

STRENGTH IN VULNERABILITY

The strongest brothers in the world, Tom and Luke Stoltman, have risen to the top – quite literally in Tom's case – of professional strongman. Their secret lies not so much in out-training their competition, but in out-thinking them »

Tom Stoltman – the 6ft 6in, 174kg Scotsman – may officially be the World’s Strongest Man, but it took more than hauling insane weights to land him the coveted title. When the going got tough, 27-year-old Tom (who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as a child), one half of the world’s strongest pair of brothers, got the help he needed from a clinical psychologist.

“I went from feeling that although my body was strong, my mind was weak, to feeling that my mind was the strongest part of me. I went from feeling fragile, to knowing I was invincible,”

“Luke and Tom are a new kind of role model. They’re willing to own up about the need to work on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities”

Tom tells *MF*, as he opens up about how he and fellow strongman brother Luke only found the success they deserved by embracing their vulnerabilities.

It has become en vogue, in recent years, for sports people to engage the services of a sports psychologist: someone who can help them with their mental focus or preparation, in order to win at all costs. Fewer athletes have been brave enough to recognise that what may be holding them back might be to do with deep-seated mental health issues, which require the help of someone with a whole different set of skills. In that sense, as in many



Flying the flag for mental health understanding

others, the Stoltmans are currently ahead of the game.

The post-lockdown year of 2021 saw an extraordinary trophy haul for the giant highlanders. In June, Tom landed the biggest prize in strongman, winning WSM in a closely fought contest. Then, in September, brother Luke secured an impressive double: clinching the title of Europe’s Strongest Man in

Leeds, then topping the podium in Glasgow when the Giants Live World Tour finals made its first trip to Scotland. To crown what had already been a mind-blowing tour-de-force, Tom returned to competition after a bout of Covid to claim the title of Britain’s Strongest Man in October. After years of securing second place, the brothers



Support from a clinical psychologist has seen the brothers go from strength to strength

were now hitting their stride. Something had changed.

No more Mr Nice Guys

“This year has been such a shift,” Luke tells us. “At comps and things I’ve gone from being the joker, the nice guy, the one who goes around trying to support the other athletes, to being in the zone. People are afraid of me – even our coach found that.”

“Obviously people were asking what had changed,” he adds. “We had built up a full team of specialists. We had Dan Hipkiss, a lifting coach; as well as Nathan Peyton, our nutritionist; and we have a physiotherapist who works with us, too. But the biggest difference was that we had started working with a clinical psychologist, Dr Amy Izycky, which is just not something our competitors were doing.”

It took a disappointing performance by Tom at World’s Ultimate Strongman, in Bahrain in March 2021, for the



The Stoltmans are now able to remain ‘in the zone’ during competition

brothers to turn to Dr Izycky for help. Luke had taken a very creditable fourth place in the competition, but Tom, who had taken second place at World’s Strongest Man 2020 just months

before, had surprised the crowds by seeming to lose focus during the competition, and only placed fifth.

Dr Izycky, a specialist in neuropsychology, works



Dr Amy Izycky

with many professional athletes and she already knew Luke through his involvement in her book, *Skewed to the Right: Sport, Mental Health and Vulnerability*, which looks at the obsessive nature of some sporting achievements.

“I’ve known Amy for a number of years,” says Luke, “so when we were in Bahrain and I was thinking a lot about mindset and mental health, I realised that, although a lot of the other guys are talking to sports psychologists, we needed something different.”

“I reached out on behalf of Tom. I knew he needed support that went beyond sports psychology, and I thought Dr Izycky would know what to do.”

EXPERT ADVICE

The mental health experts you should see, and when

Clinical psychologist

Arrange to see a clinical psychologist if you need specialist help for your mental health. Clinical psychologists are trained to offer a variety of evidence-based talking therapies to treat a variety of difficulties, including depression, anxiety, addiction, learning difficulties and relationship issues.

Counsellor

Seek out a counsellor if you are experiencing problems that are causing you emotional distress. This could be if you are going through a hard time due to bereavement, trouble at work, or relationship problems.

Sports psychologist

Book a session with a sports psychologist if you’re looking for ways to deal with sports-related stresses, such as recovering confidence after an injury, or if you have problems communicating with teammates.

