



A HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

How can we combat the psychological comedown from achieving our big season goals? **Anna Gardiner** investigates

Words Anna Gardiner

Illustration Peter Strain



It's not surprising that pushing your physical limits impacts your mental state too

“Whatever the distance of the race, if you have trained hard for it and felt it was important to you, then once it physically ends you might have a psychological hangover in the shape of post-race blues”

You've trained for months, put body and mind through the wringer, bunked off work commitments, shirked family duties and gone on to make the finish line of the big bike race that you'd been targeting for the previous 12 months. Then, a brief rush of euphoria, which might last a couple of days if you're one of the lucky ones, followed by a far longer period of feeling flat and despondent.

Your close family and friends can't understand why you're not on cloud nine after achieving this all-encompassing goal that has consumed your life for so long, but among cyclists it's a common, if seldom talked about, phenomenon.

“Whatever the distance of the race, if you have trained hard for it and felt it was important to you, then once it physically ends you might have a psychological hangover in the shape of post-race blues,” says sports psychologist Dr Josephine Perry (performanceinmind.co.uk). But what, exactly, are these blues and what can we do to mitigate against feeling this dejection?

Bicycle blues

Tal Ben-Shahar, a Harvard lecturer in positive psychology, came up with the idea of 'arrival fallacy'. This, he says, is the idea that “once we make it, once we attain our goal or reach our destination, we will reach lasting happiness”. For the few lucky ones, such as multiple Haute Route finisher Christopher Brekon, the achievement of finishing does indeed provide a lasting afterglow. “I do find that I can live off the

memories and the thrill of the event for several weeks,” he says.

For others, it's an illusion. James Trim's life on the bike began by training for one of the big ones: Land's End to John o'Groats (LEJOG), the British end-to-end. But by the time he reached the most northerly tip of mainland Britain, there was no revelatory moment or lasting sense of achievement. “It was the biggest sporting event I had ever undertaken,” he says. “I went from 14 to 11 stone in under a year and trained six times a week, so it's fair to say the training took over my life. Arriving in John o'Groats was a massive anti-climax and going over the finish line I just thought, well that's it, after nine months of training.”

With the passage of time he looks back on it more positively, but for the first few months afterwards he felt low. More big rides have followed, such as Wales' Dragon Ride and a coast-to-coast, and he is now aware that the culmination of a big goal isn't always the joyous occasion it might appear.

Left It's not just amateurs who struggle after events. What you do next can offer a mental lift, however

Post-race blues aren't just for those amateurs who might be caught out by them. It happens to seasoned elite performers too, as found in a 2021 study, >

Images: Getty Images, Tom Simpson

LIGHTEN THE LOAD

If you have found yourself in a funk after your big event is over, there are ways to prevent or lessen these negative feelings



Dr Josephine Perry, author of *The 10 Pillars of Success*

MANAGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

“Expect that an event you have been working towards and are really focused on will be different than imagined. With videos, magazines and different sorts of media, we can get a good idea of what events will look like, but they may be different on the day; the weather will have changed, supporters might not be there... Even if we've done an event before, things can change year to year, so while it's useful to prepare your bearings, we need to leave some leeway in our heads about what it will actually be like.”

FIND YOUR CYCLING TRIBE

“Having a sense of belonging to our sport and the community we interact with is incredibly important for motivation. Find others doing the same event as you.”



PREPARE SOME COPING MECHANISMS

“Have a plan in place before the post-event blues kick in. It could be a distraction (a holiday or a new sport for a few weeks), goal setting or giving back to those who've supported you.”

HAVE SOMEONE YOU CAN CHAT TO

“It's important that you have someone you completely trust and know is on your side. A sports psychologist is brilliant for this. If that isn't in your budget then it could be a really good friend, family member or someone from your club that you feel able to talk to and know won't spread gossip.”

Left It helps to be part of a group or club to share your highs and lows with



Abandoned to Manage the Post-Olympic Blues, which also demonstrated that feeling down after a major target happened irrespective of success.

"We think that the blues will come if we haven't performed as well as we would like, yet this study highlighted that even when athletes do really well, there are issues," says Dr Perry.

