

# Golden girls agree that Olympics are about winning mind games

Gunnell gives Ennis pointers for London 2012

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This is what happens when you win an Olympic gold medal. "My whole life changed in one night," Sally Gunnell said. "That took an awful lot of getting used to and then you get scared of who you are and what you can do. You ask, 'Can I still do it?' I was on that rollercoaster for a good four years afterwards."

This is bad news for Jessica Ennis — the idea that, 20 years on, the finishing line in 2012 may actually be the start of fresh fears — but as two generations of golden girls met up, they agreed that the difference between winning and losing is a mind game.

Gunnell became the Olympic champion in the 400 metres hurdles in 1992, but it is the story of the two World Championships which straddled Barcelona that showed how much of glory is in the head.

"In 1993 I went to Stuttgart and was so ill that I didn't want to compete," Gunnell said. "Three days beforehand, I ummed and aahed. I could not get out of bed and was on antibiotics. I thought, 'How can I even get round the track?' It was so unlike the Olympics where I'd ticked all boxes. Then I went out and broke the world record. I was in total shock. I just could not believe how I'd done that."

"It was so different to 1991. Back then I was worrying about things beyond my control. There was that inner voice sowing negativity. You have to block it out. I honestly think winning the Olympics will be 70 per cent mental."

Ennis is the world heptathlon champion and already a household name. She defends her title next month in South Korea and will then focus on London. It is a daunting year and she is aware of the danger of mental burnout.

"In the few weeks beforehand, in the holding camp, my mind is overloaded," she said. "I go through every event of the heptathlon each night before I go to sleep. You can go too far, but I want to create automatic positive thoughts. I'm ticking off goals now and my motivation is not wavering."

Gunnell believes Ennis is a positive force in a tainted sport. "We have role



Flying the flag: Gunnell admits life changed overnight after winning gold in the 400 metres hurdles in Barcelona in 1992

models created by reality TV these days, but I don't want my children following them," she said. "We've got someone like Jess and we need to push her out there to inspire kids. We have to take this opportunity."

Ennis is comfortable with the billing. "It's nice when parents come up and say their daughter has got involved because of me," she said. "It's nice to think you are making a difference."

The journey from household name to national treasure will be completed only if she matches Gunnell's feats from 1992. That mind game is the end-game for every wannabe, but Gunnell is one old pro who refrains from using kneejerk nostalgia to damn the new generation.

"I'm excited by our 400 metres

hurdles, Dai Greene and Perri Shakes-Drayton," she said. "Dai is capable of the gold and so is Perri if she really believes in herself and uses the home crowd."

"I honestly think that any Briton who makes a final stands a chance of doing something really special because of the unique circumstances. The crowd can make the vital difference."

Gunnell also said that the additions to the Olympic talent pool from the United States and Anguilla should be forced to live in Britain. Shana Cox and Shara Proctor have been accused of opportunism in taking advantage of eligibility rules to switch nations.

Gunnell said: "I don't want to watch an Olympics and think I don't know these people very well, but rules are

rules and if they've gone down the right channels, then we can't stop them. But part of me also thinks they should have to live here for six months of the year and I just hope they're not pushing other people out."

Ennis sidestepped the controversy, saying "I think Sally's covered it," but she will line up against another import, Tiffany Oflin-Porter, at next week's World Championship trials in Birmingham. Although she has an automatic place in Daegu, Ennis said that she will treat the trials as a dry run and will do five events — hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot and javelin.

● *Jessica Ennis and Sally Gunnell are ambassadors for Aviva, supporters of British athletes since 1999 — aviva.co.uk/athletics or Twitter @AvivaAthletics*