

# Alistair Brownlee



'I've told my brother it's the first

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He's the double gold-winning Olympic triathlete who once gave up his chance of a top World Series medal to help his brother Jonny cross the finish line. Until recently he had his sights set on winning a third Olympic gold...

then he was sensationally disqualified. A month on, Alistair Brownlee has resigned himself to sitting out Tokyo but, as Jim White finds out, he's still furious. Portrait by Chris Leah



ALISTAIR BROWNLEE is giving me an unintended guided tour of his home, as he searches for a better Wi-Fi signal to continue our Zoom chat. And it is quite the property – a lovely stone farmhouse in the Yorkshire Dales, with a grand sweep of a garden.

It is not where I'd expect Brownlee to live. Scrawny, geeky, shyly self-deprecating, he is a youthful 33 with the air of someone who would be most at home in cramped student digs, a bike propped up in the hallway and sweaty kit draped over the radiators. But then Brownlee has – for 10 years now – been living proof that appearances can be deceptive. He may look like a computer programmer, but he has a legitimate claim to be reckoned the finest all-round athlete this country has produced since Daley Thompson.

A master of swimming, cycling and running, his record of success is astonishing, winning successive Olympic gold medals and four triathlon world championships. Along the way he has inspired thousands to squeeze into Lycra and take up the challenge of the gruelling sport in which he so excels. As someone once said to him (he thinks it was intended as a compliment): he's an inspiration because he looks so normal it makes everyone think that if he can do it, they could too. And the rewards for his abilities are there all around him, set in Yorkshire stone.

'Yeah I owe the Olympics a lot,' he says, glancing round the place. 'Actually I owe them everything.'

This summer however, he will not be adding to his roll call of Olympic glory. And the gold medals he keeps in the house safe will remain at two. At the end of a season dogged by an ankle injury, he was on the brink of gaining a place in the British team for Tokyo when he was disqualified during a race after an incident in the water.

'It's been really stressful,' he says today. 'The Olympics have been absolutely central to my life. They caught my imagination as a 12-year-old and I was still trying to do silly things to my body to get there 20 years later. But unfortunately, it just didn't work out.'

Things went wrong during a World Championship Series race in Leeds in June. This was the final chance he had of gaining the necessary qualifying time for the Olympic Games, which open in Tokyo later this month. But almost as soon as the race got underway, as the athletes began the swimming leg, an eagle-eyed marshal accused him of 'ducking' (or pushing underwater) the American triathlete Chase McQueen. Later, Brownlee tweeted to say any contact in the water, which inevitably boils with

**Top left** Helping his brother Jonny over the line in 2016.

**Left** Congratulating Jonny on winning bronze at London 2012



thrashing limbs in the opening moments of every race, was 'completely unintentional'. He had, he added, 'had worse done' to him 'in every World Series race I've ever done'. But his rationale fell on deaf ears. He was disqualified under the rule which states: 'Where competitors deliberately target another competitor to impede their progress, gain unfair advantage and potentially cause harm to another competitor will result in disqualification.' His Tokyo dream was over.

'It was the most subjective decision you could come up with. Of course I didn't do it,' he says, today, clearly still exercised by the memory. 'It's impossible to know what's going on at the start of a race in the churn of the water. It's just mayhem in there. And for someone to suggest that you're going to do something like that on purpose is absolutely ridiculous. It makes no sense at all.'

He pauses for a moment, perhaps to let a growing swell of anger dissipate.

'Whether I agree or disagree with the decision is irrelevant now. The fact is, I won't be competing at the Olympics. I don't regret trying. I had to give myself the chance of being there again. Ultimately, though, the process wasn't in my hands.'

As he speaks there is a narrowing of his eyes and a tensing in his jaw that must have been a familiar sight to anyone who ever raced against him. This is not someone easily reconciled with defeat. As his younger brother and fellow triathlete Jonny, 31, would attest.

