

# PINNACLE

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# FROM THE CEO

NICOLE LIVINGSTONE OAM  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

It is a pleasure and honour to pen my first message as Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Institute of Sport, an organisation that has been somewhat of a spiritual home to me since 1990 when I was an inaugural scholarship holder.



Whilst the home base is a little different to the one that greeted me as an athlete 34-years ago on Albert Road, there are some obvious similarities. The energy of the VIS hits the moment you go through the doors. It exudes passion, drive, and a desire to enable Victoria's athletes to be the best in their respective fields from our staff and the dedication and the hard work and attention to detail by our athletes to hone their craft is on full display.

In the 12-months leading into Paris the VIS has proudly supported over 500 athletes, equating to 99% of Victoria's categorised athletes across 45 sport disciplines.

This is the 100th edition of the VIS Pinnacle magazine, after the first edition was published in October 1990.

Whilst looking through the publications left in the office by my predecessor Anne Marie Harrison, I came across the third edition of Pinnacle, published February 1991. It was a pleasant surprise to read the thoughts of inaugural CEO, Dr Frank Pyke, as he reviewed that year's World Swimming Championships results and spoke to the VIS' plans to support me on my Barcelona Olympic campaign, which I eventually won Olympic bronze in the 200m backstroke.

This milestone edition provides insight into our athletes and their experiences

in 2024, which included the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris. The Games were packed with memorable moments, including athletic feats and historic firsts, all of which took place at stunning venues in front of enthusiastic crowds.

VIS athletes made an outstanding contribution to Australia's Olympic and Paralympic teams, with 122 competing across both Games, and 31 VIS staff assisting both campaigns.

83 VIS athletes were selected in the 460-strong Australian Olympic Team, our highest representation since Beijing 2008, with nine athletes winning eight medals, equating to 15% of Australia's record-breaking medal haul. While VIS athletes proudly made up a quarter of the 160-strong Australian Paralympic Team, our highest representation since Athens in 2004, with fifteen VIS athletes contributing to the medal tally.

In all, our VIS athletes returned with 23 medals; five gold, four silver and 14 bronze.

Our golden performances emerged from two sports: cycling and table tennis. Grace Brown on the road in the Individual Time Trial and Kelland O'Brien on the track with the Men's Team Pursuit, won Olympic cycling gold. Emily Petricola OAM won Paracycling gold on the track and along the way claimed a world record in the C4 Individual Pursuit.

Qian Yang OAM was a standout VIS athlete in Paris. The four-time table tennis Paralympian won two golds in the WS10 Singles and the Doubles, with partner Lina Lei OAM.

VIS athletes also won medals in athletics, basketball, boxing, shooting, rowing, swimming and wheelchair rugby. Yang and Lei, Olympic race walker Jemima Montag and Para-cyclist Alistair Donohoe all won two medals.

As ever, the Games were both a start and end. 54 VIS athletes made their Olympic

or Paralympic debuts, while for others, Paris was a final word. Opals captain Tess Madgen, who led the team to bronze, announced her retirement. As did Grace Brown, after a history making season.

Paris marked the conclusion of one cycle and the beginning of another, and I would like to sincerely thank and congratulate the 83 Olympians and 39 Paralympians, along with their VIS coaches and performance support staff, extended networks, and importantly their families, for their endeavours over the four-year cycle.

Away from the Games, 7 VIS athletes won 8 World Championship titles, whilst 21 finished in podium positions during the 2024 calendar year. This continues the positive trend in performance and is a tribute to the talent, hard work and dedication of those athletes and the many personal and VIS coaches and staff guiding them.

Finally, as I take the reins from Anne Marie Harrison after 18 progressive years at the helm, I would like to formally thank and applaud her for her lengthy stewardship of the VIS and her enormous service to Australian high-performance sport. Her passion and enthusiasm for our athletes and staff and willingness to dig in and work for them is renowned. She has shown many what it means to lead with empathy, integrity, and passion and has left an indelible mark on the organisation. But her true legacy lies in the one-of-a-kind "VIS family" culture she has created – something that is recognised by every athlete and staff member, and something I will wholeheartedly endeavour to continue.

With the dust now settled, 2024 is a wonderful memory, but the VIS is teeming with the ambition, drive and effort required for a long march to Milano Cortina in 2026, Los Angeles in 2028 and beyond, a march that I am thrilled and proud to lead.



VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF SPORT

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO. 3 FEBRUARY, 1991

## FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Chief Executive Frank Pyke

Breastroker Linley Frame, was clearly superior to the field in winning the final of the 100 metre event and if she continues to improve, she will undoubtedly be a strong contender at the Barcelona Olympics. Linley developed her talent as a young "Water Lion" with Victorian "home coach" Wayne Laws, then spent the last two years working with AIS breaststroke coach Terry Gathercole.

Nicole Livingstone, who made the world championship finals in 100 and 200 metre backstroke has preferred to live and train in Melbourne. However, now finds it useful to supplement her preparation for Barcelona with sojourns in Canberra and overseas. This will allow for periods of specialised training and regular competition against the best swimmers in the world. At this stage of her career this would seem to be the best strategy for Nicole, who now needs to make the next step from being a finalist to being a medallist in world level competition. VIS swimming co-ordinator Buddy Portier will oversee her program during this important period.

The Frame-Livingstone situation underlines the importance of co-ordinating State and National programs in satisfying the needs of individual athletes.

## VIC HEALTH STATE SWIMMING CHAMPIONSHIPS



VIS swimmer Nicole Livingstone broke the 13-year-old Victorian record in the women's 100 metre freestyle at the recent State Championships.

Her time of 57.9 seconds makes her the second Victorian woman to break the 58 second barrier. Nicole beat fellow VIS swimmers Penny O'Connell and Megan Llewellyn.

Mark Thompson (VIS) won the 100m freestyle event in a time of 54.23 seconds, and was also successful in winning the men's 100m, 200m, 400m and 800m freestyle.

Nineteen year old Andrew Maver (VIS) won the 1500m freestyle in 16:13.29 seconds and the 200m individual medley.

Congratulations to all three winners.

## VIS SWIMMERS AT THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS



Although not happy with her overall performance at the Championships, Nicole Livingstone can still manage a smile for the photographer.



Silver medallists of the Women's 4 x 100m medley. Pictured: Nicole Livingstone, Linley Frame, Susan O'Neill and Karen Van Wirdum.

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The start of the 50m backstroke heats, Nicole Livingstone (lane 4) is quick off the mark.



## PARIS REVIEW

# NEW HISTORY WRITTEN FOR VIS ATHLETES

The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games were packed with memorable moments, including athletic feats and historic firsts, that took place at stunning venues in front of vocal crowds.



122 Victorian Institute of Sport athletes competed in Paris across both Games, marking the conclusion of one four-year cycle and the beginning of another, with Los Angeles in 2028 already on the minds of many.

Some, such as teenage Olympians Brock Batty and Keefer Wilson, or 20-year-old runner Claudia Hollingsworth, are eyeing Brisbane in 2032.

But Paris won't be forgotten quickly.

The city itself was podium worthy, with its Gallic charms at times seemingly in competition for attention with some of the incredible action.

Olympic beach volleyball, contested before the Eiffel Tower, may never know such a picturesque juxtaposition again.

In all, the VIS cohort returned with 23 medals; five gold, four silver and 14 bronze.

VIS cyclists were a force to be reckoned with at both Games. Grace Brown claimed top honours in the Women's Road Individual Time Trial (ITT) and Kelland O'Brien made track history as part of the Men's Team

Pursuit with a World Record on their way to golden glory.

Emily Petricola OAM won Para-cycling gold in the Women's C4 3000m Individual Pursuit, claiming back-to-back titles from Tokyo. Her win was made sweeter after enduring a gruelling lead into Paris with an MS flare-up.

Paralympic cycling debutant, Alana Forster, also came home with a bronze medal and Alistair Donohoe won two Para-cycling medals, a silver and bronze.

VIS Para-table tennis athletes were also a standout during the Paralympics, namely a silent assassin by the name of Qian Yang OAM.

Yang, a four-time Paralympian won gold in the WD20 Doubles class alongside teammate Lina Lei OAM, then another gold days later in WS10 Singles. Her victories in Paris are the fourth consecutive Paralympic Games she has medalled in.

Lei and Ma Lin also finished with bronze medals in the WS9 and MS9 table tennis respectively.

Jemima Montag joined Australian athletics history, becoming the sixth Australian woman to win two medals in athletics at one Olympic Games.

She executed a strong and strategic performance in the Women's 20km Race Walk to take home bronze, then paired with VIS athlete, Rhydian Cowley, in the Mixed Marathon Race Walk Relay (a debut event at the Games) to claim another bronze together.

VIS athletes also won medals in other athletics disciplines, basketball, boxing, shooting, rowing, swimming and wheelchair rugby.

As ever, the Games were both a start and end. 54 VIS athletes made their Olympic or Paralympic debuts, which suggests that there is much to work with and look forward to as LA approaches.

Dayna Crees, who surprised with Paralympic bronze in the F34 javelin and Reece Langdon, performing a tactical run to claim bronze in the 1500m T38, were among the debutants.

For others, Paris was a closing chapter on their athlete careers. Opals captain Tess Madgen, who led the team to a bronze medal, announced her retirement, as did Paralympic long jumper Nick Hum, Olympic diver Anabelle Smith and Olympic and Paralympic table tennis star, Melissa Tapper.

The youngest VIS athlete in Paris was 17-year-old skater Wilson, who made the park final and will see his favoured ramp discipline included on the skate program in LA. The oldest was Dianne Barnes, the colourful 66-year-old Para-equestrian from the Mornington Peninsula.

While Paris is now a wonderful memory, the VIS is humming with the ambition, drive and effort required for a long march to LA and beyond.



IMAGES: TOP: (L to R) ANNABELLE MCINTYRE AND JESSICA MORRISON, TESS MADGEN  
MIDDLE: (L to R) MADDISON KEENEY AND ANABELLE SMITH, AISLIN JONES  
BOTTOM: (L to R) JEMIMA MONTAG, KEEFER WILSON



## AOE WINNERS

# GOLDEN GRACE BROWN CAPS OFF DREAM YEAR WITH VIS AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Olympic and World Champion cyclist Grace Brown joined the Victorian Institute of Sport honour roll as winner of the prestigious Award of Excellence for 2024, presented at a gala event held at Zinc at Federation Square in Melbourne's CBD in November.



