

A pregnant pause: Returning to sport after giving birth

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Jessica Ennis

- **The persuasive powers of your coach and family can play a major role in helping new mums return to sport.**
- **The time factor and tiredness are the biggest in a long list of issues as priorities change.**
- **Where there's a will, there's a way - thinking outside the box can help you negotiate some of these problems.**
- **Seek motivation from your friends, club members or elite athletes who have successfully made the comeback.**

Taking those first baby steps back to sport can be just as stressful for a new mum as the physical and emotional turbulence associated with giving birth.

Sport understandably takes a back seat as your priorities in life change but making a decision to give up your hobbies or career altogether, never to return, is a bit drastic.

Great Britain heptathlete Jessica Ennis-Hill's return to competitive action this season after a year out of the sport following the birth of her son culminated in a thrilling gold medal at the World Championships in Beijing. Cue the 'Mother of all comebacks' headlines in the national media.

There is no 'one size fits all' solution to returning to peak fitness following pregnancy but there are a whole bunch of inspirational case histories of women from every sphere of the sporting spectrum promoting an empowering message to mothers that 'it can be done'.

And it is vital coaches understand the issues involved as they have a key role to play in the process of activating a return to sport, whether this be at elite level, club level or anywhere in between.

Where there's a will, there's a way

Nobody grasps the gamut of problems that exist more than Level 3 athletics and Level 2 basketball coach [Emma Tomlinson](#), who has had five children.

'I was running when I was six months pregnant with my twins,' says ConnectedCoaches member Tomlinson. 'When I had them they were 10 weeks premature and it took me a good eight months before I started running again.'

‘You have to spend so much time with your child and you need to create a bond with them, and that has a massive impact on sport, whether you are playing it or coaching.’

And there in a nutshell you have arguably the biggest single factor affecting a return to sports participation: time, or rather, lack of it.

The feeling that there simply aren’t enough hours in the day, what with caring for your new child, spending quality family time with your husband or partner and your other children, cooking meals, going shopping. And what if you return to work part-time or full-time? The list is endless.

‘Finding the time to be able to get fit again in between looking after the baby is a massive problem but then there is the issue of not being able to get enough sleep,’ adds Tomlinson as she casts her mind back. ‘If you’ve been up all night, you don’t really want to go out for a run.

‘You’ve got to have that motivation to be able to get back into your sport.

‘I went from a six-and-a-half-stone person up to around 12, 13 stone. Feeling rather fat and unhealthy, that was what gave me the motivation to get back into running again.’

And so the list continues to build:

- no time and lack of childcare
- sleep deprivation and tiredness
- lack of motivation
- body image and lack of self-confidence

You could add myriad more to the list. What about those mothers suffering from post-natal depression, or the separate problems being a single mother throws up? Oh, and as your children grow up, get ready to become a chauffeur service as you ferry them around to their various clubs.

Tomlinson explains: ‘Having children is a massive commitment, especially for those heavily involved in sport. When I had the girls, I didn’t go back to work so I was able to get back into sport, but when I had my youngest, who is seven, I put him in a nursery when he was three months old and did return to work.

‘It was only when he was nine months old, I realised I couldn’t work and be a sportsperson as well and maintain my fitness levels.

‘I wanted to work but ended up leaving because it cost too much to put him in nursery. I didn’t want to stay at home all day but I felt I had no choice because it wasn’t cost-effective.

‘Then again, I started running and it was fantastic to get back into shape.

‘You have to prioritise. The priority for me is to be able to spend quality time with my children and not leave them to other people to look after.’

The guilt trip

For those women who do try to combine coaching sport or playing sport with motherhood, guilt can be a painful side-effect.

Tomlinson’s predicament will be a familiar story to a lot of women as she discusses the contrition she felt for simply popping out for a daily run and, ultimately, returning to her other passion of coaching.

‘I had five children and, between myself and my partner, we have seven children altogether but I’ve still gone out and done my running. I have felt really guilty doing it though, having my daily run while my partner was at home looking after the children.

‘It wasn’t until a few months ago that we had this conversation and he said he doesn’t mind me going out for a run if it de-stresses me and makes me feel better.

‘I would also ask my oldest child, who is now 19, to look after the youngest when I went running and, again, I would feel guilty.’

As an avid athletics coach, Tomlinson would take her twins with her to the track. To begin with they got bored quickly but, after a while, they started to enjoy the evenings out.

Light at the end of the tunnel

But it’s not all doom and gloom for mums. Your body will recover, hormones will settle down and there are ways around the

time and motivation problems through the help and cooperation of your family and coach.

‘If you have a really good coach and also good people around you it will make a huge difference,’ says Tomlinson. ‘They will also be pushing you and - if you are umming and ahing, and you’ve got those people saying, ‘we will help you, whatever decision you make’ - that can really help.’

And you could always think up clever ideas of your own.

For Tomlinson, she became something of a local laughing stock (her words, not mine).

‘I used to have people laughing at me in the street because I would run with a double pushchair. You didn’t see that sort of thing 15 years ago.’

Maybe she should have patented the idea.

Role models

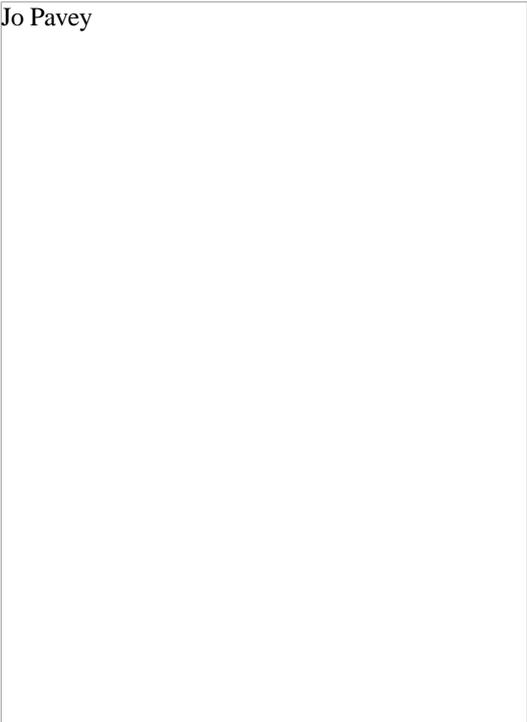
Then there are the examples of elite athletes whose own inspirational experiences should serve to provide a huge motivational boost.

Ennis-Hill returned to training just three months after giving birth to her first child. The rest is history, as they say, as her performance in Beijing at the World Athletics Championships will testify.

She even claimed the pregnancy had given her an edge in training by increasing her endurance levels.

Fellow athlete Jo Pavey claimed the European 10,000m title last year at the age of 40, the oldest woman ever to claim gold at the championships, having given birth to her second child only 11 months previously.

Jo Pavey



Baby talk: Jo Pavey celebrates with her child after winning the Aviva UK Championships 10,000m.

And Olympic gold medal-winning rower Anna Watkins is back in training as she looks to defend her double sculls title in Rio, six months after the birth of her second son.

Okay, not every mum is an Olympian, and a gold medal-winning one at that, but they are burdened with the same day-to-day issues as the ‘woman on the street’.

‘I’m so glad I carried on running,’ says Tomlinson, ‘because I think my children have learned from that and can say, “If my mum can do it, who’s now nearly 40, then we can do it as well”.’

Have you made the comeback into sport or coaching after giving birth? Was it a struggle, or were there other issues you encountered on top of those mentioned in the article? Share your anecdotes by leaving a comment below.

