

# Teamwork for health

**Brennon Dowrick**, Director, Performance Max Pty Ltd

FACILITATOR: As a former Olympian and now a businessman, Brennon Dowrick knows the similarities between successful business and elite sport. To achieve in both endeavours requires commitment, discipline, goal setting and team work. Brennon's sporting career includes two Olympic Games, three Commonwealth Games and seven World Championships. Brennon now focuses his energy on motivating and inspiring corporate Australia and today he will be sharing with us some of the highs and challenges of his career. But before we meet Brennon, let's have a look at some of his past performances.

BRENNON DOWRICK: Thank you. Good morning to our traditional land owners and, of course, Rural Health. You're probably asking yourselves, why do we have an Olympic gymnast talking to us this morning? Well, believe it or not, what you all do in your every day working environments and what you just saw up there on the screen are a lot closer than you may think. I am sure at the end of this presentation you will see how close both of what we do actually is.

At the age of seven I had a dream. I remember watching the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games and seeing these athletes almost flying through the air. Those athletes were gymnasts. So from that day onwards I said to myself, "That's what I want to do, I want to represent my country at an Olympic Games". I achieved that dream on my 21st birthday to the day, when I competed at my first Olympics in Barcelona in 1992. So a lot of work. In fact, many years of hard work went into achieving that dream. But it was so satisfying and rewarding once I had accomplished it.

Now, I stand before you today having been retired for the last five years and I look back over my career with many fond memories. But I have come to realise that the most important part is not the destination but rather the journey and the process and how you get there. And my journey has taught me a lot about life itself.

Like many of us out there, we've all travelled a long way to be here and I myself have travelled from Canberra. Now, the reason I live in Canberra is not because I'm fond of the politicians we have there or perhaps I really enjoy the cold weather we have in Canberra, it's because of one very important building. And that building is the Australian Institute of Sport.

Why do we have it? Well, let's face it, in Australia we are a sports mad nation and we love to do well at sport. But this was not always the case. In fact we came home from the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada, without any gold medals. Would you believe it, even New Zealand beat us in the medal tally. I hope there's no New Zealanders out there this morning. If there are, there is no one I would rather see than our friendly New Zealand neighbours win a silver medal.

So in 1981 the AIS was set up and it is considered to be the backbone of Australia's success over the last 20 years. It works so well because it has such a wonderful support network that gives the athletes the very best chance to get the very best out of themselves. Now, I have been on scholarship there longer than any other athlete from any other sport. I was there on scholarship for a total of 16 years. And I know you're probably saying, "Gee, wasn't this guy good enough to graduate from the place?" But, as I said, this was not the case at all. I had the best coaches, the best facilities, the best doctors, physios, sports massage therapists to help me get the very best out of myself.

Now, gymnastics, unfortunately, we have to train many, many hours. We would train seven to eight hours a day, six days a week. We have to train so many hours because we have to be as good as we can be on not one, two or three events but six very different disciplines. You saw them all up there on the screen. But if you ask any gymnast throughout the entire world what the most difficult, what the most demanding apparatus is, they'll all tell you exactly the same thing. The most difficult apparatus in men's gymnastics is, in fact, the pommel horse. And that's what I've brought along with me this morning.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the real deal. This is an Olympic pommel horse. Now, the reason it is called a pommel horse is because gymnastics has been performed in every modern Olympic Games and also in Ancient Greece. However, in Ancient Greece they competed on a real live horse. I don't know how they kept the thing still, but they did. In fact, these handles here represent a saddle and even 140 years ago the pommel horse had a fake head and a fake tail. So we've certainly come a long way since then.

