

Harder, better, faster, stronger



PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK BALLON; IAN WALTON/GETTY; SOPHIA SPRING

PAID CONTENT

Former hurdler Perri Shakes-Drayton retrained as a sprinter for the Commonwealth Games, competing again thanks to her supportive family and colleagues, and her own incredible focus since a knee injury four years ago.
By Rosie Mullender

Perri Shakes-Drayton never gives up. Her single-minded determination is a subject that comes up again and again when talking to her close and very passionate family and friends about her rollercoaster career.

After an injury five years ago, Perri had to learn to walk again and switch disciplines from hurdles to sprinting. And despite doctors and physiotherapists setting her chances of a full recovery at around zero, she has been competing as a member of Team England in the 400m and the 4x400m at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games in Australia.

“She wasn’t so focused at first,” says Chris Zah, her trainer for the past 18 years. “When we started working together, I made her do everything from 60m sprinting to cross-country. She hated it and didn’t see the point. As a kid from east London, she really wasn’t keen on mud.”

Perri’s outlook changed in 2007, after coming second in the 400m hurdles at the European Athletics Under-20 Championships. “She grabbed me and said: ‘What are we going to do about this?’” Chris says. “From then, we agreed to think outside the box. I’d watch competitors and say: ‘This girl gets to the first hurdle in 6.2 seconds, so get there in 6.1.’ She’d reply: ‘Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.’”

This attitude, along with her natural talent, pushed Perri to the world No 2 spot in women’s hurdles. But in 2013, she suffered a torn ligament and cartilage damage in her left knee at the finals of the World Championships in Moscow, leaving her unable to walk. “It’s when you’re at your fastest that your body is most likely to break down, and I’d just won two gold medals,” says Perri. “I tried to stay positive, but I went to some dark places.”

Her family, along with Chris, rallied round to encourage her not to give up, even on her lowest days. “I’d get so nervous - like it was me on that starting line,” says Perri’s mum, Norma. “I’d tell her to run like she could see me at the finish line with my arms open. So when she got injured, it was a terrible time - I can’t put it into words. There were a lot of tears. It’s amazing to think how far she’s come.”

Norma is speaking from LA, where she’s helping niece Jodie celebrate her 30th birthday. The pair’s enthusiasm when talking about Perri, “the CEO of the family”, sees them scrambling to finish each other’s sentences.

“We grew up together, so she’s more like my sister than a cousin,” Jodie says of Perri. “When she got injured I dragged her to parties on her crutches. I told her it could be worse - she’d bounce back. Now, she’s better and stronger than ever.”

Part of Perri’s fierce determination is a legacy from her father, Patrick, who for 14 years was one of boxer Lennox Lewis’s fitness trainers. “She’s passionate



‘After all she’s been through, she’s bulletproof’

and competitive, and so am I,” says Patrick. “If she’s down, I’m a picker-upper, and I was there for physio and hospital appointments. It’s taken determination and grit to get past her injury - but having good people around you, that’s what gets you through.”

In 2014, during rehabilitation, Perri met her fiancé, Mike Edwards, an entrepreneur and athlete. Welcomed by the family with open arms - “I gained a brother and Norma gained a son,” says Jodie - he helped Perri connect with the world beyond sport during her recovery.

“Perri had a strong desire to get back on top, but I wanted to offer her positive distractions and give her a bigger life beyond track and field,” says Mike. “With my cigar business, I’d developed myself as a person and, in turn, Perri had achieved athletic goals I was trying to achieve myself. We really inspired each other.”

“After all she’s been through, she’s bulletproof. It’s great that we’ve been able to support each other.”

Perri has come a long way - and as always, her family were right behind her in Australia. “Everything she feels, we feel, so it’s like we’re all running that race with her,” Jodie says. “We lifted her back up as a family.”

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



See theguardian.com/paid-for-content for GNM’s commercial content guidelines

The Guardian Labs