Grace Brown joins previous winners such as Cathy Freeman OAM, Dylan Alcott AO, Lydia Lassila OAM, Mack Horton OAM, Cadel Evans AM and 2023 recipients Australian Diamonds Liz Watson, Jo Weston and Kiera Austin.

The Award of Excellence recognises the most outstanding achievement in high-performance sport by a VIS athlete.

Brown was recognised with the 2024 Award of Excellence for her international triumphs at the Paris Olympics and the World Championships, while her accolades off the bike were highlighted when she was also awarded the Open Universities Australia Performance Lifestyle Award for 2024.

"I'm very honoured to win this award, I've been up against some exceptional finalists and in a year where we have the Olympics, Paralympics and so many huge sporting events, I'm really blown away to be the one receiving this award because this room is full of exceptional performances," said Brown.

"At the start of the year there were some definite struggles. I was at the VIS very regularly, seeing Alison Low [VIS physiotherapist] for maybe 10 hours per

week during my off season, trying to get me back up and running.

"In my final year in the sport... I think that's what it gave me too, the superpower to go all in and make sure that I left no stone unturned.

"Thank you everyone for supporting me, thank you for being on the journey. Keep doing all the good work, keep achieving and making Victoria proud. I'm very proud to be a part of this state," she added.

Paralympic and World Champion Paracyclist, Emily Petricola OAM, dual bronze medallist in Paris race walker Jemima Montag, and dual Paralympic gold medallist in table tennis Qian Yang OAM were among the other nominees for the 2024 Award of Excellence.

Petricola, the 2023 Para Individual Pursuit World Champion, won Individual Pursuit gold on the track at the Paris Paralympics in world record time and finished fourth in the C4 Individual Time Trial.

Montag, silver medallist at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest, won two bronze medals in Paris, finishing third in the 20km Race Walk and third in the Mixed Marathon Relay event with VIS colleague Rhydian Cowley.

Qian's double success in Paris – in the WS10 Singles and Doubles with Lina Lei OAM - continued a run that will ensure she is remembered as one of the greatest Para table tennis players of all-time. Qian has medalled at four consecutive Paralympic Games including five gold medals.

Two of the AOE nominees, Petricola and Yang, were named joint winners of the VIS Para Athlete Award 2024.

Olympic rower Jean Mitchell won the very special Sarah Tait Spirit Award. Aged just

16, Mitchell was diagnosed with brain cancer, presenting her with incredible challenges in sport and life.

She underwent surgery to remove the tumour followed by several rounds of radiation and chemotherapy. After two arduous years, she was now in remission and slowly returned to rowing.

Mitchell maintained an inspiring positivity, rebuilt her strength and fitness from scratch, and fulfilled her dream of competing at the Olympics as part of the Women's Four in Paris.

Outside the boat, she serves as ambassador for Connor's Run and Connor's Erg, studies a Bachelor of Design at Deakin University and supports Rowing Australia with the design of their athlete handbooks.

Brock Batty won the 2XU Rising Star Award after a year where he made history, becoming the youngest ever athlete to compete in the Trampoline Gymnastics event at an Olympics and finishing a very respectable 13th.

The Frank Pyke Achievement Award, presented to an athlete who enjoyed a successful sporting career, made a significant contribution to the VIS and their sport and who has built a successful post-athletic career, was awarded to former Diamonds and Vixens/Kestrels icon Sharelle McMahon.

One of Australia's all-time greats in their sport, McMahon represented Australia at four Commonwealth Games, winning two gold and two silver medals and three World Cups, winning twice.

Following her successful sporting career she is now a respected media presenter and engaging keynote speaker, and currently holds the role of Head of Female Cricket at Cricket Victoria.



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QIAN YANG OAM

# IN A CLASS OF HER OWN

Australia received a gift in the form of an unstoppable Para-table tennis sensation when Qian Yang OAM emigrated from China after the Rio 2016 Paralympics, arriving Down Under to improve her English and for a life change.



The table tennis extraordinaire also arrived with a desire to bring glory to her adopted country, which she, and two other former Chinese champions Lina Lei OAM and Ma Lin, brought in spades.

Qian won two medals at the Tokyo Paralympics, claimed Australia's only table tennis gold medal at the 2022 Commonwealth Games and made a clean sweep across all the international events she competed at in 2023.

The four-time Paralympian, who now calls Melbourne home, may also have reason to be regarded as the standout VIS athlete in Paris, bringing home two gold medals for her adopted country.

Virtually unknown in Australian sporting circles despite winning their singles competitions at Tokyo in 2021, Yang and Lei joined forces in Paris to beat Taiwanese top seeds Lin Tzu Yu and Tian Shiau Wen 11-7 11-6 3-11 12-10 in the Women's Doubles WD20 classification final.

Needing just a touch under half an hour to win the Doubles gold, the dynamic duo proudly wrapped themselves in the Aussie flag and embraced their other squad members before heading to the podium for the playing of Advance Australia Fair.

In the Women's Singles Class 10 competition, Yang was in a class of her own.

She brushed past Poland's Natalia Partyka 11-6 11-9 -12-10 in a lopsided gold medal match in the French capital that also lasted less than half an hour.

With the win, the naturalised Chinese star successfully retained the Category 10 Singles crown she first won for Australia at the Tokyo Paralympics in 2021 and solidified her standing as one of the world's best Para-table tennis players.

Just 28 and at the peak of her powers, she is now in search of a new challenge and has revealed she is going to have a crack at trying to make the Australian team for the next Olympics.

"If I am given the opportunity, I would really like to compete for Australia at the Olympics," said Yang, who was born without a forearm below her left elbow.

"I really like playing for Australia. There is a very friendly training environment. It is not very high pressure in the team."

That's her polite way of saying she doesn't get a lot of serious competition in her current category, which is entirely true, because she really is a cut above everyone else.

The competition is much harder at the Olympics and just qualifying is a feat itself although a handful of talented women have competed at both Games - including VIS stalwart, Melissa Tapper.

Yang is a woman of few words but of many medals, and following her golden campaign in Paris, is the certified rock star of the Australian Para-table tennis team.

There's no question where her allegiance sits now.

KELLAND O'BRIEN

# MEN'S TEAM PURSUIT BREAK 20-YEAR DROUGHT IN PARIS VELODROME

At long last, Australia was crowned the Men's Team Pursuit Olympic champion at Paris 2024.



It took just three minutes and 42 seconds to end 20 years of pain. It wiped away the pain of the broken handlebars that robbed them in Tokyo.

The pain of being denied gold by just 0.7 of a second in Rio, and by 2.9 seconds in London, and of missing the medals altogether in Beijing.

And who else could they beat in the final than Great Britain which had been the source of so much of that pain for so many years.

VIS athlete Kelland O'Brien and teammates Sam Welsford, Conor Leahy and Oliver Bledbyn emerged from a titanic battle with their arch-rival at the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines National Velodrome with a historic gold medal.

Barely 0.2 of a second separated the two teams for almost the entire 4km before Australia broke their opponents on the final lap and won by over two seconds.

Their time of 3:42.067 was slower than their world record ride 24 hours earlier when they clocked 3:40.430, but it didn't matter.

It was Australia's first gold medal in the sport's blue riband event since Athens in 2004 when Graeme Brown, Brett Lancaster, Brad McGee and Luke Roberts beat Great Britain in the final.

And to show how far - and fast - the sport has come in 20 years, their winning time in 2004 was 3:58.

Of all the iterations Australia has had trying to break the Olympic drought, it took two debutants in Leahy and Bledbyn who teamed with experienced campaigners O'Brien and Welsford to deliver a historic victory.

O'Brien said the final went to plan.

"It was a heated battle as it always is, hats off to those guys they rode an amazing race, and we just stuck to our process and nailed it," he said.

"I couldn't be more proud of the boys and our coach Tim [Decker] for getting it done, we've said all along it's going to be won on day three and it was."

Eight years earlier, Welsford and Decker sat in the middle of the velodrome in Rio dejected, having just lost to a Bradley Wiggins-led Great Britain by 0.7 of a second - a margin so small it's almost impossible to even measure.

In Paris, Welsford and Decker were arm in arm after the race, having turned the tables.

Decker has been through Olympic cycles in Rio and Tokyo with Australia, then took a one-year sabbatical coaching in China in 2022.

But he returned to coach Australia to Paris because he knew he had unfinished business and after the race he was almost lost for words.

"This is such a big moment for these boys and they deserve it, we've been to hell and back and for them to make this happen has been amazing," he said.

"And to be a small part of that journey, to help lead them and get them to keep believing that it was possible, that's one of the things I've prided myself on."

Asked whether he was surprised by what his riders were able to do in Paris, he replied:

"No, never. People forget Tokyo and what happened. We were a very, very strong team there and we got a bronze medal and the resilience these boys showed and to move forward from that and come back and make this happen is high level history in track endurance cycling."

CREDIT: REECE HOMFRAY | AUSTRALIAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE



EMILY PETRICOLA OAM

# PROUD PETRICOLA DEFENDS PARALYMPIC TITLE

## Emily Petricola OAM overcomes gruelling MS flare-up to defend Paralympic title

Emily Petricola OAM could not hide her delight when she successfully defended her Tokyo Paralympic title in the C4 3000-metre Individual Pursuit in Paris.

The 44-year-old fired a warning shot in qualifying, stopping the clock at 3:35.856 to smash the world record already belonging to her.

She returned two hours later and hauled in gold, producing a crushing victory when she overlapped Kiwi Anna Taylor just over 2500 metres into the race.

The Victorian screamed with elation when victory was confirmed, and tears flowed as she embraced her team and loved ones at the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines Velodrome.

It was an emotional victory for Petricola who had been battling severe multiple sclerosis flare-ups that caused spasms on her left side in the lead up to the Games.

"It's been such a hard eight weeks - my body has been fighting me really hard," she said.

"It's been a crazy, horrible period, but this makes it worth it."

Petricola was diagnosed with MS at age 27 and describes it as an "invisible disability", affecting life in unseen ways — from tremors to sight loss to extreme fatigue, and more.

She was particularly grateful to win for those who had been through the highs and lows with her.

