

# PINNACLE

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BRILLIANT BIRMINGHAM

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# INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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04.

**BRILLIANT  
BIRMINGHAM**

06.

**THE BEIJING  
GAMES**

08.

**FEAR OF THE  
UNKNOWN**

10.

**BE LIKE  
COL PEARSE**

11.

**A ROLLER  
COASTER OF  
EMOTIONS**

12.

**GOLDEN  
HOUR**

13.

**RISING  
CHARLI**

14.

**THE LOWEST  
LOWS, THE  
HIGHEST HIGHS  
& THE TEARS IN  
BETWEEN**

16.

**REWARD FOR  
EFFORT**

17.

**YOU WIN OR YOU  
DON'T COME OFF  
THE MAT**

19.

**THE LONG  
ROAD BACK**

20.

**MONTAG SHINES  
BRIGHT AT  
VIS AWARD OF  
EXCELLENCE**

22.

**A STORY OF  
VULNERABILITY,  
PERSEVERANCE &  
HARD WORK**

24.

**VICTORIA  
2026**

25.

**VIS COMMUNITY  
PROGRAMS**

# FROM THE CEO

**ANNE MARIE HARRISON**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Reflecting on the Birmingham Commonwealth Games there are so many factors which are positive. Congratulations to the “Brummies” on the pride and enthusiasm with which they tackled the challenge of pulling a Games together in a short timeline and the pandemic. The volunteers and crowds were compelling contributors to a colourful and wonderful environment for athletes and spectators.

Commonwealth Games Australia and the Team management, including many VIS staff in a variety of roles, did a great job. Importantly athlete performance and wellbeing were at the forefront of their planning and delivery.

As always, the stars of the show quite rightfully were the athletes. Many achieved outstanding performances in their field of play, and all demonstrated qualities of which we can be enormously proud in upholding the mantra of ‘the friendly Games;’ fierce competitors, great sports, and community role models.

VIS scholarship holders’ achievements and performances were plentiful with 43 of 67 athletes winning a medal. They are reflected through their stories in this magazine. For many the journey was as challenging as their competitors on the day and many people play a role in enabling them to perform. The great thing about a Commonwealth Games team is that so many, from their first club or coach, their family, or the enthusiastic supporter back home who got up early to see them compete; we all get to share the joy of seeing them represent Australia and strive to produce their very best performance.

Earlier this year we also celebrated the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games held in Beijing. The Australian team’s performances were a testament to the programs of OWIA and Snow Australia along with the AOC and PA’s determination to enable athletes to participate in these Games after the challenges for the past couple of years. We particularly acknowledge the performance of Scotty James in winning the snowboard silver medal and Mitch Gourley who was selected as one of the flagbearers at the Opening Ceremony of the Paralympic Games.

So now we look forward with excitement to Victoria 2026, which will be held between 17-29 March in four regional hubs: Geelong, Bendigo, Ballarat, and Gippsland. The multi-city model where each of those hubs will have its own athletes’ village and host a range of sports that will create a legacy for Victoria that extends well beyond the competition period. Our role is to ensure that Victorian athletes have the opportunity to shine, and we use each day to prepare them for that opportunity.

The year has ended with the VIS being named the recipient of the inaugural Win Well Award at the AIS Australian Sports Performance Awards (ASPAs). This is a wonderful recognition and proud achievement for everyone who has been a part of the VIS for the last 32 years and serves as a further reminder to us all to focus on holistic development as captured in our motto “success in sport and life” whilst striving for the podium.



# A GOLDEN GAMES FOR THE VIS

# BRILLIANT BIRMINGHAM

IMAGE (LEFT)  
**ABBEY CALDWELL & LINDEN HALL**

IMAGE (MIDDLE)  
**CAITLIN WARD & JESS GALLAGHER**

IMAGE (RIGHT)  
**FLYNN OGILVIE & NATHAN EPHRAUMS**

It was a golden Games for Victorian Institute of Sport athletes, who took home an incredible 13 gold medals from the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

From Jessica Gallagher's impressive golden double on the cycling track to the Kookaburras seventh gold Commonwealth Games medal. Not to mention the historic 1000th Commonwealth Games gold medal won by the Australian Diamonds led by a group of Melbourne Vixens players.

There were 67 VIS athletes that were selected to represent Australia, bringing home 41 medals from the XXII Commonwealth Games, including 13 gold, 12 silver and 16 bronze.

The Australian Judokas were a feature of Birmingham, winning ten medals, including two gold and eight bronze, making it the most successful judo campaign of all time at a Commonwealth Games. Aoife Coughlan and Tinka Easton headlined the sport both winning gold in their respective weight divisions.

Four years after Anabelle Smith and her synchronised partner Maddison Keeney missed their final dive at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games and went from first to last, the duo overcame the pressure at Birmingham and won gold after an impressive series of dives. The gold rush continued that night in the diving pool, with Australia's youngest athlete at the Games, 14-year-old Charli Petrov, winning a gold medal, paired up with one of her idols, Melissa Wu.

On the athletics track, Jemima Montag inspired the nation, winning her second Commonwealth Games gold medal, this time in the women's 10km race walk. Peter Bol finished with a silver in the men's 800m, and Abbey Caldwell flashed home to win a surprise bronze medal in the women's 1500m. In the long jump, Brooke Buschkuehl won another Commonwealth silver, but this one she described felt more like gold, considering the adversity she had to overcome to get back to her best.

In the artistic gymnastics, Kate McDonald also found herself on top of the podium, after she saved her best beam performance for last and surprised at her Games debut, pipping her teammate and Australian Team Captain Georgia Godwin for gold in the final. After failing to initially make the final in his pet event, the high bar, due to withdraws and injuries Tyson Bull was given an opportunity to compete in the final. Bull fought through pain and claimed the silver medal while thanking his teammate for giving up his spot in the final to him.

Para-swimmer Col Pearse put on a show in the men's 100m butterfly S10 final, winning his first Commonwealth Games gold, overcoming fellow Australian Will Martin. Meanwhile, Sam Williamson had a busy competition schedule, swimming in the mixed 4 x 100m

medley relay heat and the men's 4 x 100m heat, which went on to win gold and silver, respectively. Individually Williamson also won silver in the men's 50m breaststroke and bronze in the men's 100m breaststroke.

Australia brought up its 1000th Commonwealth Games gold medal milestone at Birmingham, and there was no better way to reach that landmark than with an Aussie Diamonds victory. Led by Liz Watson, the Diamonds ran out victors over Jamaica, 55-51, overcoming their 2018 heartbreak to win their fourth Commonwealth title.

The Kookaburras continued the side's unbelievable run at the Commonwealth Games winning the nation's seventh consecutive gold medal in the men's hockey event. Nathan Ephraums was instrumental in Australia's 7-0 victory over India, scoring twice in an impressive performance. The Hockeyroos fell 1 goal shy of England, claiming another Commonwealth silver.

In the table tennis, Qian Yang came out on top to win gold in an epic battle with fellow Aussie Lina Lei in the women singles C6-10 final. On the final day of her sixth Commonwealth Games, Aussie table tennis legend, Jian Fang Lay won her ninth Games medal, adding to her decorated career. Although still missing gold from her collection, Lay may just be saving that accomplishment for when the Games come to her home state, Victoria in 2026.

Recently added VIS scholarship holder Alex Kiroi-Bogatyreva was the star of rhythmic gymnastics winning her maiden gold medal in the women's clubs event, which completed her medal set at Birmingham. She joined forces with Ashari Gill and Lidiia Iakovleva to win silver for Australia in the team rhythmic team event.





# THE BEIJING WINTER GAMES

## SILVER SUCCESS

The wizard from Warrandyte Scotty James won a well-deserved silver medal at the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games, alongside Olympic debutant Valentino Guseli finishing 6th.

In arguably the most anticipated event of the Games, Australia's dominance in the halfpipe was on display with the best snowboard talent from around the globe, including from five-time Olympian Shaun White from the USA.

A special anticipation and excitement was in the air early at the Genting Snow Park halfpipe, in the athlete Villages and all the way back in Australia – particularly in Scotty's hometown of Warrandyte and Valentino's home Dalmeny, or 'Valmeny'.

Clear blue skies, no wind and a brisk -12C made for perfect competition conditions and a picturesque setting for what would be one of the biggest and most exciting halfpipe finals in Olympic history.

Scotty was thrilled to win a silver medal for Australia with a score of 92.50, with Japan's Ayumu Hirano only better with a 96.00 to take the gold.

