

Exclusive interview

'That was the hardest thing to accomplish, being accepted again'

Dwain Chambers on his doping ban, coping with the criticism and internal realisations.

By Alex Oakhill

As Dwain Chambers leans back in his chair, surrounded by the impressive Lee Valley Athletics Centre, you could've been forgiven for thinking this was an athlete who'd had a straightforward career in the world of sprinting. His infectious smile exudes warmth, and he speaks with the confidence and clarity that leaves you hanging on to every word he says. However, beneath the surface is a man who was once isolated beyond belief, and has since conquered a mammoth climb to reach the peak of the mountain where he stands today.

In 2003, Chambers tested positive for the performance enhancing drug THG, and was subsequently banned from athletics for two years, along with an Olympic and Commonwealth ban that would eventually last until 2012.

"I was scared, I've never cried so much in my life and that's the honest truth," Chambers says, thinking back to when he received the news of his ban.

"When you're coming from number five in the world as I was, and highly regarded as the next best thing, to then everybody disliking you, that's tough.

"I had the nation behind me, and when people trust you, they trust you with all their heart. I'd broken their hearts in so many ways."

Chambers had big support at a young age for good reason as well, being one of the best young sprinters in the world around the turn of the millennium, winning 100m World Championship bronze in 1999 whilst breaking the infamous ten second barrier.

"I didn't take on any external pressure because I didn't understand it," he says. "I didn't understand the



responsibilities of going from a kid off the street to becoming one of Great Britain's brightest prospects.

"Because I won so many races as a young star, winning wasn't the ultimate fulfilment, it was more the feeling of freedom that running gave me. Winning was just like the icing on top of the cake."

In 2002, Chambers moved to California to work with a new team, which included nutritionist Victor Conte and coach Remi Korchemny. As it later turned out, Conte had been developing an anabolic steroid called THG, and Chambers tested positive for the performance enhancing drug in 2003.

"The publicity surrounding me was toxic. It was poisonous. I was not in a good place, and nobody wanted to be around me"

"The decision to do what I did and take performance enhancers wasn't a decision I came to lightly," Chambers says. "I didn't want to take them, but I thought I had to, and I just lost faith in myself."

"I began looking at other people thinking they were doing it (taking performance enhancing drugs). I had no evidence they were doing it, but I thought because they were winning and getting all the fame and glory, it was attributed to them taking performance enhancers. But really, a lot of it probably stemmed from the fact that they were just working harder than me, they were more focused."

"Once I had made that decision to take performance enhancers, I knew that I was going down a path I couldn't control or come back from. There were alarm bells ringing, several alarm bells ringing. I put my sports reputation in jeopardy, I put my sponsors' reputation in jeopardy and I put my career on the line, but I chose to do it at all costs and

ignore all the consequences"

After his ban, Chambers returned to athletics, in the face of heavy criticism from journalists and fans alike. Many at the time believed that an athlete who had cheated in the past should not be allowed to return to the sport, and those with that belief made their voices heard.

"I still had a mountain to climb in terms of re-establishing myself, gaining people's trust and feeling accepted," he says. "That was the hardest thing to accomplish, being accepted again."

"I thought my running was going to solve the problem, but it didn't. I was going out and performing on the track, but the audience weren't as supportive. Whenever I wanted to get back into competitions, the publicity surrounding me was toxic. It was poisonous. I was not in a good place, and nobody wanted to be around me. I still wasn't honest in myself, which meant whatever I was trying to portray wasn't showing. It wasn't working. The acceptance of what I had done took a long time to process."

For many athletes, a doping ban could signal the end of their career, whether that be through a lack of opportunities or an unwillingness to face the criticism and hate that comes with renewing a career after a scandal. However, Chambers felt a desire to not only return to sprinting, but to be accepted back into the athletics community.

"I realised that I was in love with sport," Chambers says. "Sport found me and gave me an opportunity."

"I wanted to be accepted back in again, that was the underlying drive. I wanted to be accepted again because sport accepted me. I wanted to fix it." Slowly but surely, the disgraced drugs cheat managed to change the opinions of the sporting world. The boos he faced at every event got quieter, and Chambers managed to win his own internal battle, which changed the public's perception of him for the better.

