can have an impact, your mind needs to be in the right place. Athletes need guidance in this respect, someone who knows this professional environment and can keep them on the right track. They can tell you what things to say yes to and when to say no, even if you don't want to. You might be invited to make an appearance somewhere, perhaps you could meet some Hollywood stars, have dinner, but your coach and those who advise you say no. Earlier in my career I always wanted to go to these things, but now I understand how important it is to stay on

track and stay focused on the thing that started you on your path as an athlete.

Do you have any message for young athletes?

The people you surround yourself with are very important. You might have friends who want to go out or stay up late, they might invite you out for coffee, but all of a sudden it's midnight and you have training in the morning. If you do something like that 3 days in a row your body will be exhausted. So you must make sacrifices. You sacrifice time with you family and friends, all the good times you could have. Sometimes I haven't seen my mother for 6 months because I have been off training in Europe. But you are rewarded when you step onto that podium to receive a medal, that's the reason we do it. So my message is sacrifice and guidance are what an athlete needs to keep them on the path to success.

Jake Bambrough