

Nafissatou “Nafi” Thiam captured the World’s imagination by winning the 2016 Rio heptathlon gold medal and became the youngest ever heptathlon Olympic champion. She knows how to deliver on the day: her Olympic gold medal came after achieving personal best performance in five of the seven disciplines. This is even more remarkable as it was her first Olympics! She was a flag bearer for Belgium at the Olympic closing ceremony and continued her dominance on the world stage by winning the World Championships and European indoor and outdoor titles.

Not only is Nafi a brilliant athlete but she is also pursuing a degree in Geography at the University of Liege, Belgium. She was the IAAF female athlete of the year in 2017 and still is UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador for her country.

Nafi is an inspirational role model for young aspiring athletes around the world.

NAFISSATOU THIAM

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2018** Won gold medal in the heptathlon at the European Championship in Berlin
- 2017** IAAF Female World Athlete of the Year
- 2017** Gold medal in the heptathlon at London World Championship
- 2017** Won gold medal in the pentathlon at the European Indoor Championship in Belgrade
- 2016** Olympic gold medal in the heptathlon at Rio Olympic Games
- 2013** European Athletics Junior Championships in Rieti, gold medal in the heptathlon

Is it tough to be an elite athlete today?

I think it has never been an easy job being an elite athlete. It always has – and always will - require a lot of work and sacrifice, but I guess nowadays, with all the new technology and knowledge, there is a lot to assist athletes to reach their full (physical and mental) potential.

With the athletic schedule the way it is, do you ever get any downtime?

After each major championship I take some time to go on vacation and empty my mind. I think it is super important to recharge the batteries and not to think about sport for a few weeks at least. A



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sports career is short. Every year there is some new goal to reach so we tend to always focus on what is coming next - but everybody needs to have some time for themselves once in a while. Also, sometimes during the season, I try to get away from training for a few weekends to relax a bit.

Who makes up your medical team?

I see a physio several times a week - depending on how my body feels. I also work with a nutritionist for in - and out - of competition feeding and body evolution over the years.

I see a doctor for general health and another one if I have problems related to athletic injuries. I also see an osteopath regularly.



My goal is always to get better and be the best I could be.



Who makes decisions around your health?

Me – together with the medical team.

How important is your coach is for you?

My coach is, of course, a very important person in my career. I've been training with him for 10 years and I think we're both learnt a lot working together over the years.

Do you follow any injuries prevention program?

I do more and more injury prevention as I get older. I'm still young but I can feel that my body is, of course, not recovering like it used to when I was 18 for example. So this is indeed something I pay more attention to than before.

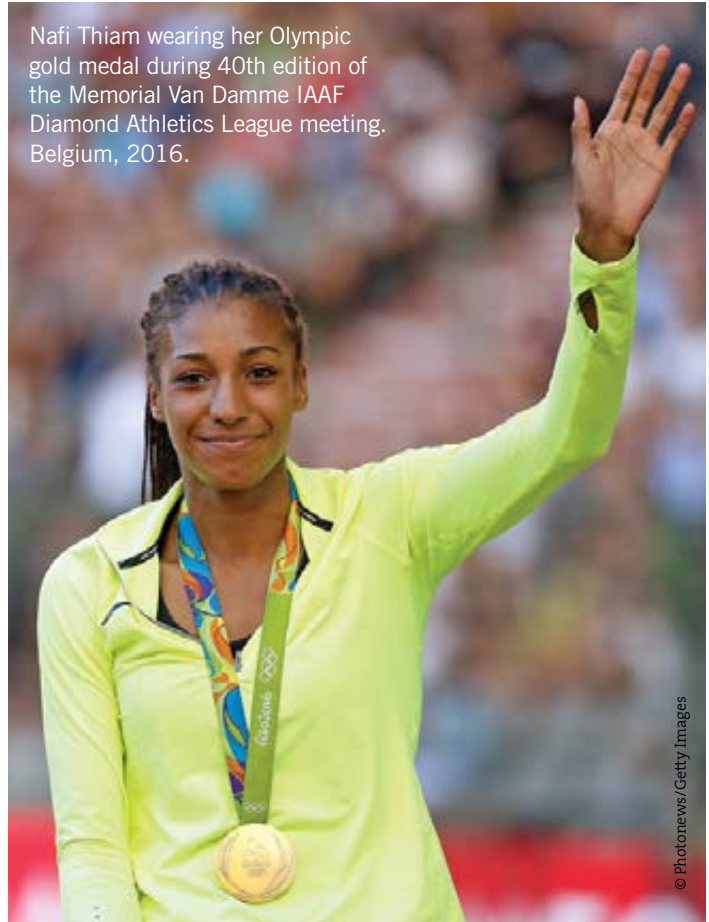
What advice you can give to a team doctor?

To really talk with the athletes to know what eventual struggles they have before a championship so you can adapt any follow-up. It is, of course, easier to have a more personal approach when you have a small delegation like Belgium than with very big teams.

Do you think doctors should have a more performance focussed approach to dealing with high level athletes?

What I expect from my medical team is to keep/get me healthy but, of course, performance is something that they must take into consideration when you work with all elite athletes. My coach is the one in charge of the performance - but if I have a physical problem, for example, I want to know how best I can fix it and also the best way to fix it to allow me to come back strong and perform at my best.

Nafi Thiam wearing her Olympic gold medal during 40th edition of the Memorial Van Damme IAAF Diamond Athletics League meeting, Belgium, 2016.



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Nafi and her coach Roger Lespagnard at the 2019 IAAF Birmingham Diamond League athletics meeting in 2019.



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Image above: Nafissatou Thiam of Belgium and World high jump champion, Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim, holding their trophy with IAAF President Sebastian Coe (left) and Albert II of Monaco (right), after being awarded Male and Female Athletes of the Year 2017. IAAF Athletics Awards 2017 in Monaco, 2017.

Image below: Nafi holding her "Golden Spike" athletics award during a ceremony in Sint-Truiden. November, 2016.

How do you balance high level sporting obligations and university study?

It takes a lot of organisation. I have to plan things in the most effective way possible in order not to lose what little time I have left. It also takes a lot of discipline to go through very long days but keep doing both athletics and university at 100% everyday. 6 years at university is a very long and tiring course – it takes a lot of energy to do both at the same time but it has always been my desire to get a degree.

Do you have support and understanding at University?

My university actually has a great program for student-athletes. It allows us to split years to have time to train on the side. My teachers are also very understanding and I can change my exams date if I have a training camp or competition at the same time.

What is your advice to young people who would like to become Champions?

To be patient and resilient – nothing comes quickly or easily. High level sport is a long journey so you have to learn to enjoy the process with all its ups and downs as well.

World Championship in Doha – how do you see it?

It has been a tough year for me but I feel great. Doha has been my main goal since the beginning of the season and I have worked very hard to be back and perform here.

I aim for a high score and will do my best to keep my title!

*Nebojsa Popovic M.D., Ph.D.
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