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Lolo's No Choke

The U.S. hurdler stumbled horribly in Beijing, losing gold. What we can learn from her nightmare

By **SEAN GREGORY / BATON ROUGE** | July 19, 2012 | +

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MARTIN SCHOELLER FOR TIME

Choke. The word just sounds so noxious, really. Never mind its ties to suffocation and death. Just say it: *choke*.

Athletes in particular would like to strangle the scribe who first applied such an ugly term to their most spectacular — and public — failures.

Count Lolo Jones among them. Jones, the telegenic American hurdler, lived through a nightmare in Beijing. With a commanding lead in the 100-m event, on the verge of taking the gold and winning Americans' hearts with her good looks and homeless-to-heroine story, she clipped the ninth hurdle. There are 10 of them. She stumbled across the line to finish in seventh place, then tumbled to the ground in a pool of tears.

Jones is reflective about her failure. "So many people have said they saw my story in Beijing — they're inspired, they picked themselves up," says Jones, who handled the aftermath of her disaster with incredible grace. "I just want to have this story for all of us."

But when I ask her for her gut reaction to the word *choke*, she runs from it at world-record pace. "Choking is going out there and having just a terrible performance from start to end," she says while picking at swordfish in a Baton Rouge, La., restaurant. "I was winning the race." But the word was still gnawing at her the next day as she stood on her front lawn waiting to be photographed, visibly stressed out from her demanding training and media obligations. She had spent 10 minutes or so in tears. "Nobody has ever asked me that question," she says. She sticks to her conviction that if she had truly choked, she would not have been a few ticks away from gold. But now she offers an addendum: "I really just put too much pressure on myself. If people want to consider that choking, if they want to use that terminology for me, I completely understand. I'm not going to argue with them."

(LIST: [50 Olympic Athletes to Watch](#))

No sporting event puts more mental stress on its participants — or cultivates more choking — than the Olympic Games.

They're a quadrennial pitchfork to the brain. The rare spotlight shines on athletes in barely visible sports: Grab that gold, or call us in 2016. Elite athletes need gold-medal brains to operate their Olympian bodies. And scientists are beginning to understand an athlete's brain under the intense pressure of the Olympics and why some athletes handle it while others don't. Performing under pressure demands proper allocation of resources — training the cerebral cortex to filter out the billion distractions available, leaving the body free to perform. Or as Yogi Berra famously said, "How can you think and hit at the same time?"

Jones could use some tips. You'd be hard-pressed to find an Olympic athlete under more strain. "I'm worried," says her mother Lori. "Lo is so hard on herself." Constant reminders of her Olympic mishap aside, the world will be wondering if Jones, 29, is worth the hype. She's stolen pre-London buzz despite clocking underwhelming times going into these Games. She'll contend with curiosity about her bedroom behavior — or lack thereof: a devout Christian, she said in a May HBO interview that despite her ability to attract pretty much any guy she wants, she remains a virgin. The Internet swilled this news like cheap champagne, instantly expanding her fame.

Behind her lighthearted public personality lies a lifetime of mental aches at home, in love and on the track. An Olympic victory would soothe all that pain. A future of adulation and marketing dollars awaits — *Lolo!* It just rolls off the tongue — if she can survive a 12-sec. race. Beijing, and her sad eyes, would disappear. "I've carried that burden so long," says Jones. "I'm tired of carrying it." On your marks.

Hungry-Man Heists

Growing up in Des Moines, Iowa, Jones was a five-star prospect — as a thief. Jones pilfered food for survival. She was fast, which helped during getaways. And she didn't have a larcenous profile. "My dad would always say they're never going to suspect me because they never look at a cute young girl," says Jones. Her father shuttled in out of prison but tutored her in the fine art of snatching TV dinners. "There was definitely shame for sure, but looking back, I was able to eat," she says. "There's a Hungry-Man — steak and potatoes and a little brownie — you're like, I'm all over that."

Jones' mother worked low-paying clerical and housekeeping jobs to support Lolo and her four siblings. The family bounced around apartments, and Jones went to eight schools in eight years. Given such upheaval, she struggled to keep friends. "The hardest thing was not having those conversations with a girl pal, like when you're talking hours on the phone," she says. "I don't remember those moments."