Sourced: Winter Olympic Institute of Australia



IMAGES:  
LEFT: SCOTTY JAMES  
MIDDLE: WILL MORGAN & SCOTTY JAMES  
RIGHT: DEAN HEWITT



## SCOTTY'S UNIQUE BOND

Over five years ago, Scotty James teamed up with VIS Physical Preparation Manager Will Morgan at the Victorian Institute of Sport.

Since then, they have been able to form a unique bond and even travel the world together.

We caught up with Scotty to learn more about his relationship with Morgan.

**Scotty:** It's been amazing working with Will here at the VIS. Fortunately, he has also been able to travel over to Europe with me which is always really fun.

We try keeping training entertaining by picking different locations to train every year.

Will and I have really good chemistry with training; he understands me, and I understand him, which makes us flow really well with our work together.

We're also very open to evolving, in terms of what I feel like I can be better at physically, and then he will come up with some different ideas. He is a bit of a professor in that matter, trying to accommodate to anything I'm trying to achieve on the snow as well as in the gym.

I love working with him and plan on doing so long into the rest of my career.



## OUR FIRST AUSSIE CURLERS

With no official curling ice in Australia and interruptions from continuous Victorian lockdowns, the odds were stacked against the pair from the beginning.

"When we were in Melbourne, we only got to train once a week on the ice which is difficult for a national team, especially when you're playing against teams that train on the ice more than once a day," Hewitt said.

But with the ongoing support of the VIS, Hewitt had every confidence that he would still be able to achieve his dream of representing Australia at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

"The multidisciplinary team that works with me at the VIS is fantastic and always has me ready for the big events," Hewitt said.

"Their [VIS services] willingness to explore initiatives and training techniques that are outside the box has taken performance to the next level, especially when I didn't have access to ice in 2020," Hewitt said.

Since receiving his VIS scholarship in 2019, Hewitt has embraced all the different services that the VIS has to offer, which have all been working collaboratively to help him set and accomplish his goals.

With the approval of his proposal for the VIS to purchase a 'Smart Broom' (a piece of technology that records data and analysis of sweep efficiency in real time) he was able to set targets that would allow him to improve his overall performance.

"The 'Smart Broom' is essentially a mini-force plate attached to the head of a broom," Hewitt said.

"This measures a combination of the pressure and velocity of the broom head on the ice."

"The data that was able to be captured included aspects such as foot placement and movements, weight distribution, grip placement on the broom, broom angle, hip height and angle and broom head positioning under the body."

VIS Strength and Conditioning Coach Farhan Juhari says a key focus was to develop a program for Hewitt that would ensure the transfer of

strength and conditioning could be applied into improving his sweeping and technique.

"One of the key goals was to turn Dean into a more efficient sweeper," Juhari said.

"Majority of his program in the gym is predominantly around building his upper body strength and his power, as the most physically demanding part of the sport is the sweeping of the ice."

VIS dietitian Elaine Bo also aided Hewitt with nutritional strategies that would allow him to increase his upper body muscle mass and be able to manage the demand of heavier training loads.

"My role was to provide the nutrition strategies to facilitate the increase in muscle mass," Bo said.

"This included ensuring Dean was consuming enough kilojoules throughout the day and extra on his heavier training days; along with strategies to achieve this."

"He was able to successfully gain the muscle and the goal shifted to maintaining it whilst he trains internationally."

With limited access to training on ice, Juhari says that some of the biggest obstacles Hewitt had to overcome was emulating training on ice and making sure he was still able to work on the technical side of his training.

"The rest of the training was either done on a sliding board or a sweeping session at home on his tiles," Juhari said.

"So, when you consider all these things, the achievement is incredible and a credit to the amount of time and effort he's been able to put into himself and training."

Hewitt also worked with VIS sport scientist Sylvie Withers, who armed him with different jet lag strategies that would allow him to be in peak condition when moving from country to country to perform at his best.

"Travelling across time zones is an area that is often difficult to get right," Withers said.

"Jet lag can negatively impact performance if proper planning is not conducted."

"Dean was travelling from Calgary to the Netherlands for the Beijing qualifiers, with a quick turnaround between arrival and competition."

VIS General Manager of High Performance Harry Brennan, said that the support Hewitt received by the VIS is what the organisation is all about.

"The support Dean has been receiving has been performance driven, collaborative and thorough and an excellent example of using an interdisciplinary approach to identify and address performance gaps and achieve results."

Hewitt had nothing but praise for everyone that supported him on his journey to Beijing.

"All the hard work paid off," he said.

"We had so much support from back home, and we can't thank them enough."

"It's such an exciting time and we're hoping that this can really build curling in Australia. This is for all the Aussie curlers out there, everyone who has supported us and for all those new curlers who can now have a platform to play more."

At Beijing, the pair finished with 2 wins and 7 losses - 5 of them by just 1 point, which was not enough to qualify them out of the group stages.

Although Hewitt and Gill didn't have the result they initially anticipated, they learnt a lot from the experience and will always be Australia's first ever Olympic curlers.



MITCH GOURLEY

# FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

**As one door closes for long-term Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) scholarship holder Mitch Gourley who announced his retirement from an alpine skiing earlier this year, another door has opened.**

The four-time Paralympian enjoyed a decorated career that spanned 15 years. From becoming World Champion in 2017 to carrying that Australian flag at the 2022 Beijing Opening Ceremony, Gourley achieved a lot in his sporting career. But he admits that the athlete transition process hasn't been easy.

"You can plan for retirement as much as possible, but it's still a process that you have to let happen," he continued, "I'm still in that process."

When reflecting on his career Gourley says he will have to be content knowing that there are still some goals he has set for himself in his sport that he will never achieve. But will continue navigating the transition process and is excited for the chapter of his life.

"I have a lot to look forward and be grateful for outside of sport," he said.

Gourley has taken a big step in his professional career since retiring from sport, returning to the Victorian Institute of Sport in a working capacity.

He recently applied and went through the recruitment process for the role as Performance Lifestyle Adviser, seeing this as an opportunity to give back to elite sport and assist athletes learn some lessons that he wishes he learnt at the start of his career.

"There's two key standout learnings in my sport and life journey," he said.

"One is to get the order right, do the self-discovery part first, learn about yourself, figure out who you are and what you stand for."

"The second part is to reach out to your support networks. I was able to do this with the VIS' support and found opportunities to try new things and gain valuable work experience."

For Gourley, it's been a journey filled with twists and turns and discovering what he wanted to do when his time in alpine skiing was over, and it was never easy.

Athletes often live in fear around what will happen next in life if success in sport doesn't happen. Often dedicating their whole life to your sport, with minimal fall-back options, and funding only coming through based on results. Gourley admits that this was at the back of his mind constantly.

"I didn't know how to do it. I didn't know how to gain valuable experience or how to learn what different industries or roles were out there."

"I also needed to learn some things about myself and what I was good at outside of my sport."

From juggling education, training, and a bit of part-time work on the side, there is always a lot on your plate as an elite athlete so finding time to discover what you wanted to do after sport was often hard. Gourley admits that because of the nature of his sport, and being unable to fit work around that, he had "no idea where to start."

"I didn't understand my values or the type of work that I wanted to get into"

"I picked a university course which sounded interesting but got to the end of it and realised this is not what I want to do."

Gourley reached out to his support network at the VIS and was grateful the Performance Lifestyle Team were able to help him understand and learn the introspective part of his career thinking.

"The VIS helped me with the self-exploration bit, around my values and where I wanted to be and how I wanted to contribute to the workforce."

IMAGES: MITCH GOURLEY



The other element the VIS could offer him was opportunities to practice some transferable skills that are useful in a lot of industries.

"I was able to do things such as school tours, which gave me some form of income, as well as deliver presentations for the VIS Performance Lifestyle Team."

"All the experiences helped me build my understanding and my time and personal management skills, but also my public speaking and the ability to present to audiences."

At the conclusion of the 2019 snow season, Gourley made the decision that when he returned home to Australia, he would put some time into getting some experience in the workforce.

"It was a break from competing, but it also could've been retirement for me, I wasn't sure, it was a 12-month check-in with myself."

He first applied for the VIS Performance Lifestyle role, and although unsuccessful for the specific role in 2019, it led to a path of learning and development.

Disappointed to not have successfully secured the role, Gourley knew he had to be resilient, and like his sporting career he knew it would not always be "success after success."

VIS Performance Lifestyle Manager, Leesa Gallard, said that Gourley reached out after the process making use of the VIS network and the wider sporting community to explore and give opportunities a go.