I started my AIS years at the age of 12 and finished at the age of 29. I remember my very first day, the head coach walked out and said, "Brennon, congratulations on receiving a scholarship here. But I'll be honest with you, we have got a lot of work to do. Your flexibility, it is terrible, you're as stiff as a board; your strength, it's non-existent, you've got these skinny little arms. Brennon, I know you're only 12, I'm not sure what your mother's been feeding you but we're going to have to trim you up a lot, send you to the dietitian, we've got many, many years of work ahead of us. And Brennon, I'm going to be totally honest with you, you are not the most talented gymnast we've ever had here".

I'm thinking – "Why am I even here", I asked the coach. He said, "Brennon, you are here because of one very important attribute that you have and that is, your determination". "That's right, I am really determined, coach, I'm really willing to work hard". "We know that Brennon but what we have to be is structured in how we go about that hard work. Now, out of all the apparatus the pommel horse is the most difficult. If you can master this event, then you become a world class gymnast".

"Well, okay, what do I have to do, coach?" He said, "Brennon, I want to share a short story with you. If you were a construction worker and you were about to build a house, what's the most important part?" "Well, I'm not sure, coach, what is it?" He said, "Brennon, the base, the foundation. If you can build that foundation one hundred per cent correct as strong and as sturdy as it should be, you can then go and build a very strong, sturdy, perfect house. What I want to do, Brennon, is teach you the foundations of the pommel horse. Now, there's only four foundation skills but I want you to promise me that you'll do each of those skills one hundred per cent correct before you move onto the next and I guarantee you at the end, you will have a world class routine".

"That sounds great", I thought. "What's the first foundation skill, coach?" "Brennon, I want you to walk around the pommel horse". I thought, "this sounds a bit easy, what's the coach going on about here?" He said, "Brennon, I want you to walk around the pommel horse on your hands. I want you to keep a nice, tight body, I want your legs to be together, your toes to be pointed, but the most important part is I want you to move swiftly and confidently around that pommel horse". I thought, "No problem, this is my very first day at the AIS, I really want to impress this coach but I'll do exactly as he's told me".

So this is pretty much what happened. First foundation skill on the pommel horse went something like this – a bit harder than I thought and I'm trying to get around here, slipped a bit there, "don't worry, coach, look, I know my legs aren't really together, I'm not really that swift but look, I'll tell you what, you know, coach, I'm really confident" – I'm getting around there, "Gee, it's a bit harder than I thought, I'm almost there" and look, crikey, I've just caught

my tie – it reminds me of the first time I did this I caught something else but it was a lot more painful.

Got around, “what do you reckon, coach”, he looked back, he shook his head, he said, “Brennon, that is terrible. I want you to do five more.” And I said, “Five more, you’ve got to be joking?” After doing this skill for a total of 18 months, that’s right, 18 months, this is what the finished product looked like, fast, smooth, confident and one more, jumped to the middle. There we go, the first foundation move on the pommel horse. Thank you, I can’t really believe you’re clapping at that, it’s really boring. I think you might like this morning’s session.

The next skill, the foundation skill, a lot more spectacular. It is called the scissor. Now, I thought it was called the scissor because it looked like a pair of scissors opening and closing. Unfortunately when I tried it, I found out the real reason why they call it the scissor. This took me two whole years to learn, two whole years. I am then going to go on and show you double leg circles, which were a very important part of the pommel horse. Again, another two whole years to learn.

The third skill I’m going to show you, the third foundation move is probably the most spectacular. It’s a combination of the scissors and the double leg circles. Its technical term is the flare. But thanks to a couple of gentlemen named Roy and HG, this now has a new term. For some reason they have named that skill, “the hello boys”. Now, all I know is that this took me a total of six whole years to learn, to get all of these skills one hundred per cent correct and perfect.

Gymnastics has been performed in every modern Olympic Games as I told you, and in Ancient Greece. However, there was one other major difference and that was that gymnastics in Ancient Greece was also performed naked. Don’t worry, ladies, we’ll be doing the modern form of gymnastics today. The reason I’m taking my clothes off in front of you all was not because I enjoy doing this in front of a thousand people. It’s because I’m going to show you some very serious things on the pommel horse. Not only do I want to look and feel the part but I want to make sure that everything is kept nicely in place and we don’t have any accidents up there. I know we’ve got many doctors out there but I do not want to take that chance. So here we go, remember, six whole years of work to get this perfect.