When Lolo was in third grade, the family became homeless and bunked in the basement of a Salvation Army church. "That was the dark place where the kids just would not go," Jones says. "And all of a sudden, we're living there. I just remember the open showers and coldness to it." To hide her dismal plight from other kids, she would wake up early to play in the church gym before children arrived for camp. That way, it appeared that someone had dropped her off.

Jones was always running: when the family car broke down, she would jump out and sprint to the store. The practice paid off. She picked up the hurdles in high school and showed so much promise that in her junior year, when her mother moved to Forest City, Iowa — about 125 miles (200 km) north of Des Moines — Lolo stayed behind to pursue a college scholarship. She lived with three different families before leaving for college, still struggling to fit in. "Think about her situation," says former Des Moines *Register* editor Randy Essex, who took Jones in for 16 months. "Her dad is in and out of her life, her family moved a lot, and all of a sudden she moves in with these people who are pretty much strangers."

(LIST: [See the History of the Olympics in TIME Covers](#))

Jones kept quiet, poured herself into hurdles and homework and earned a ride to Louisiana State University. "My first year, I was quite miserable," she says. "But I couldn't say, 'Oh, I'm homesick,' because there was no place for me to go back to in Iowa." Jones spent her breaks and holidays on campus and eventually found her stride, winning three national championships. The Olympics were in reach.

Until they weren't. At the U.S. Olympic trials in 2004, Jones failed to even make the finals — a foreshadowing of harder times ahead. Back in Baton Rouge, she watched the Athens Olympics in tears, unsure of her future. With an economics degree, should she get a real job? She conferred with Dennis Shaver, her coach at LSU. "I told her, You never want to wake up seven, eight, nine, 10 years from now and wonder, What if?" says Shaver, who still trains Jones today.

So she stuck with the sport, though she could barely support herself. At work at Home Depot, she sweltered at the gardening-department cash register. "They were like, Oh, put her outside," Jones says. "She trains, she runs outside." She also worked as a restaurant hostess and later in a gym, where she would bump into former classmates who knew her as Lolo Jones, hurdling star. Now they saw her taking out the trash. "It was a little bit more embarrassing," she says. "They were like, 'Oh, did you graduate?' Yeah, I graduated."

Jones' hurdling technique sharpened, and she started winning races in Europe. In 2007 she took the U.S. indoor title. That success led to sponsorship deals with the likes of running-shoe brand Asics and eyewear maker Oakley. The Baton Rouge doctors and lawyers working out at the gym would see races replayed on the TVs and wonder, Hey, isn't that the girl from the front desk? They started asking her for training sessions. Jones turned them down. By then she could afford to quit and

prep full-time for the 2008 Olympic trials. She won her 100-m race. She was bound for Beijing.

The Science of Choking

When the gun went off, the Australian girl got out on me. She beat me to the third hurdle. You know, I was cool and calm about it. She had been doing that all year, and I would always get her in the end.

Sure enough, I passed her, and from hurdles three through five, I was just in an amazing rhythm. I started turning it over, and then I knew at one point I was winning the race. It wasn't like, Oh, I'm winning the Olympic gold medal. It just seemed like another race.

And then there was a point after that where I was like, Wow, these hurdles are coming up really, really fast. You have to make sure you don't get sloppy in your technique. I was telling myself to make sure my legs were snapping out. So I overtried. I tightened up a bit too much. That's when I hit the hurdle. Honestly, I should have relaxed a little bit and just run. Instead, I was just so paranoid because they were coming up so fast, I snapped it down too fast.

You know, when I hit it, I thought I would still be able to get a medal. But when I crossed the line, I knew how bad it was. I collapsed on the track, and I couldn't stop thinking, I just wish the next Olympics were tomorrow.

Jones can recall that night in the Beijing Bird's Nest — Aug. 19, 2008, the night she lost the 100-m-hurdles gold — with surprising clarity. And that might be why she choked. “Often, athletes can tell you exactly what they are doing when they screw up,” says Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago who wrote the book on blowing it — *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, published in 2010.