"I've been in an MS flare-up for the last eight weeks and I literally could only get on the bike because of the medical support I've received from my team."

"This one has caused a lot of muscle spasm through my back, my left leg and then into my neck... my abdominal area — the whole thing is gone."

"We've had to manage my load just to make sure my leg turns over on the bike and I just kept telling myself that my body is trained for this, to go on autopilot and get it done."

"I feel so incredibly proud... I sang (the anthem) completely out of tune, but I refuse to apologise for that."

She said defending her title was "better than I expected".

"I have people from home that are with me here - my brother and his kids, my best friends, my oldest friends - these are the people that picked me up when I was at my lowest point when I first got sick."

They've seen her at her worst, and now they've seen her achieve something amazing.

One of those people was VIS Sprint Cycling Coach Shane Kelly, who won two bronze medals and a silver across five Olympic Games on the velodrome.

Another of her closest confidants is Matt Ryan, a member of the Australian men's rowing four that won silver at the Beijing 2008 Olympics.



Running, walking, swimming and weightlifting are almost impossible for Petricola because of problems with regulating body temperature, but Ryan suggested she take up cycling and she was soon thriving in the sport.

She was wary of riding a bike because of a lack of grip strength, a common struggle faced by people living with MS, but Ryan got her started on a watt bike.

He was also the first person to encourage her to aim for the Paralympics - the mere suggestion made her laugh.

"In my mind the Paralympics were really for amputees or people in wheelchairs. I didn't know there was neurological illness and impairment in there."

She's now gone from laughing at the prospect of being eligible for the Paralympics to becoming a two-time Paralympic gold medallist.

OLYMPIC DIVER ANABELLE SMITH

PARALYMPIC SWIMMER COL PEARSE



# THE QUEST FOR PARIS

## AN OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC DOCU-SERIES

TWO ATHLETES | TWO STORIES

A FILM BY DOMINIC HOOK

Featuring three-time Olympian, Anabelle Smith, who faces a formidable injury as she endeavors to secure her fourth Olympic Games qualification, and Paralympic swimmer, Col Pearse, chasing to turn his Tokyo 2020 bronze medal into a gold in Paris... if he can learn to control his competition nerves.

WATCH NOW





## CAITLIN PARKER

# CAITLIN PARKER MAKES OLYMPIC BOXING HISTORY

**An inspired Caitlin Parker won the nation's hearts when she became the first Australian woman to win an Olympic boxing medal at the Paris 2024 Games.**

Making her second appearance at a Summer Games, Parker had expectations both internally and externally to medal – and she did – becoming the first Australian female boxer to stand on the Olympic podium.

In front of boisterous crowds under the roof on the famous Philippe-Chatrier court at Roland Garros, Parker blitzed through Mexico's Citlalli Ortiz and Morocco's Khadija Mardi in the women's 75kg competition, before facing China's Li Qian in the semi-final.

It was a fast start by the 28-year old, who looked quick on her feet in her defence against the much taller Li.

Landing several quick punches on the counter, Parker was able to secure the favour of the judges with all five giving her a score of ten for the first round.

Li showed why she was the tournament's number one boxer in the second, quickly establishing momentum with a series of hits throughout the round.

Parker fired away plenty in return, however her opponent was quick to the defence, locking Parker and the bout down on several occasions in the centre of the ring before the referee stepped in.

All five judges scored Li a ten in the second round, giving extra spice to the third.

In the end the tenacity and power of the Chinese competitor was too much for Parker, with a flurry of hits in the final round doing enough for Li to secure a unanimous 5-0 decision.

Parker was proud of her performance, despite being disappointed at not getting an opportunity to fight for gold.

"I said I was going to go to war, and I did," she said.



"I left everything out there and the game plan didn't go as I wanted, but I'm proud of myself for making history for Australian boxing."

"She's such an amazing opponent and I have all the respect in the world for her."

Parker has reviewed her first two fights but is yet to watch her medal fight, knowing she will be "too negative".

She said she would run over the fight harshly as she knew she was capable of winning gold and "manifested it" between Paris and a disappointing result in Tokyo.

"My phone lock screen was a gold medal for years ... I just wanted to manifest it from as early as I could," she said.

"I know that I did everything I could in the fights and in the preparation before that, so the colour doesn't bother me, I wanted the gold, I came home with bronze, I am proud of myself.

"I will learn from this experience and improve and will still be manifesting the gold for LA."

With Commonwealth Games and Los Angeles gold in Parker's mind, there's work to be done.

"LA is definitely something I want to do but before that I think we want to explore some options, maybe some pro fights but I want to train with the Australian team.

"I have fought for Australia for the last 13 years, I feel like I would like to give myself a bit of a challenge of something new – it's scary but I want to try it."

# MONTAG AND COWLEY COMBINE FOR HISTORIC RACE WALK BRONZE

**Victorian race walkers, Jemima Montag and Rhydian Cowley stormed home to bronze in the inaugural Olympic Mixed Marathon Race Walk Relay at Paris 2024.**



The medal marked Montag's second bronze medal for the Games after finishing third in the 20km Individual, and Cowley's first.

The feat made Montag the first Australian woman in athletics to win two medals at the same Games since Raelene Boyle in 1972, and just the ninth Australian track and field to be a dual medallist at the one Olympics.

The list includes Olympic legends Shirley Strickland - who performed the

feat at three consecutive Games from 1948 - Betty Cuthbert and another walker, Jared Tallent.

For 26-year-old Montag, the prospect of the walk double was something she hadn't considered until days before the relay race.

"The day after my individual, I was trying to just go for an easy race walk again to prepare," she said.

"My coach [Brett Vallance] said, 'I'm going to dangle a carrot for you. There's only been four track and field Olympians to get

two medals at the same championships and you're in for a chance'.

"I thought, 'Oh gosh'. Anytime someone dangles a carrot, that competitor in me has to go after it," said Montag.

In the mixed relay, each athlete walked two legs of equal distance, with all four legs equal to the marathon distance (42.195km) around the Trocadero course below the Eiffel Tower.

Cowley led off the relay walk and was ninth after the first leg.

Montag then steamed to the lead at the midpoint before Cowley completed the third leg in fourth spot.

Montag made ground on the last leg to secure bronze in two hours 51 minutes and 38 seconds.

Spain won the gold medal in 2:50.31, with women's individual silver medallist Maria Perez anchoring. Ecuador claimed silver in 51 seconds back and Cowley/Montag were just 16 seconds further back.

After a heavy week of competing for Montag, she said post-race she had struggled to find the motivation to power through.

"I'll be really honest, it was hard to come back up after that first medal," she said.

"I felt like I was self-satisfied already and I was thinking 'where am I going to go to find the motivation to get myself to go again six days later?'

"I had to tap into one of my values of teamwork and gratitude to (Rhydian). We've been training together for as long as I can remember.

"All the laps that were hard, I just had to tell myself to do it for Rhyds. This might be his last Olympics and I wanted to send him home with a medal. To be able to do that is rewarding," she added.

Cowley praised the success of his teammate and labelled their victory as a dream come true.

"Jemima is a big inspiration for me. It's just amazing to be able to race with her and to earn a bronze medal with her," Rhydian said.

"If you had told me a few years ago I would be an Olympic medallist I wouldn't have believed you. It's just fantastic to be able to fulfil all the dreams that we've had together.

Fellow VIS athletes Declan Tingay and Rebecca Henderson combined as the second Australian team and raced their hearts out to place 22nd.





GEORGIA SHEEHAN

# ALMOST OLYMPIAN BY GEORGIA SHEEHAN

**“I found myself in the club that no athlete wants to join: the circle of ‘almost Olympians’.”**  
While this time of year is filled with tears of relief and elation for some, for others, it’s utter devastation. VIS diver, Georgia Sheehan reflects on the reality of missing out on the Olympic dream.

This year in the women’s 3 meter springboard, only the top two Australian divers qualified for the Olympic Games. When the final scoreboard appeared, my name was in third place, and with it, my vision of an Olympic debut shattered. The pain was excruciating. 15 years of relentless effort, all seemingly for nothing. My dream of representing Australia at the Olympics was gone in an instant.

As soon as those numbers appeared on the scoreboard, I found myself in the club that no athlete wants to join: the circle of ‘almost Olympians’. We trained just as hard, sacrificed just as much, and dreamed just as big, but due to some cruel twist of fate, we fell agonisingly short of punching our ticket to this year’s Olympic Games. The reality of not competing in Paris this year is a hard one. There’s a peculiar ache that comes with almost-but-not-quite achieving your dreams. It’s the kind of pain that nestles deep in your chest, a constant companion reminding you of what could have been.

When your dreams are as big as the Olympics they have a way of becoming part of you, as integral as breathing or your heart beating.

For me, my dream of diving began when I was nine years old, after watching Mathew Mitcham and Melissa Wu win medals for Australia during the 2008 Beijing Games. I was transfixed, determined to become the next big thing. One round of tryouts later, and I found myself plunging headfirst into a new life: 30 hours a week in an elite national squad for junior athletes. My mornings began with 4:30am wake-ups, my days orchestrated by the demands of a full-time training schedule. Unlike other teenage girls,

things like part-time jobs, parties and dating were replaced by swimsuits, gruelling training sessions, and a lingering chlorine smell.

While my dedication drove me forward, I quickly realised that my journey was not one I travelled alone.

The immense sacrifices that come with high-performance sports were shared by the unwavering support network around me.

**“When your dreams are as big as the Olympics they have a way of becoming part of you, as integral as breathing or your heart beating.”**

Over the last 15 years my family has given up so much. They gave up after-school hobbies, stretched our finances, drained their emotional reserves, and disrupted the normal flow of family life—all for my Olympic dream. A dream, which remains untouched.

But here’s the thing about dreams: even when they shatter, they leave behind a glimmer. Fifteen years of dedication and sacrifice haven’t just disappeared; they’ve woven themselves into the fabric of who I am, making me stronger, more resilient, and ready for whatever comes next. Still, in these moments of heartbreak, it is easy to question what that is.