Three different skills, the scissors, the double leg circles, then the flares. So let’s see how we go here. All right, let’s start off with scissors. Okay, double leg circles and now, the hello boys. There we go. Thank you. I’ve got a fan up here on the stage. I should let you know that this pommel horse, I’ve borrowed it from a local Alice Springs club but I also have my own back in Canberra. What pommel horse? I’ve got some advice for you all, I do quite a few of these presentations. Last year I did one overseas in Bangkok. My advice to you all, if you ever travel to Bangkok, don’t take a pommel horse with you. For some reason I was stuck in Customs for about seven hours. I probably shouldn’t have put this white chalky stuff in the middle of it. I eventually got it into the country.

After six years or almost eight years really of work, I was about to debut in my first major international competition. I was to debut in China and the Chinese are world champions in gymnastics, a very strong nation. I was about to compete in front of 15 000 screaming fans. And out of all the apparatus, the pommel horse was the one we were due to start on.

That’s always very difficult because when you start a competition you’re a bit tense, a bit nervous. But that didn’t bother me, the crowd size, thought I could cope with that. There was this strange custom that the Chinese people had that I was a bit worried about however and that was, normally when a gymnast falls off an apparatus you’ll get this reaction, “Oooh, aaah, poor guy, he fell off”. In China you get this, “Oohh, ahahahaha”. They’d laugh at you.

But that wasn't going to happen to me, I've worked eight years of my life for this moment. I cannot wait to show these world class head judges that, "Hey, Brennon from Australia, he's a force to be reckoned with". This crowd, "I was going to show them that I'm going to be a great gymnast". It was all about me, I just wanted to do this to prove all the work was worthwhile.

So there I was, I put my arms out like this, I touched the pommel horse and for some reason my arms were doing this, "Geez, there are a lot of people around, aren't there" and I started getting really nervous. I was trying to concentrate. And this is pretty much what happened. I jumped up, hand slipped, straight off. I couldn't believe it, I fell off before I even began and I slowly got up and, of course, could hear, "Ohhh, ohhh, ohhh". I went and chalked up and tried to regain my composure. I started again, it was terrible. I was hitting the horse everywhere. In fact I think I almost invented a new move. My arm buckled so much that I landed on the handle, did this 360 degree turn, up in the air, came down, bang. I remember looking up at the ceiling just wishing I wasn't there. As I slowly got up, of course the laughter was even louder.

When you compete in major international events, you compete on what is called a podium, very similar to this stage. The judges sit beneath you, the apparatus sits on top, so the judges can get a really good view of what is happening. Now, for some very unfortunate reason the chalk bucket was really unstable and because I was just shaking so much as I was trying to chalk up, I accidentally knocked the chalk bucket over. I was heading right towards the head judge's table.

My coach said it was like watching something slow motion. He jumped out of his chair and he was running like this to try and save the head judge. And he got there just at the wrong time. Chalk came out of the bucket, went all over the head judge's table, over his jacket and his tie. He kind of exploded upwards, hit my coach in the face. He staggered backwards, he lifted up his head, his face was covered in chalk, he opened up his eyes, he looked exactly like a clown.

You should have heard the crowd. I have never heard 15 000 people all laughing at once and they were all laughing at me. Right then and there I had two choices. The first was I was to run out of that gym never to return again. The second was, somehow I've got to try and finish this routine. Luckily for me I chose the second.

I went out to the chalk bucket to chalk up again, there was no chalk in the bucket, "Sorry, head judge, the chalk off your table there". Somehow I finished the routine and I felt terrible. What a way to begin my international career. I sat down on the bench, shoulders were slumped, coach came and sat down next to me. The first thing he said to me was, "Well, Brennon, that wasn't the best routine you've ever done". He said, "Brennon, you are here representing Australia. I want you to forget about that routine and think of the team".

