

MEET...

Katherine Grainger

It hasn't been all plain sailing for the UK gold medallist as back problems nearly put a stop to her Olympic dreams, reports Iona Walton

Britain's most successful female rower may seem to cruise through life looking as though she can conquer any situation, but behind the scenes the situation can be far from easy.

Katherine Grainger's career has been nothing short of astonishing, with a gold medal win in London's 2012 Olympic Games joining her collection of silver medals from Sydney (2000), Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008), plus six world championships.

"Rowing is a way of life for me – in a good way – but like everyone I have bad days," Katherine explains. "The winter training season involves lots of mileage to build my body, mind and technique, so the team is constantly tired. Summer is race season, which is intense and exciting."

September 2014 was decision time for Katherine as she had to choose whether or not to compete at the 2016 Olympics in Rio.

"I was really unsure and there were lots of reasons supporting both decisions," she says. "Either choice would transform my life but the indecision was the real killer, leaving me uncomfortable and unsettled. But without a defining moment, I realised that I'd already decided gradually without knowing. And after the first morning back training I knew I'd made the right choice."

Last summer, Katherine officially opened a new major research centre for arthritis in her home town of Glasgow.

"The team behind the centre is inspirational and forward thinking, and being involved meant a lot," she says. "My granny was the heart of my family and had osteoarthritis the whole time I knew her. But it doesn't just affect older people – a friend I used to row with is only in her forties and has been told her knee arthritis is as bad as someone in their sixties. We think we'll always be able but it can happen to anyone, at any time."

Katherine knows only too well how debilitating chronic pain can be.

"Rowing is a very repetitive movement, using the same movement day in day out, so the result is lots of wear and tear and I've had back problems at different times," she explains.

During a period of intense training in 2003, a disc in Katherine's back ruptured. Unfortunately it took weeks to diagnose and the situation was complex, with pieces of the disc pressing on a nerve and leaving her with decreased power to her left leg and foot.

"Three different surgeons recommended surgery but the coach said if that was the action taken it would mean the end of my Olympics and most likely the end of my career," Katherine remembers. "One surgeon gave me a six-week window and said if there was improvement in that time he wouldn't have to operate, but if I left it any longer it could sever my sciatic nerve and cause long-term damage."

"So I met with the lead sports doctor and physiotherapist for rowing



and set up a plan to get the nerve working properly again. Acupuncture, exercises, physiotherapy every day... then swimming and working on a static bike to ensure I was still at optimum fitness for when I could get back in the boat."

With only two days to go before the end of the six-week period, Katherine was finally able to raise her heel off the ground, which was enough to convince the medical team that she would make a full

recovery without surgery. Three months of rehab followed, after which she was given a clean bill of health.

"It could have been the end of my career, which I'd dedicated so much of my life to," Katherine says. "When I was out of action I had felt isolated and no longer part of the team as the others had no choice but to continue preparing for the Olympic Games without me."

"Being part of the Olympic team is an emotional rollercoaster but it's what we sign up for. Some days are easy and I feel like I'm flying, but at other times I might not be rowing as fast, and am anxious about selections."

"Everybody has ups and downs and feeling lonely and depressed can unfortunately be part of life. The low times are usually temporary and we've all been there, so it can be helpful to try to keep perspective. Long-term goals are great but short-term goals help regain a sense of achievement. And sometimes just getting through the day can be a success in its own right and simply moving forward is enough." **AD**

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i For more information visit www.katherinegrainger.com.