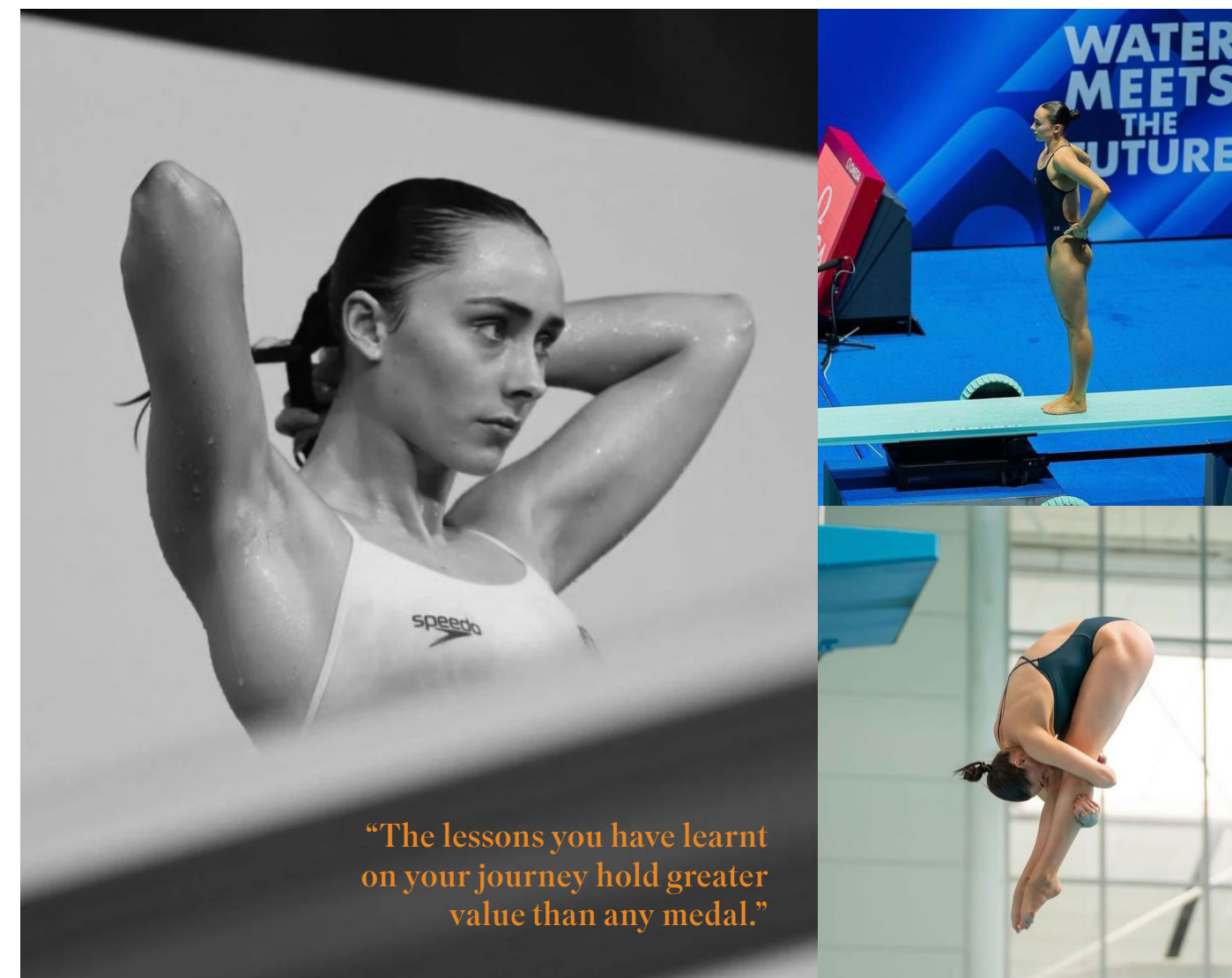
I’ve flirted with the idea of retiring from professional sport twice in my career. The first time was right after my synchro partner and I won gold at the 2018 Commonwealth

Games. After such a career-high, I faced an all-time low. Any young athlete who’s been at it for over a decade knows the feeling—burnout. It’s almost inevitable.

Burnout isn’t just physical; it’s about the emotional and mental toll that the relentless pursuit of a dream takes. This struggle is not unique to athletes of course. It’s a universal experience. We all face moments where our passion feels like a burden, and the thing we love most becomes the source of our greatest stress. Whether it’s a demanding job, a challenging project, or even the daily grind of balancing responsibilities, we all know what it’s like to feel overwhelmed and question if we can keep going.

In my moment of exhaustion, I decided to step away from the pool for 18 months. It was a scary hiatus to discover who I was outside of sport, but necessary. What kind of person am I, I had to ask myself? What kind of athlete did I want to become if I chose to return to the pool? Did I even want to go back?

But, somewhere in those 18 months, I knew I did. It happened during a Saturday night dinner with my closest girlfriends. She pulled me aside and asked if I planned to return to diving. Her directness struck a chord deep within me. My comeback to diving had been a sensitive topic, avoided by many around me. “Give it another shot,” she said. “You might not see it now, but you only have a small window to pursue this. Just be sure you’re doing it for yourself, not anyone else. That’s the only way you’ll feel truly satisfied.” Her words echoed the feeling that had been quietly stirring within me for weeks—I was ready to head back to the pool.



By late 2021, I found my way back to the springboard, with my eyes firmly set on the Paris Olympic Games. This time, I returned with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of myself. I was convinced that things would be different—I believed in my potential and trained with a newfound intensity. Reflecting on the past 3.5 years, I can confidently say that I poured every ounce of my being into this journey. Of that, I am proud.

However, despite this unwavering commitment, the path of an athlete is rarely straightforward. A missed goal, a stumbled routine, a poorly timed injury—that’s all it can take to derail years of dedication and sacrifice. For me, it was 0.5 points. As a springboard diver, this number is so small it almost seems laughable, and yet it is the chasm between me and the Olympic Games.

So, just as I have once before, I now find myself at another crossroads—considering

retirement for the second time. But this time, I’m not alone. As I grapple with this decision, I can’t help but think of my fellow athletes, who have given their all but fallen short of the finish line.

For those retiring, I wish you fulfilment on your journey and hope that you walk away proud, not just of what you have achieved, but of the person you have become. Please remember that we, the sporting community, are deeply proud of you. The lessons you have learnt on your journey hold greater value than any medal, and are bound to guide you on whatever path you decide to take next.

To those continuing the Olympic pursuit, know that you have my utmost respect. The emotional energy it takes to stay hungry and humble when it feels like your untapped potential is within arm’s reach is exhausting.

As I contemplate my own future in sport, I feel a familiar spark of determination that hints I, like you, am not ready to let go just yet. So to my fellow athletes still chasing their dreams: I see you, and I want you to know you are not alone. I’ll be right there with you. In these tough times, I find comfort in knowing that I am part of a remarkable community of full-time athletes and dreamers, united by a love for the sports that have shaped us.

My final message goes to my teammates who successfully qualified to compete in Paris this summer. Congratulations and best of luck to you. While I’ll miss being there in person, know that I’ll be cheering just as loudly and proudly from home as I would if I were beside you.

One day, I hope to join you there.

ARTICLE CREDIT: VOGUE AUSTRALIA AND  
GEORGIA SHEEHAN



# FAREWELL AMH

On Thursday 31 October 2024, 'AMH' walked out of our beautiful red brick building for the last time as CEO.



Many have reflected on her marvellous career and conveyed their appreciation for 18 years of exceptional, pioneering leadership, including VIS Chair, Nataly Matijevic.

"Anne Marie's leadership of the VIS and her contribution to high-performance sport in this country over many years has been inspirational," Ms Matijevic said.

"The holistic development and success of elite athletes that the VIS is renowned for and the progressive example the VIS has provided over decades to the Australian sports eco-system is in no small part due to her intellect, empathy and passion.

"On behalf of the Board of the VIS and the many athletes and high-performance staff who flourished under her leadership, I offer congratulations and gratitude."

Here is a snapshot of the 'AMH Era'.

Anne Marie succeeded inaugural VIS Executive Director Dr Frank Pyke in 2006, after an impressive seven-year career as the founding ED of the Scottish Institute of Sport. The Scots had just enjoyed their most successful Commonwealth Games, in Ms Harrison's hometown of Melbourne, and Dr Pyke was retiring.

The VIS was housed in a half of the 1956 Olympic Pool building, known as the Glasshouse. Athletes from golf, cricket, tennis, baseball and football were a significant portion of the cohort.

Since then, the likes of Cadel Evans AM, Scotty James, Dylan Alcott AO, Lydia Lassila OAM, Glenn Ashby, Mack Horton OAM, Leisel Jones OAM, Kim Brennan AM, Kelly Cartwright OAM, Carol Cooke AM and Liz Watson have passed through

the VIS, working with our renowned high-performance staff.

A decade on, 312 athletes and 39 sports prepared out of the VIS and today the VIS accommodates over 450 athletes across 45 sports and nearly 120 high-performance staff in a world class sports precinct at the heart of which stands our organisation.

The VIS sent 83 athletes to Tokyo in 2020 for the Olympics and Paralympics. This number swelled to 122 for Paris.

It is not enough, though, to dwell on numbers. Anne Marie's story can't be properly told through statistic.

If so much at the VIS has changed and improved in the time of Anne Marie's stewardship, across the years her personal touch - a style composed of empathy, a love of sport and clear-eyed strength - has not.

Many have drawn inspiration from her example, and many of the VIS 'family' refer to the organisation not as a place of work but as a home, as something dear and worthwhile to belong to.

This, as much as anything, has defined Anne Marie as a leader. She always understood the relationship between human worth and achievement. Success in Sport and Life.

At her retirement announcement, Anne Marie addressed athletes and staff, advising them of her decision to end her remarkable tenure following the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris.

"It is the right time in my life and, I believe, the right time for the VIS," Ms Harrison said.

"It is the greatest privilege to lead the VIS, and I am immensely proud of our role in high-performance sport in Victoria and Australia and of the benefits that we deliver to all Victorians as a source of excellence and inspiration.

"The VIS is close to my heart and because of that I believe the end of my current contract will be the right time to step aside and provide a new CEO and the team with the opportunity to work with Victoria's wonderful athletes to enable them to flourish and achieve their dreams in future Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games, particularly with a home Games in Brisbane in 2032.

"The VIS must always evolve and improve if it is to continue to serve Victorian sport to the high standard it has for 34 years."

Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events Steve Dimopoulos also paid tribute to Anne Marie for her significant role in upholding the state's reputation as the home of Australian sport.

