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JOURNAL RIDERS

Lizzie Armitstead

The British star talks fame and fakeness, how to beat Marianne Vos and British Cycling's lack of a pathway for women.

WORDS
Andy McGrath

PHOTOGRAPHS
Sam Needham

Forget a mid-life crisis; the quarter-life one is hitting Lizzie Armitstead hard. "I am old now and I don't like it. Twenty-five is pretty old, don't you think?" No way. I give a quizzical, look to encourage a reaction. "You're a man, you're all right: you don't have to push a baby out. Now I am starting to think, crap. What am I gonna do after cycling? What career am I gonna have? Everyone's buying a house, getting married, having kids and I'm still a bit of a nomad."

The time of year probably doesn't help the feeling of unsettlement.

We've drifted out to early December, as distant from the racing season as you can get: nine weeks after her last race of 2013, another nine before the season gets underway. Normal life has caught up. Armitstead is at her parents' house in Otley, a world away from her first race in Qatar or her seasonal residence in Monaco, which she likens to Disneyland, clean and pleasant but ultra-fake.

Lizzie doesn't do phony. She has the kettle on and a mug of tea in my cold hands within minutes of me walking through the door. You can take the girl out of Yorkshire, but you can't take the Yorkshire out of the girl.

In her hands, she holds a London 2012 mug, adorned with five slightly faded coloured rings. A few dishwasher trips too many, probably.

The Olympics. Let's get that O-word out of the way first. It's hard to avoid – it's what most people associate with Lizzie Armitstead with – and the experience has informed a lot about her current state of mind.

It had always been about London 2012 for her. One day in July would define her whole career. Pressure? Just a bit. In the approach, she was a woman on the cusp of a breakdown. She wept on a train back home after getting ill at the Giro Rosa, worried that she'd compromised her chance.

It didn't help that her dad, John, had a habit of putting his foot in it when chatting to her on the phone as the race approached. "He manages to say the wrong thing. He's funny. He'd be like 'are you gonna beat Vos then?' Or 'but she's looking good though, isn't she?'"

Armitstead rose to the challenge on the day to take Britain's first medal of the Games. Sometimes it seems easy for the public to forget – a Sky sports gameshow even announced her as Olympic champion – that she actually finished second, a bike length away from Marianne Vos, and from achieving what she had set out to do. I think she hesitates to feel complete happiness with the result, and it is hemmed in by the memory of the surrounding pressure. "Looking back, it was full on for a year. It was a relief when it was over," she reflects.

For Rio 2016, she wouldn't change it. "I think it's a good thing. It never became 'get me out of here, I don't want to do it'. I like having pressure, I don't perform without it."

Her two weeks in the Olympic village went by in a blur. She wishes she'd written things down. She spent time doing laps of the post-Games dinner circuit, realising her finite appeal as a medallist. "I wanted to embrace all the things I got offered to do in the off-season," she says.

So Armitstead sat on the same table as Stephen Hawking one night and met Prince William and Kate on another. Did she ever feel like she was losing touch with her normality? "No. Doing the whole celebrity thing made me realise even more that" – she drops her voice to a whisper, as if it's a secret – "actually, I'm not impressed by it."

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P cruzcampo – Member

I'm surrounded by people who love overeating, large quantities of crisps, sugary snacks with takeout food chasers at lunch. Evening crashing out in front of the telly, rinse and repeat mon-fri. 1-5 sick days a month is pretty standard, as is excess weight and lots of manflu throughout the year. By comparison i've not had a day off sick in 8 years, and shift colds/manflu incredibly quickly. I'd like to put a large part of it down to biking.

So how much would you say your biking attributes to your overall health and fitness, and how does it compare to your none cycling peers?

POSTED 5 MONTHS AGO #

P scaled – Member

I'm off sick much less, in hospital much more 😊

On a serious note though, having children seems to be a much better indicator of likely hood to be off sick. I know I suffer with sickness much more now the germ exchange is back in term time.

POSTED 5 MONTHS AGO #

P jam bo – Member

By comparison i've not had a day off sick in 8 years, and shift colds/manflu incredibly quickly. I'd like to put a large part of it down to biking.

Children? Bet not. Biohazards.

POSTED 5 MONTHS AGO #

P schmiken – Member

I imagine diet has a bigger effect than exercise.

POSTED 5 MONTHS AGO #

ton – Member

I have had about 12 weeks sick in the last 5yrs, including 4 operations. cycling is far from good for some people.

POSTED 5 MONTHS AGO #

P jam bo – Member

And 5 days a month off sick? These people still have jobs?

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philjunior – Member

I don't seem to get less colds and flu than my colleagues and sometimes it hits me like a tonne of bricks to be honest. I do have kids, and my wife until her maternity leave for the second one started was working as a childminder. I also don't eat particularly well if I'm honest. Too much convenient junk food to keep my energy levels up in the office.

Compared to some of my peers of similar age, though, I'm in pretty good shape, and I know I can go out and do stuff (walk up a mountain etc.) that they struggle with.

Edit - 1 to 5 sick days a month? Ok, far less than that for me. 1-2 a year at a guess.

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