"I'd love to forget about that routine". "Hang on a second, he's right". I had just had a disastrous debut to my international career but what my coach had just told me was the most important information I was ever given. You see, as gymnasts, we're up here on the apparatus as individuals but what we do as individuals directly affects the team. The most sought after medal in gymnastics is the team gold. From that moment onwards I put the pressure on my back that I was going to be a team player. That meant both in training and in competition. And by always doing and training and competing as a team player, a very interesting thing happened over the next 10 years of my career.

Not only did the Australian team results dramatically improve, but my own individual results improved as well. It was a win/win situation and something I cannot stress enough. It was so important to my successful career.

And I got back to Canberra, really motivated to train hard when my coach of eight years said, “Brennon, it’s time for me to step aside”. And I said, “What do you mean, we’re working so well together, I feel like I know how to compete and train now”. He said, “Brennon, you’re to receive a new coach, who is very sought after. In fact he has taught two world champions. He’s extremely tough, he’s from China and he saw your competition in China”.

I’m thinking, “This is change, I really don’t like change but I had to believe and trust my coach”. So I met this Chinese gentlemen and he said, “Brennon, I am reasonably impressed with your gymnastics, however, I do want to change your pommel horse routine”. “Yeah, I’ve got to make it more confident, I’ve got no confidence actually, fell off a couple of times, knocked the chalk bucket over”. He said, “I know, Brennon, I will regain your confidence. I want you to promise me something, I want you to promise me, at the end of your training session, I know, you train close to eight hours every day but at the end of your training session, I want you to promise me that you’ll be the last person training in the gym”.

I thought that sounded a bit strange. Ran into one of my team mates, “G’day mate, how are you? Gee, you had a rough training session today, you look exhausted. You are really tired? Let me get that door for you, here we go”. “I’ll see you later, okay, I’ll just” – coach said, “No, Brennon, I want you to do a little bit extra training. In fact all I want you to do is another 15 more minutes training”. I said, “15 minutes, what’s that going to do? Wouldn’t it be better for me to have an early dinner or get to bed early that night?” By putting in an extra 15 minutes, that worked out to be another 70 hours more work than my team mates. That’s something pretty good to have on your side, both mentally and physically, when you’re faced with a situation where you’re going for one remaining Olympic Games spot, against team mates.

Now, it’s good, as long as it is time spent productively. My coach would make me, at the end of training, when I was absolutely exhausted, without any warm up, he’d make me do one more routine. He’d say, “Next up for Australia is Brennon Dorrick” and I’d have to do this routine. For the first six months I fell off every single time. I’d say to myself, “I blew it. At least I didn’t knock the chalk bucket over I guess”. Ten months later, started getting a little more consistent. Twelve months later I was doing that routine every single time. I felt so confident.

Eighteen months after my debut in China, there I was about to compete in my first Commonwealth Games, on the pommel horse. Now, for some reason I started getting really nervous, “Gee, are my arms all right, they’re not too wobbly?” “What about that chalk bucket, is it stable enough?” The coach could see I was getting really worried and as I stood in front of the pommel horse I heard my coach yell out, “Come on, Brennon, just like training”. I thought, “Just like training. Gosh, my coach believes in me, my team mates believes in me. Everyone back at the AIS believe in me”.

They have all helped me in their own significant ways. The doctors working with the physios, the physios working with the soft tissue therapists, the therapists working with the dietitians, all of them had helped and contributed to me being there right then and there. Even the ladies in the dining room who cooked my meal had helped in their own, little but significant way. If they had all believed in me, at the very least I had to believe in myself.

