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# Sport

The weekend starts here



## Alone

Depression, anxiety and  
the dark side of sport



# Meet the ~~super~~ humans

Depression, anxiety and the dark side of sport ☹

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**A**thletes aren't supposed to have emotions. They are meant to be superheroes - immune to fear, doubt and mental health issues. They're not.

"I think a lot of people do a very good impression of being a superhero," says Victoria Pendleton, who seemed to spend much of her glittering track cycling career on the verge of an emotional collapse.

The double Olympic champion was wracked with anxiety, but stands out as one of the few high-level athletes who have opened up about their issues.

"I've always been very honest and open about my own insecurities and vulnerabilities from a mental perspective," she tells us. "I've never been too embarrassed about it, even though I have been criticised by people within my sport, saying it was making me an easier opponent to beat."

There is still a stigma when it comes to elite athletes and mental health. "As a sportsman, you're supposed to be seen as tough and robust - as having no chinks in your armour at all," says cricketer Jonathan Trott, who pulled out of England's Ashes tour in 2013 with a stress-related illness. "But, at the end of the day, you're not a robot - you're a human being. And, sometimes, I think people forget that."

## Speed demons

Nearly one in five of us will experience anxiety or depression during our adult lives. For athletes, the figure might well be higher. A survey by players' union FIFPro found that 38 per cent of current footballers had been affected at some point during their career. Sport creates unique pressures.

"In elite sport, you're susceptible to the extremes all of the time," says Ian Maynard, professor of sports psychology at Sheffield Hallam University. "Take cricket - you can score 100 one day, you're out first ball the next day."

For Damon Hill, who discusses his battle with depression in new autobiography *Watching the Wheels*, things came to a head towards the end of his Formula 1 career.

"It came to a point where I thought: 'I just want to be out of here, I can't deal with it, I've got to go,'" he tells us. "It was affecting my driving. It was affecting my ability to be in the right frame of mind to compete when I was actually in the sport. But it wasn't actually anything to do with the act of driving - I could do all that stuff. It was more to do with the scrutiny, I think."

Top sportspeople are constantly in the spotlight. If they make a mistake, that attention is then focused like the sun through a magnifying glass. It burns. Millions read the tabloid headlines when footballer Vinnie Jones attacked a journalist in a bar, but no one was there when he walked into the woods with a gun in the aftermath, intent on taking his own life.



**"No one ever really recognised it, and actually it was all about their targets of getting medals. There wasn't that support network. We just wouldn't talk about it"**

DAME KELLY HOLMES

Dame Kelly Holmes (pictured) also struggled to deal with the highs, the lows and the pressure to perform. In her book *Black, White & Gold*, the double Olympic champion recalls locking herself in the bathroom and cutting her arms with a pair of nail scissors - one cut for every day she was out injured and couldn't train.

"No one ever really spoke about it," she tells us. "No one ever really recognised it, and actually it was all about their targets of getting medals. There wasn't that support network. We just wouldn't talk about it."

## Cycle of loneliness

When Wales manager Gary Speed took his own life, the reaction from those close to him was one of shock and surprise. Hardly anyone knew he had been suffering. Legendary Formula 1 driver James Hunt was another high-profile sports star whose outgoing persona hid a prolonged fight with depression.

"It can be quite a lonely place," says Trott. "You don't want to burden people

with the fact that you're struggling a little bit, and you need a little bit of help."

Maynard calls it 'the washing machine effect'. "One of the prime symptoms of depression is that you feel you're in a negative place, and you've always got negative thoughts running around inside your head," he explains.

"Invariably, people will have a single thought that keeps going round and round and round. If you haven't got any technical skills or coping skills, or you haven't been taught by somebody how to handle it, then that becomes a massive feature in your life. It becomes a downward spiral."

Communication is key. When one person speaks out, others follow.

"There are a lot of people out there who sympathise with it," Trott says. "And, having spoken out about it, you actually find that a lot of your teammates have gone through it, but didn't actually have that confidence or feel there was support around them at the time to speak about similar situations they found themselves in." ➔

Sport psychologists can help athletes learn those coping skills, and develop the mental resilience they need to live under that immense pressure.

“First and foremost, you have to be aware that some anxiety is actually quite good for you,” says Maynard. “I always say to athletes that it’s about getting the butterflies to fly in formation - it’s about making sure the anxiety actually works for you, not against you.”

Often, a friendly ear can do the trick just as well. “Sometimes you just need a mate who you can sort of offload on a little bit,” says Trott. For him, that person was Mark Saxby - a member of England’s physiotherapy team. This kind of informal support structure is a vital part of the set-up, particularly when some players might be reluctant to engage fully with a professional ‘shrink’.

“Inevitably, you spend a lot of time with the guys,” Saxby tells us, standing alongside Trott at a barbecue organised by mental health awareness charity Heads Together. “I suppose, over a period of time, you get to understand them as people. You know when they’re having a bad day, a bad week, a bad month or a bad tour. It’s important to act on that.”

Generally, things are improving. More clubs and organisations are employing experts, and there’s a changing of attitudes among athletes, too.

“People are more willing to talk about things,” says Holmes. “It’s not like that hidden disability any more, where people will open the door if you’re in a wheelchair or on crutches, but they won’t ask you how you feel when you’ve had the worst morning of your whole life and you have to go to work with a smile on your face.”

Pendleton is a great example of the benefits that sports psychology can reap. Like Trott and many others, she worked with renowned psychiatrist Dr Steve Peters, before the 2012 Olympic Games.

