

Thanks, coach! Olympians honour unsung ‘superstars’ who shaped their success

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Behind every great athlete is a great coach, and to celebrate the eagerly anticipated start of The Rio 2016 Olympic Games, some of our most famous heroes and heroines pay tribute to the people who made their dreams come true by supporting them through their formative years.

Coaches are an integral part of Team GB’s success at every Olympic Games.

But it’s not just coaches working at the highest echelons of their sport who are worth their weight in gold.

Amateur coaches can make an unforgettable impression on people’s lives, and play an equally instrumental role in their journeys from fledgling athletes to fully fledged celebrities.

And so, while the Olympic Games is a celebration of sporting achievement, it should be a celebration of coaching too.

Standing ovations and plaudits are not what draws people to coaching, but there is no harm in showcasing the important part they play.

And with Olympic medal winners always quick to show their appreciation for their early mentors and role models, without further ado, let’s hear from a few, as they cast their minds back to where it all began.

Nicola Adams and Alwyn Belcher

Nicola Adams

Nicola Adams flashes her trademark smile after another victory

I was lucky enough to get a close-up view of Nicola’s gleaming Olympic gold medal (she refused to take

it out of its case as she had just cleaned it!) when she returned with Alwyn to one of the local boxing gyms she used to train at in the centre of Bradford a few months after the London 2012 Games.

Alwyn – who also coached Amir Khan and Naseem Hamed at amateur level – worked with Nicola from the age of 15 until she joined the Great Britain boxing squad full-time at their English Institute of Sport training headquarters in Sheffield.

The influence he has had on the reigning Olympic, World, European and Commonwealth champion has been immense. Nicola told me and a colleague on another trip back to the gym to unveil a plaque in Alwyn’s honour prior to the start of the 2012 Games: ‘Volunteers and coaches like Alwyn do amazing work, and it’s right that he is being recognised in this way. Because of him, I am going to the Olympics.’ And she tweeted: ‘My coach Alwyn Belcher is the best in the business as far as I’m concerned. He’s 80 yrs old and has the enthusiasm of someone 60 years younger.’

On the day Nicola brought her gold medal in to show the club’s boxers, Alwyn said: ‘Look at these people, these youngsters here, I get so much respect from them. We’ve had so much success, it’s brilliant. Nicola’s made such an impression, and the interest that Nicola’s brought in is bringing these people in.’

Alistair and Jonny Brownlee, and Charles Lines, Tony Kingham, Corrinne Tantrum and Dave Woodhead

Brownlees

Alistair, left, and Jonny show off their medals from London 2012

Alistair Brownlee won a gold medal in the triathlon at the London 2012 Olympic Games and at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2014, and was world champion in 2009 and 2011. Younger brother Jonathan claimed bronze in London and silver in Glasgow and was world champion in 2012.

Former Bradford Grammar School teacher Tony and the school's Director of Sport, Charles, along with fell-running race organiser Dave, are the ones to thank for making sure the brothers caught the running bug, while Corrinne was their coach at City of Bradford Swimming Club when they first started triathlon. Each played an important part in driving the Brownlees' development during their schooldays.

I interviewed them one school lunchtime at the start of their triathlon journeys, aged 15 and 13, and again after their Olympic success, and on both occasions, they heaped praise on their network of amateur coaches who they owe such a deep debt of gratitude to.

The brothers reserved special praise for Tony in the foreword to their book *Swim, Bike, Run: Our Triathlon Story*, writing: '(Thanks to) Tony Kingham for showing us every footpath in Bradford and teaching us the love of running.' In an interview with the Victoria Quarter online blog, they wrote: 'We went to Bradford Grammar School and had a great teacher there called Tony Kingham, who's really into running. At lunchtimes, he'd encourage us to get our trainers on and take us out. It was a brilliant feeling of freedom, to be part of the outdoors and to get the opportunity to run during the school day.'

Current coaches Malcolm Brown and Jack Maitland were honoured, alongside Tony, Charles and Corrinne, at the [2012 UK Coaching Awards organised by sports coach UK](#), winning the Coaching Chain prize in recognition of their work with the Brownlee brothers. Malcolm said at the event, which followed the London Olympic Games: 'It's appropriate that after British Triathlon's best Olympic Games, there is recognition of the coaches that contributed to the success of Alistair and Jonny as they worked over the years towards the Olympic podium. Coaches are only part of the picture, but they are critical to the long and rocky road that is endurance sport.'

