

Human Factors in Medicine with Mackenzie Little

Dec 8, 2021 | 0  | [COVID-19](#), [onthepods](#), [tips for internship](#), [Wellbeing](#)

In this podcast interview Tom Ayton speaks with Olympic Javelin thrower, Mackenzie Little, about how being an athlete can make you be a better medical student and doctor.

Summary Writer: Michelle Wu

Script Writer: Tom Ayton

Editor: Tom Ayton

Interviewee: Mackenzie Little

Interviewer: Tom Ayton

About Mackenzie Little

Mackenzie Little is a 24 year old medical student and an Australian Olympic javelin thrower. She received her Bachelors degree from [Stanford University](#) and is now going into her 3rd year at the [University of Sydney](#). She was the World Youth Champion in 2013, is a two time finalist at the World University Games, and most recently threw a personal best and placed 8th at the Tokyo Olympics (in the middle of oncology block!). She's looking forward to Commonwealth Games and World Championships in 2022, and being a junior doctor by the time the Paris Olympics come around in 2024.

About Dr Tom Ayton

Dr Tom Ayton is an Ophthalmology Registrar at Sydney Eye Hospital, Sydney, Australia. He is from Albany in Western Australia and has a background in exercise physiology and sport. During his postgraduate medical training Tom became interested in medical education, which he completed his course research in, as well as [medical student teaching](#) and Junior Medical Officer advocacy. Tom loves the beach, keeping healthy and is a very poor [surfer](#).

Human Factors in Medicine with Mackenzie Little: Being an Athlete and Medical Student

With Mackenzie Little, a Medical Student and Australian Olympic javelin thrower. She is interviewed by Dr Tom Ayton, Ophthalmology Registrar at Sydney Eye Hospital, Australia

Introduction

In this Human Factors in Medicine podcast, Tom Ayton speaks with Olympian and medical student Mackenzie Little. Mackenzie has recently returned from the Tokyo Olympics, where she represented Australia in the javelin throw, finishing eighth in the world. She's also a medical student at the University of Sydney, currently studying for her end of year exams.

1. How does it feel to have competed in the games?

- It was absolutely surreal, particularly coming from Sydney lockdown in the middle of exams
- I was on the wards at North Shore Hospital just the week before leaving for Tokyo so it was odd going from that to a crazy environment filled with hundreds of athletes from all over the world
- Usually for the Olympics or World Championships, the Australian athletics team would do a month of travel, training and competition overseas to get acclimatised and used to the time differences
- However, with COVID-19, I only landed in Tokyo three days before my qualifying
- As more of a power and technical athlete it was not as disadvantageous for me
- I think it would have been difficult to be a long-distance runner, for example, dealing with that humidity and the changes to your environment

2. Were there any highlights at the games for you?

- I've been competing in athletics for a while now and I have friends from all over the world who I've been competing against since we were sixteen
- To see some of my friends and competitors was amazing, especially coming from where I had not seen my friends who lived more than five kilometres from my house
- There were some quite inspirational people there and it feels very surreal

3. How much training did it take to get yourself ready?

- I started training in Javelin specifically in about year seven or eight of high school
- At the moment, my training is six times a week for 3 hours and I have Saturdays off
- You just have to put in the work over a long period of time and then over time, you will build up your average, your strength and your power

- When I moved back to Australia from after my undergraduate degree, I started with a new coach, and he's been phenomenal

4. How are you finding the Sydney Medicine program?

- The Sydney program was my top preference when I was applying to Medicine as it is a prestigious university and have a diversity of candidates
- We're the first year of the new Sydney Medical Program where we have clinical immersion from week one of year one
- I'm really enjoying it and am not holding my breath to finish - I think I could do this for a while

5. How do you find time to sleep!?

- I know the importance of a good eight hours sleep and I specifically remember taking a class at Stanford University by Professor William Dement, who was someone who pioneered a lot of sleep research. The class made me learn how important sleep is and had a huge impact on me
- I do make sure to get my sleep in, similar to other athletes. I see it as complementary to my studies. Everyone needs an outlet, and everyone needs physical activity in their day so I get to have both at the same time

