

Help your athletes talk their way out of trouble: A single-minded approach to fighting mental illness

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Michelle Smith



Michelle Smith proudly shows off her Commonwealth Games silver medal in Delhi, which she claimed in the 50m prone pairs with partner Sharon Lee

Times may be changing, but there is still a social stigma attached to mental health issues. Great Britain shooting star and ConnectedCoaches member Michelle Smith openly discusses her battle with anxiety and self-harm – which culminated in two suicide attempts – as she urges those struggling with a mental illness not to suffer in silence.

It was destined to be a year to remember for Great Britain rifle shooter [Michelle Smith](#).

The former European champion and Commonwealth Games silver medallist was enjoying the 2012 winter break, one eye fixed firmly on the summer's home Olympic Games in London, which were hovering tantalisingly on the horizon.

The multiple British champion and record holder – and first woman to win the national long-range shooting championship – was relishing her golden shot at the Olympic title. Life was good.

Fast-forward several months, and Michelle's Olympic dream lay in tatters, while her life was hanging by the narrowest of threads after two failed suicide attempts. Her year to remember had become just that, but for all the wrong reasons.

When mental illness strikes – a toxic mix of self-harm and anxiety in Michelle's case, following a painful relationship breakdown – it can hit like a bombshell, bringing the walls of your cosy existence crashing down around you.

Whether the slide into an unremitting vicious cycle is immediate or gradual, once the wheels have been set in motion, breaking free of its grip can feel like an impossible task.

Michelle's story is traumatic and thought-provoking, but uplifting too, serving as a message of hope for those with mental illness that you **can** halt the alarming spiral of decline.

It also contains important information for sports coaches on recognising the red flags and how, by offering appropriate guidance and being a willing and patient listener, you can effect a positive outcome in people's lives in times of distress.

Counselling skills

Mental health issues such as depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety and panic attacks, self-harm, eating disorders and addiction do not discriminate between young and old, rich and poor, active and inactive, celebrity and man in the street. People of every background, education, lifestyle and status are affected.

One in four people in Britain will suffer from mental health problems during their lifetime, according to Department of Health figures. It is inevitable, then, that coaches will encounter athletes in acute need, which is why general surveillance as a coach is such a key area of responsibility.

It is often said that a good coach needs to be a jack of all trades. Besides possessing in-depth technical and tactical knowledge of their sport, it helps if they have a general grasp of psychology, physiology and nutrition. Basic counselling skills are another valuable asset modern-day coaches increasingly need to call on.

It is not necessary to have a mental health specialist's knowledge or training, but being equipped with sound interpersonal skills can make a real difference.

For Michelle, having someone to talk to helped her through her darkest days.

It was all she had, in fact, as she was unable to turn to the sport she loved in her hour of need.

With her firearms licence having been revoked following her second suicide bid, she found herself blacklisted from joining a gun club, and her rehabilitation suffered badly as a result.

'If I could have gone back to doing my shooting, perhaps things might have taken a different course,' says Michelle.

'My comfort blanket has always been shooting; to go down the range, relax and have a bit of banter and a good time.

'I started shooting as a 12 year old at Keighley Rifle and Pistol Club and grew up in that environment so it was difficult to have that taken away from me.'

Downward spiral

Michelle talks candidly about the horrendous two months when her life deteriorated rapidly. She does

so, not as a cathartic exercise or a purging of pent-up emotions (she says she has fully exorcised her demons), but rather to help others who find themselves in a similar situation.

Her story is testimony to the fact that, no matter how many blind alleys you might encounter as you bid to disentangle yourself from the mental maze you find yourself trapped in, there is always a way out.

The degeneration in a person's mental state can have many psychological triggers. They include, but are not limited to, bullying, family problems, exam pressure, pressure to perform in your chosen sport, a perfectionist personality, low self-confidence or self-esteem, and exceptional stress.

Stress was the cause of Michelle's sudden breakdown, exacerbated by an overwhelming sense of rejection.

'I was making a daily 300-mile round trip from Taunton to Birmingham, where I worked for an ammunitions manufacturer,' she explains.

