

STRONG MIND

As the countdown to Tokyo 2020 begins, sports stars become big news. But while these elite athletes elicit cheers and veneration *now*, by the age of 30, their all-encompassing professional life can come to an abrupt halt. Here's the story of what happens next...

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PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



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am Murray kept a lid on her emotions for the entire journey home from Rome to Bath, it wasn't until she finally heard her front door click shut behind her that she started screaming, jumping and madly punching the air. She had been at the World Modern Pentathlon Championships, where she secured one of only two places in the GB squad for the 2012 London Olympics, and she felt as close to invincible as someone this side of a Marvel comic can get. 'Imagine after an amazing first date when you run up and down the stairs and think, "Oh my god, yes!" Doing well in sport is the ultimate addictive feeling. When you prove what your body can achieve, it's like the ultimate victory.' Sam went on to win Olympic silver and recalls basking in the recognition. 'In what other job do you appear on the news and receive floods of well done texts simply for having a good day at the office? That's the crazy world athletes live in.'

But if elite sport comes with extraordinary highs, it largely promises extraordinary brevity, too. The average age to set a world record in sport is 26.1, with retirement, often soon after 30, lurking over your shoulder as subtly as a fellow commuter reading your Kindle. Running out of professional puff with a stuffed medal cabinet but decades of bill-paying and life ahead of you can unsettle



even the most unflappable. Sporting celebrities aren't immune: Dame Kelly Holmes likened retiring to losing her entire identity; Andy Murray sought psychological help when his hip injury threatened to end his career, revealing that he had 'zero interest' in doing anything else; swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time with 28 medals, suffered such severe depression after calling time post-2012 Olympics that he sat alone in his bedroom for five days and contemplated suicide. In May, an International Olympic Committee report confirmed that 45% of former athletes suffer from anxiety and depression after transitioning out of sport.

RECORD LOWS

'Was I depressed at my lowest point? Absolutely,' says Catherine Spencer, 40, a former England rugby captain who retired after the Six Nations in 2011. Born into a rugby-mad family – with a PE teacher mum, and a dad and two brothers who all played – her decision to retire was prompted by age. 'I would have been 35 by the 2014 World Cup and I wanted to retire on my terms rather than get deselected or injured,' she tells *Women's Health*. 'But I'll never know if it was the right decision.' In 2014, the England squad won the Rugby World Cup without her – something Catherine found devastating. 'I was working for Sky TV when the whistle went and I started sobbing in the studio. The squad then won Team of the Year at BBC Sports Personality of the Year 2014, which was so amazing, but I watched with tears streaming down my face because I thought, "Could I have been the one lifting that trophy?" And then I hated myself for feeling that way.'

Experts believe this emotional struggle affects athletes with hefty medal tallies and glorious victory narratives hardest because of the life-upending impact of retirement on identity. Dr Alan Currie, chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists sports and exercise psychiatry group and a member of the English Institute of Sport's mental health panel, is one of these experts and recalls the industry noticing the negative side of early over-achievement around 15 to 20 years ago. 'After Sydney in 2000 and Athens in 2004, it almost took people by surprise that athletes were coming back from the Olympics, having been very successful at the one thing they'd spent years striving for, feeling flat. You'd hear, "My only goal in life was getting two Olympic medals. I've got them both – what do I do next?"' The problem was that they'd achieved their goal without thinking beyond it.

GIVING YOUR ALL

It's like the friend who does a Houdini when she finds a new boyfriend but later learns that he's still active on Hinge and she's got no support network to turn to. Dr Currie explains: 'Most people have multiple roles, so when something goes wrong in one area, you can seek a balance because things are going right in another area. But elite athletes have just one role that takes over everything

made from her teens up until her retirement last year, she admits, was sport-first.

On her bedroom wall in her childhood home, Sam stuck a photograph of Dr Stephanie Cook, the modern pentathlete who won gold at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. During secondary school, life was a balance between training and education: Sam would get up at 5.30am to train with the local swimming club three times a week, go to school, come home, quickly do her homework and then dash to athletics club or fencing classes, go horse riding at her grandma's house or shoot targets with an air pistol in her back garden. Weekends were spent participating in competitions across the country. Most 16-year-olds plan as far ahead as that night's Netflix, but Sam was already working out how to secure a place at the University of Bath because it hosted the national training centre for modern pentathlon. She chose her three strongest

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else.' Consequently, when something within that sphere goes wrong, it feels as if your whole world is imploding. Practically, this can translate as struggling to know what to do with your morning – even your whole future. Compounding this is the fact that, for the majority of athletes, success starts to build just as their personal identity is forming.