"I would like to thank Anne Marie for her incredible contribution to the Victorian Institute of Sport across her illustrious tenure, helping transform the Institute into what it is today."

"Her leadership over the past 18 years has been instrumental in helping guide the VIS through so many national and international events, supporting athletes from across the state and upholding the reputation of the VIS as national leaders."

From every member of the VIS family, past and present, thank you AMH for your lengthy stewardship and enormous service to Australian high-performance sport - we hope that life in retirement remains as interesting as it was in the world of sport.

Farewell.





# 30 YEARS OF BE FIT. BE WELL.

The VIS legacy is the leader of high-performance sport in the state, but the institute extends beyond elite sports through its impactful community program, Be Fit. Be Well, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2024.



The Victorian Institute of Sport is the spearhead of high-performance sport in the state, something of a finishing school for the very best and diverse talents our sports-rich state produces.

122 VIS athletes were in Paris for the recent Olympic and Paralympic Games, 54 of them debutants who should be the cornerstone of future Olympic and Paralympic Games teams which will compete in Los Angeles in 2028 and in Brisbane in 2032.

Approximately 450 athletes trained out of the VIS in 2023/24 and the expertise guiding every one of them is renowned.

There is something more to the VIS story, though, and it might be best told through the remarkable VIS community program known as Be Fit. Be Well which celebrated its 30th anniversary this year.

The cause of sport as inspiration, as a source of motivation to be active, as a portal to inclusion and social cohesion, may be served by wondrous Olympic and Paralympic feats but at a community and school level these outcomes have all been made real to hundreds of thousands of children by Be Fit. Be Well since 1994.

In fact, something like 300,000 children have experienced the Be Fit. Be Well program, brought to them by Olympians, Paralympians and world and national champions who visit schools all over the state.

Of late, the program, which is delivered through a partnership

with School Sport Victoria, has seen the likes of dual Olympic bronze medallist, Jemima Montag, triple Olympic long jumper Brooke Buschkuehl and Paralympic triathlete Liam Twomey create for their audiences a connection between sport and good physical and mental health.

Danielle Cook, Head of Learning at Brunswick Secondary College, has built a regular place for Be Fit. Be Well into the school's year.

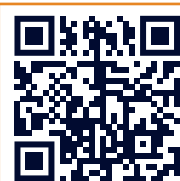
"The Be Fit. Be Well program is really important to our school curriculum. It shows our students how they can overcome adversity, build resilience and keep the motivation up to engage in physical activity for the rest of their lives," she says.

Buschkuehl was the beneficiary of a similar visit in her primary school years.

"We had an Olympic swimmer come out to my school. It was so inspiring, motivating and encouraging. I see so much value in being able to not only share my story but share the benefits of staying healthy and active from a young age," she says.

Be Fit. Be Well is one of a suite of VIS Community Programs that have been designed for specific audiences that range from academic to early-school.

It was the first, however, and it has built a reputation that increases its popularity by the year. Generations of Victorians have experienced Be Fit. Be Well. Seemingly, generations to come will also hear the message.



Find out more about our Community Programs



# THE MOMENT SERIES

The Victorian Institute of Sport presents a short-form series featuring six of Australia's best athletes, reliving a moment in time that changed the trajectory of their sporting career or made a significant impact in their sports history.



THE MOMENT  
SHANE KELLY

**1996 Atlanta Olympics.** Shane Kelly is the world record holder and world champion in the Men's Kilometre Time Trial, a feat for which he is dubbed 'The Minute Man'. He's the one to beat. The favourite for gold.



THE MOMENT  
MELISSA TAPPER

**2016 Rio Olympics and Paralympics.** Milly Tapper etches her name into Australian Olympic and Paralympic sporting history. Now, in 2024, she is about to add 'three-peat' to her dual-Game legacy.



THE MOMENT  
SARAH TAIT  
AS TOLD BY BILL TAIT

**2012 London Olympics.** Sarah Tait clinched silver with her rowing partner, Kate Hornsey. It was a moment that proved glory isn't always golden.



THE MOMENT  
ROWIE WEBSTER

**2012 London Olympics.** Australia's women's water polo team, Aussie Stingers, are handed a lesson which will stay with them for the rest of their lives. A mistake many have made, and many more will make. It's not over, until it's over.



THE MOMENT  
LAUREN BURNS

**2000 Sydney Olympics.** Fame came calling for Lauren Burns. Success was only the start.



THE MOMENT  
ALISTAIR DONOHOE

**2016 Rio Paralympics.** The Men's C4-5 Road Race. Tough, tactical and unpredictable, the Road Race favours the brave. Alistair Donohoe rode a near perfect race. Until...

WATCH THE  
SERIES NOW



*Have the tissue box handy.*



ALEXANDRA KIROI-BOGATYREVA

# SUCCEEDING IN THE CHALLENGING WORLD OF RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS

**Behind the moments of elegance shown by rhythmic gymnasts in competition, is arduous training, fatigue and injuries. The juxtaposition between the two aspects of the sport is more than most would know. Hidden, to an extent, by athletic grace.**

Every movement of a rhythmic gymnast's routine is scrutinised, with performance judged on two criteria: difficulty and execution.

Perfection on the judge's scorecard is rare and the level of commitment to get even close is incredible.

Commonwealth Games gold medallist and VIS athlete Alexandra (Sasha) Kiroi-Bogatyreva is intimately acquainted with the sacrifice required and difficulty of near-perfection.

Born in New Zealand in 2002, Kiroi-Bogatyreva and her family moved to Australia when she was one.

"Gymnastics is very popular in Europe and coming from a European background, my parents introduced me to the sport when I was growing up," Sasha explains.

"At two years of age, I started doing ballet before moving into gymnastics and progressing to rhythmic gymnastics when I was 6."

Living and breathing the sport from a young age, it wasn't long before Kiroi-Bogatyreva's striking flashes drew the

attention of the gymnastic world.

"When I was 10 years old, I won my first international competition in Spain against some of the leading gymnastic countries. The reward from the competition was a kettle, which I still have," she laughs.

Having proven she could match the abilities of the best rhythmic gymnasts in the world, Kiroi-Bogatyreva's drive to master her craft intensified.

"I needed to push myself, so I started attending more and more training camps in Europe. Over time, the training hours and my abilities increased," she says.

Having sharpened her routines, the teenage prodigy was once again keen on showcasing her abilities in international competitions.

The arrival of the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast provided her with that chance. Kiroi-Bogatyreva claimed bronze in both the ball and all-around events. The remarkable performances from the 16-year-old lit within her a new fire.

And with the careers of rhythmic gymnasts being relatively short-lived, an

urgency. In a sense, her career was on the clock.

"Rhythmic gymnasts usually retire between the ages of 21 and 24. Turning 22 this year, I want to make the most of it," she says.

This urgency motivated her to move her training to the National Gymnastics Arena in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2021.

Baku is home to some of the world's top gymnastic training facilities, which have attracted professional gymnasts from all over the world.

"The training facilities in Baku are based in an arena stadium that hosts world championships for all gymnastic sports. It is a very unique experience to have the floor that we compete on made available for our training. I don't know of any other training venues in the world that do that," she explains.

The pool and sauna are available 24/7, as are medical rooms for treatment.

"The centre is kind of like a boarding school. We live, eat and train there. Everything needed to do gymnastics is in Baku."

To produce their fleeting moments of brilliance, athletes in Baku are willing to make

a plethora of sacrifices. Sasha is no exception.

"We train every day for 8–10 hours. The day is broken down into cardio, strengthening, a rhythmic warm-up and the day's plan. The plan may be to complete 3 clean routines without a mistake, or to be focused on movement repetitions," she says.

"When leading up to competitions we train longer hours, often not leaving the gym until we have perfected our routine."

These long training sessions prepared Kiroi-Bogatyreva for the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, in which she was intent on producing a world class showing.

It turned out to be a career-defining competition for Kiroi-Bogatyreva, who collected gold in clubs, silver in the team and bronze in the individual event.

"It had been so many Commonwealth Games without a gold for Australia, so to get the streak back was very rewarding. It had been my dream since my first Commonwealth Games and proved a great stepping stone for future competitions," she reflects.

However, the quest to be ever better, the dream of perfection, inevitably began to take its toll.

"Sometimes I have to repeat moves 50–100 times to get it right, and with that comes overload injuries such as stress fractures," she says, not in search of pity but to explain how the most recent phase of her career is turning out.

This level of dedication, and occasional suffering, is an expectation in the world of rhythmic gymnastics.