"I realised that in order for things to change, first I had to change," he says. "I couldn't expect anybody else to change. People can only change once they have looked inside and figured out the cause of the problem, and the cause of the problem was me. That's when things turned around, because I took accountability for my actions."

Chambers realised that in order to complete his comeback to top level sprinting, he needed a team around him to help navigate the difficult situations he faced. Not only did he need people supporting him to improve his on-track performance, but he needed help dealing with the



criticism and pressure off-track.

"I chose to embark on a team approach, because as an athlete I felt that I was the only one doing the work," Chambers says. "I had to have a team around me that understood me, and I had to understand them. Once I realised that it was a team effort, I began the process of working on myself, listening to my team and discussing a strategy."

Once Chambers had conquered his first peak, accepting the decision that he had made to dope and taking accountability for his actions, he then had to convince the rest of the world that he was a changed man. He had been handed a lifetime Olympic and Commonwealth Games ban due to a British Olympic Association policy when he was first found guilty of doping in 2003, but the policy of lifetime bans was not compliant with the World Anti Doping Agency's code at the time. Chambers campaigned for the lifetime ban policy to be removed ahead of the London 2012 Olympics, and the issue went to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, where the policy

was overturned. As a result, Chambers was cleared to compete at his home Olympics.

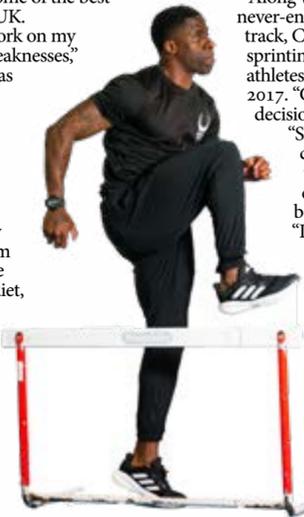
A huge smile breaks out across Chambers' face as he thinks back to London 2012. "It was the best atmosphere I've ever experienced," he says. "To be at an Olympic Games, when I was told I would never make it to one ever again. I went out there, got through the heats and I was in the semi-final with the great Usain Bolt. That for me was my Olympic gold medal. Just to be there was an achievement beyond anything else, it meant more to me than any other medals I'd achieved. That was worth the fight, that was worth the drive, that was worth all the sacrifice I'd put in."

Twelve years on from his home Olympic Games, Chambers is still competing at the age of 46. Earlier this year the sprinter reached the semi-finals of the men's 60m at the UK Indoor Championships, beating sprinters almost 30 years younger than him during the meet. He is the quickest man in the world over the age of 45, currently holding the M45 60m

indoor world record, and he is still mixing it with some of the best sprinters in the UK.

"I've had to work on my strengths and weaknesses," Chambers says, as he spoke about how he's still competing well into his forties. "I've started to realise in order for me to perform the way I want to perform at this age, I have to improve my diet, my sleep and my nutrition. I also have to watch how frequently I can train, 20 years ago I could train five days a week, but now I have to

cut that down to two or three." Along with his seemingly never-ending career on the track, Chambers runs his own sprinting academy for young athletes, which he started in 2017. "Coaching was my wife's decision," said Chambers. "She said to me that if a child wants to go down the road that you went down, then you might be able to talk to them. "I coach in the way that I wish I was coached when I was younger. In sport there's no guarantee that the young athletes going to make it, a lot of it stems from opportunities, luck, or chance. So, I coach young people to make decisions and make them decent human beings."



Not finished yet: Dwain Chambers (main) is still competing at the age of 46; Going through his warm up routine (inset and bottom left).

Photo Credit: Dwain Chambers

Timeline

How Dwain Chambers won over the world

October 2003
Chambers is given a two year ban, after testing positive for THG.

June 2006
Chambers returns to sprinting after his ban, under huge media scrutiny and worldwide opposition.

May 2008
His appeal to overturn a British Olympic Association ban is rejected, Chambers is ineligible for the 2008 Olympics.

March 2010
Wins 60m gold at the World Indoor Championships, his first world title.

July 2012
The Court of Arbitration for Sport overturns his lifetime Olympic ban, and Chambers reaches the semi finals at London 2012.

February 2024
At the age of 45, Chambers reaches the 60m semi finals at the UK Indoor Championships, receiving adoration and support from the crowd.