(LIST: The Best, Worst, and Weird of Olympic Uniforms)

Beilock and other scientists who study choking — there are more of them than you might think — suspect that athletes under stress choke when too many thoughts flood the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that houses informational memory. Worry, and the brain becomes too busy. It's a misallocation of resources. The motor cortex, which controls the planning and execution of movements, should be doing most of the work for experienced athletes.

When athletes talk about being “in the zone” or “unconscious” when winning, their prefrontal cortex is quiet. They often can't tell you what was happening. They have no memory.

In experiments, scientists have shown that when top athletes start thinking about details of their technique instead of just letting muscle memory run the show, they tend to mess up. In the University of Chicago's Human Performance Lab, for example, Beilock instructed skilled college soccer players to dribble a ball around cones and indicate which side of their foot was making contact with the ball. Those players who were asked to exercise their prefrontal cortex and focus on the details made more errors than the players given no instructions. Similarly, while he was teaching at Arizona State University, psychologist Robert Gray, now a senior lecturer in motor control at the University of Birmingham in England, put college baseball players through a hitting simulation. Gray told them to identify whether the bat was moving up or down at certain moments. Their swings suffered.

Jocks should be dumb and not think too much. Jones' recall of her Beijing race suggests that her working memory, rather than her muscle memory, was too engaged. She talks about technique. Notice that she was “telling myself to make sure my legs were snapping out” rather than just letting her motor cortex do it.

So how can Jones calm that part of her mind? Some shrinks think she should go to the videotape. After the 2004 Olympics, Hap Davis, a psychologist for the Canadian swimming team, conducted a novel experiment. He asked a group of swimmers to watch videos of their failures at the Olympic trials or at the Games, then peeked inside their minds using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a technology that measures blood flow to specific areas of the brain. Rewatching failure triggered relatively high levels of activity in the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain, and low levels of activity in the motor cortices, where movements are executed. This brain snapshot likely mirrored the athletes' physiological state of mind when they choked.

But after asking the athletes to view their terrible moments, Davis did a “cognitive intervention,” in which he asked the athletes to share their feelings about the race and discuss ways to correct their errors. After working through their emotions, the athletes rewatched the video, and the fMRI showed that the athletes' brains were much healthier for competition: prefrontal-cortex activity declined, while blood flow to the motor areas increased. “Watching the failure washed out the negative emotion,” says Davis. “Now I can discuss it with you, and it's no big deal.”

The Canadian swimming team religiously watches its mistakes. Steve Portenga, a psychologist for USA Track & Field, has also adopted immersion-therapy methods; though he cannot name specific patients, he says U.S. track athletes who watch videos and talk through their low moments improve their performances. “The general practice of addressing failure is absolutely vital,” Portenga says.

Dan O'Brien, a former decathlon gold medalist, viewed so much footage of his famous choke at the 1992 Olympic trials that he became desensitized to it. That year, the reigning world champ failed to make the U.S. team, leaving Reebok's ubiquitous "Dan and Dave" marketing campaign, which promised a Barcelona Olympics showdown between O'Brien and fellow American Dave Johnson, in tatters. ("I don't think you can call a rookie a choker," O'Brien says.) Going into the 1996 qualifiers, he anticipated endless questions about his gaffe on the pole vault. He used the tape as motivation. "I'd watch it, watch it, watch it, then go jump," O'Brien says. He won Olympic gold in Atlanta that year.

So when O'Brien bumped into Jones some six months after Beijing, he advised her to go to the video. She blanched at the idea; she couldn't stomach it. Jones says she's not living in denial. In fact, she sees the race all the time — just not on a screen. "I don't need to watch it, because I remember every bit of that race," she says. "I'll have flashbacks quite often." The trick will be to shut it off at the starting blocks in London.

Practicing under pressure can help Jones quiet her nerves. Raoul Oudejans, a researcher at VU University in Amsterdam, has repeatedly shown in studies involving free-throw shooters, dart throwers and armed police officers that people perform better in tense situations after creating stress for themselves in practice. In one experiment that appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 2009, for example, dart throwers who practiced hitting a target while they were suspended 17.5 ft. (5.3 m) in the air on a climbing wall — a situation that caused considerable anxiety — later outscored those who didn't receive such frightening training.