This summer Brownlee still hopes to travel to Tokyo, but will be sitting on the sidelines, cheering and working to help Jonny get over the line in first place to keep the gold in the family. (He has been granted entry into Japan as an Olympic delegate, there to spend the Games canvassing votes among competitors for a seat on the IOC's athletes' committee.)



## Alistair on being competitive with his brother Jonny

'FOUR KILOMETRES from the finish in the Olympic final in Rio in 2016, Jonny and I were out in front together – clear of the field but locked in an unspoken battle for gold. It was hot and we were both feeling the effects of the

punishing pace we'd imposed during the cycling stage to open up the field. Jonny was first to break the silence. "Relax," he said, between deep intakes of breath. My ears pricked up. It was just one word. But, knowing him as I do, it was far more than that. It was a tell. He was struggling. "Go, go, go!" something inside me screamed, and I did – cranking up the pace, kicking on, and embracing the agony because, whatever hell I was suffering, I knew with the certainty of a thousand training runs that Jonny was feeling it just that little bit more. We're brothers. We've trained together for years. He's been instrumental in getting me to where I am today.'

'Actually, in a weird way I'm looking forward to it,' he insists. 'I'm a big triathlon fan and I've never had the chance before to watch a big race at close quarters. It's going to be fascinating.'

Not least cheering on his brother.

'I've told him this is the first time ever that I'm hoping he wins the gold medal.'

**T**he Brownlee brothers are one of Britain's finest sporting products. Though there could have been even more of them on the international stage. Alistair claims the youngest of three Brownlee boys, his brother Edward, 24, was the most promising athlete in his youth. But he decided not to follow his siblings on their gruelling course, instead becoming a vet. 'If you saw him now, you wouldn't confuse him with a sportsman,' smiles Brownlee of Ed. (One newspaper unkindly nicknamed him 'The Roundlee Brother'.)

Alistair and Jonny, however, were sufficiently enthralled by the triathlon to turn professional. And their brotherly relationship has been a central part of the Brownlee story: in those early days, before their commercial deals with everyone from Aldi to Volvo allowed them to buy their own places, they lived together, trained together, pushed each other on, constantly striving in pursuit of a shared Olympic ambition. Their inexhaustible ability to put in the training miles in weather that would drive all but the most foolhardy indoors became legendary.

Once, for instance, they were running in the hills in a mid-January snow squall and mistook the surface of a frozen river for the path. Jonny fell through the ice into the arctic waters below. Most rational people would have given up. But Jonny carried on. He had to, he said, in order to catch up with his brother who had left him trailing in his wash.

It must have been a familiar feeling for



### GOING FOR GOLD

#### ← BEIJING 2008 →

In his first Olympics, Brownlee came out of the water in fourth place. He eventually finished 12th but was the top British competitor.

#### → LONDON 2012 →

Brownlee finished the bike leg down in the pack, but managed to pull out all the stops and win his first Olympic gold medal.

#### → RIO 2016 →

Alistair and his brother Jonny ran the road race toe-to-toe, until the final four kilometres, when Alistair kicked on to take his second gold.



Jonny in Rio in 2016. The two had worked together throughout the race to forge collective advantage, but at the last it was Alistair who broke away to win Olympic gold after he heard Jonny mutter the word 'relax'. It was a giveaway sign, he reckoned, that suggested his brother was struggling.

'Looking back on it, yeah, it sounds harsh,' admits Brownlee. 'But I like to imagine if it had been the other way round and it had been me saying "relax" he'd have done exactly the same, running off thinking, "How stupid was he to tell me that?"'

This is what it takes to win, he says: the psychological brutality of being prepared, metaphorically, to put your foot on your opponent's jugular. Even if that jugular belongs to your brother.

But despite the times he has beaten him (Jonny took the bronze medal at London and the silver at Rio behind his brother) the pair remain remarkably close.

'We push each other, we [tease] each other, we are there for each other,' says Alistair. 'We've been kind of ever-present in each other's lives. Well, until lockdown last year, when we had to spend three months training separately. That was the first time we'd not trained together in, well, 15 years.'