Psychiatrist

Ask your doctor for a referral to a psychiatrist if you have a mental health issue that may need to be diagnosed and monitored by a medical doctor. Psychiatrists are less likely to engage in talking therapies, and more likely to diagnose and manage mental illness with medication.



Tom Stoltman deadlifts a weight we can only assume is 'extremely heavy'

Beneath the surface

It's only a slight exaggeration to say that Tom Stoltman is as big as a bear. At just 27, he's in physical prime, with a wingspan reaching 7ft. At just under 30 stone, and quite literally the strongest man in the world, he's the epitome of old-school notions of masculinity. However, beneath that muscular exterior, there's a hidden vulnerability.

A painfully shy teenager, it was not until Tom was diagnosed with autism that the family came to realise his

mind worked differently. In particular, he struggled to deal with the unknown – a problem that really came to the fore in Bahrain.

"When we were at the competition, there was what they call a mystery event – something you can't prepare for," he says. "When I had to deal with that, my mind just went off like a bazooka: I was really struggling, unable to focus, unable to perform. Luke could see the trouble I was having, so he reached out to Dr Izycky.



Initially I wasn't sure about it, I couldn't see why it would help, but after just two or three sessions with Amy, I began to find it hugely helpful. I started

to understand my mind, and my head is in a different place now."

Watching Tom go through this transformation had an effect on Luke, too,



who realised that perhaps it wasn't just his younger brother who could benefit from this sort of help. Placing higher than Tom at WUS had also made him realise that he had what it takes to be fighting for the top spot with the best in the world.

Energy efficiency

"When I saw what an effect the therapy had on Tom, I wondered if I could also benefit, and that was easily one of the best decisions I've ever made," he says.

"For me, there were two things really. Firstly, it was about learning to deal with external factors: we're not just strongmen, we're business people, too. This is our work. Talking to Amy helped me see I was being very free with my energy, I was giving a lot of myself away, and that had to stop – I was letting people take a lot of my energy.

"I also started to see that I have a tendency towards self-sabotage. I took fourth place in Bahrain, I was up there in the very top tier of strength athletes, but in the past I'd often talk down about myself and say things like, 'I'm just a big daftie from the Highlands' – that sort of thing. I wasn't taking myself seriously, which was impacting the way I thought, and the way I performed. I had some work to do on how I talk about myself, and doing that was very powerful for me.

"It helped to think that I wouldn't accept other people talking about me in the way that I was talking about myself, so I shouldn't accept it from myself either. When Amy and I talk, it's like

fireworks going off in my head – I will analyse what we've said and go over it in my mind – and I then go off and talk to others about it, once you realise the benefits of it, you know, it really changes things.

"I really commit to Amy and what we talk about, Tom reacts really well when things we talk about work and so do I. There's no doubt in my mind that this stuff works, it means we can get on and do the things we enjoy, and we really do become those bigger men."

Paving the way

For Dr Izycky, the approach the brothers have taken is game-changing:

"I've worked with professional sports people for over ten years, so I've seen a lot of different people, and none of them have wanted to be open about it because they're afraid it might harm their careers, team selection, or make them seem weak.

"Really, Luke and Tom are a new kind of male role model. They're willing to own up about the need to work

on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Sometimes for an athlete it can be quite fashionable to work with a sports psychologist, to have one as part of the coaching set-up, which can of course have its benefits, but this is a different kind of situation. It's not fashionable to do this: to be open about your vulnerabilities and willing to work on them. Luke and Tom are leading the way.

"Because I had already interviewed Luke for my book, I already had a wealth of knowledge about the brothers' developmental experience. I knew the importance of the brother's lineage, and the story of their Polish prisoner of war grandfather, who had been given asylum in the Highlands.

"I also knew from my own clinical work, and my heritage of having a Ukrainian prisoner of war grandfather, the complexities and nuances this brings to functioning in the generations that follow. The family narrative is characterised by adversity, unspeakable truths, survival and, most importantly, the need for strength."

Genetically, Luke and Tom were unquestionably made for the sport of strongman. Psychologically, they were even more prepared. Responding to adversity, struggle and pushing through was already inherent in their psyche. Their motivation to leave a legacy for the Stoltman name was central to everything they did, and will do, in the future. 🏆