"Learning comes from doing and Mitch was prepared to do this, he tread a path of



learning and discovery that was rewarding but also challenging and uncomfortable at times," she said.

Having already stepped into a role as an athlete representative at the International Federation, Gourley realised that working in sport was attractive to him, and the element of giving back was something that aligned with his core values. His resilience and hard work eventually paid off and he managed to land a diversity and inclusion role at Netball Victoria.

Gourley's year off the snow quickly became three, due to the enforced COVID-19 Victorian lockdowns.

"There was a real upside for me in terms of increasing my employment experiences and my workplace experiences that came out of COVID, getting three plus years' experience which I wouldn't have otherwise got."

When Gourley finished his time at Netball Victoria, he landed another job, a PWC role in graduate recruiting, developing processes so that businesses could hire more people with a disability and reduce barriers to people with disability.

But unfortunately for Gourley, and a lot of Australians, COVID cuts led to him being made redundant. Although it was another challenging time for Gourley, through some other work he had been doing with the Australian Institute of Sport in the employment space, an opportunity came up to do consultancy with the engagement team.

"It gave me a whole different experience and helped me build a lot of different skills."

With a variety of work experience under his belt, Gourley decided that he didn't want

to end his alpine-skiing career crashing out at a World Championship with a broken wrist and decided to return to the snow. With the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympic Games around the corner, there was no better time to return.

"I felt my body was ready to handle the training and I had some work experience, so I was feeling more confident about being able to return to the working world afterwards."

"The fear of the unknown no longer lingered in my mind, because if I went and skied and it didn't work out for me, then I'd still have something set aside."

Gourley went on to represent Australia at a fourth Paralympic Games in Beijing, announcing that this would be the end of his glittering sporting career.

Earlier this year a Performance Lifestyle Adviser role became vacant again at the VIS. Gourley decided to apply for the role and this time had a longer list of skills and experiences making him the successful candidate.

Gallard insists that Gourley's story of career exploration is "inspiring" and shows what you can do if you give different opportunities and experiences a go.

"The VIS are thrilled for Mitch to be appointed to the role of VIS Performance Lifestyle Adviser to share the experiences he has as an athlete pursuing both success in sport and life, and to also make his contribution to the community post his sport."

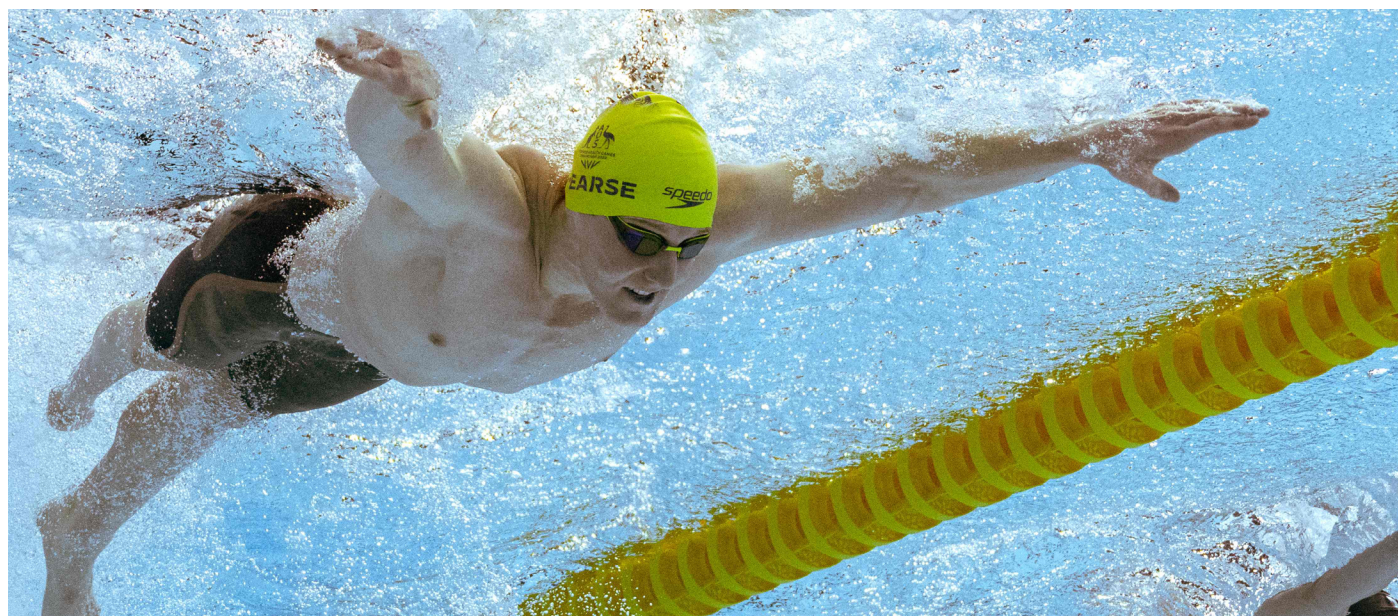
"Being able to move forward from setbacks in a career sense, just like in the sporting sense has enabled Mitch to grow his skills and experiences and be ready for the role he now undertakes at the VIS," she said.



COL PEARSE

# BE LIKE COL PEARSE

Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) scholarship holder, Col Pearse, has never let his disability get in the way of dreaming big. He hopes that he can use his profile as an elite athlete to inspire the next generation of kids to want to “be like Col Pearse.”



“My disability has let me achieve many amazing things,” he said.

“All the way from winning a Commonwealth Games gold medal, to having the opportunity to inspire kids back home [Echuca] with or without a disability.”

Pearse had his right foot amputated when he was 2 years old, after an accident with a lawnmower on his family’s dairy farm.

“There have definitely been challenges along the way,” Pearse admits.

“But I’m so grateful that my family just treated me like a normal kid.”

The 19-year-old has enjoyed a sensational year in the swimming pool, winning two silver medals at the 2022 World Para Swimming Championships, a gold medal at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and presented the 2022 VIS Para Athlete Award.

“I’m so grateful for the opportunity to compete for Australia and wear the green and gold.”

When Pearse reflects on his journey to becoming a Commonwealth Games gold medalist, he recalls a moment in his life that motivated “someone like him” to go on and represent Australia.

“I watched Ellie Cole win four gold medals at the London 2012 Paralympic Games,” he said.

“For me at a young age, seeing people that are similar to me do amazing things in the world is what really inspires me.”

Remembering the impact this moment had on his life, Pearse is grateful that he can now use his profile as an elite athlete to inspire the

community and continue normalising people with disability.

“One of the big things I want to do, is really normalise it [his disability], have conversations about it, and to never let it stop me,” he said.

I was just a kid who wanted to be like Ellie Cole, and now I have the opportunity to inspire younger kids to want to be like Col Pearse.

Pearse has been encouraged by how far inclusivity has come in his sport, and his daily training environment.

“I’m part of an Olympic swimming program, and for me to be a Paralympic athlete amongst a group of people without a disability is amazing,” he said.

“My disability has become normalised within that group.”

“They all understand that I’m missing a foot, but they all also hold me accountable for training and my day-to-day life inside and outside of the water.”

Looking towards the Brisbane 2032 Paralympic Games, Pearse is excited about the future of Para sport and the funding boost it may receive to help encourage more athletes to experiment with different sports and hopefully want to represent Australia at a home Paralympic Games.

“It’s a great time now for kids living with a disability in Australia to try out different sports and most importantly have fun and enjoy doing it.”

TYSON BULL

# A ROLLER COASTER OF EMOTIONS

**A teammates selfless act before the men’s horizontal bar final in Birmingham, meant that Tyson Bull would come home to Australia as a Commonwealth Games silver medalist – even though he didn’t initially make the final.**

After stamping his name into the record books at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, Bull had his sights firmly set on success at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

“I took a little bit of time to reflect on the Olympics and mentally and physically let myself calm down before turning the page and working towards that next goal.”

Bull took further confidence leading into the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, when he won gold in the horizontal bar final at the 2022 Koper World Cup in Slovenia – his first podium at a Challenge Cup or World Cup.

Everything was falling into place, until disaster struck.

“Three weeks out from competing in Birmingham, I was doing a parallel bar dismount that I’ve done 100 times before,” he said.

“I landed really short, on my ankle, and straightaway I knew it was pretty bad.”

Unable to put any pressure on his foot without pain, Bull’s scans revealed some “good and bad news.”

“The good news was that there was still a chance I would be able to compete at the Commonwealth Games,” he said.

