



Jess Ennis arrived at London 2012 as the face of the Games, the darling of the British public and favourite for heptathlon gold. She will leave it, quite simply, as an Olympic champion

**“I could never imagine it would be like this,”** gushes a wide-eyed Jessica Ennis less than 24 hours after fulfilling her Olympic dream. On one of the finest nights British sport has ever witnessed, her gold medal-winning performance in the heptathlon sent an entire nation loopy with adoration for an athlete who has for so long been the poster girl for London 2012.

With the events of the previous evening still yet to fully sink in, Ennis meets *Sport* in a small interview room in the depths of Stratford’s shopping mecca, Westfield. The paper bag of a LOCOG-approved fast food chain sits nearby, its contents recently demolished by a refuelling Ennis, while fiancé Andy Hill perches next to her – the pair happily reunited after weeks of training camps and life in the athletes’ village for Ennis.

The medal, though, is nowhere to be seen. “I slept with it by the side of my bed last night,” Ennis reveals. “Well, for the two hours of sleep I got, anyway. When I woke up this morning, I just looked at it in disbelief. I couldn’t believe I’d done it.”

#### Hopes and fears

“Last night surpassed any dreams I had,” she continues. “I never imagined I’d feel the way I did when I crossed the finish line after the 800m. I’m normally quite reserved with my performances – I probably do a little clap or something – but I was just so overwhelmed and really emotional. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it could so easily have gone wrong, and that would have been it – gone forever. I just can’t believe I took that opportunity and I won.”

Ennis’ words offer a glimpse of the stress she’s been hiding from view ever since becoming world champion in 2009, a feat that made her favourite for gold at her home Games. “Was I stressed?” She looks at Hill, her partner of nine years, who raises an eyebrow knowingly by way of response.

“Okay, I was worried,” she admits. “You always doubt yourself. I knew I could do it, but I also thought that something could go wrong and that I’d be there, nearly touching the gold medal... but then not quite get it.” →

Despite her fears, Ennis got her Olympic heptathlon career off to a rip-roaring start in the opening discipline last Friday morning, smashing her personal best in the 100m hurdles to set a new British record of 12.54s – a time so exceptional it would have won individual gold in all but two Olympic finals.

“I was so shocked to start with that time,” she reflects. “All the training I’ve done showed me that, in terms of running, I was in the shape of my life. My times have been brilliant, but I couldn’t imagine how the crowd in the stadium would lift me – and they did. I was really calm before the hurdles and I kind of expected the stadium to be a bit empty when I came out. I’d only been to World Championships before, and they’re always a bit quiet in the morning session. So when I stepped into the stadium, I couldn’t believe it. It gave me goosebumps.”

### Seven steps away

The roar when she was introduced on that first morning of competition was, says Ennis, “like nothing I’ve ever experienced in my life”. She explains: “I know people have spoken about the pressure and whether it’s going to be too much for some of the athletes, but for me that’s the best environment for you to perform to your best.”

The rush of adrenaline dissipated quickly, with Ennis’ high jump and shot put failing to match her previous bests, but the fourth and



final event of day one played to her strength: speed. A new lifetime best over 200m put Britain’s golden girl back in the driving seat overnight and gave her the highest first-day score (4,158 points) of her career.

Not that such a performance was conducive to a good night’s sleep. “Normally I’m so tired from the first day that I’m out like a light, but I got back to my room at about midnight and I just could not sleep,” admits Ennis. “My legs were really sore and restless, I was tossing and turning and thinking about what was going to happen. Am I gonna mess it up? Is it all going to come together?”

Not long after the 6am alarm sounded, Ennis headed for the long jump pit, stomach churning beneath those eye-catching abs.

“I was very worried, because my long jump has been up and down all year, and I wasn’t sure whether I was going to do three fouls or something dreadful like that,” she says. “The runway is very fast and the winds were swirling, so it was hard to judge your run-up.”

“My first-round jump was dreadful, so when I jumped 6.48m in the final round, that was a big moment psychologically for me. I’d seen what [world champion Tatyana] Chernova had jumped and I knew at that moment I was on my way. My javelin had been going well in training, so I knew I wasn’t going to perform like I did in Daegu [where she failed to throw over 40m, effectively gifting Chernova gold]. I knew it was there.”

Her javelin coach, former world bronze-medallist Mick Hill, knew it too. And after watching Ennis throw a new personal best of 47.49m, he was ready to hand her gold there and then. “I was trying not to get carried away and Mick was saying ‘you’ve done it!’” she smiles. “I was like ‘no, I’ve still got one more event, I’ve not done it yet’. →

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"It was a long few hours waiting for that 800m to start. I was trying to nap or listen to music, but it was so hard to switch off. I kept thinking about crossing the line and how I would feel, then trying to think about how I was gonna run the race. Then I'd think about celebrating again, and then the race. Part of me still believed I was going to fall over or lose a shoe or something."

### Guts before glory

The final event of the heptathlon is overwhelmingly despised by all who take part in it. At the end of two long days of competition, a gruelling 800m is about as welcome as a bear hug from a one-eyed Olympic mascot. All Ennis needed to do was run it steady and cross the finish line in one piece, but the crowd wanted victory – and she desperately wanted to give it to them, reacting to the start gun by setting off at a rapid pace. When two of her rivals caught her up on the final lap, Ennis heeded the roars of 80,000 and kicked again, crossing the line with her arms aloft and with an expression that spoke for itself: thank god this is over.

