

Running in the family



PHOTOGRAPHY: SUKI DHANDA, REX

Sprinter Emily Diamond comes from a long line of elite athletes. Will she add to the family's sporting legacy by bringing back a gold from the Commonwealth Games? Rosie Mullender catches up with three generations of track stars

The face of sport today is practically unrecognisable compared to that of 1950, when Valerie McGee – née Webster – represented the UK in long jump at the European Athletics Championships. And the differences feel all the more stark as her granddaughter Emily Diamond prepares to compete in the women's 4x400m relay at the Commonwealth Games on Australia's Gold Coast.

"It's not easy to be an athlete these days," says Valerie, who's now 86. "We'd train three days a week, but now they have to train almost every day. Emily's got a degree, too – she's had to do it all. Although they don't have to sew the team badges on to their own outfits like I had to. And I've noticed the medals these days are a lot bigger, as well ..."

Valerie's innate athleticism was passed down from her "sporting-mad" father who, she says, "had three daughters, which must have been a great disappointment".

Keen to get his children involved in sports, he encouraged Valerie's elder sister to play county cricket, while she focused on athletics. It was at a Surrey schools sporting event that she met her husband, Alan, a sprinter.

"I loved sport, but Valerie is one of those people who's good at whatever she touches," he says. "Athletics runs in the family, although success like Emily's can only come through hard work and dedication. It's not all in the genes."

Emily's mother, Nicola, snatched up the sporting baton from her parents as a long jumper who competed internationally, and was awarded a coveted Blue for long jump at Oxford. "I didn't consciously follow in Mum's footsteps, but with such athletic parents it was inevitable that I'd get into sports," Nicola says. We've all got competitive instincts, dedication and determination.

"Sadly, I suffered an achilles injury at university that meant I didn't go as far as I might have. But because I've been through similar emotions myself, it means I can empathise with the highs and lows Emily goes through."

Perhaps unsurprisingly Emily, who is now 26, showed an aptitude for sport from an early age, playing tennis from the age of four. "She fell out of love with it when she was 16, so I suggested she tried long jump," Nicola says. "I wasn't pushy, but because I'd enjoyed it I thought she would too."

To her grandfather's delight, it quickly emerged that Emily's true talent lay in sprinting, so she began training for 200m races, before being asked at the eleventh hour to replace a team member who had pulled out of the 4x400m relay at the 2011 World University Games. Her team took home a bronze medal, proving her aptitude for 400m running. At last, she'd found her niche.

In 2016, the high point of her career so far, Emily won gold as part of the 4x400m relay team at the European Athletics Championships, followed by bronze at the Olympics in Rio. "When she brought her medal home, the family gathered at her grandparents' house to celebrate, and we all tried it on," Nicola says. "We love sharing that excitement with her – the whole family gets involved."

Clockwise from main: Emily training at the University of Bath Sports Training Village; Emily at the Rio Olympics 2016; Emily's mother, Nicola; and her grandmother Valerie



'My family have always been an amazing support'

As Emily faces her latest challenge on the Gold Coast as part of the women's 4x400m relay team, she reflects on how it feels to have taken on a legacy passed down to her from her mother and grandmother.

"Seeing Mum and Nan's medals and photos when I was younger spurred me on and made me want to succeed," she says.

"My family have always been an amazing support, and it helps that they understand what I'm going through. They've always been there cheering me on – my grandparents particularly enjoy the chance to reminisce about their sporting days.

"I'm proud to be carrying on the family legacy, and if my children and grandchildren are athletic too, it'll be amazing – it really bonds the family together."

As she competes in Australia, Emily's family will be supporting her every step of her races – Valerie and Alan from their care home in Surrey, and Nicola from the sidelines in Australia with Emily's father, Jeremy.

Nicola and Valerie are in agreement that watching Emily is more nerve-racking than competing themselves ever was. "We're not only aware of what can go right, we know what can go wrong, too," Valerie says. "But we've done our best to support her, and I hope we've inspired her too."

npower – proud sponsors of Team England and their official anthem for the 2018 Commonwealth Games, Jerusalem. Visit npower.com/teamengland and theguardian.com/the-home-team. Follow [#powerofsupport](https://twitter.com/powerofsupport) for updates

PAID FOR BY 