“But the bad news was that it was going to be very painful for me.”

Bull managed to make it to Birmingham with the Australian team, however, his preparation for his event was less than ideal, still struggling to land on his troublesome ankle.

“I hadn’t been able to land any dismounts in the lead up to qualification and even though there was heavy taping on my ankle, I was still in a lot of pain,” he said.

In the men’s artistic team event, which also acts as qualification for the individual apparatus events, Bull and his Australian teammates narrowly missed out on the bronze medal, finishing in fourth place.

What made this result even more “gutting” for Bull, was a small stumble on his dismount off the high bar, meant he didn’t score enough points to qualify for the apparatus final.

“After qualification, I was gutted on two fronts,” he said.

“We just missed out on a team podium and my main medal opportunity on the horizontal bar was gone.”

“It was a roller coaster of emotions.”

A day out from the final of the horizontal bar, injury struck the Australian team camp again.

“24 hours out from competition, one of the younger guys, Jesse, who had been carrying a bit of a shoulder injury, aggravated it in the warmup gym and couldn’t do any high bar without a lot of pain through his shoulder,” Bull said.

“That spot in the high bar final then fell down to my other Australian teammate Clay Stephens.”

Stephens selflessly decided to sacrifice his spot in final, giving Bull the chance to chase his first Commonwealth Games medal.

“A Commonwealth Games final is not something that comes around very often and for him to give that spot to me was huge and something that wouldn’t have been an easy decision,” Bull said.

Bull, who just hours earlier wasn’t going to be in the horizontal bar final, now felt that he had to “do the spot justice.”

“I’d been given this opportunity and I was going to give it everything to try and make the boys proud.”

Fighting through the pain in his ankle and with limited ability to land, he knew that if he nailed his routine anything could be possible.

“I thought ‘I’m going to put this landing on my feet no matter what, he said.

And that, he did.

Bull scored a gutsy 14.233, earning him a silver medal, as well as creating an iconic story which captured the hearts of Australian’s watching on.





## ANABELLE SMITH

# GOLDEN HOUR

Anabelle Smith overturned a string of three-bronze medal performances at Commonwealth Games level to win gold in Birmingham.

She secured her first international gold medal alongside her long-time synchronised partner Maddison Keeney.

We caught up with Smith to see what her fourth Commonwealth Games experience was like:

**VIS:** Prior to Birmingham you had won three Commonwealth bronze medals, how does it feel to be a GOLD medalist?

**Anabelle:** To be honest, it makes me feel complete. I don't necessarily measure my success as an athlete on the medals I have won, but a Commonwealth Games gold medal was the only medal I didn't have in my collection that I've been working hard for, for a long time. It has been a nice reward, for the hard work and resilience over the past few years.

**VIS:** What was it like competing in front of a crowd again?

**Anabelle:** It was incredible to compete in front of a full stadium. The English crowd was loud and passionate, and it certainly gave me energy and adrenaline that I missed in Tokyo! I had a moment before my event where I paused to think 'Wow, I can't believe all these people have paid good money to come and watch us dive.' I felt a huge sense of gratitude!

**VIS:** What was your best moment from the Games?

**Anabelle:** Running to see my family outside after my event. It was very special to me to have my entire family in the stands at an international competition. I am towards the end of my career, and the last time they were all together was when I was at the very start of my career! Everyone was just so happy, proud, and relieved!

**VIS:** Tell us about village life?

**Anabelle:** The diving team stayed in the main Village at the University of Birmingham. Our Australian section was decorated with green and gold and our dorm rooms were filled with letters and posters from school kids back home. I appreciated the 'Australian kitchen' for breakfast, coffee, and snacks, because the main food halls were a fair walk away! It was nice to be able to mingle with fellow athletes again and run into old and new friends!

**VIS:** How did the VIS support you leading into the Games?

**Anabelle:** I have an incredible team of support at the Victorian Institute of Sport. From coaches to physical preparation, psychology, nutrition, physiotherapy, massage, performance lifestyle... the list goes on! I have never felt so supported, and I feel a huge sense of gratitude to my team at the VIS who make sure I am as prepared as I can be for a major competition.



IMAGES: LEFT: ANABELLE SMITH, RIGHT: CHARLI PETROV (LEFT) & MELISSA WU (RIGHT)

## CHARLI PETROV

# RISING CHARLI

15-year-old Charli Petrov burst on to international diving the scene in 2022 representing Australia at the FINA World Championships and Commonwealth Games where she created history with her performance.

A strategic decision was made after a Diving Australia camp at the start of the year to pair Petrov with one of Australia's most decorated divers, Melissa Wu, in the women's 10m synchronised platform event.

"Reading on the board, 'Melissa Wu and Charli Petrov' - it was a dream come true," Petrov said.

The two athletes worked hard on their pairing, which proved to be a success, winning gold in their first event together at the Australian Open Championships.

The result secured their selection for the World Championship and Commonwealth Games teams, making it the first time Petrov had ever been selected in any Australian team.

The success continued for the pair, winning gold at the FINA Grand Prix in Calgary and placing a respectable seventh at the World Championships against a strong field.

But it was at the Commonwealth Games that Petrov really shone.

As a 14-year-old, she was the youngest athlete in the 429 strong Australian team and the youngest diver competing from any nation.

"It was a dream for me to go one day," Petrov said.

When Wu won her first Commonwealth Games medal at the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games as a 13-year-old, Petrov wasn't even born. Now at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, 16 years later, Petrov was on the platform standing next to her childhood hero about to dive for gold.

In a nerve-wrecking final the pair edged out England's Eden Cheng and Andrea Sirix to take home the gold, winning by 7.14 points.

Petrov became the youngest Australian diver to win a Commonwealth Games gold medal.

Diving coach Mat Helm has been impressed to see how Petrov has handled her rapid rise and has loved being part of her journey.

"She has taken every opportunity in her stride, and has been so humble in her success," he said.

"She is starting to pave her own way in this sport."

Petrov recently completed Year 8 at St Michaels Grammar and has worked closely with her VIS Performance Lifestyle advisor, Sarah Thompson, and Diving Australia's AW&E manager, Teri Crilly, to handle the expectations and international travel over the last 12 months and to ensure she has kept up with her studies.

"Balancing, school with diving, competition and training is not always easy but I work with my school and my support team to get the best outcome for my education," she said.

"My VIS support crew has been a huge part of my development."

To cap off her impressive season, Petrov became a dual Junior World Champion winning gold in the Girls B Platform and in the Girls Synchronised Platform event together with Sam Olivier as well as winning the 2XU Rising Star Award at the VIS' Award of Excellence.



BROOKE BUSCHKUEHL

# THE LOWEST LOWS, THE HIGHEST HIGHS, AND THE TEARS IN BETWEEN

**After months of feeling “broken” and questioning whether it was worth continuing her long jump career, Brooke Buschkuehl overcame all of life’s challenges to win a second-straight Commonwealth Games silver medal in Birmingham.**

After going in for knee surgery at the end of 2021, never in her wildest dreams did Buschkuehl believe she would be back jumping at her best this season, let alone on the podium at another Commonwealth Games and coming home with a new Australian/Oceania record.

“Commonwealth Games silver, it honestly feels like I have won gold,” Buschkuehl said.

“There have been so many times where I wonder why I put myself through the stress of it all, but when you do have success and things go your way, it makes it all so worthwhile.”

During the times where she doubted herself, she insists that her support team at the Victorian Institute of Sport went “above and beyond” for her during the recovery period, and always knew what she was capable of.

“I certainly wouldn’t be where I am today without the ongoing guidance, expertise and support from everyone at the VIS.”

## Jumping through pain

For all of 2021, Buschkuehl was jumping through “persistent” knee pain.

“It got to the point where I couldn’t accelerate, decelerate or jog without pain,” she said.

Determined to jump at the Tokyo Olympic Games, she tried her best to manage the pain.

On and off anti-inflammatories throughout the year and regular cortisone injections were the only answers for her pain but she still impressively pulled together a 6.83m jump at Tokyo to finish seventh.

When she returned home to Melbourne in September, she decided she could no

longer battle through the pain and surgery was her last resort.

“I had an MRI scan and that showed I had a full thickness trochlear cartilage tear, which is a tear right down to the bone,” she said.

“I had a chondroplasty and had that cleaned up, and then I also had ITB release surgery as well because my ITB was really inflamed.”

With a big 2022 athletics season on the horizon, which included the World Championships and Commonwealth Games back-to-back in July and August, the recovery gave Buschkuehl a chance to “start everything from scratch.”



