



The comeback kid

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUKI DHANDA; DAVID LEVINE/THE GUARDIAN

PAID CONTENT

After suffering a devastating injury that crushed her dreams of competing in the 2016 Olympics, weightlifter Zoe Smith was carried through her darkest days by her family and support team. By Rosie Mullender

On a typical Monday morning, you may find Zoe Smith manning the bubble tea kiosk at Loughborough University campus. At home in her student house, textbooks lie waiting for her to cram in revision for the exams she'll be taking in May. After that, she might hit the gym.

At first look, Zoe's life doesn't seem too different to any other 23-year-old. But not many other students will be taking their exams straight after competing at the Commonwealth Games, which come to a close today on Australia's Gold Coast.

Despite making history as the first English woman to win a weightlifting medal at the Commonwealth Games (in 2010), it took a huge amount of determination from Zoe and her support network to get her to the 2018 competition. In 2016, an injury at the GB Championships left her unable to compete in the Rio Olympics that year.

"I partially dislocated my shoulder, and needed surgery when I should have been in Rio," says Zoe. "I was in a pretty bad place. Luckily, I had loads of people around me, from my parents and boyfriend to my coach and physio, who were amazingly supportive."

Zoe's mum and dad, Niki and Terry, have been there to cheer her on from the moment she first lifted a barbell at the tender age of 12. "We lived in a tower block in Greenwich, so Zoe spent a lot of time at Europa, the local gym," says Niki, who has come out of retirement to take on a part-time job to help fund Zoe's training and studies.

"One day, they were looking for someone to make up the numbers in a weightlifting competition, and Zoe decided to give it a go – it was total serendipity," she says. "On her second day, Terry went to pick her up and came home white-faced. He'd only been able to lift one of her weights six inches off the floor – she was a total natural."

Zoe's push into weightlifting came from Olympic gymnast Yvonne Arnold, who co-owns Europa with her husband, Len. "When the weightlifting coach, Andrew Callard, asked if we had any girls who might want to try it, Zoe immediately sprang to mind," says Yvonne. "She was powerful, and her legs were already strong. I told her: 'You're a great gymnast, but you'll never get to the Olympics – you might as a weightlifter though.' She took to it like a duck to water."

Andrew appreciates how lucky he is that Zoe was the one to walk into his weightlifting gym that day. "It was obvious from the start that she was gifted," says Andrew, who still coaches her from London. "She has loads of talent – probably more than anyone I've ever seen. When she's focused, she can improve more in two months than other lifters can in two years."

As the weightlifting coach for Team England on the Gold Coast, Andrew was there to support Zoe as she competed. "I've spent a lot of time with her over the years," he says. "She's a lovely kid, and went through a lot when she was injured. I just want her to do well."

Weightlifting and powerlifting physiotherapist Oliver Freeman, of the English Institute of Sport, was also supporting Zoe and Team England in Australia.

He was working with her when she suffered her shoulder injury two years ago.

"It was a very difficult time, especially when it became clear she needed surgery," says Oliver. "She decided to relocate to Loughborough to have easier access to physiotherapy

Clockwise from main: Zoe training at Loughborough Uni; competing in the 2012 London Olympics; and pictured with her mother Niki



'I needed surgery when I should have been in Rio - luckily I had amazing support'

and other members of her support network, and that was a brave decision."

As well as her physical recovery, Zoe needed emotional support after missing out on the Olympics. "I tried to make sure she was OK, going to appointments with her and taking her for coffee," says Oliver. "The whole team worked hard to help her settle in and get back on her feet. To see how far she's come is fantastic."

Shortly after moving to Loughborough, Zoe met student Ed Foxall, who has been another key member of her support network. "I'd seen her perform at the 2014 Commonwealth Games on television, but by the time we met she was facing months of rehab," says Ed. "Our relationship grew as she was recovering, but when she had to perform in her first national competition to qualify for the Commonwealth Games, I wasn't worried – I knew she could do it."

Mum Niki says of watching her in the Commonwealth Games: "When I see her compete, I always intend to keep quiet, but end up screaming from the sidelines ... We couldn't make it to Australia, but were watching at home. We're all so proud of her."

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