**B**rownlee has long been obsessed with what makes a winner. His father Keith, a consultant paediatrician, was a decent cross-country runner, while his mother Cathy, a GP, swam competitively in her youth. But it was school – and an unrelenting competitive urgency to beat his

*'I had to give myself the chance of being there again. Ultimately, the process wasn't in my hands'*



## ... on winning his second Olympic gold

'Podiums are awkward places at the best of times, but receiving my second consecutive gold medal in Rio in 2016 was on a different level. It was hot and I was shattered, physically and emotionally. The months of

preparation and expectation had taken a huge toll. The pressure was gone and I was dizzy with relief. But I don't think that explained the discomfort I felt. I simply didn't know what to feel. I'd joined an elite club of back-to-back gold medallists. And yet I felt... entirely normal: Al, the down-to-earth Yorkshireman who loves nothing more than haring around the Yorkshire Dales; whose friends call him 'thin fat lad'; who probably drinks one too many pints of Yorkshire bitter for someone practising a sport that's built on the finest of margins. Whatever a sports "star" was meant to look like, I was pretty sure I wasn't it.'



The incident at the World Series race in June, when Brownlee was disqualified for 'dunking' a fellow competitor

brother – that first developed the possibility for Alistair that he might become an athlete.

He and Jonny used to cycle the eight miles from their home to Bradford Grammar every day. His father reckons the boys would turn everything, even emptying the dishwasher, into a competition. After gaining four As at A level, Alistair – already a leading junior triathlete – won a place at Cambridge to read medicine, but he dropped out of the course when his athletic career took off. His academic enthusiasm did not wane, however, and he has subsequently, in his spare time, undertaken a degree in sports science and physiology. And he has constantly used his own experience as a crucible to enhance his study.

'I'm absolutely fascinated by what the body's doing and I've got a pretty good understanding of all the science around it,' he says. 'The conclusion I have come to is that the most important part of an athlete's body is the brain.'

This is the subject of his new book, *Relentless*, in which he speaks to legendary sporting winners, including snooker player Ronnie O'Sullivan, cricketer Alastair Cook and cyclist Chris Froome, to establish the common thread to their success.

'I found it a really hard process,' he says of writing it. 'What I was trying to do was learn

through other people's experience. I had to try to combine that with my own anecdotes, in the right amount without talking too much about myself. Which is hard, because as you know all athletes are self-obsessed.' He raises his eyebrows, jokingly.

And what of his suffering, and pushing his own body to the limits? 'Well, there are different types of suffering,' he concedes. 'But yes, for me, you get up in the morning, you're stiff, you're tired, you dive in the pool and frankly it hurts. I guess at least three or four days a week I'm doing something that is physically painful for me. But yeah the truth is I do enjoy the sense of confounding that suffering. I enjoy pushing my body to test its limits.'

Despite his Olympic disappointment, next year he has set himself a new target that will push his body even further: becoming the first man in history to complete an Ironman (an extended version of the triathlon involving swimming 2.4 miles, cycling 112 miles and running the 26.2 mile marathon distance) in under seven hours. (The current fastest for the Ironman World Championship is 7 hours 35 minutes.) His suffering dial, presumably, is about to go up to eleven.

'Sure when you're absolutely out on your legs and you've still got another two hours to run, let's not pretend it's easy;



embracing suffering is part of it,' he says. 'But training wise it is really hard to do more hours. For [the Olympics] you're doing five hours a day, six days a week of neck-breakingly hard effort, especially with the running. Whereas the Ironman training... you're not trying to do the quick running. So in that way it's slightly – and I mean slightly – easier on the body.'

But what of the longer-term impact? Does he worry that consuming mountainous quantities of calories, exerting himself for hours on end and forcing his body to do things it is surely not equipped to undertake must ask questions of his longevity?

'My anecdotal feeling is I've done a bit too much activity to be at my optimum health. In truth, I have probably been overdoing it a little bit,' he concedes.

'When I got asked as a 20-year-old, "You're doing so much training you'll end up crippled in later life, but you'll have two good years as champion, would you take it?" I always used to say, "Yeah, of course." Partly because when you're that age you never believe that's going to happen. But the fact is I made that decision to train as hard as I could whatever the consequence. And I still stand by that decision.'