## The long nonlinear road back to the pit

After a successful surgery, she was told that she could be back running 10 weeks post-surgery.

However, with any injury, the rehabilitation process is rarely linear, and Buschkuehl was feeling the full effects of this.

“I was so far from where I hoped I would be 6 months out from the World Championships,” she said.

“The recovery wasn’t going as smoothly as I would’ve liked, causing a lot of stress and frustrations knowing I had two major championships ahead.”

An international long jump career that has already spanned over 10 years, Buschkuehl has had to deal with numerous injuries. But she insists that this one has by far, been the most challenging.

“The main reason was because my quad was wasting away quite substantially towards the end of 2021, and the start of 2022, and I couldn’t activate it properly because of the pain I was in.”

Being forced to miss the Australian athletics season and the World Indoor Championships was tough for Buschkuehl, as these were event’s she had told herself she would be ready for.

Buschkuehl got into the pattern of looking forward and telling herself where she needed to be and what events she should be jumping in, instead of reflecting on the milestones she had already reached.

To try and get out of these “negative mind frames,” Buschkuehl said that she would reach out to Laura Cosgrove, the Performance Psychologist at the VIS regularly.

“Laura constantly reminded me how far I had come, and how much progress I was

making each week which kept my spirits high,” Buschkuehl said.

6 months post-surgery, Buschkuehl was back in the long jump pit jumping and determined to get back to her best in time for the upcoming major championships.

“I was super excited to get back into jumping but I also had a lot of anxiety around whether my knee was strong and stable enough to tolerate the training.”

After getting through a block of jumping in Australia, Buschkuehl headed to Europe for a few weeks to build on her competition form leading into her major events. The experience ended up being a “big blow” to her confidence, getting sick whilst away and jumping nowhere near what she knew she was capable of.

“My body just simply couldn’t do what I wanted it to do.”

“Coming home from Europe, I was just questioning everything, picking at every little thing, over-analysing every single jump in training, and it was just to a point where it was just way too much.”

## 6 years and 4 months later...

The week Buschkuehl left for America, things were all starting to come together again.

“I felt healthy, I was jumping well, I was feeling fast, and I had set some personal best testing results in the VIS gym.”

Buschkuehl’s long-time VIS strength and conditioning coach, Cory Innes, has been an integral part of her journey to date and has always believed she had “all the right ingredients” to jump big again.

“We had done some gym and jumps testing just before she flew over to America, and in this testing block, she so far exceeded anything she had ever done before,” Innes said.

“We had all been thinking somewhere between 6.90m – 7m was on the cards.”

The competition Buschkuehl had her sights on in preparation for the World Championships, was an event in Chula Vista, Southern California. Chula Vista is well known for good conditions and good jumps performances, so she knew if she got to the runway in one piece “anything was possible.”

“I remember telling my husband after my training session that I was going to jump far tomorrow,” she said.

“I hadn’t felt this confident in myself for years and even he was shocked hearing those words come out of my mouth.”

Buschkuehl opened her competition with a 6.86m jump, the furthest she had jumped since 2018, two attempts later, exceeded this jump by a further 2 centimeters.

“These jumps had well exceeded my expectations for this competition, already,” she said.

But she wasn’t done there and in her final attempt she went further than she had ever been before.

“7.13!” the judge read out to the scoring table.

A new Australian and Oceania record, a World Lead jump, and a personal best jump, 6 years and 4 months later.

“The jump felt effortless. I ran in fast, yet controlled, nailed the board and flew through the air.”

“I didn’t expect a 7.13m distance, but at the same I was not surprised after all of the months hard work I had put into get myself back to the pit.”

Innes couldn’t be happier for her when he heard the result, and insisted that it was a credit to all the work she had put in.

“I distinctly remember her saying to me, in the middle of a very difficult phase of her rehab, where she still couldn’t take weight on her injured leg, that she still felt her big jumps were still ahead of her,” he said.

“That stuck with me because it takes a lot of trust and belief after months and months of setbacks, that her best is still there.”

## Back among the World’s best

A fortnight later, Buschkuehl continued her impressive form into the Oregon World Championships.

She soared to 6.87m in the second round of the Women’s Long Jump final, missing out on

a podium finish by two centimeters.

“I’m so happy to be back competing and I’m proud based on where I’ve come from, but at the same time, those two centimeters are going to haunt me forever.”

Weeks later, she got another chance to show the world what she was capable of at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

Buschkuehl confirmed that she was well and truly back to her best, on her fifth attempt in the Women’s Long Jump final, she recorded a jump of 6.95cm – her third longest jump ever, and far enough to win her a second consecutive Commonwealth Games silver medal.

Although the same colour as the medal she won at Gold Coast 2018, this one was made even more special based on the journey she’s been on over the last four years.

“I have overcome numerous injuries, a knee surgery, dealt with two autoimmune diseases daily and the challenges when COVID struck.”

“These hard times have made the successes this season all the more special.”

When reflecting on the last 12 months, she doesn’t shy away from the fact that it’s been filled with some of the lowest lows.

“I feel like there’s been more days where I’ve been in tears this year, than I’ve been happy and smiling.”

“But I think having been through the really tough and challenging times definitely made me stronger and made me more determined as an athlete.”

“Just that pure relief and happiness. It’s definitely all worthwhile.”



IMAGES: BROOKE BUSCHKUEHL



## NATHAN EPHRAUMS

# REWARD FOR EFFORT

**Nathan Ephraums was instrumental in helping the Kookaburras to their seventh consecutive Commonwealth Games gold medal in Birmingham, but his journey onto the Australian team hasn't always been an easy ride.**



Ephraums had to overcome the heartbreak of being one of the unlucky Australian squad members to miss out on the final Olympic selection for Tokyo in 2021.

"It was definitely a challenging experience being the younger guy in the team and just missing out on selection," he said.

Although the experience was tough for Ephraums, he admits that it allowed him to work harder and make the most of future opportunities.

"It let me feel what it feels like to miss out, and it's something that I wanted to be avoiding in the future," he said.

"Missing selection put the fire in my belly to keep making sure I put my best foot forward for future tournaments."

Post Tokyo, Ephraums made his mark on the Kookaburras, proving to be one of the most reliable goal scorers in Australia's four-game series in New Zealand.

"I gave him (Colin Batch, Kookaburras Head Coach) a call to let him know that I had just tested positive to COVID after our New Zealand tournament and I was going to be out for a week," Ephraums said.

"He said, 'whilst you're on the phone, you've been selected for Birmingham.' It was such a surreal feeling and something that I'd been building towards for ages."

The striker made the most of his chance to represent Australia at his first Commonwealth Games, scoring twice in the gold medal match against India, capping off an "unbelievable" tournament.

The Kookaburras dominated from start-to-finish, defeating India 7-0 and keeping alive their golden Commonwealth Games run, still yet to be defeated in a gold medal match.

"We got to play free hockey, enjoy it, and put on a show for everyone," he said.

"Winning gold is the ultimate goal for any hockey player, and to score in the final was even better."

Ephraums high-performance journey first began when he received his scholarship at the Victorian Institute of Sport in 2017. He was coached by one of the best hockey players Australia has ever produced, Jay Stacy, who is still the current VIS Head Coach. Ephraums recalls the experience to work with Stacy as "unforgettable."

"He (Jay) has a wealth of knowledge and helped me get to where I am today and for that I am forever grateful," Ephraums said.

After working his way through the hockey ranks, at the end of 2019 Ephraums received the phone call that he'd been dreaming of since he was a kid.

"Colin Batch called me and let me know I'd made the Australian squad," he said.

"I was over the moon, it's something I wanted to do since I was a little kid playing hockey."

Part of the process of playing hockey for Australia is having to transition to Perth. Ephraums was thankful for the support of his Performance Lifestyle Manager at the VIS, Leesa Gallard, who made the process "seamless."

"Living out of home as a 20-year-old on the other side of the country, was probably more daunting than the hockey stuff at times," he said.

"She (Leesa) helped me transition my university and made the move from Melbourne to Perth a lot easier."

Looking ahead, Ephraums wants to ensure he's a regular on the Kookaburras line-up.

With the 2023 Hockey World Cup coming up in India, the Paris Olympics in 2024 and a home Commonwealth Games in Regional Victoria in 2026, there is a lot to be excited about for Ephraums.