Laura Trott and Simon Layfield

Laura Trott

Laura Trott celebrates after winning the women's omnium at the 2016 UCI World Track Championships

Road and track cyclist Laura Trott has amassed no fewer than 20 gold medals in Olympic, World,

European and Commonwealth competition and is the reigning Olympic omnium and team pursuit champion.

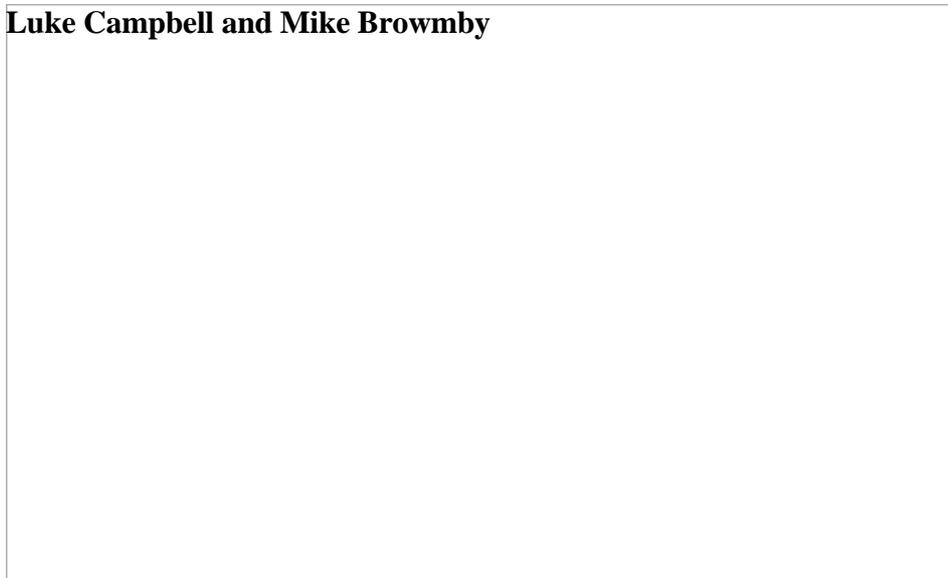
Unforgettable is again the word for her childhood coach, only more poignant in Laura's case as Simon sadly passed away in 2014.

An inspirational coach to her and her sister Emma during their days growing up in Cheshunt and riding for Team Welwyn (now known as Green Arrow CRT), Laura tweeted after his death: 'RIP Simon Layfield. The work you and Sophie [his wife and fellow cycling coach] put in down at Welwyn is why I am where I am today. Thank you. Just glad we shared the moment.'

When asked in a Q&A with *Sport* magazine what the best piece of advice she had ever been given was, she replied: 'When it's getting tough, make sure you click down a gear. I mean on a road bike. That was advice from my coach Simon Layfield, who died last year. I have it in my head all the time when I'm riding.' An unforgettable man, who dispensed unforgettable advice.

Luke Campbell and Mike Bromby

Luke Campbell and Mike Bromby



Luke Campbell with Mike Bromby, left, after winning the Commonwealth lightweight title

Luke Campbell struck gold in the 56kg bantamweight division in London before deciding to turn professional. He has gone on to win 13 of his first 14 fights, claiming the vacant Commonwealth lightweight crown in his last bout.

In an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, he said he had become great friends with his coach Mike Bromby, having been with him 'since day one'.

'The coaches are all volunteers, and they are the source and the roots of everything. If it wasn't for people like them giving up their spare time to help lads like me, I would not be Olympic champion. None of us would be. But because of Mike I have gone on to achieve massive goals.'

'It's important that the coaches should get some recognition... You cannot underestimate how important it is for kids to take up sport. It gives them an opportunity. And without coaches, there would not be any sport for them to play. I owe Mike so much. He's always there when I need him.'

Mike was ringside to watch his protégé strike gold and declared it 'the proudest moment of my life'.

Mike told the *Hull Daily Mail* that Luke was an inspiration for 'helping kids get off their backsides, put

down their computers and get off the streets’, something for which Mike too can take credit.

‘We want to see them doing exercise, and Luke’s success can inspire them to do that.

‘It isn't about finding another champion, it is about improving the fitness and well-being of the kids in this city. It is about friendships, discipline, respect. Sport can give you those things.’