Jason Henderson: 'Chambers was massively friendly and held no grudge'

Waiting for a train at Kings Cross station, Jason Henderson, journalist for *Athletics Weekly*, catches the eye of a man in the distance and quickly looks away. The person in question? Dwain Chambers, someone that Jason and many other journalists had criticised heavily in the past, for his decision to take performance enhancing drugs.

"I think a lot of people in that situation might just look away, and blank the other person," Henderson says. "Instead, he let out a big grin, came over, shook my hand and spoke to me. I've written things which were not very favourable towards him in the past, I was at the front of the queue criticising him for doping, and yet a few years later he was massively friendly and held no grudge."

Henderson's career in journalism has loosely mirrored Chambers' career on the track, starting at *Athletics Weekly* in 1997, during the time that the sprinter was starting to make waves in the athletics world.

"He was super good as a teenager, one of the absolute best in the world," Henderson says. Then he moved into the senior ranks and continued doing really well. He was thrown into a world at a young age where he had a lot of money and sponsorships, it's probably quite easy to get led astray when that's all happening to you."

Henderson was the editor of *Athletics Weekly* when Chambers returned to sprinting, after his two-year ban. "At the time everyone treated him like the devil incarnate, all the

media just laid into him and painted him out as this dreadful character," he says.

"When he made his comeback at the national indoor championships, the headline on our front cover was 'Chambers of horror'. I was almost encouraging people to boo him, which I feel slightly embarrassed about now."

Slowly but surely, Chambers began to win his critics over. He apologised profusely for his mistakes, went into schools to try and educate young athletes on the dangers of doping, and won a court case which made him eligible for Olympic selection in 2012.

"I went from being someone who wasn't happy with him coming back to athletics, to becoming a bit of a fan again," Henderson says.

"He maintained his dignity while being criticised, he didn't ever have a go back at people like me, he just put his hands up and admitted he had made a mistake. He sort of had this charm offensive where he just went about his business and was nice to everybody, and gradually he won people over."

While Henderson was reporting on the UK Indoor Championships earlier this year, he saw first-hand the love and adoration that athletics fans now have for Chambers.

"I think people look at him as a role model now," he says. "You can see his popularity because you get all the younger spectators coming round and trying to get selfies with him. I think the vast majority of athletes and fans have definitely forgiven him."

Athletes who undergo experiences like Chambers' are still stigmatised

Sanctioned athletes, who have been banned for doping in a similar way that Dwain Chambers was, are still being stigmatised within sport, but a brand-new TALE research project is hoping to give these athletes a voice.

Daniela Lux MSc is part of the team behind the TALE project, and she believes that the current treatment of sanctioned athletes is too severe.

"There needs to be a punishment, but it's not like they murdered somebody," she says. "You're completely excluded from all your sports friends, and there's many other side effects including stigmatisation. The athletes are maybe treated a bit too harshly."

Lux's role within TALE is to analyse the interviews conducted with sanctioned athletes, and is hoping that the project will be able to give banned competitors a voice, without the worry of being judged.

"We are currently in the first year of the project, and so far we have interviewed twenty sanctioned athletes from all around the globe," she says. "We're still lacking athletes from areas like South America and Africa, as it's really hard to attain interviewees from those parts of the world."

Before the project began, there was a real lack of information and research around the experiences of athletes found guilty of doping, and there have already been some major revelations in the first year of interviews.

"Intentional dopers are often just relieved that they can now talk openly about it," Lux says. "There is such a high mental pressure

during the doping, having to stay silent all the time, that many athletes say that they wouldn't have been able to carry on for much longer."

The project is not only focused on the opinions of sanctioned athletes, also speaking with clean athletes to understand their feelings on the matter.

"We found that some clean athletes are actually very accepting in terms of welcoming banned athletes back into the sport, as long as the sanctioned athletes apologise for what they have done," Lux says. "However, we only have a small sample of clean athletes currently, so this will be something that we look at in more detail over the next year or two."

"There needs to be punishment, but it's not like they murdered somebody"

The TALE project began in March 2024, and is funded by a variety of sources, including the World Anti Doping Agency.

"The goal of the TALE project is to gain a deeper knowledge about sanctioned athletes," a WADA spokesperson says.

"It hopes to develop informed education programmes for athletes who have been caught doping, as well as young emerging athletes, using community based participatory research to inform the process."

"Long term, the project will look to present a strategy or proposal for international governing bodies to consider."