## AOIFE COUGHLAN

# "YOU WIN OR YOU DON'T COME OFF THE MAT"

**When Aoife Coughlan woke up the morning of her Judo competition at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, she had only one thing on her mind – gold.**

"There was no other option for me other than to win," Coughlan said.

Having earlier in the week witnessed teammates Josh and Nathan Katz win bronze medals and Tinka Easton become Commonwealth Games champion – The Australian judo team were on their way to creating history in front of a packed house at Coventry Arena.

"We had such a great day the day before. Knowing we had the potential to be the best Judo team in the history of the Commonwealth Games."

When Coughlan's time came on the mat, "game plan wise," everything was falling into place.

"I'd trained really hard for this and started to realise I was good enough to do this."

After cruising through the opening rounds of the competition, Coughlan drew an opponent in the gold medal match, she wasn't anticipating, forcing her to pivot tactically.

"Ebony (from Jamaica) wasn't the person I thought I'd be fighting," she said.

"We'd planned for the other English girl (Kelly Petersen-Pollard). Kelly is right hand handed and attacks more, Ebony is left-handed and waits and counters."

"We did a little shift knowing I couldn't go down to her (Ebony's) pace. I had to lift."

Coughlan lifted.

She outlasted her opponent and their hometown support (Ebony is Jamaican but grew up in Birmingham) to take home the gold medal – a fitting reward for the countless hours of training and recovery spent at the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) and Combat Institute of Australia.

IMAGES:

LEFT: NATHAN EPHRAUMS (CREDIT, DOM HOOK)

RIGHT: AOIFE COUGHLAN



"Judo is the highest of highs and lowest of lows. And it's only your fault if you lose."

This brutality of Judo is not lost on Coughlan.

"You can spend your entire life training for this one moment and then it's over in 10 seconds – which is utterly heartbreaking. Or you can have the best day of your life and there you go you have your gold medal."

The win was made special with relatives and friends, including her 89-year-old Nanna who Coughlan describes as a "complete force," cheering her on in the stands.

"The fact that she can do all this travel at her age is just incredible," Coughlan said.

"It was the first time that (my family) had seen me fight live. And potentially the only time they would see me fight."

Coughlan's gold medal capped off a historic effort at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, with the Aussie Judokas bringing home 10 medals (2 gold, 8 bronze), the most for any Australian judo team at a Commonwealth Games.

Coughlan credited the VIS for providing the best possible integration of key performance services.

"The added support from the VIS is something we never previously had," she said.

"It adds an extra layer of professionalism."

"We now have the support of professional athletes."

Coughlan insisted that VIS Physical Preparation Coach, Dean Ritchie, played a large role behind the scenes providing the judo athletes with programs to assist with their international preparation.

"Dean was really great about putting in minimal equipment, bodyweight and moderate to gentle recovery conditioning so we could choose from four different options on any given day," Coughlan said.





IMAGES: LIZ WATSON (RIGHT IMAGE SOURCED FROM INSTAGRAM)

LIZ WATSON

## THE LONG ROAD BACK

**It's hard to imagine that Liz Watson was sidelined for almost the whole 2021 netball season, because when she returned to the court this year, she looked like she hadn't missed a beat.**

Just months after Watson co-captained the Melbourne Vixens to their third SSN Premiership, and with her bags packed for the 2021 pre-season trip to Sydney, she received a "shock" phone call that she had been fearing for a while.

It was from VIS Manager of Physiotherapy and Soft Tissue Therapy Steve Hawkins, who had just finished talking to Watson's surgeon, agreeing she would need to stay behind for an appointment.

"The news came as quite a shock, because we didn't think we'd be going down the surgery path," she said.

"But sometimes your body just knows, and surgery was the only option to get this foot right and get back out there and continue doing what I love."

Watson hadn't missed a netball season since she was an 11-year-old and knew that 2021 was going to be a challenge for her personally, but continuously reminded herself that this is "the right thing to do."

"It was about seeing the bigger picture," she said.

"There's so much netball happening next year and the year after and so much more I want to do, so I have to do this now."

Watson admits that it was a "difficult feeling" knowing she wasn't able to contribute on-court.

"I had to get my head around that, and contribute in other ways," she said.

The mentor role that Watson played to the developing players, particularly first-year player Hannah Mundy, cannot be underestimated. Mundy insisted that Watson was a great mentor and loved being able to learn from the "best wing attack in the world."

"Even though Liz wasn't on the actual court, it was really helpful to have insight from her, especially for me in my first year," Mundy said.

"I always looked to her for advice and for her to tell me what to do."

Watson used the extra time she had away from the court to continue focusing on setting up her life after netball, studying a Bachelor of Primary Education at Deakin University.

At the end of 2021, Watson could see the light at the end of the tunnel. And although missing the whole season, she was voted by her peers and deservedly named the 25th captain of the Australian



Diamonds.

"I love this sport, I love this team and I love this country. To be given the honour as captain of the Origin Australian Diamonds is something I will forever be thankful for," she said.

Diamonds head coach Stacey Marinkovich was thrilled with the appointment.

"Liz's passion and drive for success is evident and she has a fantastic ability to stay calm whilst continuing to empower players around her," Marinkovich said.

In 2022, Watson returned to the netball court in a big way.

She led the Diamonds to a significant Quad Series victory, defeating a determined England Roses side – a slice of redemption over the team who beat them for gold at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games.

Her return to Super Netball was also impressive, propelling the Vixens from the bottom of the ladder in 2021 to becoming Minor Premiers in 2022.

But one of the main highlights for the year came at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games. Watson played a key role in leading the Diamonds to a gold medal and it was only fitting that it became Australia's 1000th Commonwealth Games gold medal.

"Connected for life with the most amazing team," Watson said.

To top off a sensational year, Watson was named the winner of the VIS' very special Sarah Tait Spirit Award. Presented to an athlete who has demonstrated courage, commitment, and persistence to achieve their sporting goals, whilst showing the ability to inspire and bring out the best in others, engage with and bring pride to their community.

Like the Award's namesake, Watson has shown her fighting spirit on her long road back to the netball court.



JEMIMA MONTAG

# MONTAG SHINES BRIGHT AT VIS AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

**Jemima Montag etched her name into Victorian Institute of Sport history in 2022, becoming the first race walker to win the prestigious Award of Excellence.**

Montag capped off an impressive year on the walking track this year by taking out two awards at the VIS' Award of Excellence event held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"The Victorian Institute of Sport family is so special to be a part of," Montag said when she accepted her award.

"Thank you for celebrating my year with these awards tonight, I'm overflowing with gratitude."

In 2022 her list of accolades on the track were long, she broke a long standing 18-year 20km Australian and Oceania race walking record by 13 seconds, and won a second consecutive Commonwealth Games gold medal, months after her top 4 performance at the World Athletics Championships.

Off the track, Montag is equally impressive, which was highlighted when she was also awarded the Open Universities Australia Performance Lifestyle Award on the night. An award presented to the athlete who has achieved personal excellence in their studies, career ambitions, and/or work setting whilst pursuing their dual sporting career.

Montag is passionate about encouraging people to move, eat well and connect through her role as an IOC Young Leader, selected among a group of 25 athletes around the world. She identified a decline in participation of young girls in sport and physical activity, which drove her to develop a program 'Play On' – focusing on how females can overcome their unique barriers to playing sport.

Finally, Montag has completed a Bachelor of Science degree and is currently studying medicine at the University of Melbourne.

At the VIS Award of Excellence Montag was interviewed by MC Sam Lane after receiving the prestigious award. interviewed Montag to learn more about how she was able to juggle all her commitments in 2022.

**Sam:** If you could write your own blurb for the year 2022 – how would you compose it?

**Jemima:** It has been an awkward balance, with first year medicine, World Championships and Commonwealth Games all in the same year. I've tried to have them all up on full volume at the same time at times,

but it's just not possible. In the middle of the year when I was overseas competing, medicine had to be put on the side and I was grateful to have support from the VIS Performance Lifestyle team and to everyone who was able to help me do that juggle. Then recently when I had my medical exams, training really had to take a step to the side. It's been really awkward, but we finally got there in the end.

**Sam:** You don't have to be Jemima to think 'how do I juggle life,' what techniques do you use to try and calm the mind and do all the things you're able to do?

**Jemima:** Two things; it's definitely about the village and leaning on the people around you. But the other thing would be based off something I heard Hugh van Cuylenburg say on a podcast, which was about "leaning into the season you're in." If you're juggling a number of things, it can be frustrating when you can't do all of them to the highest level at the same time, particularly when you're comparing yourself to others in those few areas. But it's really about embracing, that right now I'm in a season of medical exams or Commonwealth Games and allowing yourself to lean into that thing. You can't have everything up on full volume at once, instead you've got smaller focus' throughout the year.

