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THE SUNDAY TIMES

# No easy ride on the comeback trail for gritty Grainger

Scot wants to sign off in style at her final World Championships today, in the hunt for her seventh gold at the tournament

Andrew Longmore Published: 5 September 2015



Grainger has faced a challenging return to a sport she previously dominated (Gerry Penny)

from hope to despair almost week by week is that Grainger's partnership with Vicky Thornley in the women's double is still very much a work in progress.

Having scraped into the final today via a repechage and third place in the semi-final, any medal would be a bonus for the Britons in a class that has become notably competitive since Grainger and Anna Watkins both took time away from the sport after winning gold in London. Watkins has recently announced she is back in full training after having two children and wants to compete in Rio next summer.

Grainger cannot afford to look that far ahead, but she can certainly confirm returning to a sport as physically

IF KATHERINE GRAINGER can add to her tally of medals at the World Championships this afternoon on Lake Aiguebelette, she will count it as one of the greatest achievements of her career.

That might sound odd, given the Olympic champion and three times Olympic silver medallist has six golds, a silver and a bronze to her name in 11 World Championships, but the reality of a comeback season that has veered

and mentally demanding as rowing after two years out — let alone after three years and two children — is far more demanding than it seems from the comfort of the sofa.

Grainger came back because she found no ready replacement in civilian life for the competitive camaraderie of one of the most successful programmes in Olympic sport. At the back of her mind was the thought that maybe time could stand still and, at the age of 39, the heart could still rule the head.

“As soon as you get back into training, the dormant beast is woken and you’re not patient and you’re not sensible or rational,” she says. “You want the results now because, although physically you’re not the same athlete, mentally you are exactly the same athlete. I’m very competitive and I have very high standards. I expected it to be difficult and a real challenge but a small part of me hoped the years would fall away and it would be instant. I realised pretty soon that wasn’t going to happen.”

Grainger can even pinpoint the moment halfway through the first race at the European Championships in Poznan, her first regatta back, when she and Thornley had led from the start and seemed in control of the race only for two crews to sweep past them in the final 500m. All the ingredients were there for a successful partnership, but both the mid-race cruising speed and the finishing acceleration proved elusive.

It has been much the same story through the remainder of the World Cup season. In a bid to find consistency, Grainger moved from the stroke seat to the bow for the first time in a decade, an indignity she accepted with good grace. But a few home truths were voiced in the aftermath of a World Cup regatta in Lucerne when Thornley caught a crab in the early stages of the heat and the GB double were consigned to the B final. Though they won the race, Grainger thought they should have raced more aggressively and said so to Thornley and head coach Paul Thompson. “It wasn’t a case of blame but these are the sort of conversations you need to have,” she says.

This will be Grainger’s farewell to World Championships and she will not want to depart as just an extra in the cast. “Nobody made me come back,” she says. “I still feel I’ll get it right.”

Another highlight of the final day of these World Championships will come in the men’s eight, where Germany, the Olympic champions, and Britain, the defending world champions, renew a rivalry that will stretch all the way to Rio.

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