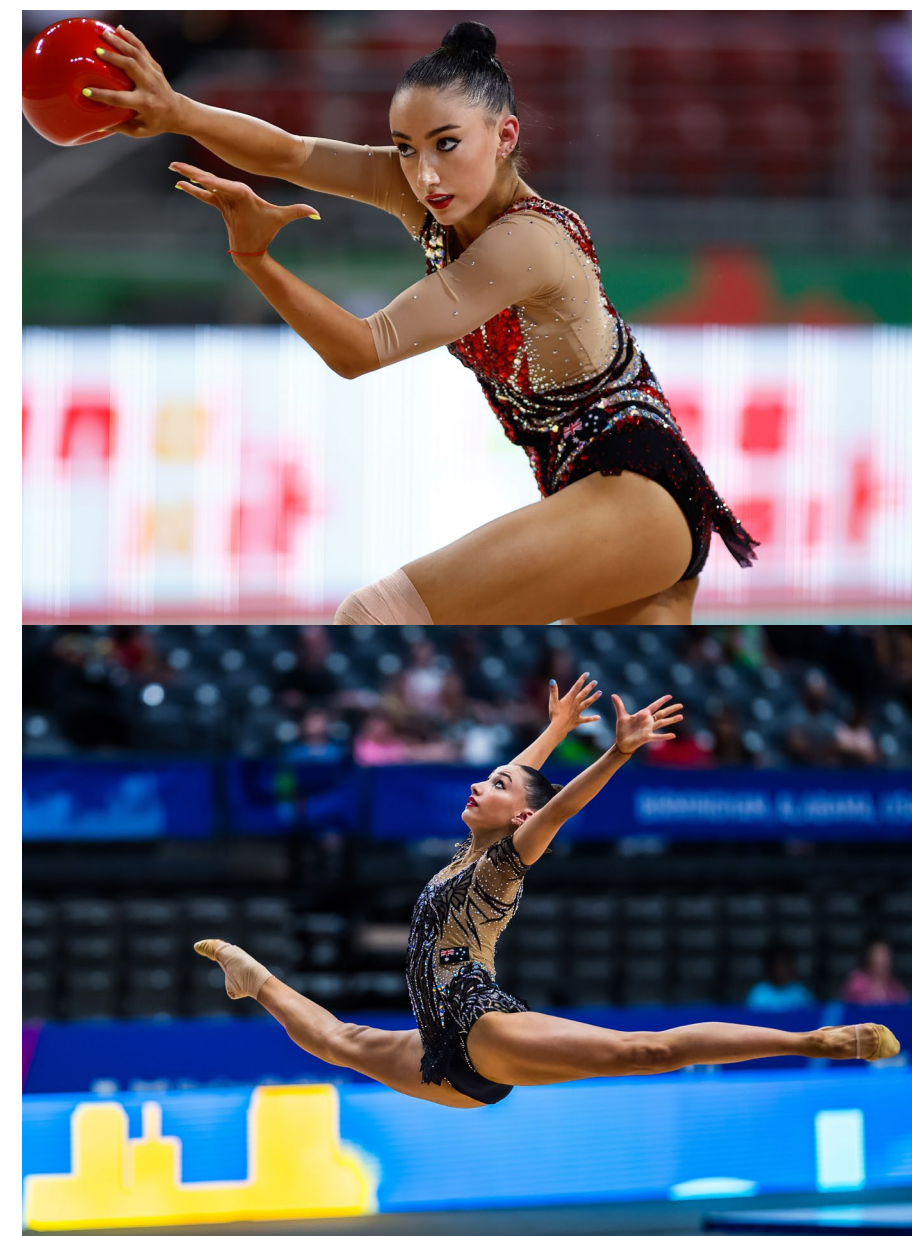
Kiroi-Bogatyreva spends 10–11 months of the year in Baku before returning home to Australia, where she visits the VIS for strengthening and medical treatment.

"During my time back home, I come into the VIS every day to use the gym and see the medical team. The physios and medical staff are able to get my body right so I can start training for the next season and striving for my goals."

If the injuries, training, and short careers weren't enough to deal with, rhythmic gymnasts must also contend with challenges outside of the arena.

Financing sporting dreams is a constant battle for most athletes. Rhythmic gymnasts are no strangers to this plight.

The financial pressures of getting yourself to each international competition in a sport where your leotard can cost upwards of \$2000, are immense.



"It certainly creates a hardship. On top of living on my own in a country far away from home. I love Baku but I miss home," she says.

"My parents and grandparents have set money aside to fund everything I do in rhythmic gymnastics, which I am very grateful for."

In her limited time outside of the arena, Kiroi-Bogatyreva studies a Bachelor of Law (Honours). She is completing her degree remotely at Monash University in Melbourne as she prepares for life after sport.

"It's hard to balance rhythmic gymnastics and study, which is why most girls training in Baku don't attend university. However, I have my goals in sports and law, and that's what keeps me going every day," she says, as

if to reinforce a point made many times over earlier in her story.

Kiroi-Bogatyreva qualified for the 2024 Paris Olympics via the Oceania Continental Championships in May 2024, securing her place on the Australian team and making her long-held dream a reality.

She dazzled in her Olympic debut and equalled Australia's second highest ever result in the Rhythmic Gymnastics Individual All-Around competition at an Olympic Games - she scored a total of 114.350 to place 22nd in the Individual All-Around at the Porte de La Chappelle Arena in Paris.

BY THOMAS OLIPHANT



THE  
CARBINE CLUB

"FOR SPORT AND GOOD FELLOWSHIP"



# ‘BETWEEN YOU & ME’

In 2024, the VIS produced an eight-part written series entitled ‘Between You & Me’.



Each article featured two people with a unique connection, each reflecting on their mutual journey and relationship, providing a candid glimpse into the special nature of the ties that bind two people together.

Those interviewed include siblings, friends, couples, colleagues, parents and children – all of whom have a connection with the VIS and high-performance sport. Each speak with openness about their perceptions of the other - how they met, what brought them together, the ups and downs and ins and outs of their relationship, and in speaking of the other, each inevitably reveals much about themselves.

In this edition of Pinnacle, we feature father-son duo, Dave and Mark Crosbee, who speak frankly about balancing legacy, pressure and passion in the world of high-performance paddling.

Dave Crosbee is the Director of High Performance at the VIS, with responsibility for all aspects of performance, including coaching, performance services and data intelligence projects. His son, Mark Crosbee, is a VIS scholarship athlete in canoe and World Junior Champion.

## DAVE CROSBEE

Mark was in part the reason why I stepped back from front line coaching. My wife Rachel was pregnant with him, and the previous few years I had been spending over six months of the year on the road, and I wasn't sure that was the lifestyle I really wanted as a father.

When Mark and his sister Sarah were youngsters, we'd get in boats and Mark just loved paddling. They both do. He took it on from there.

All his life I've been working in high-performance sports, and canoeing has been part of the family all his life.

There's never been a pressure or an expectation that either of the kids should take up high-performance sport. If anything, it has probably been the other way, that it's not as easy as you think it is - particularly in a sport like slalom.

The frustrating bit is that there's so many ways to win in the sport, so you need to be really adaptive as a coach and as an athlete and understand that you'll have some strengths and weaknesses compared to others - but that's fine, play to your strengths and work on your weaknesses.

You have to do it for the love of it, not expecting there's a tangible reward that comes out of it. The ultimate thing is that they have to be enjoying it.

They're under some pretty significant shadows, of which I'd actually say Rachel and I are the least significant.

We both competed in canoe slalom back in the UK, as members of the British team. Rachel is a two-time Olympian and multiple World Cup and World Championship medallist.

But Mark's uncle is Richard Fox, a five-time world champion who dominated the sport for a decade, and his aunt is Myriam Fox who is a multiple world champion and Olympic medallist. They have two daughters, Jessica and Noemie, who are Mark's cousins.

Jessica is a multiple world champion and Olympic gold medallist, and Noemie is also an Olympic and world championship team gold medallist.

That's a fair shadow to operate under.

But both of them, if they want to continue and operate in high-performance slalom, they're going to have to find their own way and deal with it because it isn't going to go away.

To be clear I've never really wanted to coach Mark. A perfect world for me, from the outset, would've been he paddles, and I just be a parent.

The nature of our coaching relationship probably changed and became more integral



to his approach during COVID, because of all the lockdowns, the only way he could get coaching was with me, because you could only have two people to go paddling.

He has since moved up to Penrith and in an ideal world I'm trying to be more of a mentor because he's got to develop a strong coaching relationship with others, so I'm trying to support him to do that.

He's quite intense, although there's no expectation from myself or Rachel. He's been very self-driven. Going through COVID, he trained bloody hard, but it was all him.

His biggest strength could be his biggest weakness, his intensity. I think he puts a lot of expectation on himself, but you probably need some of that if you're going to be an elite level athlete.

A constant discussion I try and have with him is to focus on himself.

Canoe slalom is the type of sport where you can do very little to impact the other athletes, the course designer and the river set a puzzle, and you've just got to find the best way you can to solve that puzzle, and then you look at results.

I'm not going to hide from the fact that high-performance sport is ultimately measured on your success, and that's why athletes are in it, but I think you've got to keep in mind a bigger picture.

I think that's really important, particularly for Mark at the moment with those performance shadows he lives under.

For me it's all about is he enjoying it? That's my only hope.

## MARK CROSBEE

Both my parents were paddlers, so that helped me get into what is a relatively niche sport.

While my relationship with other sports has changed, I've always been around

paddling.

I can't remember a time without boats and paddling in my life.

They were definitely a little cautious about me pursuing paddling, they know what it takes.

The main thing was always reassuring me that I didn't have to do it if I didn't enjoy it.

My dad was a really good paddler when he was younger, before he retired early and started coaching at a very high level, at the 2000 Olympics and with the British World Championship team, so he's coached a lot of very good paddlers.

I imagine it would be an interesting challenge to coach me. I think it can be difficult to separate the parent from the coach and, from their end, decipher if I'm not enjoying it or if I'm just having a bad session.

But having them has really helped me overall, in reminding me to ask myself if I am still enjoying the sport. There was never any pressure to follow their path, or the family's path - so that was really helpful, I knew there was never any pressure.

When we had that success in Ivrea in 2022 at the Junior World Championships, I think that was really special for Dad.

He was my primary coach until I moved up here to Penrith, and now I'm in the NSO (National Sports Organisation, Paddle Australia) system in Sydney, so now he's moved into more of a mentor role.

It's a tricky dynamic, but when we get it right it's really good.

I am quite competitive, sometimes too competitive, but I think a lot of athletes have that issue, just being around sports, having that dream, having a family to look up to and seeing that it is possible.

Occasionally when I was younger, I'd find an excuse not to go to training sometimes, when I just wanted to stay in bed. But I don't make those excuses now, because I know what I need to do and I enjoy it. It's almost like I make the choice to enjoy it in those tough points.

During the lockdowns, my dad was still sacrificing his time to coach me, so I had to respect his choice to get up early as well. Those times taught me a lot about the sacrifices that coaches and support staff have to make, for me to do what I love.

The main thing that my parents always try and emphasise is that the results matter

less than the experience. However, knowing that I also want the results, they also look for ways to support me in that.

Dad has really emphasised the importance of building up a bank of experience to help me in the future, to focus on that as the main thing, and not the results.

In training, the most difficult thing to separate is the father versus coach relationship, so I've got to stop thinking about him as my dad and focus more on being objective.

It's been a process to get to that point and I'm still learning, even with other coaches.

When it comes to the big races, I'll usually get my dad's advice on the course, and we'll communicate that with Titouan, my coach, and then I'll be talking with Titouan on the race day.

There were definitely times where I didn't know if I wanted to keep going, but when I get on the water, it's just about that feeling of paddling down a river, doing the thing I love.

Knowing that I could stop at any point and that I'd be fine, makes me realise that it's a complete choice, I would be fine whatever way I go, but this is what I love doing.

There's a balance in switching off at home, because I was always with my coach, everyone in the house is a paddler, so it's always a hard one to not talk about paddling for once.