'That was a strain in itself, and there was also an element of stress from being on the shortlist for the Olympic squad.

'I had had my gall bladder removed in 2011 and suffered with that for a while and was off work. I had a bit of historic stress carried over from that too, I think, as I was stuck in the house, unable to do anything.

'But when my relationship ended, that was the crux of it. I just couldn't understand it; it made no sense to me why it had broken down. I did a lot of stupid things after that.'

By stupid things, Michelle is talking about her bouts of self-harm. There is no need to go into the lurid details, suffice to say she soon hit 'a rapid downward spiral'.

This culminated in her attempting to take her own life twice in the space of two months.

'I remember waking up in hospital two days after overdosing on anti-anxiety pills,' says Michelle after her second failed attempt.

New partner Mike, her former long-term boyfriend, had alerted the emergency services.

After the suicide attempts, the police detained her under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 while she underwent a psychiatric assessment at a mental health facility.

'The thought of that place terrifies me now,' she adds. 'I was assessed and deemed not to be thinking reasonably, which was valid, as I accept I wasn't in a good state of mind at that time. So they revoked my firearms certificate and seized my guns.'

Skin grafts

Michelle admits she is an anxious person by nature and always had a tendency to ‘lock herself away’ when anything confrontational happened.

‘When I became anxious, the thoughts inside my mind would be going ten to the dozen. I’d be up all night worrying and that would then throw my sleep cycle out.’

She describes her anxiety as like a crushing feeling inside her chest, while self-harming was a way of offsetting her mental anguish through physical pain.

‘The best way to describe it is taking the lid off a pressure cooker,’ she explains.

According to the mental health charity [selfharmuk](#), people who self-harm do it ‘as a way to cope with, block out, and release intense feelings of anger, shame, sadness, loneliness, or guilt.’ It is a growing problem during puberty, with around 13% of people aged 11–16 thought to have self-harmed.

The recovery process was slow for Michelle. Her instinctive need was to get straight back on the shooting range, but, as explained, this form of therapy was not an option.

Her requests to join shooting clubs were initially met with a string of rejections, while having her firearms licence revoked also resulted in her losing her job at the ammunitions manufacturer, piling on more stress: ‘I would sit at home doing nothing all day, just thinking and stewing.’

But time has been a great healer. She got in touch with [Mind](#) and [selfharmuk](#), who offered help and advice, and impressed on her the remarkable benefits of talking therapy.

It may be a daunting prospect, but as Michelle is keen to point out, plucking up the courage to talk to someone will help you get the support you need to divert you back on to the right path.

She had skin grafts on her leg to cover her scars, enrolled on coaching courses that bypassed the traditional National Small-bore Rifle Association (NSRA) qualification framework, and discovered a route back into competition.

She passed a Level 2 award in the principles of coaching sport (which involved 90 guided learning hours) and is currently nearing the end of a foundation degree in sports coaching at Bradford College, which she plans to ‘top up’ to a full Bachelor of Arts degree next year. She has nothing but praise for her ‘fantastic’ lecturer, ConnectedCoaches member [Sam Messam](#).

‘Although I’ve been through a really rough patch, I’ve come out the other side a much better person,’ says Michelle.

‘I’ve got my coaching qualifications and am the first person in my family to work towards a degree – and nobody can take away the medals I have won.

‘I wouldn’t trade Mike for the world. We bounce off each other, and he’s been an absolute rock. And the friends I’ve got now are very close friends. They know what I’ve been through and, if something happens now, I know there are at least five people I can instantly call on.

‘I had a lot of hangers-on before because I was successful but, thankfully, they have dropped like flies. It’s one of the good things to come from all this, that I now know who my really good friends are.’

I ask her if she has any advice for those struggling to cope with their mental demons.

‘First and foremost, go and see your doctor and have a chat.

‘My GP, when I was living in Portsmouth, was an absolute star. I’d sit down and just have a long

chat with her. It really helped.’

Going for gold at Gold Coast

One of the close friends she refers to is Dr Ron Carter, a GP and an avid rifle shooter.

