

Sport

'Before me, they said British people could not win weightlifting medals'

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND

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In the last of our series Emily Campbell tells **Matt Dickinson** about the moment in Tokyo that made all her sacrifice worthwhile



If the greatest joy of covering an Olympics is coming across someone enjoying the best day of his or her life, there were few better moments in Tokyo this summer than watching Emily Campbell collapse to the podium floor in the instant she became the first British woman to win an Olympic medal in weightlifting.

As Campbell let go of the 161kg weight — mind your toes! — she let out a scream and fell to the ground sobbing. “My legs were like jelly,” she says. “I had given everything I had. It was a bit like when Beth Shriever [who won gold in BMX] said her whole body collapsed.”

She had just clean-and-jerked twice my bodyweight, but this was something deeper than physical strain. It was an emotional release after years of striving and struggle.

“Once I hit the ground it was the realisation I had done something I had dreamt of. And something which many people said couldn't be done, [proving] that British people can win Olympic medals in weightlifting.”

Campbell was on an ecstatic high. “And there's a lot of caffeine and adrenaline going on,” she says. “It's the next day when you wake up and feel like you were hit by a bus.”

She recounts it all with the exuberance that made Campbell not just a trailblazing silver medallist but one of the most popular members of Team GB in Tokyo. She is a refreshingly straight-talking woman from Nottingham who is not just an ambassador for her sport but has been outspoken on social media about what the fitness industry can do to promote inclusivity rather than an impossible quest for physical perfection.

“Society has this ideal about how we should look a certain way to be part of the fitness industry. It's making people feel like they are a failure before they have even started,” she says with passion.

Campbell has turned her ire on some of the big clothing and apparel companies for only ever using perfect slimline models.

“The average size in the UK for women is size 16,” she says. “Most of our gym kits go up to 14-16. How can they stop there? Charge more if you are making bigger sizes and I'll say that as a bigger female, just to have clothes that fit and not have to buy a men's T-shirt.”

“Some brands are doing great stuff now but if companies are going to jump on the body-positivity bandwagon and claim to be inclusive, their sizes have to reflect that. If I can't find an outfit to buy, it's hypocritical. It's something I have always been passionate about, being a bigger female.”

Campbell has had to bulk up as part of her job competing in the +87kg category and says that she feels confident in her body, but she knows that it is not that way for many.

“The strongest woman Britain has ever had, which is very cool,” she says. “My body is doing something right but, for people who don't have that platform or voice, I feel I have to represent that. There's so much pressure on young girls with all their social media. We have to start filling their timelines with something more positive.”



Campbell became the first British woman to win an Olympic medal in weightlifting in Tokyo, below, but feared Laurel Hubbard would dominate headlines

To that end, she went back to her old primary school in Bulwell, Nottingham, with her Olympic medal and a message of inspiration.

“I am from a pretty deprived area. I loved going there and saying that my bum had once been on the same floor they were sat on.”

To hear Campbell talk not just about her success this year — including a bronze in the World Championships in Uzbekistan this month — but efforts to promote her sport makes it all the more surprising that it has been a battle to become funded.

She did not receive UK Sport backing as she trained for Tokyo, having to rely on parental support and working part-time, and wheels have turned slowly since Japan.

“I am not sure what I am allowed to say.

There are conversations about being supported. UK Sport have given British Weightlifting more funding so it is working in the right direction but I can assure you that no one was ringing me the next day to say, ‘Let's get you funded.’

“It's been a very slow process — no urgency about it, which is disappointing — especially when you have achieved that medal through everything you have done yourself. I have accepted it and got on with it but hopefully it gets sorted soon.”

She mentions how hard it is to compete against nations, like China, where weightlifting is heavily backed.

“I want boys and girls to come into the sport because they love it but it's tough if you want to be the best. You will be competing against people who are weightlifting as their full-time job.”

“They don't have to think about how they are going to pay their rent or [for] the next physio appointment. Li Wenwen, who won gold — whatever she wants, whenever she wants it, is provided. It's hard if you are waiting for treatment or waiting a week for scans.”

British Olympic weightlifting medals

Year	Location	Weightlifter	Category	Medal
1896	Athens	Launceston Elliott		Gold
1948	London	Julian Creus (Men's 56kg)		Silver
1948	London	James Halliday (Men's 67.5kg)		Bronze
1960	Rome	Louis Martin (Men's 90kg)		Bronze
1964	Tokyo	Martin (Men's 90kg)		Silver
1984	Los Angeles	David Mercer (Men's 90kg)		Bronze
2020	Tokyo	Emily Campbell (Women's 87kg+)		Silver

*one-hand lift **two-hand lift

Campbell has had to earn everything. She only took up weightlifting five years ago when she went into the gym to work on her strength for hammer-throwing. At the time, she was working with children in the care system. It was a job she loved, but it proved draining as she devoted more time to her sport, dealing with the constant state of “doms” — or delayed onset muscle soreness for the uninitiated. “To feel shattered becomes your norm,” she says.

She went down to part-time but the British team felt it was still too much so she moved on to become a part-time receptionist at the University of Nottingham. “Living at home, the Bank of Mum and Dad,” she says. A grant from the International Olympic Committee was worth £300 a month.

Campbell, 27, had risen to become European champion by early 2021 but, when the media descended on the weightlifting hall in Tokyo, it was in the expectation of writing about Laurel Hubbard, the first openly transgender Olympian.

Hubbard crashed out early and suddenly we had a very different story on our hands as Campbell, with her striking blue and red buns of hair, took fourth place in the snatch round, with 122kg. She was well aware of the hubbub around Hubbard but was determined that it would not become a distraction.

“It was all very new at the Commonwealth Games when I won a surprise medal and my

limelight got overtaken by that [issue],” she says. “I vowed not to let that happen at the Olympics.”

“I am far from a selfish person but I felt it was an amazing opportunity to reach my first Games and I didn't want my limelight taken just because people want a story. I wanted to give you another great story.”

She certainly did that. With 161kg in the clean and jerk, Campbell's combined 283kg was beaten only by China's Li with a massive 320kg.

It had been fascinating watching Campbell, with her pre-lift routine of a scream, mentally set herself up for the biggest moment of her life.

“I'm very good at switching on and off and I like to be off when I am backstage, listening to my music, quite chilled out. That scream is my wake-up: now turn it on!”

“Then it's about clearing the head. A snatch takes two seconds — you can't think of anything in that time. It's making sure I set myself properly at the start of the lift so you almost go into autopilot. I stand on that stage, I scream, [do] a clicking thing with my heels, then walk up to the bar.”

“You can't think of a hundred things. I can't tell you where the scream after the lift comes from but I had to fight for that jerk a little and that was 18 months of work and emotion coming out.”

Her hope in Tokyo had been to reach the top eight, perhaps the top five, before moving on to Paris 2024, so she is ahead of schedule, but with ambitions still to chase. “I have always wanted the magic 300kg total, which is possible for only a handful of women in the world,” she says. “And I've always said I want to do a 170kg clean and jerk because that's triple reds [three 25kg weights on either side] and it looks great on the bar so it will make great photos.”

Her hopes of progress have improved with finding her own place to live nearer the gym in Alfreton, saving the time when she was previously stuck on the M1, and her podiums in the three major championships this year have shown she is an athlete who can hold her own among the very best, and strongest, in the world. “Bring back the bling,” is her motto. She is amassing quite a collection.