Tom Daley and Andy Banks

Tom Daley and Andy Banks

Tom Daley and Andy Banks made a formidable team

[Andy Banks](#) was the coach who helped propel Tom Daley to stardom. The multiple World and European Championship gold medallist and Olympic Games bronze medallist was coached by Andy from an early age after joining his local club in Plymouth.

Their association lasted until 2014, when the poster boy for Team GB relocated his training base to London.

Tom paid tribute to his mentor following his success at the 2012 Olympic Games by telling the *Plymouth Herald*: ‘We have had a long and tough journey, and I know this is a moment I am going to remember for a long time, and I hope that Andy will too.’

When their partnership came to an amicable end, he said: ‘I would like to take this opportunity to thank Andy for all his help over the years. He has been pivotal to my achievements, and I wouldn't be the diver I am today without his continued dedication and support. I know we will keep in close contact, and I know he will always be there for me.’

[In an interview with ConnectedCoaches](#), Andy said: ‘The statement “every expert starts as a beginner” is very true. I started off as very much a beginner coach. I wasn’t trying to be an Olympic coach, that was way out of my league at the start and wasn’t even on the radar, but I **really** wanted to learn. And as the knowledge and experience grew, so did an ability to coach successfully, and I gradually became more expert by default.

‘When Tom walked into our centre with his dad, he saw what we were doing and said: “I want to do that.” It was the right time in my career, and we had a support team that was ready to help him thrive.’

Jason Kenny and Graham Leeke

Jason Kenny

Jason Kenny is all smiles after claiming gold in this year's UCI World Track Championships sprint final

Track cyclist Jason is a three-time Olympic and World Champion in the disciplines of individual sprint, team sprint and keirin.

He credits Graham Leeke, based at the National Cycling Centre in Manchester, with making him the success he is today. In an interview with BBC North West Tonight, he said: ‘Graham is a coach at Eastlands Velo kids club here at the velodrome, where I started when I was 11. People like Graham who work there and who are all voluntary are the unsung heroes. They get kids involved in the sport. Graham was the coach who took the sessions and showed me how to ride the track properly so I owe it all to him.’

Graham said: ‘I was screaming at the TV when Jason won gold. I get people asking why I coach, and my viewpoint is, if your kids could go and play football at Old Trafford, they would, but they can’t. But they **can** come down to the velodrome and ride the same wood as Sir Chris Hoy and Vicky Pendleton.’

Mo Farrah and Alan Watkinson

Mo Farah

The iconic picture of Mo Farrah winning gold in the 5000m at the London 2012 Olympics

Remember this goosebump-inducing snippet of commentary from Steve Cram? ‘But Mo Farrah gritting his teeth now. The arms have got to pop, the knees have got to come up high. He’s got to find something extra. He’s got to kick hard. Come on, Mo Farrah. Farrah is going to make it two gold medals for Great Britain. Beautiful!’

That was from the finale to the 5000m final at the London Olympics, when Mo completed his golden 10,000m and 5000m double.

Mo’s humble beginnings are a far cry from the razzmatazz that greets him now every time he makes a public appearance, the trappings of becoming the most successful British athlete of all time.

But Mo will never forget his roots, and the PE teacher who catapulted him on to the road to glory. That’s not a throwaway comment, either – Alan Watkinson was Mo’s best man at his wedding!

‘When I was young, I absolutely loved football and wanted to play for Arsenal. I had never really considered running until my PE teacher, Alan Watkinson, recognised my talent for athletics,’ Mo told the Rio2016 website. ‘Thanks to him and his support, I was able to win quite a few English Schools titles while I was still at school. It was only when I won the European Junior 5000m Championships in 2001 that I thought I could do this professionally.’

In his first race, Mo admits he set off running in the wrong direction! Alan certainly got him back on track. On their enduring relationship, Alan told journalists after Mo’s gold medal exploits in London: ‘Just a remarkable feeling. From knowing him 17, 18 years ago and seeing him develop from that youth who had a few troubles at school but who was charming and good humoured... to see him go from that to the stadium in London was just... you couldn’t make it up. Tears were rolling down my cheeks, I don’t think I even saw him go across the finish line, I was so emotional.’

Have you coached someone who went on to become an Olympian, or are there any similar quotes that have stuck in your memory where Olympians have paid tribute to the coaches that helped set them on the road to international success? Please leave a comment below.

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