

As 39-year-old Olympic great Katherine Grainger returns to rowing in a bid to match Redgrave's five successive medals, she asks: Am I giving up on a family life for ever?

# Perhaps one day I will be a normal person again



BY JAVIER GARCIA/BPI



By Jonathan McEvoy

**K**ATHERINE GRAINGER'S extraordinary Olympic journey has restarted. And, on days such as the one when we meet, it is easy to see the allure. The rowing lake at Caversham is still and the sun beats down.

But behind that picture of stillness there are sacrifices that most people who are in their 40th year would no longer be able to tolerate.

For Grainger, who is back in the British rowing squad and could now emulate Sir Steve Redgrave in becoming a medalist at five consecutive Olympic Games, that means lung-busting sessions and early starts.

But that is only the beginning of the self-sacrifice for this most engaging and intelligent of athletes. She has put life on hold.

Since winning a gold medal at London 2012, after three silvers, Grainger stopped rowing to consider her future. While her double sculls partner Anna Watkins went off to become a full-time mother to her little boy William, Grainger took to television punditry, gave talks to schools and businesses, and completed her PhD in criminal law. She was also made chancellor of Oxford Brookes University.

'I didn't rush to decide whether to come back,' says Grainger. 'I wanted to make it a hard decision. I didn't want to keep doing it just because it was all I had ever done. I needed a break to be sure of my own mind.'

She returned to full-time rowing last September and was last week selected with a new double sculls partner, the 6ft 4in former model Vicky Thornley, to compete at the European Championships in Poznan,



## Greatest British female Olympians

- 5 Kitty McKane Godfree (Tennis) 1 gold, 2 silver, 2 bronze
- 4 Rebecca Adlington (Swimming) 2 gold, 2 bronze
- 4 Katherine Grainger (Rowing) 1 gold, 3 silver
- 4 Virginia Leng (Equestrianism) 2 silver, 2 bronze
- 4 Joyce Cooper (Swimming) 1 silver, 3 bronze



**RETURN:** Grainger wins gold in London (above left) and with new partner Vicky Thornley

Poland, next week with an eye on the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics.

'I didn't want to be stuck in time,' she said, 'and spend forever talking about something that happened 15 years ago. I had to be moving forward.'

Grainger, who was born in Glasgow, honed her competitiveness playing sport against her elder sister Sarah. They still play 'fiendishly' cut-throat squash. 'You can thump things off walls,' says Grainger, who is also a karate black belt with a self-styled 'licence to kill'.

'When my sister beats me, she is very pleased. She has a burning competitive edge, but she hides it better than me. It was my sister, rather than anyone famous, that I wanted to beat. She is a teacher now. She's got a little boy. She is very content with family life. She's like a normal person in society. Perhaps one day I'll be like that.'

Auntie Katherine's nephew Seth recently turned one. She is God-mother to countless other children.

'Kids don't know whether I have

four medals from four Games. I am just Auntie Katherine. I am still quite physical so they kick a football with me. They can throw things at me. They can hang off me. I am a human climbing frame.'

She has friends galore, but the individualistic devotion to rowing success has its downsides.

'I had this slightly stupid assumption growing up in a very lovely, solid family that everybody grows up and has kids,' she says.

'I didn't think you had to plan it. It just fell into your lap at some point in your life. And then I started rowing at Edinburgh University and thought I would do one Olympics if I was lucky. Then I did another. Then a third and a fourth. You realise that

a huge chunk of your life has been spent rowing. It is hard, and part of the decision about coming back was about what I was giving up.'

'Job-wise I think there will always be opportunities. But home life, am I giving up on that? I would find it hard if I definitely was. I haven't given up on it. But it is difficult to keep all parts of your life going when you are devoted to something like this.'

Grainger is nevertheless something of a polymath. As well as being a highly qualified lawyer, she is a devoted patron of the arts. The National Portrait Gallery is a favourite London destination. She loves the cinema, having worked at one in Glasgow as a girl, shining a torch to show people to their seats. She goes

to the theatre, enjoying it more than when her mother, an English teacher, took her there when she was young and she occasionally thought 'not another Shakespeare'.

She tells me about the Royal Albert Hall ('wonderful building, not such good acoustics'), and becomes the only sporting interviewee on record to discuss Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. Her cherished iPod carries pop music from every decade from the fifties.

'I love chart music but there is a different level of emotion, something incredibly profound in classical music,' she says. 'It takes genius to write one of the great symphonies. It is like great art.'

A polite PR girl asks us to hurry up and I suggest we return from music to the subject of rowing. 'No, don't,' urges Grainger.

'Pieces like the *Dream of Gerontius* you kind of get lost in, don't you? I was talking to someone the other day about the power of music, especially loud, powerful music, to lift you, whatever mood you are in, especially if you are low or disappointed.'

Another medal for Grainger would give her as many as any British woman ever, joint with Kitty McKane Godfree. A second gold would put her on top by any metric.

Does history-making excite her? 'It's lovely to hear about setting records, but I started doing this because I loved it. It is about the challenge. About pushing yourself physically, technically, mentally. It becomes addictive.'

'But if holding a record is too important, how do you feel when someone breaks it? What does that mean? That you are nobody now?'

'Yes, part of the attraction is doing something nobody has done before. It is an extra motivation, but not the main one.'

'Sometimes you are chipping the ice off your car at dawn and thinking this is not great, but I have no regrets about coming back. Genuinely none.'

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