Many student athletes begin specialising and training heavily in one sport before they've even turned 12, and that all-or-nothing pressure to turn it into a professional career means that at an age when most tweens dart between cringeworthy emo phases, rebellious haircuts and wanting to be the next Emma Watson, athletes already define themselves by (and make life decisions based on) their careers above anything else.

This phenomenon is known as 'identity foreclosure', a term coined in the 1960s by American psychologist Professor James Marcia, who defined it as: 'when a commitment is made without exploring alternatives' – something that certainly rings true to Sam based on her experience. Every decision she

subjects as A-levels – biology, English literature and French – and got the grades to study French and politics. At university, being a full-time GB athlete added a fresher-unfriendly 30 hours of weekly exercise to her course schedule. 'Every Sunday, from October 2008 until October 2018, I received a spreadsheet from my coach detailing what I was doing at each time of the day: lessons, training (swimming, running, fencing, horse riding, shooting, gym), physiotherapy, nutrition appointments. That timetable popped into my inbox every Sunday for 10 years of my life, and it was awesome,' she laughs. 'I'd start my week with genuine excitement because I loved training – and knowing what I was doing. Athletes thrive on regime.'

FREE AND NOT EASY

When Sam left competitive sport, having ticked off a to-do list that would delight even the pushiest of parents – Olympic medallist, world champion, world record holder – she crashed. 'I went from being a self-assured expert in my sport to second-guessing myself in job interviews when I was asked what made me a worthy candidate for that role,' she recalls. 'I overanalysed the current me and glorified how busy I *used* to be, representing my country. Physically, the biceps and triceps that I'd worked so hard to build during swimming training just disappeared, and I became concerned about maintaining my body's strength and size without someone there to give me the formula.'



Sam lasted two months after retirement – during which she couldn't join friends in the pub for a beer without stressing over her next move – before launching herself back into the world of sport, taking a mentoring role at the British Athletes Commission. To say it opened her eyes to the scale of the issue is an understatement. 'Within a month, I'd met multiple retiring or retired athletes suffering with serious mental health issues; struggling with financial difficulty because funding abruptly stopped after retirement, while battling a loss of identity,' she explains. The individuals' biggest concern was what to do next, professionally and logistically; like Sam, many had moved to towns like Lilleshall or Loughborough to be close to training

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centres, which no longer had the professional opportunities or social networks to serve them once they'd retired. Unlike Sam, however, many athletes hadn't studied because their sports hadn't been supportive or flexible in allowing them the time to do so. It meant that, on retirement, there was no thread of continuity in their lives, no academic skill set or part-time job to fall back on, and very little information about how to turn their contact book and transferable skills as an athlete into tools for a business environment.

'The general feeling among people I spoke to was, "Other than move home with Mum and Dad, what am I going to do?"' she explains. Because many hadn't studied past school, they were working out how they could afford Open University. The houseshares they'd shacked up in with other athletes to keep rental costs down now felt too expensive without an income. A survey of 800 former sportspeople by the Professional Players Federation found that 50% did not feel in control of their lives within two years of their careers ending. However, judging by the accounts of the sportswomen contacted by *WH*, this seems a conservative assessment.

LIFE IN LIMBO

One among them, Olympic gold medal-winning hockey player Crista Cullen MBE, 34, was so apprehensive about free-falling after retirement that she maintained a part-time role as a marketing director throughout her competing years, but it proved an uncommon – and sometimes unpopular – strategy. 'Coaches understandably don't want their athletes training at 5am to fit in a day's work because it affects sleep patterns and potentially the next day's training,' she recalls. Crista ended up experiencing two retirements. Her first, after London 2012, was cut short. She had been retired for three years – during which time she'd gone back to her childhood home of Kenya, thrown herself into conservation projects, trained to be a pilot (with a view to doing aerial wildlife surveillance),

and hadn't picked up a hockey stick once – when the head hockey coach invited her to rejoin the GB squad for Rio 2016. She did, and immediately noticed a change – within herself and the culture of the group. 'I felt lost for six months the first time I retired,' she recalls. 'I was very quiet, and keeping fit was the only thing that I could control, so I punished my body as a coping strategy.' During Rio, it was clear that the support had been stepped up since four years earlier. 'There were constant references to post-Rio events.

