

I remember my second jump at Calgary so clearly." Michael 'Eddie the Eagle' Edwards' eyes (now surgically corrected and glasses-free) glaze over with the sheer nostalgia of it all. "I was at the top of the run and I heard the crowd begin to chant. 'E-ddie. E-ddie. E-ddie.' Ninety-thousand people shouting your name, can you imagine? There were still about 10 jumpers to go before me and they were all smiling and having a bit of a laugh about it, encouraging me. And all I could think was: 'Shiiiiiiiiit!'"

Edwards is, of course, looking back to the 1988 Winter Games, when he became the first-ever British ski jumper to take part in an Olympic competition and promptly shot, or rather plopped, to fame by coming last. Twice. It was the year the redheaded, bespectacled, 24-year old Cheltonian got his nickname, Eddie the Eagle, and became the first, and only, athlete to be individually named in an Olympic closing ceremony speech. He's been dining out on it ever since.

Now aged 46, Edwards is a plasterer and builder with a sideline in property development. Construction is not new to him.

Eddie the Eagle, aka Michael Edwards, soared to international stardom when he flopped in the 1988 Winter Olympics ski jumping event. After the glow faded, he finally came back to earth as a Gloucestershire builder. **Emily Wright** asked him about a life of brilliant improvisation

He was one in a long line of builders in his family, way before he became Eddie the Eagle, working for his Dad's plastering and roofing business, along with his uncles and his brother. Back then, as a teenager, his life was a strange mix of construction work in the summer and ski training in Europe and the US in the winter. In many ways, after the whirlwind years following Calgary, his life has come full circle as today he fits running a small building firm in Gloucestershire around his other work – making public appearances, starring in TV adverts and, if it comes off as planned by the end of the year, being involved in the production of a film about his life.

On the day the 2010 Winter Olympics kicked off in Vancouver, Building went to visit Mr E Eagle to ask him, belatedly, about those Olympic performances, how he balances a life of construction and celebrity and why he thinks the 2012 London Games will be a complete waste of money.

1988: speed skier to jumper
The Snowzone, Milton Keynes' indoor ski slope, may be a million miles away from the excitement of the Winter

Olympics in Vancouver, but Edwards doesn't care. He is sitting there in his bright red ski jacket, eating a chunk of Dairy Milk chocolate broken from a huge family-sized bar stashed in his top pocket. Nothing, he says, can quash his enthusiasm for the winter Games: "I just love them," he beams. "They're my thing."

Unfair though it may sound, many would argue that, in fact, they really aren't his thing. Although he is an impressive downhill skier – he was once the world number nine – ski jumping was something Edwards embarked on out of necessity rather than because it was a natural talent. A self-funded mission to compete in the 1988

HOW MANY VELODROMES DO WE NEED IN THE WORLD? IT'S NOT THAT POPULAR A SPORT AND SOON ENOUGH WE'RE GOING TO HAVE ONE IN EVERY BLOODY COUNTRY



Winter Olympics involved a decision to move out to Lake Placid in the US to train for the downhill skiing event. Before he could attempt to qualify, Edwards ran out of money and, rather than give up, switched his discipline to ski jumping, which was cheaper. "I was always scared right from the first jump I did and I was scared when I did every one of my 86,000 jumps. But it was important – I was scared enough to concentrate on what I was doing, but not scared enough that I wouldn't do it."

Although he insists that his jumps in Calgary, though not his best, were still British world records, the truth remains that, compared with his fellow competitors, Edwards' performance made him famous for all the wrong reasons. He weighed about 20lb more than the next heaviest competitor and had to wear his glasses – which steamed up and impaired his vision – when he jumped. As a result, he came last in both the 70m and 90m jumps.

Bizarrely, perhaps, Edwards' performance saw him become an overnight celebrity and in the three years following the 1988 Games, his feet didn't touch the ground. "I think there were two moments that made me realise just how much my life had changed. One was at the closing ceremony when I was singled out. I stood up and waved and 100,000 people went bananas. The guy had to stop his speech for about 10 minutes to let the cheering die down. It was a very surprising moment. And a lovely one. The hairs on my neck still stand on end when I think about it."