But at the same time, when it comes to the difficult times, you're surrounded by the people who you trust and who can understand you.

When I had my rib stress fracture, having him at the house counting the sets on the Watt bike, was really helpful and meant that I wasn't alone in the pain cave.

I think that's been one of the biggest helps in going through some of the hardest points.

It has taught me a lot of the skills I need to create strong relationships with my coaches and support team.



Scan to read the eight-part series.



## CAREERS WEEK

# BEYOND THE STAGE WITH SARAH THOMPSON

Sarah Thompson's journey from ballet to high-performance sport offers a unique perspective on athlete welfare. As a former ballerina turned Performance Lifestyle Adviser at the Victorian Institute of Sport, Thompson's experience navigating the demands of professional dance informs her approach to supporting VIS athletes.

When Sarah Thompson discusses with her athletes the vagaries of life in high performance sport, she brings to the conversations an unusual perspective.

Before becoming a Performance Lifestyle Adviser at the Victorian Institute of Sport, where she is immersed in the welfare of VIS divers, gymnasts, rowers and aerial skiers, Thompson was a ballerina.

For 11 years the Toowoomba native danced professionally as a company artist with the Australian Ballet, performing 200-odd shows a year, working six days a week and travelling constantly to bring ballet's theatrical creativity and graceful physical expression to stages overseas and interstate.

Thompson left Queensland at 16 to accept a place with the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne, an opportunity her parents declined the previous year fearing that their daughter was too young to live alone, in a sprawling city 1500km away.

As it was, Thompson and another aspiring dancer from Queensland shifted to Melbourne together the next year and took an apartment near the school.

"Our parents would loop or coordinate visits to us as much as they could, especially in the first year," Thompson recalls.

"Neither of us could drive. We walked everywhere. Basically, we were looking after ourselves in every way.

"I went from ballet after school in Toowoomba to full-time training in Melbourne. It was a huge transition for me. There was a lot of tears....so much adjustment....and it was very much sink or swim.

And we were in the deep end. It was, and is to an extent, very much what the Russians and the Europeans are used to.

"I learned so much. Certainly, about myself."

Thompson spent four years at the school and upon graduation was one of only

two female dancers in her cohort offered a contract with the Australian Ballet.

"Suddenly, I was a professional dancer. I received a contract at the end of the year, went home for Christmas, and came back to start performing. I was 20."

Thompson enjoyed the life of a dancer, if not always the insularity of it.

"The company very much becomes your family because you are away from family and friends an awful lot. You live in a world within the world."

Thompson had been an enthusiastic and capable learner throughout her school years. It was to the classroom, or the lecture theatre, that she turned for intellectual nourishment in the latter years of her dancing career and an identity independent of her prestigious but consuming existence.

Thompson studied part-time and online while dancing and then used her long service leave from Australian Ballet to further her health science studies. Instead of a deserved holiday on a tropical island, Thompson used the time to enrol full-time for a semester and headed on to campus.

"It was the best thing I did. I met people outside of my environment, I gained confidence in myself and it helped me take the next step. I knew then that I was ready for change and capable of it.

"I got more passionate about what I was studying because I was fully immersed in it. It was unrelated to work and it gave me a sense of achievement.

"I went back to dance, did some more shows, and we were doing Alice In Wonderland in Brisbane when I thought 'This is it. This is the end'.

"I can perform in front of my family in Queensland, I wasn't injured and I was ready."

That was in 2019.

A degree in health sciences, principally nutrition, was followed by a post-graduate diploma in public health and a part-time job



as a member of Australian Ballet's Artistic Health team.

Thompson joined the eight strong Performance Lifestyle Team at the VIS in 2021, seeing numerous similarities between ballet and high-performance sport.

"Athletes, like dancers, start young. They are most often identified early, travel a lot to compete and train, they juggle multiple demands such as school, their sport and other interests, they need to look after their physical and mental health and be disciplined with their time," Thompson says.

"They also exist in high pressure environments and commonly have high expectations of themselves and are the subject of high expectations from others."

Thompson understands how intoxicating dreams of success can be to a teenager. The memory of her parents refusing, for one year, to allow her to accept her place at the Australian Ballet School is vivid.

There is a challenge to establish and retain a healthy life-sport balance when chasing those dreams.

Thompson's advice? Make the world as big as possible.

"We are people before we are athletes, or dancers, and to feel or be valued for who you are, not just what you do in the gym or on the track, is vital for health and wellbeing which, of course, has an effect on performance," Thompson says.

"Being a more complete and fulfilled person...it's also about identity. About having an identity and a store of self-worth that exists outside of your sport. So that when you finish you don't fall off a cliff.

"It will always be hard to finish up, for athletes or performers of any kind, but if you have things that you value and enjoy doing they will carry you through."

## GRACE BROWN

# OLYMPIC AND WORLD CHAMPION BIDS A GRAND AU REVOIR TO PRO CYCLING

There's no doubt that Camperdown's Golden Grace Brown finished off her days as a pro rider in sublime style, hanging up the wheels as an Olympic and World Champion - the first rider to ever win both in the same year.



But nothing, not even her unprecedented success, has made her doubt her decision to retire.

"It's done," Brown said as she dismounted from her bike after winning her last race before retirement in October, "it's time for the rest of life."

Brown indicated earlier in the year that this would be her last in the professional peloton, and what a staggering year it was

for the 32-year-old.

Starting her season by winning the Australian national time trials in Mount Helen, Brown earned the biggest win of her career by claiming the Liège-Bastogne-Liège Femmes one-day classic in April.

She backed that up with two stage wins and the overall victory at the three-day Bretagne Tour stage race in May, before her crowning glory in Paris at the Olympic Games.

Not content with that, Brown blitzed the field at the World Championships in Zurich, becoming the first rider to ever win both the Olympic Games and World Championship time trial in the same year.

Brown also claimed the team time trial crown as part of the victorious Australian squad.

Although she will not continue next year, she at least got one chance to compete in the rainbow bands of the World Champion in her final race at the Chrono des Nations.

Looking resplendent in the World Champions jersey — something Brown said would be "special" to compete in — she also sported a golden helmet and bike to reflect her Olympic title, and she blitzed the course to record her eighth race win of the season, and the last of her career.

Following her dream swansong season, Brown returned to Australia with a bulging trophy cabinet and ready for the next phase of her life.

She is now busily tackling her new role as the President of The Cyclists' Alliance, focusing on improving the rights of women cyclists in a sport that has evolved and grown significantly in recent years.

Brown is proudly leading an organisation that is dedicated to "levelling the playing field and helping the hard-working women in today's peloton to make a living from the sport", as highlighted in its founding principles - a very different role to enduring the rigours on the bike.



ALUMNI DANIEL KOWALSKI OAM

# SWIMMING THROUGH SHADOWS: DANIEL KOWALSKI'S JOURNEY TO SELF-ACCEPTANCE

**Daniel Kowalski OAM, a swimming icon known for his historic Olympic feats, faced silent struggles with deep personal demons and the challenges of living a closeted life. Today, he channels his experiences into helping fellow athletes navigate their post-competition lives, emerging as a beacon of resilience and hope.**

Throughout Kowalski's swimming career, he showed a remarkable ability to ride out adversity and still produce extraordinary performances.

He was a history maker, a World and Olympic Champion and a World Record holder, but he was also deeply unhappy, plagued by demons and even contemplated taking his own life.

Kowalski's career was lived in the shadow of fellow Australians Kieren Perkins and Grant Hackett.

It was also, sadly, lived in the closet.

Despite playing the perpetual 'bridesmaid', Kowalski is still considered among the greats of Australian swimming.

At the Atlanta 1996 Olympics, he became the first swimmer in almost a century to win a medal in the 200, 400 and 1500 metres freestyle events at the same Olympic Games.

The Victorian Institute of Sport alumni added a gold medal as part of the Australian team that won the 4x200m relay at Sydney 2000, however it was his silver behind Perkins

in the 1500m in Atlanta that he is perhaps best remembered for.

For Australians, Perkins' gold medal from lane eight was the stuff of legends, a race that's etched into Olympics folklore, a race where a hero was born.

But for Kowalski, it was the race that started his spiral into dark days.

For most winning a medal would have been enough, but not for Kowalski - he had long dreamt of taking home gold yet left with memories of heartbreak.

He suffered from depression and bulimia in the period immediately after the 1996 Games.

"It led to such a dark period for a while after I got home from the Games because you shouldn't be disappointed or feel like you failed because you won three individual medals at the Olympics," he said.

"I didn't have anything else going on in my life. I was just a swimmer and that was my one identity."

Kowalski left Melbourne and moved to the AIS in Canberra which is really when a lot

of the demons started to kick in.

He experienced a lot of dark times where he felt it would be easier to not be around.

"I thought long and hard about 'how do I end my life'. I never confided in anyone about how I was feeling."

"I was very good at putting on a front and a facade that everything was going great, and I think that's one of the scary things about mental health is that people can disguise it. I did a very good job of it," he said.

His final years of competition were hampered by persistent injury problems, distraction, and an understandable faltering of self-confidence. He announced his retirement from competitive swimming in 2002.

His battles with depression continued as he endured the life of a closeted gay man still years away from coming out.

For Kowalski, 'coming out' publicly was a bigger challenge than standing on the blocks of the Atlanta 1500m final.

He waited until 2006 before he started



his coming out process to family and close friends. Five years later, he felt the need to go public as various media publications threatened to break his news.

He outed himself in an opinion article he wrote for The Age.

"Living the lie and deflecting the innuendo grows tiring. It is emotionally exhausting, and it flat out hurts no matter how hard you try to block it out," he wrote.

"I finally accepted my sexuality at the end of 2006 following a huge anxiety attack at work. After what were literally years of torment, denial and very, very dark times, I couldn't live a lie to myself anymore."

"You often read that when people came out they had felt depressed or had suicidal tendencies. I, like them, experienced all of the extremes, but mostly it was the loneliness that was the hardest part of being gay – and still is."

"The number of times I have sat on the couch or lain in bed bawling my eyes out, scared and fearful of the future, are too many to mention. I know that people, regardless of their sexuality, experience this feeling, but stupidly in my mind I honestly felt that there was nowhere to go."

