

# V GOLDEN GIRLS

What's it like to win an Olympic gold medal? And what does it take to stand at the top of the podium? We asked the women who know, and find out their 'ones to watch' for Paris 2024

Words: Joanna Ebsworth





## SAM QUEK MBE

### CLAIM TO FAME

After making her international debut in 2007, the former field hockey player helped Team GB win their first-ever women's Olympic gold medal at Rio 2016.

**'My mantra for sporting success**, and even in life, is "tough times don't last, tough people do". It's literally the story of my Olympic career, considering I got my first cap in 2007. And it was helpful when I felt like I was letting everyone down and wasting my time - especially during those moments of pressure, sadness, injury and deselection, when you feel you're going nowhere because it seems like other people are in control of your dream. Until the latter part of 2013, I had some very tough times mentally, and was very much in my own head after I wasn't selected for the London 2012 games. I questioned myself on many occasions, but there was always a little fire inside of me that kept burning. You've got to have that fire because it takes so much energy and emotion and dedication to get to where you want. I lost friends along the way because I was chasing my dream, but I've paid back the ones that are still with me.

**'I had one of my best years** for performance and selections in the run up to the 2016 Olympics. And I think the way we won gold against the Netherlands on penalties at the 2015 Euros definitely helped put the team in a winning mindset for Rio. When we ended up in the same situation against the same team in the Olympic final, I believe we had the psychological advantage because we'd beat them on penalties before. I remember the final whistle going and looking across to the Dutch team before the shoot-out, and their body language showed their heads had gone, whereas we all sprinted into a circle and very much believed we were taking the gold home. We were strong female athletes putting in a fast and furious shift because, ultimately, we were playing for the future of our sport and just wanted to put hockey on the map.

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**'I'd always wondered** what it would feel like to stand at the top of an Olympic podium. Sometimes, I'd burst into tears thinking about it! Of course, you train for it and try to get yourself in the best position to get there but, when it happens, it's the most surreal experience. For me, the national anthem felt about two hours long! We all held hands on the podium and I was looking out at the flag and my mum and dad, and my boyfriend (now husband), who were there for every match at club level, too. I saw them in tears and thought, 'this is what it's all about'.

**'In terms of Paris 2024**, I'm really excited for the athletes who went to Tokyo for their first Olympics and won medals. I want them to be there with crowds and family members so they can feel the real Olympic experience and the opening and closing ceremonies, because that's what the Olympic dream is about. I'm a big fan of Team GB weightlifter Emily Campbell who won silver at Tokyo. She's professional and funny and down-to-earth, but also very 'this is who I am, this is how I train, this is my body and this is what I lift'. I can't wait to see what she does.'

## NICOLA ADAMS OBE

### CLAIM TO FAME

Adams became the first ever female boxer to retain an Olympic title after securing her second Olympic gold medal at Rio 2016, following up her triumph from London 2012.

**'My Olympic journey was very long** because women's boxing wasn't an Olympic sport until 2012. Getting funding was really hard, so there was lots of work to do behind the scenes. Once I'd qualified for the Olympics, it almost felt like all the hard work was done. Not to say the rest was easy! It's just that getting there was a battle, and all I wanted was to get in the ring and win. There was a lot of pressure because I was tipped to win gold in my weight division before I even qualified, but I coped by doing a lot of meditation and a lot of computer gaming.

**'My second Olympics was harder** than the first because I had a huge target on my back. I'd already won everything there was

to win because I was the Olympic champion and ranked number one in the world and Europe, so it felt like my opponents were coming in 100 per cent. It was a win-win for them, because if they won, they'd have just beaten the Olympic champion, and if they lost, they'd have lost to the best in the world. My mantra then was "Tell me I can't and that's why I will". It came from people always telling me women shouldn't box and they should be in the kitchen. I'd hear those misogynistic comments and I was like, "You know what? Just keep giving me the fuel to keep going. Give me my gloves and I'll show you what women can do".

**'You have to be determined** to win gold and be ready to sacrifice birthdays, and friends. But knowing I hadn't cut any corners in training gave me the confidence to go into the ring with the mindset that I'd done everything that needed to be done - all I had to do was go out there and perform. I've had booing and cheering crowds, but it was always just another day in the office. If I thought I was going to lose, I'd make sure to take that thought out of my mind straight away and just focus on winning, because if I'm thinking about losing, I've already lost.

