



Paula Thomas

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Head into the City of Newcastle Gymnastics Club, it was clear to see that there was one coach in particular who looked well and truly at home. For 2000 Olympian, Paula Thomas, artistic gymnastics is a way of life, hard work is something that comes naturally and the

ups and downs of an elite gymnast are something she remembers and looks back on with pride. There was no need to ask Paula any questions or probe about her gymnastics career, she was extremely open and therefore her story is best told in her own words...

I started gym when I was seven. I wanted to start when I was five but there was a two year waiting list at my sports centre, so I had to wait for two years. Finally I got a place and I still wanted to do it. A few months later a new purpose built club opened called Bush Harlow, with the coach Rod Smith. He did a trial at our sports centre and I managed to come top of the trial so I was invited to move to the club. That's where it all started and I never looked back. I never wanted to do anything else, it was all gymnastics, if I was ill for school I was still OK for the gym - I loved it.

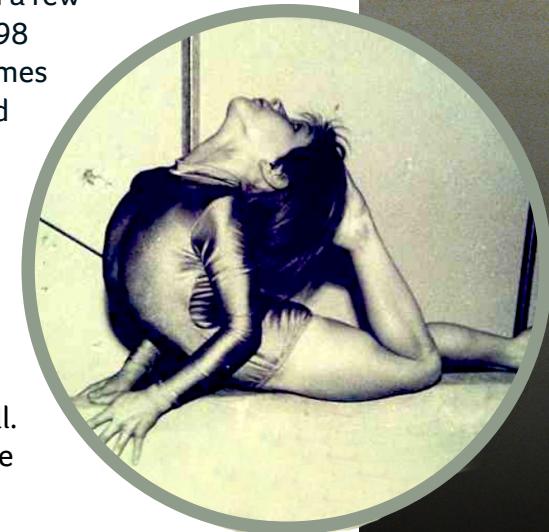
After a while, my coach Rod moved on to South Essex Gymnastics Club but I continued on at Bush Harlow for some time. One day I went to a regional squad which was being held at Huntingdon Gymnastics Club. It was here that I met and became good friends with Lisa Mason and to this day she is still one of my best friends. We were inseparable and she asked if I wanted to go and train with her at Huntingdon. At the time I was in a bit of a stand still position with my gymnastics so I felt like it was a good time and made the move. It was at Huntingdon that I trained with coaches Terry Sharpington and Monica Desalermos for many years. Unfortunately though the travelling to the gym was becoming too much. My dad was taking me a good hour and a half to the gym, we weren't getting back till very late at night and then he was getting up at 5 in the morning to go to work - it really took its toll. It was at this point I got a phone call from my friend and well known gymnast Annika Reader whilst she was at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and we got chatting, she suggested heading back to South Essex, so over that summer I moved back to my roots. Again it happened at the right time.

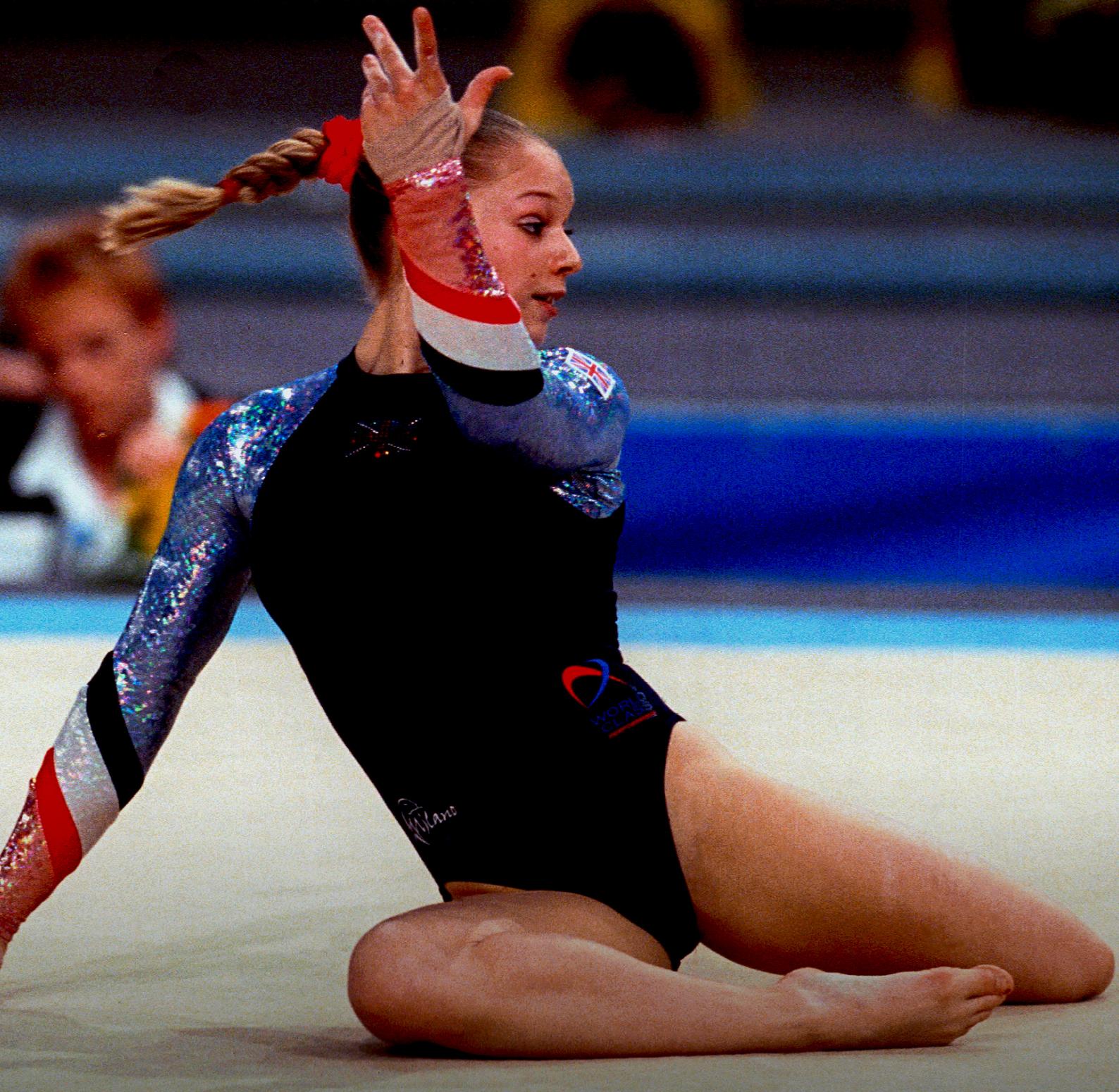
I wasn't there long however until the beginning of 1988 when I moved to Lilleshall National Sports Centre in

