

- Jess has got of legend Sally

IT HAD been in a box in the cupboard upstairs for 19 years and Sally Gunnell was not sure if it would still fit. But she took out her British team kit and put it on again for the first time since she won gold at the Barcelona Olympics.

In that moment, as Gunnell asked her father-in-law if she looked all right in the outfit, it was Jessica Ennis's future.

Gunnell was the golden girl, winning the 400metres hurdles at those wonderful Games in 1992 and taking her collection of successful wealth to two Commonwealth titles, one world, one European, one Olympic and a world record. Total domination.

Ennis is treading that path in pursuit of a second heptathlon world title this summer followed by the big one, Olympic gold in London in a year's time.

They were brought together by Aviva, sponsors of British athletics since 1999, for Gunnell to pass on advice to Ennis about how to cope with that big expectation mountain when the country waits for gold.

"That kit - and the spikes - had been in an old Barcelona sports bag in the cupboard for years and they asked me if I'd wear it for the picture shoot for this article," said Gunnell. "I said, 'No. No. No. I'm not possibly wearing that'.

"But then I thought, 'I'll just go and find it'. I was prancing around but thinking, 'I can't do it, I can't do it'.

"I went downstairs to Jon's [her husband's] dad and he said, 'Wow, is that your old leotard?' So I said, 'What do you reckon, should I or shouldn't I?' And he went, 'Do it.'"

"But I was still a bit scared on the day they took the pictures. I'd kept that kit but never looked at it. It had a bit of stain on the back, I think it was that stuff they sprayed on our bottom so it wouldn't go up your..."

"It was always doing that. You used to sit there putting elastic in to stop it. Wouldn't happen now."

Gunnell is 44, mother to three boys and in big demand as a motivational speaker and an Aviva ambassador for grass-



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reports

roots athletics. "It's schools at the moment - prize givings everywhere," she said.

Ennis, 25, was five years old when Gunnell conquered the world.

"I've watched Sally's race since," said Ennis, who started her career at 10 years old at Aviva Startrack. "I've researched that whole time when we had so many amazing British athletes. But when Sally was winning her Olympic gold I was just bothered about playing with my dolls."

The two women, the past and the future, get on well. Gunnell looks at Ennis. "I would love to be doing what you are and competing in an Olympic Games in London," she says.

"Gunnell Makes A Comeback," says Ennis in headline-speak.

"Yeah, do they do bowls?"

'Jess will be scared but then she will say, bring it on'

Gunnell's Olympic gold medal is in her bag with her. "It gets taken around, slammed about, kids dropping it on the floor. It looks a bit like a bronze medal now. The ribbon's a bit knackered," she said.

"I enjoyed the photoshoot. It brought it back. People still remember it, people came up afterwards and you think, 'God, how many people watched it?'"

"I still think, 'Was that really me, did I actually do that?' It took a couple of months for it to sink in, thinking, 'Why does a farmer's daughter from Essex become an Olympic champion? It's big, important people who do that.'"

"I never thought, 20 years on, that I would still be coming out doing bits and pieces.

But that's what winning an Olympic gold medal does for

you." Gunnell also won a world title and set a world record. Does that rank near an Olympic gold?

Ennis echoed "a world record" with awe as Gunnell said: "If the Olympics is at 100 per cent then I'd say the Worlds would be about 60. The Olympics is simply what you've dreamed about.

"I don't think I'd be sitting here if I'd just won the Worlds. Olympic gold does make a big difference. Everyone talks about the Olympics. Are you ready for it Jess?"

"I'm ready now," says Ennis. "Let's go."

Outside the rain is chucking it down. What if it is like that next July and August in London?

"That's to your advantage," said Gunnell. "Training in Sheffield, in the rain, it's another advantage for Jess. There's these Americans who don't like our weather."

Gunnell was a multi-eventer herself, missing out on qualifying for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics by three points when she was 18. She has an insight into Ennis's world, those two tough days of competition and seven events that will decide whether she becomes a British sporting icon.

"I had one more year at it, but I was so rubbish at shot, Jess. High jump I was terrible at as well," she says.

So as a motivational speaker, what would Gunnell say to Ennis?

The two women look at each other. "The build-up to Barcelona was quite scary, daunting. You get to that point where you feel, 'God, I can't wait until it's all over'. Jess will feel like that.

"But you've got a job to do. I remember thinking I was scared but then, with a couple of months to go, I was, 'Bring it on'. Something changed in my mind. I knew I had done everything right, I knew I was in great shape and it was, 'Let's get this thing done'.

"I don't need to motivate, Jess has got enough motivation. She is doing all the right things. Don't change anything. She's got it right."

● Jessica Ennis and Sally Gunnell are ambassadors for Aviva, supporters of British athletics since 1999. To find out more, go to aviva.co.uk/athletics or follow on Twitter @AvivaAthletics.

GLORY, GLORY: Sally Gunnell celebrates winning Olympic gold at Barcelona, left