6. What was your journey prior to commencing medicine?

- I grew up and attended high school in Sydney
- I did my undergraduate degree in the US which was initially not what I thought I would do
- I tried out Stanford for a year and after that year my eyes were open to many more things
- It was such an incredible opportunity I was able to combine athletics and academics in a productive way
- I decided to sit it out and do those four years in the US and I have absolutely no regrets
- I took a flight over to sit the GAMSAT in Washington D.C., came back down for interviews and started back at Sydney in the beginning of 2020

7. Do you find your interests clashing at times?

- There are times which can be challenging however I've come to a point where I am fully confident that my studying and my athletics are mutually beneficial
- I've had periods in my life where I've been injured, and I've had to take some time off from athletics and I wasn't as productive in my academic and personal life
- I've had times where I was a full-time athlete when I didn't thrive either
- I've realised that I work better under a little pressure with some deadlines, and I know that works for me
- Everyone has their hobbies outside of Medicine as you need to have a productive and healthy career and to not burn out

8. How do these two major aspects of your life differ?

- The people that I spend time with as an athlete are very different to my classmates that I'm studying with at the hospital
- I love having that diversity of people, opinions, and interests
- We get a really privileged insight into other people's lives as a medical student
- They are both things you have to work consistently on. You need to study and train consistently. I've realised how much mental strength has played in both

9. Do you find your interest clashing at times?

- There's certainly been times that that had felt difficult, and if you can't kind of pull your head up above the ground enough to see the bigger picture, it can be really stressful and it can feel like the world is caving in around you
- During undergraduate, I felt like I had hit my academic wall where I realised that I had to put more effort in to get average results
- You've just got to learn that sometimes it is not going to come together perfectly
- I think I have a much better perspective now in medical school and that I'm going to be a happy, well rounded, and motivated medical student
- Athletics-wise, there have been challenges with injuries and niggles but that is just what happens
- I've worked with a sports psychologist previously and found strategies that have been helpful
- I've had challenges where I haven't felt as confident and I haven't known what part I wanted athletics to play in my life because I do consider my career to be my priority, which isn't often well received in the athletics community where the mindset is that you give 110% to athletics

- However, for me, the best way is to have that balance and have a break not thinking about athletics that actually improves it

10. Is there anyone that you turn to for help or advice in particular?

- I would certainly have to say my parents - I have a great deal of respect for them
- I'm lucky to have a very tight-knit family that I can fall back on when things seem difficult
- As a child, they drove me to everything I could possibly have wanted to do, from band practice to soccer training
- I'm also very inspired by what they have done with their careers, and they are a very grounding force especially during these tumultuous last couple of years

11. How do you think that may influence your role as doctor?

- People like to ask about whether it makes me want to be a sports doctor
- Although I haven't set on a particular specialty or anything like that, it's pushed me away from that a little bit
- I've been the athlete who has gone to the doctor and said, "look, you know I'm functioning in every aspect of my life except for this one particular motion that's unnatural and hurts"
- I know how silly that sounds when I say it to the doctor because then I come into hospital where most people are having trouble with their practical fundamental changes to their life and I think, for some reason more drawn to that
- I've had some really good placements so far and I'm still trying to work out what I want to do so it is still early days

12. What's coming up on the horizon for you?

- I have my exams next week and then I'll be heading over to the United States
- Next year are world championships in Eugene, Oregon and Commonwealth Games in Birmingham
- I'll be working with the Sydney medical program who have been so helpful and flexible to see if I can make those work in combination with full time study
- I will also be going into third year with an MD project coming up about tyrosine kinase inhibitor resistance in medullary thyroid cancer which will be an interesting deep dive into that topic

Related Podcasts

- [Human Factors in Medicine with Khairil Musa: Protecting Yourself in Medicine](#)
- [Making people feel valued: Leadership and Compassion in Medicine](#)

Related Blogs

- [Working better together: 5 common traits of medicine and team sport](#)
- [A day in the life of a Sports Physician](#)

Tags: [#burnout](#),[#coaching](#),[#human factors in medicine](#),[#medical student](#),[#mental health](#),[#patient care](#),[#selfcare](#),[#wellbeing](#)