"I am not sure if being an elite athlete and the values you are supposed to live by compounded this, but it definitely didn't

help the situation," he wrote.

At the time, he was only the third elite Australian athlete to come out publicly.

His article and the related story by the Age showed a man in torment about his sexuality, and the ways he tried to deny it.

He said that his fear of keeping his secret led to a lack of self-confidence that might have affected performances in the pool.

These days, Kowalski has one of his most important professional roles to date as the Head of Olympian Services for the Australian Olympic Committee, a role that includes helping athletes transition to everyday life after retirement, in partnership with sport and National Institute Network managers.

The position includes taking responsibility for managing the AOC's Athlete Transition program including mentoring, developing opportunities for internships, education and creating career development opportunities.

He knows all about the unique pressures that elite sport places on its athletes and has an enormous understanding and appreciation of what it takes to be competitive at the highest level.

He also acutely knows about the challenges athletes face after retirement.

"As a proud Olympian, to have the opportunity to work in an environment where I can better the lives of the current athletes as well as those recently retired, is really important to me."

Personally, he is also in a much happier and content place.

He announced his engagement to long-term partner Chris Thistlethwaite in 2022 and the happy couple married in October 2023.

"WE got married... And it was more than we could have ever hoped for!! Thanks to our beautiful families and amazing friends who helped us celebrate, made it truly memorable and so much freaking fun!" Kowalski said on Instagram.

Kowalski's journey to self-acceptance has been a challenging endeavour and he was recently asked if he could go back to the late 90s and early 2000s, what would he tell himself?

"I would tell myself that people aren't going to love me anymore if I win a gold medal at the Olympics. People are going to love me probably more if I'm true to myself and accept who I am as a gay man," he said.

"They're the things I beat myself up about the most - I failed at the Olympics and it's embarrassing to be a gay man."

If he could get a number of those years back, he'd be eternally grateful.



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## ALUMNI SHELLEY MATHESON

# A GLIDER IN NAME ONLY

**Few have accomplished all that Shelley Matheson (nee Chaplin) has: At the age of 39, she has won three Paralympic medals, captained her country, travelled the world, and given birth to two daughters - unmedicated no less. And she's done it all from a wheelchair.**

Born with a birth defect that led to her becoming an incomplete paraplegic, Shelley has never let her disability stop her from doing anything.

Chappers, as she's affectionately known, was first introduced to wheelchair sports at the age of 12 and made her senior international wheelchair basketball debut when she was 17.

For the best part of the next two decades, she dedicated her life to being one of the best wheelchair basketballers in the world.

She competed at five World Championships and three Paralympic Games with the Australian Gliders.

The Gliders have an impressive record at the highest level – four consecutive Paralympic medals between 2000 and 2012. But this was dented when the team failed to qualify for Rio 2016.

Shelley explored other routes to get to the Games, including a tilt at para-kayaking, but all attempts were unsuccessful.

She was just three games shy of her 250 milestone for Australia when she decided to take a break to embark on her journey into motherhood.

In 2019, Shelley and her husband Kieran became first time parents to beautiful baby Ruby and welcomed Hazel in 2022 - their lives changed instantly for the better.

Pregnancy is unpredictable, but being pregnant with a physical disability came with extra challenges.

"The smallest of slopes was so hard to push up when there was a baby in the way, meaning you can't lean over, and pulling your wheelchair in and out of the car with a big baby belly was hard work."

Physically, Shelley went from being a fit and healthy elite athlete to finding everyday activities exhausting and as she got further along her mobility reduced, she was tired, enormous, fed up. Everything a mother in

her third trimester should be!

"Post pregnancy it felt so amazing just to have my body back, until I realised that I would never have my body completely back to myself."

"My body is now a place of comfort for two small people, and I love that. It seems much more important than the body I used to have that was used for sport."

As an athlete, every decision Shelley made in life was about what she wanted and needed to be a better basketballer. Being a mother is the exact opposite, especially in the early days when learning how to keep a small human alive.

Anyone that has experience of disability knows that you rarely know how you're going to adapt to something until faced with it. You know you can do it. You're just not sure how yet.

Navigating motherhood in a wheelchair was all about learning and adaptation.

"I figured out how to navigate the world in a wheelchair a long time ago, so like every new mum it was just about learning how to add a baby to my life."

"Kieran adapted a change table I could wheel under it, and a cot that would open like barn doors.

"I cannot chase my kids if they run, and we have made sure that Kieran doesn't either (able bodied), they both know and have known from an early age when we say "stop" they have to stop."

Sadly, parents with disabilities have long endured parental discrimination. They've been judged by family, friends and strangers about their ability to be a fit parent.

Including Shelley.

"I have people constantly wanting to help me and do things for me, even going so far as trying to grab my children for me. I see people watching me with my kids and think that it is unsafe."

It is a common human trait to see

disability as the worst circumstance a human could endure and that it makes one co-dependent.

"Ruby always asks me why strangers constantly ask me if I need help - she isn't old enough yet to see and understand that in our society people in wheelchairs are often looked at as incompetent or to be pitied. She doesn't see that at home or in our extended family or friendship group."

"She knows Aunty Kat has one leg, Aunty Bridie has no toes, and Teschy and Chaff have wheelchairs like Mama."

"At an NBL game we went to she didn't believe me when I said that's basketball - 'no it isn't, there's no wheelchairs'."

But it takes a quick one-on-one experience with Shelley to instantly erase any prejudices, and ultimately, a child doesn't need a parent who can walk. A child needs a parent who is always there and shows them, unwavering constant love, and support.

This is what a child needs and values the most. Not a parent up on two feet.

Now, back to basketball.

The Gliders returned to the pine in Tokyo and while there was positivity around a ninth-place finish, it was evident a lot of improvement was needed to return to the glory days of consistent podium finishes at the world's biggest events.

And so the hard work to build for Paris began in earnest.

Shelley was motivated to return to basketball by an opportunity to play in the Women's National League with the Sydney Blues in 2023, just a year after Hazel was born.

"I loved being back in that community and sharing wheelchair basketball with my little family."

The delicate balance between motherhood, work and elite sport isn't easy, but Shelley manages the juggle due to her incredible support structure.

"Kieran is the ultimate WAG and wants nothing more than to see me compete at a Paralympic Games."

"He has been a wonderful partner and Dad since day one and has taken the additional workload of balancing the kids in his stride."

Victorian Institute of Sport and Gliders Coach Craig Campbell has also been extremely supportive of her adapted training program.

"Having been an athlete for over half my life I know what I need and where my time is best invested, and Craig trusts me to make those calls on what is best for me."

In January 2024, Shelley returned to the court for Australia, racking up her long awaited 250th game against Japan at the Asian Oceania Championships in Bangkok.

"It just goes to show how long I've been playing this sport. I was so young when I first made the Gliders team, and now I'm playing with girls that are way younger than I was. In fact, some of my teammates were not even born when I made my debut!"

"I have a lot of knowledge and experience to share with this team and I'm excited by the talent we have and what we can achieve with this young group."

She was thrilled to be back in the green and gold and her lifelong dream to win Paralympic gold was back on the cards.

"I was motivated by the chance to wear the green and gold again, and be the best I can be, but this time around I'm also motivated to share this journey with my family."

The Gliders had the mountainous task of overcoming the hometown favourites Japan to qualify for the Paris 2024 Paralympics at the 2024 IWBF Women's Repechage in Osaka in late April.

Unfortunately, the more seasoned Japanese team successfully outpaced the Aussies, securing a commanding 26-50 win, and ultimately shattering Shelley's and the Gliders' 2024 Paralympic dreams.

Despite the disappointment felt within the team, Campbell is optimistic as he carefully considers the program's future direction.

Will Shelley be involved and continue on her quest for Paralympic gold? Who knows. But what we do know is that when it comes to Chappers, nothing is impossible.





OPEN DAY 2024

# PARADES, PODIUMS, PARIS OLYMPIANS AND PARALYMPIANS

Victorians flocked to the Victorian Institute of Sport Open Day on Wednesday, 2 October, to share in an unofficial welcome home for many of the 122 VIS athletes who competed in the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games.



In brilliant sunshine, a large crowd of young and old sports lovers witnessed a parade of athletes and VIS high-performance staff who wore green and gold in Paris.

Throughout the day dozens of Olympians and Paralympians, including race walking medallists Jemima Montag and Rhydian Cowley, swimming world champion Sam Williamson, Para-cycling gold medallist Emily Petricola OAM, Paralympic 1500m medallist Reece Langdon and Olympic and Paralympic table tennis player Melissa Tapper, mingled with fans who got the opportunity to explore and experience the inner workings of the state's peak high-performance sporting facility.

Of the 122 VIS athletes who competed in Paris, 24 of them returned home with medals. Over 30 VIS high-performance experts assisted the Australian Olympic and Paralympic teams.

The 2024 Open Day was a free event held at VIS headquarters at Lakeside Stadium in Albert Park. Over 2400 tickets were registered, with fans attending from all over

the state.

Visitors got to participate in demonstrations and activities conducted by VIS experts, athletes and partners. 20 sports were offering demonstrations or the opportunity for patrons to test themselves.

Archery, wheelchair basketball and skateboarding were big hits. Photographs on the VIS podium with athletes and the chance to wear their medals and get their autographs were also extremely popular.

"Yesterday I saw so many happy faces. Children and adults enjoying the opportunity to have a look behind the scenes and interact with our heroes," former VIS CEO, Anne Marie Harrison, said.

"The positive power of sport was everywhere. You could see the wonder in a child holding a medal or the fascination of a parent discussing with an athlete their playground-to-podium journey.

"And for our athletes, it was the opportunity to reconnect and share their experiences and witness the sense of joy they bring to the community.

"It was wonderful to see so many people come along, listen, play, learn and enjoy themselves."

The VIS has a rich 34-year history. Many of Australia's finest athletes have trained out of the VIS, including Catherine Freeman and Cadel Evans AM, snowboarding star Scotty James, Matildas captain Steph Catley, swimmers Leisel Jones OAM and Mack Horton OAM and wheelchair basketball and tennis star Dylan Alcott AO.

The holistic, multi-faceted training and support athletes at the VIS receive includes specialised coaching, sport science and sports medicine services, career and education advice, and training and competition support. VIS specialists from all of these fields were on hand.



Scan to watch the Open Day highlights.





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