

The AF Association is honoured to have the support of Olympic gold medallist rower, Tom James, who is our latest patron. He shared his story with us about how his AF was detected, which could have prevented him from winning gold at the London 2012 Olympics if he was diagnosed just one week later.



“I was 27 and training for the 2012 London Olympics. We had been working very hard at the start of the year and doing altitude training when I noticed my performance dropping. I picked up a virus that had been going round the camp. Two weeks later when I returned home I still hadn’t managed to shake it off.

“Menial things like walking up the stairs or going to the shops were proving difficult. I felt very tired and couldn’t train. Little did I know these were classic AF symptoms.

“So I went to see a heart specialist who did an ECG test and echocardiogram to test my heart rhythm. I was immediately diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, and had been in AF for two weeks. The cardiologist checked for any blood clots that may have formed while my heart was beating irregularly.

“It was such a shock to learn there was something wrong with my heart. As an athlete I have learnt to deal with various injuries but it was difficult to comprehend a problem with such a vital organ when I maintained a healthy and active lifestyle.

“I was given medication that helped to control my heart rhythm but I still couldn’t resume training until four weeks later. I was very lucky because if I was diagnosed a week later I would’ve missed selection for the Olympics, and would never have gone on to win gold with my rowing team at the London 2012 Games. Unlike me, its estimated around half of people with AF remain undetected.

“So detecting AF as quickly as possible is absolutely crucial to get the appropriate treatment as soon as possible.

“When it became public that I had AF I was contacted by many other athletes who said they have it too. It was amazing to know so many people, who seem otherwise healthy, also suffer from it.

“Looking after your body is integral to all athletes, which involves closely monitoring your health. I have been working hard to identify anything that triggers an AF attack, which has helped to minimise symptoms.

“It has been a year since I stopped training and I no longer need to take medication for AF. I have had a complete lifestyle change and started a new job but I constantly need to monitor my health because I have been told AF is likely to resurface when I’m in my 40’s.

“AF was not alien to me. I knew about the condition because my dad and his twin brother have it. I later found out that another uncle, my grandmother and cousin also had it. So, for me there is definite genetic basis to the cause of this heart condition.

“I assumed AF was a disorder that only affected older people. Now I have realised it can affect anyone, of any age, of any physical fitness. So everyone should be aware of the symptoms of AF to be detected as soon as possible.

“I am proud to be a patron of AF Association to raise awareness and promote better understanding of AF, which is the most common heart rhythm disorder in the UK. We all have a 25% lifetime risk of getting it. That could equate to one person in an average family.

“It doesn’t matter how fit or healthy you are, AF has no boundaries. We hear about athletes with heart conditions so imagine how common they are in the general public.”