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STAR OF TRACK AND FIELD

Sally Gunnell on how farming shaped her career

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THROUGH THE TREES surrounding an Essex family farm, the towering London skyline dominates the horizon.

It's a view that's as contrasting as Sally Gunnell's athletics career – from running around Chigwell's quiet fields to leading Britain to Olympic gold in front of the world.

It was an achievement that the 400m hurdling champion attributes to her father's unwitting inspiration and the life experience of growing up on a farm.

"People always talk about athletics and ask 'are you born with it, or do you learn it?' and for me the key was watching my dad working hard and getting up at five in the morning to milk the cows," she told *BF&G*.

"I watched him go out and work all hours of the day and I learned from that. My two brothers were very competitive too."

An ethos of hard work and dedication runs deep through the 45-year-old, who can trace her success back to the hot summer harvests when hurdling was done in less practical footwear.

"I remember dad being on the combine and I would spend the whole day running drinks and food out to him while he worked. When it was harvest time I would run behind the combine where the straw came out and I would hurdle the rows and practice my stride patterns, in wellies!

"I remember driving a tractor

Fields of gold

Farmer's daughter and Olympic legend Sally Gunnell talks exclusively to *BF&G* about being a star of track and field



“

I would hurdle the rows and practice my stride patterns in wellies!

”

around and helping as much as possible.”

The business is now run by Sally's brothers – Martin and Paul – while retired parents Rosemary and Les still live in a converted building in the yard. The farm used to be 325 acres farming dairy as well as some poultry, wheat, barley, linseed and rape.

Such is the proximity of the business to London – the closest

Made in Essex:
The hurdling
champion back
on home turf



Gunnell's golden moments

Greatest achievement:

Olympic gold

Most looking forward to:

400m hurdles and 100m finals

Best 2012 medal hopes:

Dai Greene (400m hurdles),

Jessica Ennis (heptathlon)

Any regrets?

No, I was just so lucky to get so many great opportunities



farm to the capital in fact - footballers like World Cup hero Geoff Hurst would come to buy their Christmas turkey from the Gunnells in the 1960s.

The business has now gone out of dairy and poultry but runs an arable and grass keep operation.

Olympic, world, European and commonwealth champion Sally now lives in Brighton with husband Paul and their three boys, but has never let go of her roots.

"We've got 12 acres so we have all sorts of things in our fields, including a running track around one of them. We grow a lot of our own veg too. But I love coming back to the farm to relax - it's the place I spent 20 years of my life growing up."

With the Olympics looming as large on the horizon as the Millenium Eye does at the Gunnell's farm, Sally is keen that British food and farming establishes a legacy at the Games.

"When you're running you need to be in peak condition and food is a really important part of that. When I do my shopping now it's very much about buying organic, fresh and local. I can still hear my dad saying 'we want to buy British food, not foreign!'"

"Over the past 10 to 15 years there's been this whole drive to go to get fresh food from farmers markets and farm shops. People coming here for the Olympics will experience that."

Aside from Sally's commitments as a motivational speaker, she is expecting an extremely busy 2012, acting as an ambassador for British sport during the Games, as well as handling the plethora of press demands as interests gathers.

"I want to see as much sport as possible," she said. "I'm just waiting to see if we've got tickets to the 100m final - there's nothing quite like watching it live."

One giant leap: Sally remembers how she kept fit while on the farm

More information

● For more information about Sally Gunnell's motivational speaking and personal development, go to www.sallygunnell.com.