On the REBOUND

Resilience. It's what every self-help guru is spruiking right now, but what does it mean and how does one get it? Chef de mission of the 2016 Australian Olympic team Kitty Chiller explains.
WHEN IT COMES TO BUZZ WORDS surrounding stress management strategies and the secret to success, in 2015, "resilience" was up there. It's not just learning how to cope with the tough stuff life throws at us; how well we rebound and get on with it is becoming just as important.

For me, resilience has been key throughout a long association with sport to enable me to keep rebounding. Sport is often used as an analogy for life, for challenges and choices. In an elite international sporting event, the pressure is huge and the expectations (from others and yourself) are enormous. The ramifications of your performance can often be life changing. And in sports there are certainly challenges, hurdles and unforeseen obstacles that get in our way and force us to dig deep in order to not only survive but to flourish and succeed. Resilience is one of the major factors required to achieve sporting success. High-level sporting competitions aren't won by brawn or speed. They're won by mental strength. Sure, athletes experience physical challenges and knockbacks. But the mental hurdles are just as dramatic and certainly just as important.

Pretty much every athlete wants to compete at the Olympic Games. My sporting life started at age six with swimming, then I switched to running at 14. When I was 18 and in the first year of university, my running coach suggested I try the sport of modern pentathlon. What, I asked? I learnt it was more like five sports: running, swimming, fencing, shooting and horse riding. So I joined the fencing club at Melbourne University, took myself along to a pistol club (an 18-year-old blonde from Toorak was an oddity at a gun club) and climbed on a horse for the first time.

The year was 1982 and the carrot for me then was that many were saying a women's modern pentathlon event would be admitted to the Olympics in the 1984 Los Angeles Games (male pentathletes had been allowed to compete at the Olympics since 1912). In those days, there was gender inequality in many sports, including the marathon, water polo and boxing.

The Olympics was my goal, my dream, and carried me through the tough training sessions, the nonexistent social life, the only occasional appearances at university lectures and the complete lack of funds. But along the way I realised — through no fault of my own — that goal mightn't be realistic. I constantly asked myself, Why am I still training and putting myself through physical, mental and financial hardship if there's a good chance I'll never go to an Olympics? What would keep me going, what would help me spring back? I learnt a good lesson then: to ensure your "carrot" — your reason to remain resilient — is an intrinsic one, not something external that may well be beyond your control. The challenge, training, competing and pitting myself against others became the validity for my resilience.

In 1997, women's modern pentathlon was finally admitted to the Olympics, for Sydney 2000, but during those three years, resilience was still required. I tore my Achilles tendon, fractured my skull after a bad riding accident, caught pneumonia and broke three ribs, followed by my nose in the final selection trial.

When I finally made it to the Olympics I was 35 (the average age of my competitors in Sydney was 24); I was old and extremely tired. The week before the Games, in my last fencing lesson, I fractured my kneecap. Not a great start. On competition day I began with a reasonable shot, had an OK fence and swam my best time for years. My ride was the highlight. I had a tough horse but just two knockdowns to finish second. The run was difficult with my knee, but I ended up finishing 14th. In the end it didn't matter. It wasn't the result I would have got in my prime, but I'd finally made it to an Olympics.

In 2009, I was offered the deputy chef de mission role for the London 2012 Games, then, in mid-2013, I was appointed chef de mission for the Rio team. It's an enormous honour but also an enormous responsibility. I have to ensure we offer the athletes the best environment at Games time to enable them to succeed. I look at athletes like track cyclist Anna Meares, who fractured her neck in a time trial in 2008, just seven months before Beijing. Anna came back and won a silver medal in the 2008 games and then won gold at the 2012 London Olympics. Anna wrote the book when it comes to resilience. Another is hurdler Sally Pearson; she refuses to let her compound-fractured wrist, from Rome last June, deter her from her quest to defend her gold medal in Rio this year.

The dictionary defines resilience as "springing back or rebounding, especially of mind". It implies that something hasn't gone, or is not going, to plan; there are challenges, obstacles, hurdles between you and what you want to achieve. But my tip is not to look at it from a negative aspect. You can use resilience as a motivating technique rather than just a coping mechanism. Developing a toughness to get on with things, and rolling your sleeves up in business and sports it's about attaining a high degree of self-awareness. Learn the ability to look at yourself and be your own harshest judge. Hold high standards for yourself. It's about being prepared should something tough happen. That's true resilience.