**'Winning gold for a second time** was about more than a medal: it was about leaving a legacy. Cementing women's boxing into the history books and opening the doors for the next generation means everything to me, and my tip for gold at Paris goes to Team GB boxer Chantelle Reid. Women have been stuck in a box for centuries and we haven't had equal opportunities to do whatever we want. But I want women to know they can achieve their goals with hard work and determination. Being able to use my platform to help others is amazing, from setting up a charity with the Prince's Trust to get kids into boxing and give them more options, to working with Bodyform to launch a free self-defence class for women to help them feel more confident and less vulnerable. I want women to feel empowered to tackle any challenges they face.'

Bodyform has partnered with Nicola Adams to launch a self-defence class for women, aimed at empowering them to feel more secure and confident. Visit [youtube.com/@BodyformChannel](https://www.youtube.com/@BodyformChannel)



## SALLY GUNNELL OBE

### CLAIM TO FAME

The only woman to hold World, Olympic, European and Commonwealth gold medals at the same time, she won gold in the 400m hurdles at the Barcelona 1992 Olympics.



**'I love reliving my memories** of the Olympics each time the Games come round. And I think it's crazy that so many people still remember what I achieved. Back then, there were only five of us who won gold at Barcelona, so we really did all become household names. I do lots of motivational speaking on wellbeing these days, and rewatch my race at events often, but I never get bored: it still gives me goose pimples, and I sometimes feel it all happened to someone else. When you're doing it, you're so caught up in trying to be the best version of yourself that it's not till you come away that you think, "How did I do that?"

**'It took 12 years of hard work** to be able to stand on the Olympic starting line. The three years leading up to Barcelona were the ultimate, but you need to look at the bits beforehand - like losing races you should have won and building an incredible team of support to take you to the next level in terms of confidence, mindset and physiology - to realise you can't make it happen overnight. That's why I always say about 70 per cent of your success in the final is down to your mind. This year, I would love to see Katarina Johnson-Thompson win gold at Paris because she's really gone through the tough times but stuck at it. I'll also

be rooting for Josh Kerr in the men's 1500m and Keely Hodgkinson [800m] who is in phenomenal form.

**'Confidence didn't come to me** naturally, so it was the bit I had to learn. But working with

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sports psychologists and realising that I didn't want to do anything else really helped. Going into the Olympics, I think people thought I had a chance of getting a medal, but that I was the nice girl who lacked the grit and determination needed to win. But that was the old me, and I hid my determination well. The pressure was really on once I went from the Olympics to the World Champs and started breaking records, but I had learned to love the pressure by that point and would tell myself that I ran better under pressure because

it heightens awareness and drives performance. I just took a while to learn it!

**'When my coach suggested** I should move from the 100m hurdles to the 400m hurdles, I said, "I can't do that". And he said, "There's no such word as can't". It's always stuck with me ever since, and it's something I think we should all tell ourselves - especially as we get older and more reserved - because you'll never know if you don't give something a go. Recently, I set up an online fitness, nutrition and wellbeing coaching company called Life's Hurdle, aimed at women aged 45 and over, and the reaction has been incredible. I've been wanting to do something like this for the past 20 years and I've now found the vehicle to help me build women's confidence and create an amazing community of ladies that all support each other. So, that's what my next 20 years is all about!'

For more information about Life's Hurdle, head to [instagram.com/lifeshurdle](https://www.instagram.com/lifeshurdle)

## LAURA KENNY MBE

### CLAIM TO FAME

The track cyclist has won five Olympic gold medals across the London 2012, Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020 games, making her Team GB's most decorated female Olympian.



'I didn't feel any pressure to succeed for London 2012, but the whole experience was a whirlwind. It felt like it came, then went, and completely changed my life. Although I went into the Olympics as a double world champion, only the cyclists knew that. To the outside world, I was just this little Laura Trott who turned up on the scene out of nowhere. But Rio 2016 felt like the complete opposite. There was so much pressure because everyone was expecting me to win gold again, and my then boyfriend [seven-times gold medallist Jason Kenny] and I had the added pressure of getting married later that year, so we were getting attention on and off the bike. Suddenly, you're there to be shot at. You are not the one trying to catch other people; it's the other way round, and I found that quite hard.

