

A GOLDEN FUTURE



Dame Katherine Grainger has represented GB for 20 years and is the first British female athlete to win medals at five Olympic Games. On 7 March she was made a Dame Commander by Her Majesty The Queen – **Martin Gough** reports

PHOTOS TAKEN AT CAVERSHAM BY SIMON WAY

When Katherine Grainger decided to make a comeback to rowing to aim for a fifth Olympic medal, one writer asked why she would want to add an epilogue to an already epic career. She replied that this was no epilogue but a whole new chapter.

That chapter proved far more adventurous than she would either have expected or hoped, culminating in another trip to Buckingham Palace for Dame Katherine, and a chance to have a “proper chat” with Her Majesty as she pinned on the medal.

And now there is a new chapter – Life after Rowing – in which Great Britain’s most decorated female Olympian, aged 41, tries to find a calling that fills the void left by the end of 20 years of full-time training and competition at the highest level.

“The wonderful thing that having been successful in sport gives you,” she says, “is the certainty that the right way to be in life is to find something you’re passionate about and that you’re committed to.

“I now couldn’t take anything just for the sake of it, or to pay the bills. I would always want to give it more.

“That raises the standard quite high but I know when I find the things to do to satisfy all those things that rowing has given me, I will very happily give in to it.”

Grainger is a wonderful talker: she easily conveys the passion and excitement of life as a champion athlete but also – in the detail of what she says – gives an insight into what makes her stand out, not just from the crowd but from some of the world’s highest achievers. →







Looking back on her Olympic gold medal in the double scull with Anna Watkins five years ago, she says: "I'm a massive optimist, a massive dreamer and yet, even in my greatest possible imaginations I could not have predicted just how incredible 2012 would be.

"It was so many things – the fourth attempt at winning, the home crowd, coming in as favourites, being in the most incredible partnership with Anna.

"It's still the thing people come and talk to me about. I talk about it being a dream come true, about it being magical – but those words are not enough for what that felt like."

Sir Edmund Hillary's famous line about wanting to climb Mount Everest "because it's there" comes to mind as she describes her motivation for that comeback after two years away from the GB squad.

"It wasn't to try and prove anything, to try and top 2012," she says. "The simplest reason was that of all the things I could have done, it was rowing that I wanted to do more than anything else.

"In a way, having not done it for a couple of years and making the challenge so hard was one of the reasons I wanted to come back.

"The warning I got from a lot of people was that if it went horribly wrong it could ruin my legacy and my story, but I couldn't have lived with the fact that I would have backed down because it might not have happened.

"My life has always been about taking that risk and living with whatever comes of it."

Grainger has described her Rio 2016 silver with Vicky Thornley as the hardest and toughest of the five Olympic medals she has won.



Much of the lead-up to those Games was well documented, as the duo struggled for results in the double scull, failed to gain selection for the eight instead, were only a late inclusion in the Olympic team but then came less than a second away from gold, having led much of their final on the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas.

Grainger was upset by newspaper coverage suggesting she and Thornley had fallen out, saying: "Even though we completely disagreed in some ways, our friendship remained rock solid underneath it all. To me those sorts of friendships are as important as any result."

Her description of the weeks before they finally committed to the double is still remarkably raw: "As soon as we got in the

boat, I loved it, but everything else around it was just falling apart on a great scale. Every day we were a day closer to the Olympic Games and I couldn't see how this would be possible, let alone successful.

"I had people who knew me and the sport well, say, 'Maybe you should just walk away. There's nothing that can be saved; walk away with your head held high.'

"Physically we were in great shape but emotionally Vicky and I were shredded. Our nerves, our confidence and the vision was in pieces."

The resolution on the part of the two athletes and their coach Paul Thompson to accept their only option and make it work speaks volumes for their determination and focus.

"The option was either we go in the double or we don't go at all," says Grainger. "All three of us, individually, had to come to that decision.

"Once we did, we came together and said, whatever had gone before, this was the mission we wanted to be on. Then it became simple: we weren't going to take any baggage forward and it would only be about what was going to make us fast.

"All the frustrations, the disappointments and distractions just cleared in an absolute instant. Together we created a very different crew to the one we'd had over the previous two years."

Grainger's description of the Olympic final, which she and Thornley led until 250 metres to go, demonstrates self-confident psychology and emotionless pragmatism. →

Above: Dame Katherine Grainger at her investiture in March

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“When we were leading for so long I believed with every sinew in my body that it could be the biggest coup in history,” she says.

