



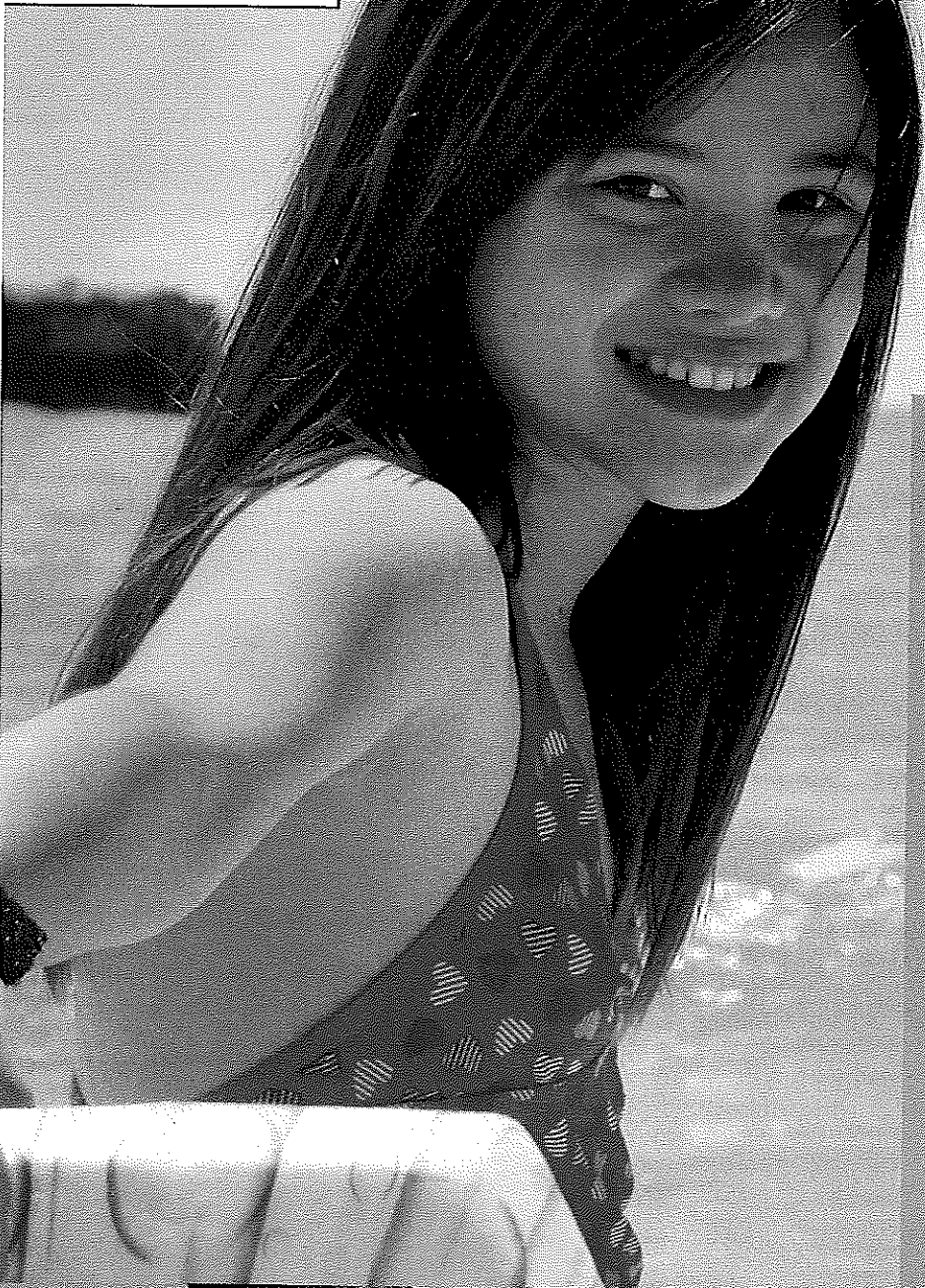
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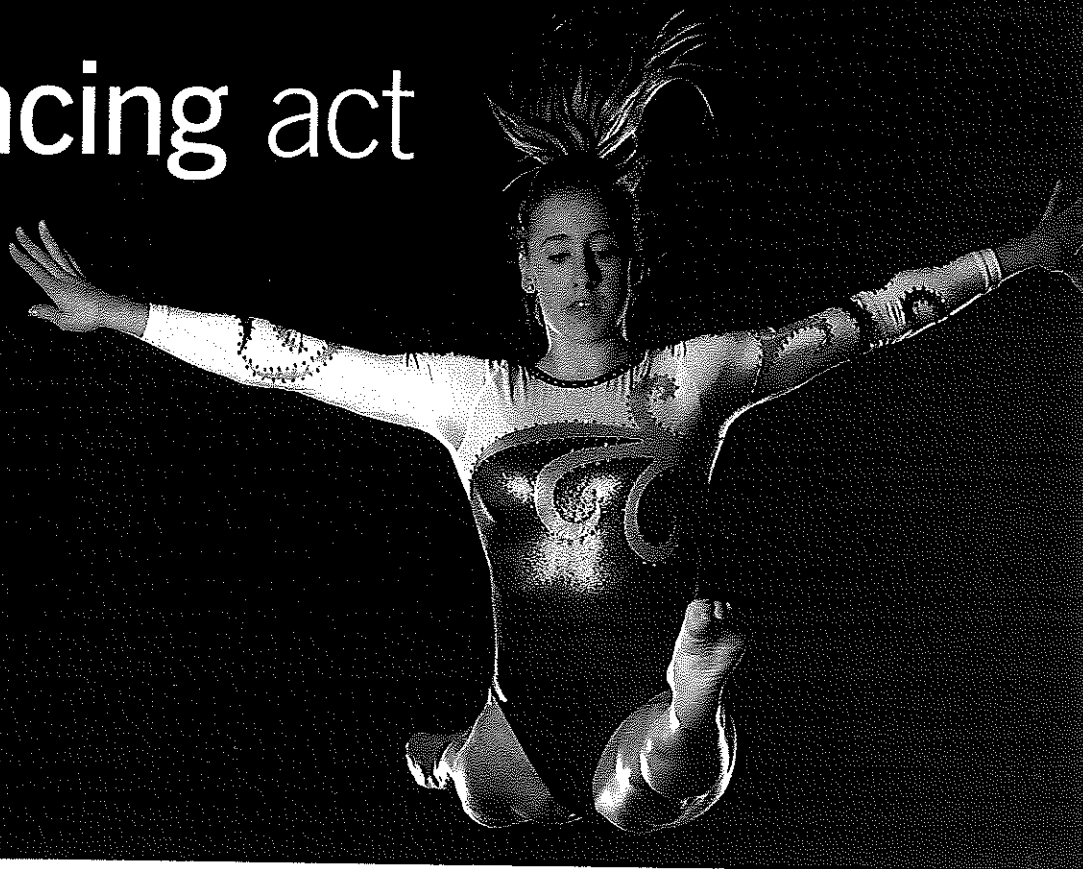
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YOUNG JOURNALIST AWARD 2011



