

Women in sport: insights from gold medallists

Helen Richardson-Walsh interview

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As a full-time hockey player, I've experienced, unfortunately, many injuries. Lots of little niggles, a few muscle tears, but I've also unfortunately experienced quite some quite big injuries that kept me out of the game for some time. When I was around 21/22, I had an ankle injury which needed three operations, and I was out the game for 2 years. More recently, I had double back surgery within the space of a year.

That was hard to take. I missed a World Cup, which was very difficult. And it took a lot of hard work and some mental resilience to get me back to the sport that I love. When I experienced those injuries, I had obviously the physical effects, but also had to deal with the psychological effects. And there were many. Trust me.

I found one of the things that I did straight away was isolated myself from the group, which I found really weird because I was someone who was very sociable, and I suddenly found I didn't want to be around the people that were doing what I wanted to do. I guess I was a little bit jealous of that and so took myself away.

I had felt a bit of embarrassment because I didn't get selected for a tournament, and I'd always been selected for a tournament. And there was fear and anxiety that I couldn't get back to the sport that I had played and had a dream of becoming an Olympic champion. That was a massive goal for me, and this injury was getting in my way. Encompassing that was a loss of identity as well.

I really saw myself as a hockey player. And when I was injured, I struggled to mentally get around that because was I a hockey player anymore, because I couldn't actually physically play it. Plus, the whole thing of not being able to do the thing that all my friends are doing, because that's my social group. So there was so many mental aspects that I had to deal with when I was injured.

So it was always a progression with how I went through to get to back on the pitch. Initially, when I was told that I had the pain and told that I had to have surgery, it was actually quite a fearful time. Surgery on your back, in particular with me, is quite scary. And so I was scared. It's not a nice thing to have to go through.

But once I had had the surgery and the surgeon comes in and says everything's fine, it was all about setting a plan. And that really helped me. I love plans. And once I was on that, I got the confidence to be able to go forward. But unfortunately, the plan never works out. Always something comes up.

And I always tell people now when they're going through injuries that expect stuff to go wrong. And having that expectation is actually quite helpful because I got to the point where because it's not going right, you feel hopeless. You're thinking is this going to work out? And you go through loads of different transitions. But once I was getting closer to the pitch, that obviously helps.

But when you get back onto the pitch, you're not as good as you were. And that's something really difficult to deal with. You're not as fit. Your skills aren't quite as good. And so you go through another difficult time. And then it's about setting your own expectations about how long things are going to take and how quickly you can get back to where you were.