It has not just required physical challenges. Brownlee likes to call himself ordinary, but to achieve what he has, he has had to be ruthlessly self-absorbed, which must have had consequences on his social life.

'People talk about it being necessary to miss family events, funerals, birthdays, weddings and not having a normal social life with friends and stuff. I think that is inaccurate,' he says. 'I've always seen what I've done as decisions I'm making rather than sacrifices. I'm deciding not to go to the pub rather than giving up on going. Besides, as a Yorkshireman I'm not averse to the odd pint.'

'Also I think probably what happens is the people who you would hang out with socially



## ... on the best thing about being a double Olympic-gold medallist

'The free kit's great. Never having to buy a round in your local? What Yorkshireman wouldn't enjoy that? Then there's the fan mail – mostly via social media these days,

though some people are still refreshingly old school; the marriage proposals (awkward); and the proposals of a rather less wholesome nature (even more so)... But, for a sports obsessive such as myself, there's one perk that beats all others: the access gold medals give you to the sporting elite. Those surprisingly weighty discs are like a currency recognised throughout the sporting world. The immortals past and present all suddenly seem happy for you to chew the fat with them pretty much as equals, even when you feel far from it.'



Brownlee (left) with his father and brothers in 1998

are people that you train with anyway. The guys I train with now, including Jonny, are a group of really close friends. I see them every day. Going off with your mates on a long bike ride in the Yorkshire Dales, it's not really work is it? I feel lucky on that.'

He has admitted he is utterly singled-minded in pursuit of victory, using anything – from acidic verbal exchanges to death stares on the start line – in the attempt to win. Anything within the rules, that is.



## ... on dealing with pressure

'Riding over the Serpentine Bridge in Hyde Park with my brother Jonny before the Olympic triathlon final in 2012, we were hit by a wall of noise. It was like nothing either of us had experienced before and I'm fairly confident ever

will again. And it was only the warm-up. I could have been daunted, but the words of my coach and mentor, Malcolm, from five years before (as I was preparing for the World Junior Championships) came back to me: 'Pressure is a privilege... It became my mantra and, on that day, what could have been a terrifyingly inhibiting factor became a cool tailwind driving me onwards to gold: the privilege of incredible, hair-raising support. This makes it sound easy, but handling pressure and expectation is of course anything but.' *Extracted from Relentless, by Alistair Brownlee*

'Yeah, I do things in such a way that on the field of play I can be ruthless in trying to maximise my chance of winning. But it's not like that in every area of my life, I'm not trying to beat everyone in everything that I do. That's kind of not part of my character. I promise you, I'm not really like that.'

Maybe the real Alistair Brownlee was in evidence that day in 2016 in Mexico when, coming around the corner to the finish line in second place in a World Series race, he saw Jonny ahead of him, but stricken by the heat, about to collapse. This time, instead of seizing the advantage, swerving round his ailing sibling, Alistair stopped and helped him over the line. It was a glorious expression of brotherly love.

So, was it also the moment, then, he decided to compensate for all those times he had put his foot on the familial jocular? 'Oh I'd love to say that was true,' he smiles. 'But actually, it was the end of a hard-fought race at a time when I'm definitely not processing things as well as I should. It was just a very instinctive thing to do.'

And, as the Tokyo Games creep closer, he will be helping Jonny all over again. He tells me that he has given him a piece of advice he hopes will make the difference. If not quite the golden ticket, it is as close to his secret of success as Alistair Brownlee has ever revealed: 'I said to him, from here on in you need to make sure you do everything exactly on your own terms. All that matters is you.'

'It is not one of his characteristics as an athlete, but I told him you have to be completely selfish and self-absorbed,' he continues. 'After you've won the gold, you can go back to being the nice old Jonny we love... until then, put your foot on the jugular.' *Relentless: Secrets of the Sporting Elite, by Alistair Brownlee, is out now (HarperCollins, £20); books.telegraph.co.uk*