When Michelle competes, she has to have a mentor with her at all times on the firing point. It is their firearms licence she uses on the day.

‘He was my babysitter, as I call it, for the British Long Range Championships last year (which she won for a record-equalling fourth time). He has been immense, offering me great support.

‘Whenever I shoot, there are more regulations put on me than a junior who has been shooting less than six months. I can understand where they are coming from but there are times when I feel I am fighting a losing battle when it comes to the politics of the sport.’

Michelle is now a member of Ashton-under-Lyne in Rifle Club in Manchester, where she trains three times a week. She has her own gun, which is licensed through the club and kept at the range, but is not allowed unsupervised access.

She is at the stage where she can reapply for her firearms certificate, with Dr Carter agreeing to act as her medical referee.

Only when the licence issue has been resolved will the NSRA begin to entertain any request from Michelle to become a club instructor.

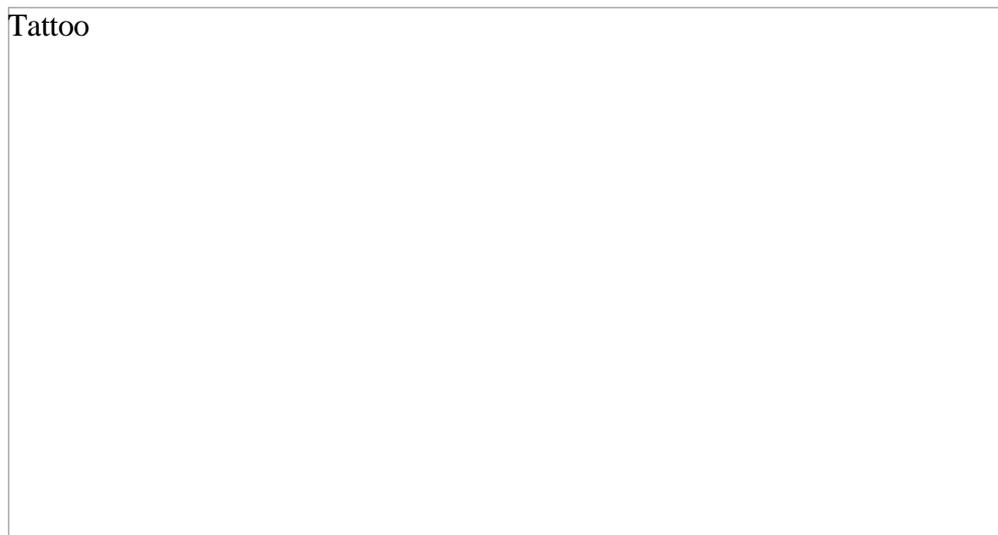
But she is focusing on the many positives. She has held the under-14s head coach role at the Leeds Academy of American Football, has been accepted as a member of a gun club and is competing again, and has her sights set on shooting for England at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games in Australia in 2018.

An inspirational message

The memories of February and March 2012 will always be indelibly inked on Michelle’s memory, but as permanent markers go, there is something she will remember even more poignantly – in the form of a tattoo on her right forearm. It reads: ‘Do it for Orson & Kurt’ – the names of her two young nephews.

‘It was an epiphany moment for me,’ she explains. ‘Kurt was sitting on my knee at a dinner, and I was teaching him to suck spaghetti and play Angry Birds. I got a tattoo there for a reason – so I could see it every day as a constant reminder of why life is worth living.’

Tattoo



A big thank you to all those who have been in touch, kindly agreeing to speak to me on the subject of mental health in sport and sports coaching. I am planning to write another article soon, containing more detailed advice for coaches. In the meantime, please leave a comment and pass on your thoughts on what is a highly emotive, and vitally important, issue.

UK Coaching has set up a 'Mental health for sports and physical activity providers' guide on their website. [View it here.](#)

Update 2019

[Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity](#) is a new online course produced as a result of a collaboration between Mind, 1st4sport, UK Coaching and Sport England. Complete the course and you'll gain the confidence to be able to support people experiencing mental health problems, helping them to thrive inside and outside of your sessions. [Learn more about this course.](#)

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