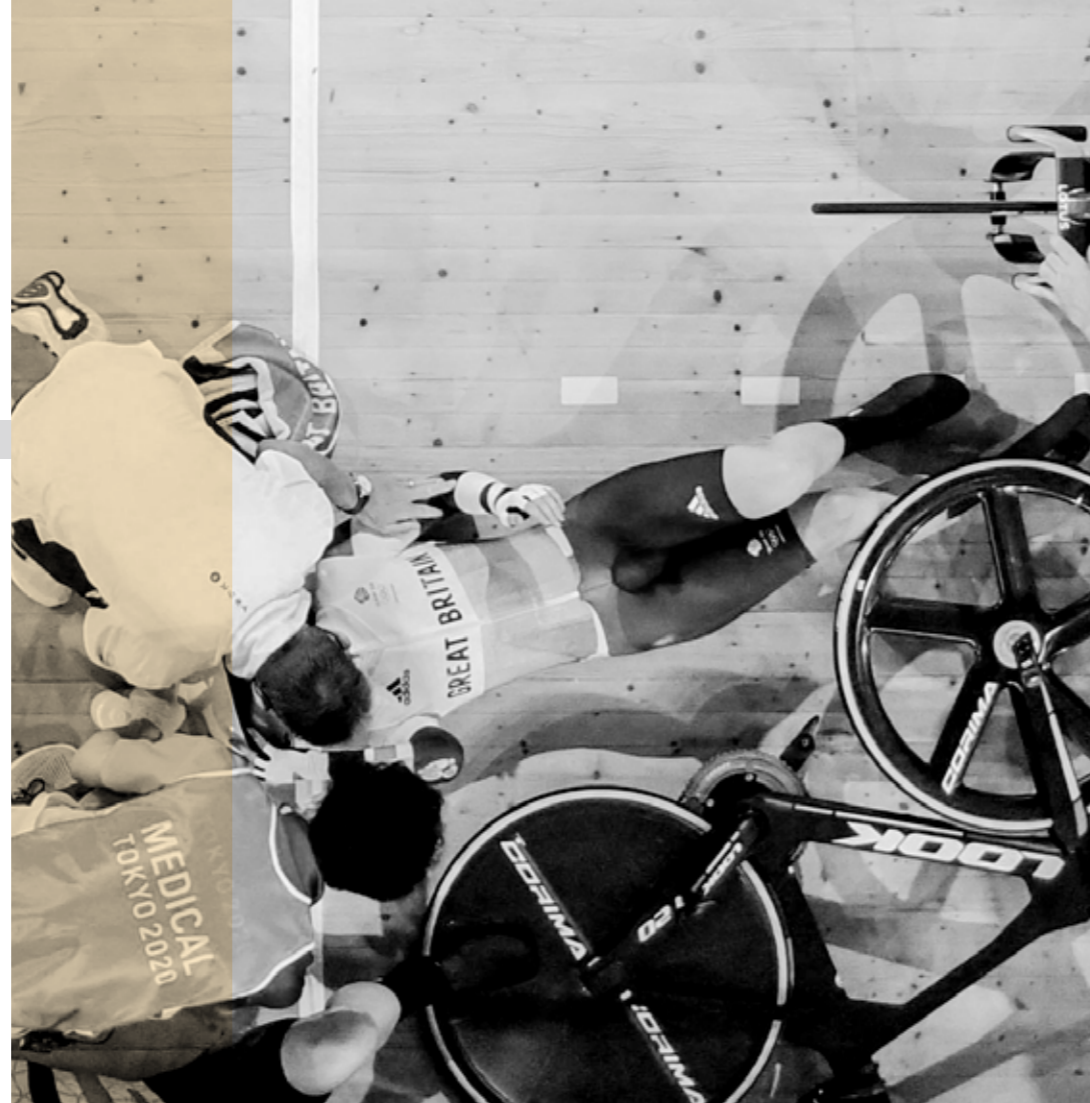
Andy Bennetts is another to complete LEJOG, on top of the Three Peaks cyclo-cross challenge, and he says he felt rudderless in his cycling after completing both. "I had some satisfaction, but after a year of training for it and then completing it, my focus for training dropped off completely. It took months to get back to my normal routine."

Dealing with uncertainty

Sometimes, there's a clear reason for being so disheartened and lacking drive. Cycling is a sport where you don't always get back what you put in, and external factors such as the weather, mechanical issues, illness or injury can alter the outcome of your race and give you a result that you don't deserve after so much sacrifice.

