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# ‘MY GOAL IS TO BE STRONGER THAN EVER’

GB rowing icon and mum-of-three **Helen Glover MBE** tells us why she’s breaking all the rules with her Olympic comeback

Words: Joanna Ebsworth







lympian. Mother. And now game-changer. That's Helen Glover in a nutshell. Not content with winning two Olympic gold medals across the 2012 and 2016 games, and making history by becoming the first mum to row for Team GB at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the rowing champion has announced she is back in training with the aim of competing at Paris 2024.

Glover will be 38 years old when the Paris Olympics take place in just over a year's time, and yet she is far from phased. In fact, she's planning to be stronger than she was in her prime. 'I have to believe I can come back better than I ever have been, otherwise what's the point?' she explains. 'If I'm coming back to accept being slower than before, I think that's really unambitious and not very motivating, so my goal is to be stronger than ever.'

*'I want to be back, better than ever, and be a mum, and so many other things at the same time...'*

### BACK ON TRACK

Sounds incredible, but we're wondering what changed. When *Women's Fitness* last spoke to Glover in 2022, she was taking a break from competitive rowing, relishing spending time with her three children – four-year-old Logan and three-year-old twins Kit and Willow – and enjoying other physical challenges (in 2017 alone, Glover ran a marathon, completed a half Ironman and finished a 124-mile kayak race!). She was telling us how she had finally found balance in later life since pausing her career as a full-time athlete. So, why decide to stage a sporting comeback now?

'I was on a break from competitive rowing and not thinking about getting back into it, but I was doing some beach sprint rowing for fun through the summer,' says Glover. 'Once that finished in October, just a couple of weeks away from the British Rowing trials, my husband [TV wildlife expert Steve Backshall] said, "I really think you should enter the trials". Part of me was thinking that if I did win my trial, then the door would stay open without any commitment, but if I didn't do well, it would help me get some closure. I think I've lost any sense of ego as I've grown older, so I just thought, "If I get beaten, that's my answer. It doesn't make me less of a person, but it's just not right for me now."'

In the end, Glover entered the trials and won, which put competitive rowing firmly back on her radar. However, she admits she did question herself as to why she would want to go through it all again. The answer, it turns out, lay in her being a mum.

'My kids were too young to understand Tokyo, and Tokyo was such a strange time anyway,' she reflects. 'I didn't feel like I threw myself into the professional athlete side of things. It was all about, "Can I do it and be a mum?". But now I'm like, "Yes, I can, I've done that now. But can I be a mum and be the best athlete I can be?". That's something I don't know, and it's something I'm really excited to find out. I want to be back, better than ever, and be a mum, and so many other things at the same time, rather than it just be, "she's doing it despite being a mum".'



We ask her, as a female athlete who has announced a cessation from sport several times when having children – only to return to her career after a break – whether she thinks there is an expectation for pregnant athletes to retire altogether, rather than being given the opportunity to make a decision once they've recovered from childbirth.

'Yes, 100 per cent,' she says emphatically. 'Because until I came back for the 2020 games after having Logan, no one else had done it before. And when nobody's done something before, it ends up being your own assumption. I was one of those people who thought my career was over now I'd had a child. I wasn't there thinking, "I've started a family, let me just think about what I need to do and work out if I can come back". It wasn't in the vocabulary of the system at the time. One of the things I'm most proud of is how that attitude is now totally stamped out. Any woman on our team who decides to have a family would be asked the question, "Do you want to carry on?". And then, after a break, someone would say to them, "Let us know when you're ready to make a decision", rather than never being asked again, because it was always assumed. Even if you come back a long time after having kids, having options is really important, even if no one takes the option.'

Since announcing her return to training with Team GB, Glover says she has received lots of incredible feedback, and not just from women in rowing and sport in general. 'Probably the most amazing feedback I've had is from other mothers, and fathers as well,' she says. 'There's a real surge of empowerment. It's like giving permission, almost, for them to say, "Yes, I can do this thing", and that's something I never thought possible. I love receiving messages from people outside of the rowing community and feeling that wider impact.'