“It is still the one thing I’m not happy with, as when I watched it I thought, we could have won the whole thing – for 20 years I’ve been trained to think that way.

“But if I go back to that point I know there was nothing more we could have done. We left everything out there.”

After Rio, there was the usual round of awards dinners and TV appearances, made more special

Right: A fifth Olympic medal at Rio

by knowing this was the last time around. She was named the Olympians’ Olympian at the Team GB Awards in December.

Recently Dame Katherine made an appearance on Desert Island Discs, another dream come true for a long-time Radio 4 listener.

When we meet, she is looking forward to giving out the sports day prizes at the nursery attended by her three-year-old nephew Seth, and has also clearly enjoyed visiting schools and sports clubs around the country.

She is Chancellor of Oxford

Brookes University and a board member of International Inspiration, a charity that uses sport to positively impact the lives of young people and marginalised groups.

Grainger says: “There is no such thing as a typical week. Every day is unbelievably different.

“I don’t know if it’s work but I’m very busy. I have longer days than when I was an athlete; they’re more intense in a lot of ways. I’m all over the place, doing different things with different people in different countries.

“When I was training full-time, it was very structured, very predictable,” she says. “I craved a bit of spontaneity and variety – a much wider screen than I had when I was rowing – and I’ve got that in spades now.

“The ironic thing is now I want a

“ THAT’S THE EXCITEMENT FOR ME: STARTING TO OPEN ALL THE DOORS AND CHOOSING WHICH ONE TO GO THROUGH ”

bit of structure. I laugh at myself because it’s what I’m used to and maybe what I need.”

She is familiar with the post-Olympics whirl. Now is the new bit: working out what the future holds in the long term, and how she can fill the void left by rowing.

Four years ago, there was little option. Her PhD in the sentencing of homicide at King’s College London was entering its second decade so she had to apply all her rowing discipline to finally completing it.

“I had had suggestions I should give up on it because I would never really have the time or energy, but I was as stubborn in that as I was in my rowing career,” she admits.

“My original plan was to finish it for 2012 but, with hindsight, it was the best thing I could have done, because after the euphoria of 2012 I then had three or four months to get my PhD finished and it was

normality instantly; I had to be disciplined, have structure and focus, to organise my life again. I had an anchor.”

As she searches for a new anchor, Grainger adds: “I don’t want to grab something just to create structure but I’ve got a huge interest in rowing – and in sport more widely – a huge interest in law and I do a lot of charity work and media.

“The first thing I need to do is say no to some things and create some space in my life.

“There’s lots of work to be done, ways you can have an impact, things where you can find contentment and challenges. That’s the excitement for me: starting to open all the doors and choosing which one to go through.”

Find out more about Katherine Grainger at www.britishrowing.org/athlete/katherine-grainger



WHAT NEXT AFTER THE OLYMPICS?



Sir Matthew Pinsent was part of the GB squad with Grainger from 1997 to 2004 and has forged a successful career in broadcasting after winning four Olympic gold medals.



Anna Watkins won two world titles, an Olympic bronze in 2008 and that 2012 Olympic gold with Grainger, and now works in the City.



Annie Vernon won world gold and Olympic silver in a quad with Grainger, and is now a freelance sports journalist and speaker.

PHOTOS: PETER SPURRIER

What is it that sets Katherine Grainger apart from other Olympians?

Sir Matthew Pinsent: “Bravery and humility – which in itself is a rare combination. All of her Olympic races were very close to the best that that particular crew could do on that day. She left nothing in the tank and that ultimately takes courage.”

Anna Watkins: “What sets Katherine apart is her combination of consistency and ability to rise to the big occasion. She’s always there or thereabouts in terms of performance, will get the training done, but thrives on – and lives for – the big moment. She always has something extra for the day that matters.”

Annie Vernon: “Katherine is just a born racer. She’s an absolute animal on race day.”

What advice would you give her on life after rowing?

Sir Matthew Pinsent: “Don’t rush – there will be many, many options of what to do next and joyously there might not be just one right one. Experiment, dabble, learn and adjust – all of that can be done away from the glare of the cameras that captured every second of the Olympic triumphs. Unless of course it’s TV – which she is already brilliant at.”

Anna Watkins: “To carry on enjoying and savouring the moment as much as she did on the water.”

Annie Vernon: “Stay out of the boat!”



PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER