

Mind games: how athletes beat the blues

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JANE SAVILLE burst into tears crossing the finish line of the 20-kilometre walk yesterday. She had not been disqualified, as in the dramatic moment at the Sydney Olympics when she said she wanted to shoot herself, but nor had she matched her super-sweet achievement of winning a bronze in Athens.

Now, on the eve of retiring after a 14-year international career that has given her the highest - and the lowest - moments Saville, 33, was simply shattered.

"When I crossed the line I thought, 'This is the biggest thing in my sport and I didn't enjoy it'," said Saville, who was 20th.

She wasn't alone.

Asafa Powell's family flew into Beijing yesterday from Jamaica to try to bolster the spirits of the former world-record-holder. Powell, a disappointing fifth in the 100 metres, was struggling with the realisation that his crown as one of the world's great sprinters had been usurped so spectacularly by his countryman Usain Bolt.

Powell's teammates were so concerned, they encouraged his brother Nigel and father William to fly to China to try to perk him up in time for the 4x100m relay.

The Australian 800-metre runner Tamsyn Lewis, who was inconsolable after a less than sparky run in her heat, still hasn't spoken about it.

Liu Xiang's shock withdrawal from the 110-metre hurdles, sending the host nation into depression, has his teammates scared for his health. "I am very concerned about him," said China's weightlifting gold medallist Zhang Xiangxiang.

Over at the softball field the Australian women won bronze, but were drained after losing a marathon 12-innings game against Japan for the right to play off for gold. Compounding their disappointment was the knowledge that the sport has been stripped from the Olympic program.

The president of the Australian Olympic Committee, John Coates, said depression among athletes, particularly those who were retiring after long careers, was a well-recognised problem.

"This is an area not well handled in the past," he said. "With disappointment comes depression.

"We do know it is a very big issue, especially for athletes retiring who can suffer long-term considerable downs."

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The Australian Institute of Sport and state institutes provide counselling services, and Coates said non-AIS athletes would also be provided with access to such expertise.

Yesterday the softballers Natalie Ward and Tanya Harding, who, with Melanie Roach, have been medallists at every Olympics since the sport was introduced in 1996, announced their retirement.

Harding said: "It is difficult, I can see how athletes suffer from depression. You spend the last 12 to 13 years of your life preparing for ... an Olympic gold medal, and when it stops ... it is a hollow feeling."

Ward said having teammates was a way of coping with the downs, because there was always someone to turn to for support.

"Softball is a big part of our culture ... we spend a lot of time together and we email, phone, talk all the time ... It is important to have that support, for our sport it's a good thing."

The Australian team's head psychologist, Ruth Anderson, has a team of four specialists in Beijing to help athletes deal with the low times. The idea is to encourage the athletes to talk early about their experiences, put them into perspective and then work out a plan.

"We are hoping this process will bring about a more successful outcome," she said.

She said it was normal for athletes to feel let down after a lengthy Olympic campaign.

"In recent years the stigma in terms of mental health has abated and most athletes seek access to psychologists ... in the same way as getting some sports science or sports medicine."

Anderson said there had been no research to determine whether Olympic athletes were more susceptible to depression than the general population.

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