### MENTAL RESILIENCE

Does she think that having children has made her a better athlete? 'Potentially it has, but there are so many parameters to judge an athlete on,' says Glover. 'Yes, there are some things that are harder. I have a few more injury risks because I don't get the same recovery and the same sleep anymore, and my body has changed through pregnancy. But my mental toughness and resilience is stronger than ever. I'm doing a full-time training programme while juggling motherhood, and I'm astounded by the fact that I'm doing things I couldn't have done in my 20s. My ability to compartmentalise rowing and weigh up how important it is to my life is better. I have to walk in the door after training and be fully present for my children, no matter if I'm ill, injured, had a terrible session or got a personal best. So rowing isn't my whole sole purpose anymore, it's just a part of my life that I happen to enjoy, and I think that brings out the best in me, as well as my most passionate rowing.'

*'My love of sport makes me happy, gives me energy and puts a fire in my belly. I'm a better mum when I've trained.'*

Right now, Glover is rising at 5am to spend time with her children before leaving home at 6.30am to do two, 90-minute water sessions with her team, followed by an at-home weight-training or rowing machine session in the afternoon or evening. It's a physically demanding regime, but one she's making work with the support of her team.

### FAMILY MATTERS

'I was very dubious when I returned to training because I knew if it didn't work for my family, it didn't matter that I'd won the trial, I'd quit,' she confesses. 'But I've got some great coaches that have really changed the game for me. All three of them are fathers, and my head coach, Andrew, gets that if I'm happy as a mum, I'm probably going to be the fastest rower I can be. He lets me do my land training session at home so I can always be there for Logan's pick-up from school and have the rest of the day as mum. Having that time with them is non-negotiable, even if I have to train at night once they've gone to bed – which can be hard to do!'

Glover also credits her husband with helping her to juggle everything. 'In fact, I'd say 90 per cent of it is down to Steve,' she admits. 'When I'm running out the door to go to training, he's running out the door to do the school and nursery drop-offs or taking the kids swimming. His support is invaluable, although his job takes him away for periods of time, so since I've returned to full-time training, we now have a childminder to help us bridge the gaps.'

Ultimately, Glover feels she is the best version of herself right now, despite being so busy, and says that as long as she can continue to fulfil both sides of her life, and the balance remains, she will carry on with her quest to get to her fourth Olympics. 'I have a competitive nature, and while my love of sport makes me happy, it also gives me energy and puts a fire in my belly,' she reasons. 'I feel a better mum when I've trained, and I have that reassurance of being a good role model. I'm ready to take on the challenges that come at me – which are many with three kids. I've already got two gold medals, so I don't need to do this. I'm choosing to. And if it doesn't work for the family, that's fine.' 🏆



## HELEN'S TIPS FOR FIT MUMS

### CARVE YOUR CORE

'A great place to start is with your core. Just five minutes of core work a day adds up to 35 minutes over a week and that makes a big difference to looking after your back and hips. Keeping your trunk strong and moving well means your limbs can do what you want them to do. Personally, I found exercises like side planks and Russian twists with a ball to be really valuable.'

### EVERYTHING COUNTS

'Reassess what you count as exercise. You don't need to be dripping with sweat in a Spinning class to do something good for your body and your mental health. I remember those newborn days when you're feeling groggy and tired, but just getting outside with the pram and going for a walk is great for you and your baby.'

### LITTLE AND OFTEN

'Little and often really adds up when you've got little ones, so don't feel bad for doing 10 minutes of exercise while your baby is napping. I loved getting on the rowing machine during my kids' naps, and the sound of the machine even helped to lull them to sleep. Just remember, taking time for a little exercise can help to release much-needed endorphins and re-energise you in the long run.'

### GET GOING

'My top tip is put your trainers on first thing, because once they're on your feet, you're halfway out the door. There's a reason why they call it the "doorstep mile", because the hardest bit is getting out the door. Once you've done it, you're away - and if it ends in a little trot, even better.'