Newport, Shropshire. As part of the current crop of British squad members, we started the centralisation for the girls. It was fantastic – the England footballers were there at the time so it was even better! We loved it and I loved training there, focusing on the gym and not travelling as well as being with friends. It was like a massive family, if you were bored you would have about ten different people you could go and see. Adrian Stan (then Performance Director) was great and Zoltan Jordanov (then National Coach) came along and was brilliant. I enjoyed my time there and I do believe that I wouldn't have got where I did without them.

It wasn't all fun and games though, it was a struggle and I was always the underdog so I had to work hard. I had a natural talent but I had fear - I hated beam with a passion. I had a couple of knocks; I had a fall on a double Arabian and then struggled to do the move again. I kept focussing however on the bigger goals and didn't let it stop me, I looked ahead to the Europeans, Commonwealths, Worlds and Olympics and that's what kept me going. I struggled with double somersaults after that, if you look at my floor routine from the 2000 Olympics I had no double backs in any of my routines. It was ridiculous really because I could do them in my sleep before. I found it hard but I wanted it so badly.

All of this happened a few years before the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur and I didn't make the team. It was the first time I felt like I should have been in the team and I was reserve. Everyone went and I was left at Lilleshall. That was a hard time





for me, a time where I could have given up quite easily and it was either fight to prove myself or give up and I chose to fight, I didn't want it to happen again but I went over to Brisbane in the team for the 1999 World Championships. We had a control comp and I went for my vault and didn't land it and then I wasn't in the team and I got sent home when everyone else went on to China. Another blow obviously, I was gutted but that's how it is at the end of the day, they want someone who is going to be consistent and at that pre competition

I didn't prove that was the case. So I came back and started fighting again, training as hard as I could for the 2000 Olympics, I won the first trial but threw the second after trying new skills and bombed out completely and then at the British I was about middle and again, what I'd prayed wouldn't happen again, I missed out on a place in the team. I was travelling reserve but I kept going strong, as soon as they wanted a routine I'd do it, just carrying on as best as I could. Then, unfortunately for her but I guess fortunate for me,



Melissa Wilcox got injured and it ended up where I went and she didn't. Most people would think the Olympics would be my most nerve wracking competition but in truth I loved it because we had never been more prepared. I was top scorer on the two pieces I competed so I felt like I had justified my inclusion in the team and I had the best time ever and I do feel very lucky. When I eventually finished gymnastics after the Olympics, I wanted a complete break to explore other things. Eventually I got back into it and I went into schools, promoting health, fitness and gymnastics with Craig Heap (former Olympian) and I loved it. Then in 2004, I got offered a job as a coach at the City of Newcastle

Gymnastics Academy. At first, I didn't want to go, I was settled and I'd never been to Newcastle before. I wasn't sure if I wanted to get back into coaching but as soon as I got back in the gym I was saying 'well you need to do this and this', I loved it and here I am nine years later. I'm a bit of a jack of all trades, I do summer camps for kids that can't do certain moves, and I love that they can learn something new. I also do pre-school,

development and some seniors and I do adults/university - you name it I do it. I like to be kept busy.

I've got two beautiful children now, Arianna and Rhys, so it's been difficult to focus on the elite side of the things so I took a step back. I didn't really want to do it, because of the time and travelling commitments etc. but as my two are getting older and not needing me so much, my hunger is coming back. It's nice to see some of my old teammates coaching now as well. It's like we're all back together again; we can reminisce on all the old times. I can bring my own kids to the gym as well; it's a great place for them to be brought up in.

In terms of my gymnastics, everyone remembers me for being talkative (laughs). I loved that time, reminiscing. We were teenagers with big personalities. A lot of people do remember me for my floor. But what I like to take most from my experience is the psychology side of things. I'm interested in it as I went through it as a gymnast, so this makes me very understanding. It's having a good balance, I want my gymnasts to feel like they can come and talk to me about their problems. I always make sure my gymnasts have fun at the end as well; I always end with a game so they go away feeling happy and fulfilled. I want kids to stay in the gym until their 19/20 years old, I want them to still enjoy it. I'm trying to find new ways for them to stay involved, not just competing but having fun at such things as competitions abroad.

In my entire gymnastics career it was clear I have had my share of ups and downs and when I look back I absolutely loved it. Talking about it now brings back so many good memories. Gymnastics is all I know and to say that you're doing a job you love is amazing, you can't ask for anything more.

