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Alternative careers No.3: Athlete – Winning gold creates income and profession

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Dame Kelly Holmes is delighted with her second working life. Her achievements in sport and success in international running and as an Olympic double gold medallist in 2004 have acted as a springboard to a whole new career in business, education and social sporting activity.

“Before, I had only ever known interest from the world of sport. By the time I won two gold medals it elevated me to a space I could never have dreamed of...I never thought I’d win two gold medals.

“But once I had, all sorts of doors began to open. Now I can formulate my career from the platform of a sports champion. So now there’s a ‘Dame Kelly Holmes is famous’ side and there’s also a new ‘sustainable income and career’ side,” she says.

It meant 2004 was quite a year for Kelly Holmes. Having won gold in both the 800m and 1500m races, setting a British record in the 1500m, she picked up a host of other awards, including BBC Sports Personality of the Year.

The following year she was made a Dame by the Queen in the New Year’s Honours List and also won the Laureus World Sports Woman of the Year award. Did she retire in 2005 because she had hit her peak?

“Well you know, at the end of 2005 I was injured again. I think it was all that wearing of high heels and a new, different lifestyle,” she laughs.

In fact, she experienced something of an epiphany while being treated in Ireland for an injury.

Speaking to a businessman with lots of enterprising ideas, she felt inspired. He was also being treated there; he had a head injury. Three weeks later, he was dead. “It just made me realise there were so many things I wanted to do. It was time to stop running,” she says.

“I’m fortunate in that I finished my career in sport at an older age,” she adds, pointing out that by this stage she had a clear idea of what else she could do. But running had never been

intended as a career in the first place – it was a hobby, a sport – later becoming an aspiration and then a dream of Olympic gold.

“I started being an athlete in school when I was 13, and I never thought of it as a future profession. It was never in my mind that it was about earning money, but more about having a medal around my neck. What happens is that if you start achieving highly, brands start becoming attracted to you – then you get sponsorship,” she says.

At 18, she followed another dream, and joined the British Army. Her role as physical training instructor there, and the salary which was at sergeant level by the time she left, provided finance for the running. But it was hard – she used annual leave to attend competitions.

“I’m someone who has to give 100 per cent to whatever I do, and after nine and a half years in the army, it was all getting too much. I was getting injured a lot. I had saved a lot of money, and that made me more secure, but I took a big risk coming out of the army as I didn’t have an income any more – but I had started to get kit sponsors.

“At the end of 1997 I ruptured a calf muscle and tore my Achilles’ heel and it was time to leave – and in 1998 I did not earn at all,” she says.

The following year Dame Kelly suffered glandular fever – and by the time government funding for sport arrived in the late 1990s, she did not qualify, as it was means-tested. “As an athlete all of your earning is based on performance,” she says.

Today, with the Olympic Games soon to arrive in London, the opportunities look very different.

“Sport has changed and people do see becoming a sports person as a career. There are far more organisations jumping on that bandwagon and attaching themselves to hopefuls which then allows those hopefuls to be full-time athletes,” she explains.

Doing her bit for some of those “hopefuls” is a big part of her current career. “In 2004, before I won, I kept thinking that if I didn’t achieve gold, all the knowledge I had would have somehow been wasted. I’ve seen so many young girls drop out of sport for so many reasons – physical, financial and emotional. So I decided to launch Camp Kelly,” she says.

“On Camp With Kelly” is a mentoring initiative and an educational development programme. The athletes involved in it gain life experiences as well as learn what it takes to become a world class athlete. With support and continuing sponsorship from Aviva, the insurer, it allows them to participate in activities at a camp in South Africa where Dame Kelly herself trained.

“We had just launched it when I won the gold medals. Everyone said ‘you’re not going to take eight teenagers to South Africa for a month now’. But I did, and there was such a transition in those girls in that time,” she says. Today, it has 46 international runners, including Hannah England and Emma Jackson, who run for England.

In 2011, Dame Kelly is a busy woman – from supporting a number of charities to corporate speaking, being a national school sport champion, mentoring, and being a BT London 2012 Ambassador for the Olympics and Paralympics.

It is not only about sport, says her website – “it’s about inspiring people, young and old all over the world to develop and perform at their best in whatever they choose to do”. It’s a tall order – but heady stuff as the 2012 Games approach.

Secret CV

- My big breaks?

At 13 years old, six months after starting to run, I won the All England School Championship and was catapulted into the ‘talent’ category. Then in 1994, two weeks apart, I won two medals and was suddenly a ‘world class’ athlete.

- Person who made a difference

My PE teacher, Debbie Page at Hugh Christie School in Tonbridge, Kent. She helped me believe I could be someone. My coach, Dave Arnold, took me from a junior to 2002. And Margo Jennings from Eugene, Oregon, coached me up to 2005.

- What else might you have done?

I would have stayed in the British Army. It was one of my two dreams – to be an army training instructor, and to be an Olympic champion.

- Best career advice to others?

Define your aspirations and goals. Listen, learn and work – and remember, it might take a long time.

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