"Then there was the moment I landed at Heathrow coming back to the UK after the Games and about 30 policemen came up to me to escort me through customs. I couldn't work out why until I walked into arrivals and the crowd was overwhelming. From then on I was being flown by private jet and helicopter here there and everywhere. And I was earning very good money – £10,000 an hour. It was fun." ©

WINGING IT

SOMETIMES PEOPLE CALL ME OUT FOR A QUOTE AND IT BECOMES CLEAR IT WAS JUST SO THEY COULD MEET EDDIE THE EAGLE

Back to construction

Edwards' celebrity status may have taken off in 1988 but his Olympic dreams went no further than Calgary as he failed to qualify for the 1992, 1994 or 1998 Games. As the years passed and Edwards' fame faded, the PR appearances became less frequent and he was unable to sustain an income based solely on his 1988 Olympic personality. He even declared himself bankrupt in 1992. Add a wife and two small children to the equation and it became clear that he needed another source of work.

In an attempt to increase his earnings, Edwards did a law degree. But just before he took his bar exams, he realised there was a flaw in his plan to go from Eddie the Eagle to legal eagle: "I can't imagine if you're a lawyer that it's that easy to race off for a week to make a public appearance on a cruise ship in Mexico or take time off to film an advert," he says. Probably not. And so he decided on a return to construction, following in his father's footsteps by setting up his own plastering and building business. "Working for myself as a builder means I can down tools at any moment to do PR jobs and then come back to things here with no fuss," he smiles. "It's just so flexible. It's great."

Edwards' goal is eventually to develop his own family home complete with a sweeping driveway, a bath with a view of the countryside and a huge sauna - "I love saunas". But for now he is focused on doing smaller roofing and building contracts for clients in his local area of Stroud. He enjoys the work but says he needs to be careful of time wasters: "Sometimes people call me out for a quote and it becomes clear it was just so they could meet Eddie the Eagle," he says.

Time wasters aside, he says business is booming. As small, regional construction companies succumb to the recession, Edwards says his celebrity past has saved him from a similar fate: "What is happening



EDDIE THE EAGLE ON...

Sport I think people have misinterpreted what sport is all about these days. It has got boring. We need more personalities. Sport is a form of entertainment. People need a favourite athlete and there aren't many with good personalities anymore. Tennis players are a good example of this. What happened to the McEnroes, Aggasis and Beckers? The people who had a bit of a laugh. Now we've got people like Federer and Murray who take things so seriously. And I hate that. Murray in particular is a bit of a whiney little shit now that he has got good.

Scots I find that Scottish people are all very patriotic until they want representing or want to be put forward for certain opportunities. And then suddenly they're British rather than Scottish, because we then pay for them.

Steve Coogan playing him in a film of his life When the script arrived, I hated it. It had been written for Steve Coogan rather than to match my personality and it read like one long Alan Partridge sketch. There was nothing in there about my life and it was full of things I would never say. It was horrendous.

David Cameron Politically, I am not sure if a change of government will help things much. I have always been a Conservative but I just don't like David Cameron - there is something about him. He is so upper crust I just don't think he will have any idea what it means to be someone who struggles every week to find work and pay the bills. But he is worth a shot as Gordon Brown and his lot have bankrupted this country.

to the construction industry is just terrible," he says. "All the building work coming to a stop and people being laid off. I read recently that there are 20,000 people going for around 300 jobs. All these tremendous skills going to waste - it's such a shame. I am lucky that, because of my name, I continue to do well. I think people quite like the idea of saying that Eddie the Eagle helped to build their house!"

It's not worth it for two weeks

Edwards also has some strong views on the construction of the 2012 London Olympics. He admits that it will be a great opportunity for Britain's athletes to perform on home soil. But that's the end of the praise. "Is it really worth it? We're talking about 10,000 athletes coming to do a sporting event that will last two weeks. And I think that £10bn could be spent on much better things. Seb Coe keeps going on about the legacy - if that actually happens, then great. But past Olympics show that nine times out of 10, the venues are never fully used and fall into disrepair after the Games." He pauses for breath for a second, taking a sip of his coffee before concluding: "And how many velodromes do we need in the world? It's not that popular a sport and soon enough we're going to have one in every bloody country."

His answer would be to switch to pop up, temporary venues that would cost a fraction of the price and could then be dismantled afterwards, separated and allocated to parts of the world that really need them, rather than the whole lot being stuck in one place: "You could send a stadium to Africa, another to somewhere in Asia," he says. "It makes sense and saves billions."

But he admits he is already looking forward to the next Winter Olympics in Russia and thinks they'll probably do a good job - "they're a bit more democratic out there now and the vodka would be good" - and he hopes he might even be able to get out there. You get the feeling that excited as he is watching the Vancouver Olympics from afar, Eddie the Eagle would prefer to be a bit closer to the action than Milton Keynes.



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