Beijing Olympian  
and Commonwealth  
Games gold medallist  
Ashleigh Brennan  
talks about keeping  
the balance between  
gymnastics, her studies,  
friends and family.

# Balancing act

WORDS Sarah Baker



**A**shleigh Brennan knows the meaning of hard work. She trains five days a week as a professional gymnast, attends university full time and still manages to live the life of a regular teenager.

From the age of seven Ashleigh has had to juggle the demanding lifestyle of a competitive athlete. Now at 19 and studying Exercise Science at Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Melbourne, Ashleigh is on an Elite Athlete Program that allows her to manage her studies while she continues to pursue her passion for gymnastics.

'All the way through high school I was always travelling and now at uni

'You can't just pursue one thing and drop everything else in your life. If you have other things in your life you're definitely going to succeed in your sport, school or your uni as well.'

(ACU) I'm just really lucky that I have such great support staff', Ashleigh says. 'The uni has been so supportive of me and helped me out through deferring exams, but time management is also very important—which I had to learn from a young age. Now I'm

constantly emailing my lecturers and coordinators and making sure I stay on top of it all.'

Ashleigh has had a successful career as a gymnast, competing at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne and the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Most recently, she competed at the Delhi Commonwealth Games 2010, winning bronze in the Floor Exercise and gold in the Team Artistic Gymnastics final.

There have been difficult moments in Ashleigh's journey. There was a time after the Beijing Olympics when the demands and challenges of being an elite athlete from such a young age caught up to her.

'It was a big 10 year process to get to Beijing', she says. 'I decided to take a year off after Beijing and finish off year 12... and also to just mentally refresh myself and find new motivation for getting into the gym everyday. Obviously I couldn't stay away from it.'

Despite completing her year 12 studies over two years and spending countless hours training and perfecting routines, Ashleigh has no regrets.

'I didn't really sacrifice anything, I got to travel the world with my friends and represent my country which is the most satisfying feeling and at the same time I go through school and managing to do uni as well', she says.

However, it's the support from Ashleigh's family and friends that have been crucial to her happiness and success.

'I've had a very good network of people around me, my family has been amazing and have always done everything to make sure I've achieved everything I've wanted to in my sport', she says.



'I came to uni and gymnastics was what I "also did", it wasn't everything to me. I think having that balance is really important.'

'But it's still important to remain as normal as possible and I enjoy hanging out with my friends and family in my spare time and doing everything any other 19-year-old does.'

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you're definitely going to succeed in your sport, school or your uni as well.'

While Ashleigh's friends have always been supportive of her athletic career, starting university has given her an avenue to pursue a lifestyle not defined by gymnastics.

'For 10 years gymnastics was my priority... now priorities have definitely changed', she says. 'Gymnastics isn't my whole life like it was for 10 years. I came to uni and gymnastics was what I "also did", it wasn't everything to me. I think having that balance is really important.'

Ashleigh may now be one of the more mature members of her training team but her sights are firmly set on completing her studies and if all goes to plan, maybe a second Olympic Games in London 2012.

'I'm just taking one year at a time', she says. 'If my body can hold out and I still have the passion for it then definitely. But you have to have the passion for it: if you don't it's not going to happen.'

## FIVE TIPS ON LIVING A HEALTHY LIFE

Recognising that our bodies are special gifts means also recognising that we need to look after them. Here are some simple ways of ensuring you have the health and energy to live how you want to live.

- 1 Eat whole foods which haven't been over processed. Wholegrain foods contain B vitamins and magnesium which are great for energy production.
- 2 Eat lots of fresh vegetables and two pieces of fruit each day to increase disease-fighting antioxidants, vitamins and minerals.
- 3 Drink plenty of water (to help remove wastes from the body).
- 4 Exercise for 40 minutes, five times a week, to improve general wellbeing, reduce risk of developing disease and maintain a healthy weight.
- 5 Avoid caffeine and alcohol, which dehydrate the body and over stimulate the nervous system causing mood and energy problems.

*By Jane Collopy, naturopath at The Sports Injury Clinic in Frankston, Victoria, [wlnatropathy.com.au](http://wlnatropathy.com.au).*