'I was lucky not to get many injuries, but I suffered everything you could imagine going into Tokyo. Obviously, I'd had my first baby, Albie, in 2017, and I wonder now if I had developed a bone density issue because I broke my shoulder in January 2020, then my arm a month later. But there was never any question from British Cycling that I wouldn't return after giving birth, and it was a great learning curve for

everyone. I don't have a mantra, but I've always made sure to be really open with everyone on my team and voice my opinion. In fact, I think my greatest tool is communication. I've never been scared to speak up when

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I don't think something is necessarily right, because I've always figured I can apologise if I'm wrong. I'd hate to sit there, keep quiet, watch it play out and then forever kick myself afterwards for not saying anything.

'Many people have supported me on my journey. The way the people of Cheshunt, in Hertfordshire (where I grew up), have supported me has been unbelievable. After the 2012 Olympics, it was decided my gold post box would be in Harlow, Essex, where I was born, but I felt like I needed

to give something back to the people of Cheshunt. So, I got the gold post box moved, and they threw me a massive street party. It's not until you see all the messages of support from people in your local area that you realise how much they wanted you to win.

'I would have been rooting for my good pal, cyclist Katie Archibald, for Paris but she's broken her leg. Now, my "one to watch" is sprint track cyclist Emma Finucane. She's only 21 years old, but she's the current world champion in the women's sprint and she could become the first female to win three gold medals in one Olympic games. I always like to watch the "old ones" too, like diver Tom Daley. I call him old because he made his Olympic debut at 14 and he's part of my era, along with swimmer Adam Peaty and gymnast Max Whitlock, who will all be competing again this year.'

Laura Kenny is a sports ambassador for Toyota GB, supporting the **Start Your Impossible** campaign.



## JESS LEARMONTH MBE

### CLAIM TO FAME

Having taken part in her first triathlon for charity in 2012, Jess struck gold with the Team GB mixed relay team, after finishing ninth in the women's race, at Tokyo 2020.

*'I'm so proud of my gold medal, and I love the fact no one can take it away from me'*

**'If you'd asked me** two years prior to the Tokyo Olympics if I was going, I would have said no. After quitting swimming at the age of 16, I didn't get back into the pool until I was 22 and only did my first triathlon at 23. But then I started to perform well consistently, and everything snowballed from there. My relay team got pre-selected a year out from the Tokyo Games, but then we had Covid, and loads of athletes started questioning our fitness because our selection had been two years prior. It was a stressful time, and I worried that I might get deselected or the Games might get cancelled. Fracturing my sacrum on my bike in December 2020 only added to the stress.

**'I started running again** in the April before the Games in 2021. As a team, we did a few practice relays, but none of them went very well for me. Once we got to the Games, however, we were all in a holding camp together, and Jonny [Brownlee] was just so chilled and relaxed, we all just had a laugh really. I know that sounds mad but being supportive of each other definitely helped. Before competing, we literally said it's no one's fault if anything goes wrong and we're all in it together, which put me at ease.

**'I used to work full-time** in a supermarket, so I know what it's like to have a normal life. That's why everything beyond getting to the Games was a bonus for me. I had the first leg of the relay and felt like the weakest link, but once it was done, I was confident we

would win because I had so much confidence in the other three. Winning in Tokyo was a weird experience because there were no crowds, but I tried to take in as much of it as possible because I realised I might never get to do it again. I'm just so proud of my gold medal, and I love the fact that no one can take it away from me.

**'I had hoped to compete again** at the Paris 2024 Olympics but I suffered a hip injury in May 2022 and spent six months on crutches. I started training again once my rehab had finished, but the silver lining of my injury was that I must have fallen pregnant about two months before I was meant to start racing. Despite the fact I had a great pregnancy and was running on the day I gave birth in September 2023, I got a calf injury about a month into training, and that was the end of the dream. I'll be supporting my fellow triathletes Georgia Taylor-Brown, Beth Potter and Alex Yee at this year's Games, who I think have good chances of winning gold. I'm just so glad I enjoyed Tokyo at the time, because having a hip injury and a child wasn't really in the plan. But, as I say, silver linings! I did my first race in May and I'm trying to juggle life as a triathlete and mum, which I'm loving as having my son Frederick has been the best experience so far.' 

Jess Learmonth is an ambassador for endurance sport apparel brand HUUB ([huubdesign.com](http://huubdesign.com)).