“Just like you improve your body, you can improve your mind and what you’re capable of through practice and repetition,” she says. “It’s the same as physically training - you’ve got to recognise that it needs work just the same, and there is no embarrassment or shame in that.”

## Black hole

“There’s a hole,” says Damon Hill. “There’s an empty hole, and that empty hole is your lack of identity.” Reaching the top of any sport requires a huge amount of time and effort, and a degree of obsession that tends to separate sportspeople from their peers at a very young age.

“My dad died when I was 15, so you kind of close down and just don’t talk to anyone,” says Hill. “I didn’t go to university, I didn’t do all those social things where you find out who you are.”

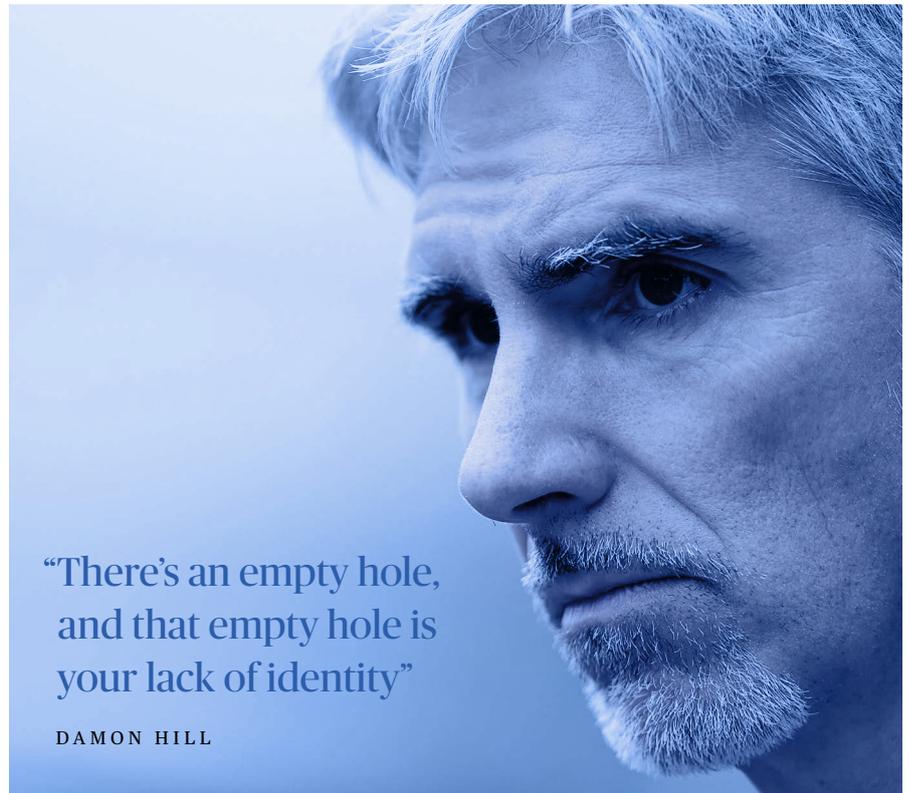
But what comes first? Are athletes just ordinary people under extraordinary pressure? Or does the mindset that drives

sportspeople to success also leave them vulnerable? “You’re a slightly different animal when you’re an elite athlete,” says Holmes. “It’s quite isolated.”

Maynard agrees. “You need a lot of negative traits to succeed,” he says. “You need to be very selfish, very arrogant, very obsessive - lots of things that would probably put somebody in jail if they weren’t playing elite sport. People might be more susceptible - because, when you have to go and live in society, people are not prepared for you to be arrogant and selfish and obsessed and paranoid. But, fundamentally, if people haven’t got those traits, they don’t get to the top.”

acetylene - a gas used in welding. Now 51, Obree has spent much of his life battling manic depression, and has attempted suicide three times. “It’s not that sport makes people depressed,” he said in an interview with *Cycling Weekly*. “A lot of people who suffer from depression have a tendency to have obsessive behaviour - that’s why more of them exist in the top end of sport. The sport is actually a self-medicating process of survival.”

Ironically, sport might actually be the best medicine. There’s a body of evidence linking exercise with increased levels of serotonin and improved mental health. Snooker player Ronnie O’Sullivan credits



It’s a complex picture - particularly when you throw in the severe change of direction that comes with retirement from sport, and the evidence linking mental health issues with sporting concussions in rugby and American football. Some athletes who suffer from depression and anxiety would probably fare better if they were in a less stressful environment.

For others, depression is an underlying issue that would be there regardless. Former Celtic manager Neil Lennon puts his struggles with depression down to genetics, while others, including snooker player Graeme Dott, have found that medication has helped them by artificially maintaining levels of a brain chemical called serotonin, which has been linked to feelings of happiness and well-being.

Graeme Obree found salvation in his washing machine. When he was 20, the cyclist tried to kill himself by inhaling

running with helping him overcome his demons. And a number of charities use sport as a tool to improve mental health in the general public - it brings people together and boosts self-esteem.

Seven years after he tried to take his own life, Obree used acetylene to weld together a history-making bike. He dismantled his washing machine with a hammer and saw, and used the struts and bearings to build the bike that broke the Hour Record and catapulted him to national fame.

Top-level sport can be a cauldron of stress and fear - a perfect storm of pressure that athletes shouldn’t have to navigate alone. But for Obree and others like him, at every level, it is simply a reason to live. ●

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Join the Heads Together campaign at [headstogether.org.uk](http://headstogether.org.uk). If you have been affected by any of the issues discussed, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or call 0300 123 3393