Although it's impossible to set up hurdles in midair, coaches can create stresses in practice. They can, say, invite a set of critical eyes, like the media or even a real or imagined talent scout, to a practice. They can punish practice failure — if you miss this free throw, the whole team sprints — to turn up the heat. They can offer financial rewards for success and penalties for falling short.

Jones isn't making side bets with her coach to up the ante in practice. But she's trying to re-create the big moments the best she can. "I do a lot of visualizing at practice to increase the pressure," she says. "A lot of times, when I'm in the blocks, I'm visualizing I'm at the Olympics, even though I'm just in Baton Rouge." She pictures the crowds, imagines the cameras hovering, the millions watching. "If you can practice at that level," says Jones, "when it comes to the actual meet, you'll be prepared."

"Stab Wound. Stab Wound. Stab Wound."

Even as Jones gets mentally ready for London, her physical ability has now come into question. A year ago, Jones underwent surgery for a tethered spinal cord, a congenital neurological condition that left her unable to feel her feet. For weeks after the operation, she could barely walk.

The pull of the Olympics helped hasten her recovery. Jones has sprinkled her house with reminders of London. Olympic rings are sculpted into the flower-pots in front of her garage. She also purchased a set of London 2012 dinner plates, which keeps her diet in check. "It's hard to eat ribs off a plate when you have the London logo looking at you," Jones says. And in 2010, she bought a London 2012 sweatshirt for her niece, who lives nearby with Jones' sister. "Randomly, she'll come home from school and have this sweatshirt on, and it's like, Yeah, this is what you're working for," Jones says.

So she threw herself into rehab. Jones recovered faster than any patient her surgeon, Dr. Robert Bray of the DISC Sports and Spine Center in Los Angeles, had treated for a tethered spinal cord. "She took it to a whole other level you don't see," says Bray. She made a stirring return to competition in late January, winning the U.S. Open, a top-notch indoor event.

(LIST: Athletes in Love: 9 Olympic Romances)

On Twitter, Jones jokes about her unlucky love life. I wonder if this Liz Lemon vibe — the smart, pretty girl who can't find Mr. Right — is a type of character she likes playing. It's great Twitter fodder but hard to believe. But she insists it's not a facade. "This is real," Jones says. "There have been so many nights when I've cried, praying to God, like, Where is my future husband?"

Her chastity probably makes her the second-highest-profile virgin athlete, next to New York Jets quarterback Tim Tebow. Despite the best efforts of Tebow's teammate center Nick Mangold to play matchmaker — Mangold led "Lolo" chants in the Jets locker room this spring and promoted the #Lobow hashtag on Twitter — this Christian dream pairing probably isn't happening. "Everybody is like, You should date Tim Tebow, because, like, you guys are both virgins and Christians," Jones says. "And I'm like, Yeah, but there's still so much involved. Like, is he funny? On Twitter, he's just a straight-up guy. You know, I want somebody I click with."

Lolo's cult will only grow in London, which peeves her competitors. They don't appreciate being overshadowed, especially in a year when Jones has been far from dominant. She sensed hostility and resentment when she returned to the track in January. "For girls to get mad at me because I may get attention, because of the mishap or how I handle myself, I think it's the stupidest thing ever," Jones says. "I don't think they realize that the fame I've had has not been the cool fame. It's been the fame like" — here Jones summons a pity voice — "Ohhhhh, you're the girl that messed up at the Olympics." Stab wound. Stab wound. Stab wound. Like, who wants that?"

Jones is not the favorite this time around. She finished third at the U.S. Olympic trials, and Australia's Sally Pearson has run the fastest times this season. A spring hamstring injury, however, slowed Jones down. Is she on pace to peak in London? After her third-place finish in her preliminary heat at the trials, Jones seemed unlikely to even make the team. But she did, and she can certainly surprise again.

When Jones balled up, wailing, on the Beijing track four years ago, she somehow enjoyed a brief sense of comfort. She thought back to the 2004 Olympics, how she watched those Games in tears while sitting in Baton Rouge. Sure, she was again sobbing, but at least she was in the race. She was an Olympian. And then it hit her. She'd be crying four years later as well. On the London podium. "I know I will be," Jones says. No choke.

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