Rob Cotton started cycling in his 40s and, after going five rounds with the Etape du Tour sportive in France, took to the boards of the velodrome at the World Masters Track Championships. He employed a coach and was surrounded by people who had won medals. His training was focused and he entered the Masters on a roll, qualifying easily in his first heat. He was confident of competing against the best and was excited for the final.

Shortly into it, however, disaster struck. "This euphoric feeling was short-lived when I got



Above Physical setbacks can knock you mentally too, so don't be afraid to seek help

Right Have a plan for after your event too, to avoid an anticlimax when the euphoria's gone

taken out by two cyclists who were trying to recklessly gain extra points," he says. "The next thing I knew I was lying on my back in immense pain with huge burns, a splinter seven inches long in my back, various cuts, a split helmet and possible concussion. I went from having a few seconds of excitement of being in the World Track Masters final to being told I couldn't ride. I was devastated. I'd gone through months of obsessive training, been on the cusp of achieving the goal and then had it taken away from me."

Rob was used to sports in which, if you put the work in, you generally achieved your goals,

"Bask in the glory of what you've done. Celebrate the three best things and be grateful that you've been able to get out on the bike, as there are plenty of people who can't"

but the lottery of frenetic track cycling, where race-ending crashes can be out of your control, was a long way from this. "I felt so dejected and stopped completely for a few months. I couldn't face looking at a bike or the Team GB kit, I just didn't want to have anything to do with cycling."

Acknowledge your feats

Experiences like James, Rob and Andy's are proof that you're not alone when struggling with the post-event blues or rediscovering your riding mojo. One of the first things to do is to celebrate your achievement, a theme picked up by Guy Wolstencroft, an amateur cyclist currently riding the entire Giro d'Italia route for charity. "Bask in the glory of what you've done," says Guy. "Celebrate the three best things and don't dwell on what went wrong. Be grateful that you've been able to get out on the bike – whether it's to the start or the finish line – as there are plenty of people who can't do that." [PLUS](#)

YOUR TIPS

Experienced riders offer their own methods for mental recovery

My tactic is to take a nice long break and do other things, so when I start it again it all feels fresh.

John Whitney

Planning more than one big goal for me mitigates the anticlimactic effect. After training for a tough C2C, I did a bike trip to the Pyrenees so that I had something else to worry about! Then I had a holiday and three weeks off of the bike so that when I returned I was looking forward to riding again.

Thomas Winskill

I always have another event loaded or take a holiday immediately after so it's not all about that focus.

James Trim

I train enough that I never feel disappointed by my performance at an event from a fitness point of view, but I am not super-dedicated to the training at the expense of the enjoyment. It's about the pure fun of riding a fast bike, however you do it!

Christopher Brekon

Plan a big meal out the night after the event. It'll let you say thanks to the people who have been supporting you while you've been absent/grumpy/tired and allow you to order some of the food and drink you've been missing out on!

Adam Thornton



Images Getty Images

BEAT THE BLUES

Strategies for overcoming the post-event blues...



Paul Mills, coach and owner of Elite Cycling Performance Coaching

HIGHS DON'T COME AROUND OFTEN

You can't always achieve greatness, or peak consistently throughout the year; aim for one to two big highs per year, and maybe some smaller ones. When you are gifted the highs, really celebrate them and give yourself a reward. It might be something like new bike kit or something completely personal to you and your family.

DON'T SET THE BAR TOO HIGH

The downfall with not hitting a target is that too much self-analysis follows and you can beat yourself up too much. Have little goals on the way to the big goal, a number of smaller targets leading to the main event, so that targets can be adjusted. Make sure you give yourself a proportional reward for achieving the smaller goals too.

HAVE TWO GOALS TO AIM FOR

Setting up more than one event or goal means that there is something to aim for if plan A doesn't hit the sweet spot. Things can go wrong on the first major event, so if you don't have anything lined up, then it's harder to pick yourself up and go again.

If you are unable to hit the target twice in a row, then consider hiring a coach to

analyse what's going on. Things that could be tweaked include nutrition and training, or maybe it's not the right course for you or you're underperforming due to work/life pressures. Sometimes it takes someone from the outside to work out the issue/s that are preventing perceived achievement, so it could be worth asking an expert for help.