

By NEIL WILSON

SALLY GUNNELL won an Olympic gold medal for Britain in Barcelona in 1992. **Jessica Ennis** hopes to win one in London next year. Their backgrounds are remarkably alike. *Sportsmail* brought them together to share their thoughts.

Neil Wilson: Was there a point in your career where it became a serious business, not just something you did for fun?

Jessica Ennis: Yes — 2009. Not that it wasn't serious before and I always went into championships serious about doing well, not bothered about seeing places but just there to compete. But in 2009 it was different. I went into Berlin as world No 1 and expected to win it. That was quite a lot of pressure for the first time.

Sally Gunnell: For me, after Seoul in 1988 it came home to me that the next four-year window was important, that I wouldn't be at championships to see how well I could do but to win medals. Then it becomes very serious.

NW: You both had boyfriends from a young age. How have those relationships influenced your careers?

Sally: Jon (Bigg) came along when I was 18 and there was always stability. It removed all the possible complications, not having to sort boyfriends who don't understand, who want to go to the cinema when you need an evening in. He understood high-level athletes because he was there at the same time. It means you are happy.

Jessica: Andy (Hill) is really into sport, loves it, particularly football. He has never experienced it at the level I have but he has been there through my junior years for the whole journey. He has developed an understanding. I know that I can go home and spill everything out and he understands the training and the relationship with Toni Minichiello, my coach.

Sally: I think we have both had very strong coaches, influential in our whole lives, even in day to day living, and we had partners who could work with that. It is a very jealous relationship you have with your coach and some partners might not understand that. Jon never interfered. He did my training with me but he never questioned, or put doubts in my mind.

NW: Did they travel with you to your big championships?

Sally: No. He was always on the end of the phone. I could phone him in the middle of the night. Our concept was he would be waiting at the end of a phone if needed. Someone to whom you could have a moan if things weren't right and he would pick you back up.

Jessica: Andy came to Barcelona and Berlin. He treats it as an annual holiday with his brothers.

Sally: But you wouldn't see him?

Jessica: Never before I compete. He is there with his group, sight-seeing, watching the competition. He's not going to Daegu for the World Championships because he doesn't get that much time off work. He was a bit worried about telling me but I didn't mind. I wouldn't have seen much of him. I'd rather have a good holiday

I want one of those: Sally Gunnell (left) and Jessica Ennis have much in common — but not an Olympic gold, something Jessica hopes to change next year

BEN DUFFY



WHEN JESSICA MET SALLY

he'll be at the Olympics, though. If he can get a ticket!

NW: How important are the other men in your lives, the coaches? Does a woman athlete need a strong personality as coach?

Sally: What's important, I think, is staying with a coach. Remember, Linford Christie did throughout his career, Colin Jackson did, I did. It's about stability and the respect and trust you build.

Jessica: Toni started coaching me when I was 13. I suppose I started having an input when I

knew nothing about any of the events. Now I do, the relationship has changed. Before it was, 'You will do this, you will do that', now I will say, 'Why?' but still do it. Now when we plan our training programme we do it by discussion, but I have a lot of trust in him. He has written the programmes for years and I have always achieved what he set out, so I would never question his programme.

Sally: You can't question. It would be negative. It would undermine the coach.

things he can't know like, 'My legs are sore', 'Can we not do this or that?' Although when it's been a tough week and I say, 'Can we cut a run off the end?' he'll just say no. He won't be that nice. There'll be a few swear words ending with, 'Get back on the track'. And I do. He doesn't let me get out of anything even now I'm a world champion. Not that I want to.

Sally: You have to argue.

Jessica: Yeah, makes you feel better. A little moan.

NW: Does your coach ever reduce

Jessica: Never! Really! My God! Something's gone wrong in my situation then. There are just days when you are tired and emotional. I remember one when I walked out on to the track and he said: 'Where's your water bottle?' and I just cried. Really stupid thing but sometimes it gets you down.

NW: What are your thoughts about Britain's athletes not going to the opening ceremony next year?

Sally: Did I go to one? No, I didn't. Now I think I would have liked to but as an athlete it was all about preparation. Opening ceremonies are not easy things to do. They are tiring, lots of standing around and you miss most of it because you are outside the stadium waiting to go on.

Jessica: I won't be there. I'll be in Portugal at the training camp. I've been asked whether I regret that but I am not fussed. We are there to compete.

NW: How important are this year's World Championships for you, Jess: is it a stand-alone event or a stepping stone?

Jessica: It's very important. It would be ideal to win to give myself a big boost for next year. There's no way I am going for anything but to retain my title.

Sally: Pre-Olympic year is crucial. It's a confidence-building year.

NW: Do you worry how you look when you go into the stadium to compete?

Sally: Yes, I spent two hours getting ready. It gave me something to do — full nails, blown-dry hair, make-up, the lot. It's also about confidence. If you feel good about yourself it helps.

Jessica: You always want to feel nice, so yes, I make an effort. Not fake eye-lashes but the hair properly done. At the start, anyway. After two days when they are taking the photos at the end you're going to be sweaty and horrible, looking like nothing on earth, but at the start you need to feel right.

NW: Is London any more pressure than Barcelona was for Sally?

Jessica: I think it will be a slightly different pressure but then I put so much pressure on myself because I know what I want to achieve. I don't see outside expectations as pressure but as support, people willing you to do well. There's no negativity about it. But it will be crazy next year.

NW: Would it help if there were more British contenders to share the pressure of expectation?

Jessica: There are some coming through.

Sally: Actually you want to be The One. I remember Linford in Barcelona saying after I won: 'I can't believe you won a gold medal. I wanted to be the only one.'

NW: At what point did you feel you were famous?

Sally: When I got home from Barcelona and these kids were all staring through my lounge windows. It had changed overnight.

Jessica: I get lots of people coming up to me already. I don't see myself as famous. It's a weird kind of feeling, like you're sharing yourself.

NW: And if you win next year, it will get worse.

Jessica: I don't think I'll mind!

Jessica Ennis and Sally Gunnell are ambassadors for Aviva, supporters of British athletes since 1999. To find out more, go to aviva.