Support staff kept on saying, "No matter whether you continue in hockey or finish after Rio, whether we have success or failure, you *will* feel like you've dropped off a cliff, and that's okay." Those of us who had experienced multiple Olympic cycles spoke openly, for once, about the comedown. It's so important that it's referenced regularly so that there are minimal surprises.'

Dr Currie agrees that, in recent Olympic cycles, authorities have become better at prioritising retirement preparation, including a growing number of 'performance lifestyle advisers' who offer guidance on CV writing and transferable skills. He's now consulting with several sporting bodies on ways to introduce mental health screening earlier. 'We screen athletes for all kinds of physiological measures, like cardiac status, lung function, muscle strength. But we're not so good at identifying when things go awry with mental health. If you start to ask athletes about their mood and anxiety at the same time as you measure their hip flexibility and resting pulse, doing so becomes

systematic and non-stigmatised.' He's gunning for a change where sport *welcomes* athletes discussing their mental health and, in turn, makes them feel comfortable doing so.

SHOW OF STRENGTH

Catherine, sadly, was far from this accepting place in the months after she retired. 'I never spoke to a GP about feeling depressed because I was Catherine Spencer, the strong person that other people came to for solutions. I didn't want to speak to my close friends – the majority of whom were all my former teammates who'd just won the Rugby World Cup – and I didn't want to share with my family and risk making them sad.' Having found that silence 'pretty tough', Catherine went on to set up her own speaker agency, Inspiring Women, which provides a platform for retired female athletes, including gymnast Beth Tweddle and Paralympian Hannah Cockcroft MBE, to openly share their experiences – the lows *and* the highs.

As for Sam, a year post-retirement, she's practising a professional split, with one foot in her past and the other in a new future. She's relocated to London, and many projects, such as modelling during London Fashion Week, come about because of what she achieved in the past. 'I go, enjoy it and answer all those questions about the Olympics, but then I have to remember that I don't live in that world any more.' She's carrying over a few techniques into this next epoch, such as writing a daily journal to monitor her thoughts and planning her meals and exercise sessions. 'It's not on the scale of the Olympics, obviously,' she says. 'But I need a way of being able to stay on track now that I control my own time.'

Bedding into this new life of a civilian athlete involves trial and error. 'I went swimming the other day and a woman came up to me and said, "You're really good, do you think you should join a local club?" I explained that, yes, I used to be in a club; I went to the Olympics and I'm actually the world record holder for 200m freestyle.' And? 'She looked at me like I was an alien!' she laughs. 'So, now, I don't tell a lot of people. My Olympic life is slowly going from being my whole life to being my secret life – and I'm enjoying it.' **WH**

ICONS: GUY HERNE/GETTY IMAGES; THOMAS LE BAS/ANDREW DODD/CHRIS PROVINS; LUDOVIC RIFFAULT/AT VISION PROJECT/SC CAREER TRANSITION.COM



HOW TO HURDLE AN IDENTITY RUT LIKE AN OLYMPIAN

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REJIG YOUR SOCIAL SELF

Pick up to 12 photos from your social media profiles (ideally from the last couple of years) that, if someone didn't know you, would tell them the most about you. What impression do they give? Then, what type of photos would you like to appear here that aren't? What steps can you take to introduce that side of you?



BROADEN YOUR INTERESTS

List all the things that interested you when you were young – school subjects, hobbies, charities, something a friend did. Now, pick a couple and find out more: watch a YouTube video, think how you could try it out or get involved in it. The aim is to expand who you are and what you're about.



BIG UP YOUR NO. 2 ROLE

Imagine a friend is giving a toast at your party. Outside of what you're most known for – eg, working in retail, a boss, a mum – what would they say about you? (If you're struggling, think of the younger you before your main identity existed.) What could you do to make sure these other things are talked about more?