**Sam:** Can you tell us more about the girls 'Play On' program and the IOC Young Leaders work that you're doing?

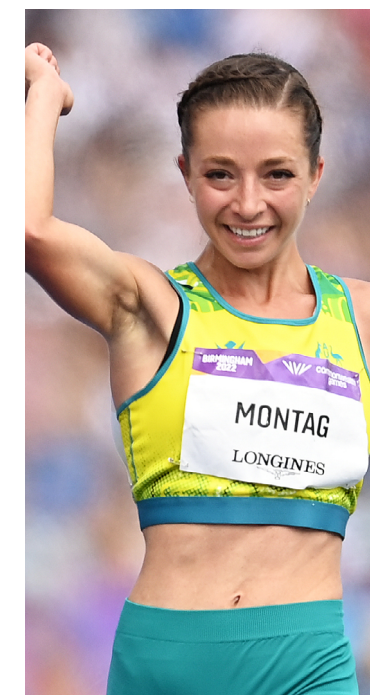
**Jemima:** The International Olympic Committee has a new program called the Young Leaders program where they selected 25 people from around the world and I am one of them for 2021 to 2025. Each leader has four years to build a sports-based solution to a pressing local issue that they're passionate about. It was easy for me to pick the decline in women and girls in sport and recreation as a pressing local issue as it's something that I'm passionate about. It then became about 'how do we address this issue?' I brought together a team of 14 women experts, and we put together a resource that young girls from sports clubs and schools can use to hopefully overcome a lot of challenges that we face in certain stages of our lives.

It's now also become part of the VIS' 'Be Fit. Be Well' speaker program, meaning

that when schools have a female athlete talk at their school they can opt for a 'Play On' themed visit. That athlete will then share their story with the students and touch on the four key theme of 'Play On.' Also granting access to the online resource that we put together.

**Sam:** I'm mindful of not wanting to overload you Jemima, in terms of putting what's next on the agenda and I'm sure people that live and breathe around you think that 'she doesn't need to strive more, she strives enough' – But what are some of the things on your dream list to achieve, in any part of your life?

**Jemima:** This year I came fourth at the World Championships, the saddest place to come. I would love to be on the podium at World Championships next year if we spoke again in 12 months. Beyond that, I would love to become an Olympic gold medalist in Paris, so we will see what we can do.



## AWARD OF EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

**Award of Excellence:** Jemima Montag  
**Open Universities Australia**

**Performance Lifestyle Award:** Jemima Montag

**2XU Rising Star Award:** Charli Petrov

**Para Athlete Award:** Col Pearse

**Sarah Tait Spirit Award:** Liz Watson

**Frank Pyke Achievement Award:** James Tomkins



AVISH SHARMA

## TEAM BEHIND THE ATHLETE

VIS Performance Scientist, Avish Sharma, spent eight weeks in Switzerland preparing Australian athletics athletes for the World Championships in Oregon and the Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

The VIS sat down with Avish to learn more about altitude training and why elite athletes include it in their programs.

**VIS:** What are the benefits of basing training in Switzerland?

**Avish:** The altitude in Switzerland provided a great base for our athletics athletes to conduct their training in between the World Championships and Commonwealth Games, and its location provided convenient for those athletes who had other competitions in Europe to attend as well.

St Moritz is such a beautiful location to train with so many natural advantages and athletic facilities – everyone just seems happy to be there which creates a great footing for a training camp. It is quite unusual for major events to be this close together, so being able to provide an altitude base to train was crucial to helping the athletes perform at their best. For the walkers, it was part of a long term strategy to accumulate time at altitude in the lead up to the 2024 Paris Olympics; our track and marathon athletes are also frequent users of altitude training, so it was a natural fit for them to base in St Moritz also.

**VIS:** How does altitude training benefit athletes?

**Avish:** For elite-athletes, altitude training provides an added advantage where training manipulation is limited in increasing performance. Briefly, the lower oxygen availability characteristic of altitude stimulates the body to produce more red blood cells, an adaptation beneficial for performance. Furthermore, training itself becomes harder, and we can use this to help our athletes get fitter than training at sea level alone when managed correctly.



IMAGES: LEFT & MIDDLE: JEMIMA MONTAG  
RIGHT: AVISH SHARMA WORKS WITH JEMIMA MONTAG



KRISTY WALLACE

# A STORY OF VULNERABILITY, PERSEVERANCE, AND HARD WORK

Kristy Wallace's journey back to the basketball court has been a "roller-coaster ride" filled with joy, life lessons and some really tough challenges that she doesn't believe she could've overcome without the support of the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS).



IMAGE: KRISTY WALLACE

VIS Manager of Physical Therapies Steve Hawkins, and VIS Physical Preparation Coach Ben King, have been on the 'ride' with Wallace for the last 3 years. She describes them as "her rocks" in her journey back to the court after a series of knee injuries threatened to end her promising basketball career.

"I honestly wouldn't have made it back to playing professional basketball without the support of the people in my corner at the VIS," Wallace said.

## Wallace's Heartbreak

Considered to be one of the best talents of her generation in the American college system, it seemed that Wallace was always destined for big things. But in her final playing year for Baylor University in Texas, she suffered her first anterior crucial ligament (ACL) tear, bringing her prosperous college career to a close, a competition where she had earned all-conference defensive honours.

"When I first tore my ACL, I was upset at the time, but I don't think I really understood what it meant or the journey I was about to undertake," Wallace said.

After suffering the blow, Wallace thought there was "no doubt" she would miss out on the WNBA and was "shocked" to

receive a phone call from the Atlanta Dream, who drafted her with the 16th pick in the 2018 WNBA draft, even knowing she would not be on the court for some time.

The rehab was "relatively uncomplicated," and she made it back to the WNBL with the University of Canberra Capitals for the 2018/19 season. In her second game after spending nine months on the sidelines, Wallace went down in agony clutching at the same knee, with her worst fears later being confirmed that she had torn her ACL and would need another reconstruction.

Rehab is never a fun journey, it's a long, gruelling process and for Wallace, it gave her plenty of time to think. The journey was now no longer about returning to the court to play basketball at the highest level, it became more about self-discovery – who was Kristy, if she wasn't a basketballer?

Wallace made the decision to "start fresh" when an opportunity came to move to Melbourne.

## The Victorian Institute of Sport

"I remember my first coffee with Ben King, I told him that my only goal at that point was simply to be healthy and to run again,"

Wallace said. "Our journey began there."

Ben King who started at the VIS in 2016, has a wealth of strength and conditioning experience, having worked with some of Victoria's best athletes. Wallace says that since the day they met in 2020, King has supported her every step of the way.

"There were days when I would be a bagful of tears, crying during my warm-ups and having no idea what I was doing or why I was doing it," Wallace said. "Regardless, Ben showed up every day, and that meant the world."

"He kept tedious rehab playful, challenged me mentally, physically and worked incredibly hard to find different strategies and methods that worked for my body."

"No matter how I felt walking into the VIS, I always felt better after I'd been in the building," she said.

Another challenge arose in 2020, the VIS closed its doors for the first time in its history due to the coronavirus pandemic, with staff and athletes forced to work remotely. A time Wallace says was "challenging" with everyone being isolated from each other.

"I never once felt alone in my rehab,

even during the coronavirus pandemic, I always knew I was supported the whole way through," she said.

Aligned with a second Victorian lockdown, Wallace was sent into have a second arthroscopy on her injured knee to hopefully try and reduce some of the pain and swelling that was still going on.

"At this point in my career I had played 14 minutes of basketball in 3 years, giving so much to rehabbing my knee, unsure of how much more I could give," she said.

Having considered retirement, with no confidence in her body anymore, Steve Hawkins was called upon for advice and guidance after the procedure.

A crucial part of the journey was the "open and honest" conversations the three of them would have on an ongoing basis about where Wallace was at and how she was feeling. She was always assured no matter what decision she wanted to make around her rehab, the VIS would continue supporting her.

"We were honest and transparent with Kristy from day one," Hawkins said. "When she asked us whether she would play again we answered honestly – we didn't know. But we also didn't know that she wouldn't play again either."

Wallace decided to give it one last go.

## The "hardest worker"

Wallace got to work. For most of her rehab she would spend 5-6 days a week, training in the VIS gym.

King and Wallace developed a unique relationship, where they would constantly push each other to "learn more" and keep things exciting, especially given how hard she attacked her training.