That expression was gone in a flash, though, and swiftly replaced by a smile: the million-dollar smile that has seen Ennis' picture-perfect face grace the covers of magazines for audiences across the entire spectrum of the population. That same smile reappears now. "Crossing that line, there was just a massive sense of relief," says Ennis. "I always feel like that after a heptathlon at a major championships, but that was just... well, there was so much excitement. I've never, ever felt like that in my life."

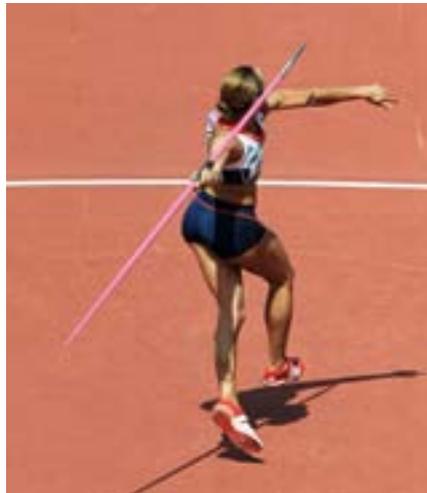
### A new high

Almost lost in the excitement was Ennis' remarkable final score after seven events: a British record of 6,955 points, edging her closer to the magical 7,000-point mark. It's an achievement only three women have previously completed, and one she admits she never thought she'd get close to. But is the tantalising prospect of adding her name to those of legends such as Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Carolina Klüft enough to ensure Ennis stays a multi-discipline athlete rather than, say, becoming a 100m hurdler?

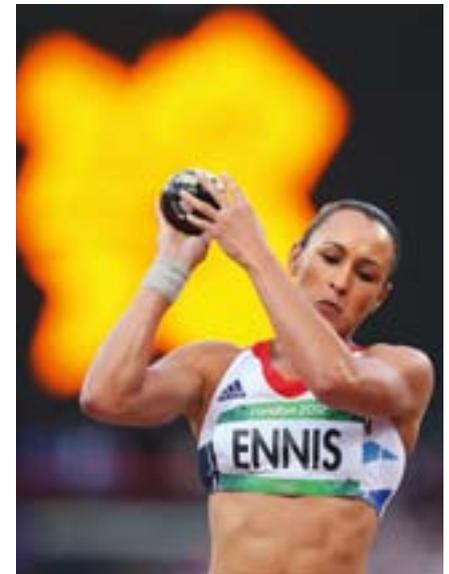
"Now I know 7,000 points is within reach, I think that's probably going to be an aim going forward," she says. "And I can't imagine not doing the heptathlon. I really don't enjoy it when I'm out there doing it. There's so much adrenaline and so many nerves, so many ups and downs. But I can't imagine not doing it. I do definitely want to give hurdles a serious go too, though. I'm so indecisive and I know I'll have to make a big decision at some point. I honestly don't know. I'm hoping a light will just shine in one direction for me."

The smile turns to a giggle: "I still feel like I'm 18 years old and at the beginning of it all. It's kind of all happened really quickly, and with it being my first Olympics, I've just not thought about what's next."

"Right now, though, I'm just so tired. I want to rest, celebrate and spend time with all my



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family and friends and enjoy it for as long as possible. I think I'm going to feel very different in a few weeks. Once I've rested, I'll get to the point where I'm itching to get back into training and that's when I'll have a chat with Chell [Toni Minichiello, her coach], refocus and decide what our next big aim is."

Minichiello has been a constant presence by Ennis' side since she was a skinny 13-year-old doing athletics at her local track for a bit of fun in the school holidays. The pair bicker and squabble just like any duo who spend a significant amount of their daily lives in each other's company – but how did the athletics sensei react to his young charge winning Olympic gold?

"Normally he gives me a pat on the back and then tells me what we have to start working on next," says Ennis. "But he is really happy. He gave me a hug and everything – actually lifted me up and gave me a proper hug, so I can tell he's just over the moon. We've both worked really hard for this. I'm sure he'll look over the footage in a few days and find something to pick out... but I don't care."

### Realising a dream

She laughs. And, when Ennis laughs, it's impossible not to laugh along with her. A few months ago, *Sport* shared another room with her in her home town of Sheffield.

**12.54s**  
100m hurdles,  
lifetime best

**1.86m**  
High jump

**14.28m**  
Shot put

**22.83s**  
200m,  
lifetime best

**6.48m**  
Long jump

**47.49m**  
Javelin,  
lifetime best

**2:08.65**  
800m

**6,955 points**  
Total score,  
lifetime best

Then, she admitted that she could only perform to her best at the Olympics – and if it turned out her best wasn't good enough for gold, she would be bitterly disappointed. All that pressure, from both herself and an expectant nation, is now visibly lifted – and the longer Ennis talks, the more it seems to dawn on her.

"Doing what I did yesterday, with all that pressure, is such a great achievement for me," she confirms. "I know there are people who thought being the face of the Olympics was going to get to me, and wondered if I was doing too much. But I didn't miss any training and balanced everything perfectly. So it's really nice to know that it's all paid off."

As being an Olympic champion sinks in, we ask Ennis how it feels to have become a part of history. Initially, she squirms at the idea – but, after a moment or two, she gives a considered response. "As a young athlete, I always said I wanted people to remember me, and to remember my name as one of the greatest athletes," she says. "And hopefully I've done that now."

She turns fidgety and her smile becomes sheepish. Ennis is uncomfortable talking of herself in such grand terms. It's something she's going to have to get used to, for you get the feeling she's only scratched the surface of the rewards her talent could bring. ●

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