They would always ensure that things were taken "one step at a time" and never looked forward more than a few weeks, adjusting based on how she was responding to the training.

Together they set three simple goals; "Enjoy human movement, get strong and try to enjoy basketball."

In the gym, Wallace is "determined" and one of the most "impressive" athletes that King has had the pleasure working with. He admits that there were often times he had to watch through his fingers as she pushed herself beyond what he believed was possible.

"I've honestly never seen an athlete do some of the things she has done in the gym," King said.

Whilst King did the strength and conditioning programming, Hawkins was always on hand to provide clinical input and

help, and to collaborate with progression planning and testing.

"They've [King and Hawkins] guided me and given me the best advice that I will carry with me throughout life," Wallace said. "They're incredibly hardworking, intelligent, reliable and most importantly just great humans."

The success of the work that Hawkins and King have been able to achieve with Wallace, is entirely reliant on the truly collaborative approach to her rehab. But ultimately Wallace is the person who has done all of the work, felt all of the pains, and managed all of the doubts and frustrations.

"Any success that she has, is her success, not ours," Hawkins insisted.

## 870 days later...

There came a moment in time where it was no longer possible to keep Wallace on the side-lines, she had been progressing in the gym, training consistently on the court and her knee was responding to everything that was thrown her way.

One element in the VIS 'return to sport testing' is repeated single leg squats to the point of failure.

"60 reps is a good score, 80 is excellent, 90+ is outstanding," Hawkins said. "Kristy did over 200! The most I have ever seen an athlete do."

May 10, 2020 – Wallace ran out on court again for the first time in 870 days.

"As terrifying as my first game back was, I was able to find that enjoyment," Wallace said.

After successfully getting through a modified season with the Melbourne Tigers in the NBLI competition, Australian Opals Head Coach Sandy Brondello selected Wallace for the 2021 FIBA Women's Asia Cup.

With a large amount of fear weighing on her shoulders, Wallace was unsure if she was ready to pull on the green and gold jersey.

"Given everything Kristy has been through, she often faced significant fear of getting back on the court and getting re-injured," King said.

Being an Opal was a childhood dream for Wallace, as she recalls the memories of her younger self in awe as she watched the Opals on TV.

"I made the decision to go, and I'm really glad I did," she said.

King and Hawkins admit that watching her achieve her dreams and aspirations after a battle that not many people are tough enough to face is truly inspiring and a "testament to the type of person she is."

But King insists that whilst seeing

her play basketball at the top level again is incredible, he believes the real success has been the journey of self-discovery that she has been on.

"I think the gratification comes from seeing the progress along the journey, being part of a collaborative, innovative and ultimately successful team, and watching someone discover the best version of herself."

## Every step of the journey

In April this year Wallace had a real "pinch me" moment when she was signed by the WNBA Team Atlanta Dream.

"The Imposter Syndrome was real at times, but to be in the WNBA and to play basketball at such an intense level everyday was a great experience," she said.

After the WNBA season Wallace achieved another goal when she was selected to the Australian Opals team for the 2022 FIBA Women's World Championships in Sydney.

Competing at the World Cup on home soil was an unforgettable experience for Wallace having her friends and family in the crowd.

"One special moment was when my S&C coach Ben King flew down to watch. One of my favourite moments was seeing his face in the crowd, someone who knows all the ins and outs of my journey and has been there through the lowest and highest times and seeing how proud he was."

King and Hawkins admit that watching Wallace achieve her dreams and aspirations after a battle that not many people are tough enough to face is truly inspiring and a "testament to the type of person she is."

But King insists that whilst seeing her play basketball at the top level again is incredible, he believes the real success has been the journey of self-discovery that she has been on.

"I think the gratification comes from seeing the progress along the journey, being part of a collaborative, innovative and ultimately successful team, and watching someone discover the best version of herself."

One of the unique factors about the VIS is the collaborative approach used by the inter-disciplinary teams, providing leadership to athletes to excel in sport and life. A commonly used phrase in high performance sport, 'it takes a village to raise a champion,' is certainly the case in the story of Kristy Wallace.

Whilst Wallace's story is a good one. It's not finished yet. She still has so much to contribute to the world, either in high performance sport or outside of it.



# VICTORIA 2026



## VICTORIA WILL HOST THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES

The Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) congratulates and thanks the Commonwealth Games Federation for selecting Victoria to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games, confirming the state as a leader in delivering world class sporting events.

CEO of the VIS, Anne Marie Harrison, said the Commonwealth Games provide a unique opportunity to showcase regional Victoria to an international audience, and gives local athletes the experience of performing in their home state.

"The 2026 Commonwealth Games is both a milestone event and a development opportunity for Australian athletes," she said.

"We look forward to supporting our Victorian athletes to be at their best and help make the Australian team proud, bring it on Victoria 2026!"

Chair of the VIS, Nataly Matijevic, congratulated both the Victorian Government and Commonwealth Games Australia on creating the opportunity to host the Commonwealth Games.

"It is particularly exciting that the events will be hosted in regional Victoria and we are excited by the opportunities to upgrade sporting facilities that will provide on-going community benefit. The events will also inspire the next generation of athletes from across the state and give Victorians the chance to witness sporting excellence," she said.

Australian Olympic and Paralympic table tennis player and Commonwealth Games gold medallist, Melissa (Milly) Tapper who grew up in Hamilton in regional Victoria, is excited about the prospect of another Commonwealth Games in Australia.

"Having a Commonwealth Games in Victoria is so exciting, and it will be incredible to compete in a major event on home soil again, and especially when it will run through the regions," she said.

## STARS OF THE FUTURE

Table tennis players Finn Luu and Nicholas Lum made their debut at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games at only 17 years of age.

Both are exciting prospects of the future who showed their promise at their first Commonwealth Games.

The duo made it all the way to the semi-finals in the Men's Double where they went down in a hard fought five set match to the more experienced team from India, Sharath Kamal Achanta and Sathiyan Gnanasekaran.

Luu also qualified for the round of 32 in the Men's singles where he was defeated once again by Achanta, who is more than double his age – 40-years-old. Meanwhile, Lum made it to the round of 16.

We caught up with the rising stars of Australian Table Tennis to learn more about their experience in Birmingham and their outlook on the next Commonwealth Games on home soil in 2026 in Victoria.

**VIS:** Nicholas, what was it like to compete at your first Commonwealth Games?

**Nicholas:** Competing at my first Commonwealth Games was an unforgettable experience. Playing against top level players from many countries has helped me improve as a player.

**VIS:** The next Commonwealth Games will be in Victoria, what do you look most forward to about having a home Games?

**Nicholas:** I'm looking forward to representing Australia in front of my friends and family at such a prestigious event. They have supported me throughout my table tennis career and have got me to where I am today.

**VIS:** Hi Finn, Do you think you will feel an added pressure when you compete in front of your home crowd?

**Finn:** There will be an added pressure to deal with which is only natural when playing on home soil in front of family and friends. This pressure is only part of the game and I believe that I should be adequately adapted to be able to use this extra pressure to allow me to play better

**VIS:** What is your goal at the Victoria Commonwealth Games?

**Finn:** Considering the results I had at the Games in Birmingham, my goals for 2026 would be to medal in all the events I play. A gold medal in any event would be especially nice. I know it's easy to speculate but it will require years of preparation and discipline to achieve these goals.



IMAGES: LEFT: GOVERNMENT POSE WITH VIS ATHLETES  
MIDDLE: NICHOLAS LUM (LEFT) & FINN LUU (RIGHT)  
RIGHT: RANGE OF PICTURES SOURCED THROUGH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

# VIS COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

In 2022 Victorian Institute of Sport scholarship holders returned to the school grounds all around Victoria, telling their stories and inspiring students to stay fit and active.



“As the kids said, we were so inspired and truly appreciated the way Stuart told his story. Stuart was an engaging and candid speaker and had 40 students focused and involved for the entire time. The students were curious about Stuart's experience so much that we were left googling more information about the Paralympics and athletes' experiences even after he left.”

- Teacher, Glenrowan Primary School



“On behalf of Yea HS, I'd just like to say thank you for organising Josh Katz to speak to our students. We were lucky enough to have him speak to our Year 10 cohort as well as speaking to our whole school during our assembly. He shared his story and aspirations with students, inspiring them to set goals and persevere. We really appreciate the opportunity and we wish him all the best for his future endeavours. We will be cheering for him.”

- Assistant Principal, Yea High School



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