You hear athletes talking about being in that zone. Well, I felt I was closest to being in the zone that day. The pommel horse I saw in front of me looked like the one I trained on in Canberra. The crowd were yelling and screaming, I couldn’t even hear them. The judges sitting around me, I couldn’t even see them. I just wanted to give this routine my all. I started the routine, everything felt like it was happening in slow motion and yet it was happening automatically. It felt like I was floating and flying at the same time.

It's very hard to put into words but the routine felt absolutely fantastic. I got the dismount, landed and said to myself, "That is the best I've got". The judge obviously liked it because he gave me a 9.9, which is still today the highest score an Australian has ever got in international competition and awarded me Australia's very first Commonwealth medal, Australia's very first Commonwealth gold medal, and there it is, right there. Thank you.

I'm very proud of this, being my first and Australia's first. For me it was the first of many. I've won 11 medals at Commonwealth Games and after this one, all the other medals were just more relief, but this was a nice surprise.

But I know all of you right now have got a busy few days ahead of you. You're here because you want to get the very best out of yourself and you have lots of challenges ahead. Well, at the very least, I've got to do something challenging for here. So I thought, because I built that moment up quite nicely, and I just happen to have a pommel horse here with me, I thought, "Why don't I show you that 9.9 Gold Medal routine right here and now?" Nothing like a bit of pressure, is there? Let's see how I go? It's about now I always remind you that I've been retired for about five years.

There was a time the more I did this routine the easier it got, but I've just got to the top of that curve now and have started to go down the other side. But I'm still going to give this a real good crack and I'm sure you won't mind looking after this chalk bucket over here. So let's see how we go. This is a 9.9, Gold Medal routine, which I should also say, when I did compete this routine, I was 18. I'm now in my early 30s, so let's just see how we go. All right, 9.9 Gold Medal routine, here in Alice Springs, on this rickety old pommel horse, on this wobbly old stage. Yes! Okay, it's all right. Thank you.

I tell you, that's a big relief. There's two things I hope you notice. The first is that gymnastics is a very physical sport but, it's even more mental. We have such a powerful tool up here. If we can learn to harness its full potential, it's amazing the results we can all achieve. I treated that routine exactly the same way as when I was competing. I treated you as world class judges. If I fell off, I was reasonably confident you wouldn't laugh at me. But I didn't want to try that theory out.

The second thing you'll notice is that – I'm puffing a lot. It's not because I'm unfit, it's just that when you do a pommel horse routine you do it so you'll have nothing left at the end. Of course, in competition the gymnasts aren't talking straight afterwards, they don't wear these microphones. In fact, normally you'll see them, particularly the Americans, land, wave at the crowd, high five from the team mates, pat on the back from the coach, they'll run over to their bench, television cameras will focus in on them, "Hi everyone back home, how are you guys doing, wasn't that a great routine?" As soon as that camera goes off, "Oh, coach, I'm dying here, get me some water". The things you don't see.

In any athlete's career, when you hear our national anthem it's a very proud moment. And people often ask me, "What do you think about during that time?" And for me, I didn't think about the gold medal around my neck, the 9.9 I received or how perfect the routine felt. What I thought about was the process and the journey and how I got there. But more importantly, all the people that had contributed and helped me get that great result. That gold medal is just as much a part of their life as it is mine.

Now, after my medal ceremony I was out in the media room. This gentleman came up to me about this height with these black rimmed glasses on. He said, "Brennon Dowrick?" I said, "Yes". He said, "You've been selected for a drug test. I will now no longer leave your side". I thought, "Okay, no problem, I hadn't had a drug test before but I thought I knew what to

expect". So we went out to the waiting room and opened up my first bottle of water, drank that quite quickly.

Nothing was really happening. I opened up my second bottle, got into that. This Canadian gymnast who was a very loud fellow, stood up and went, "Hey, man, I am ready to go, let's go do these tests" and he went off with his chaperone, with his empty beaker. 15 minutes later he came back in and sat down next to me with an empty beaker. And I said, "Well, what are you doing?" He looked at me and said, "Hey, man, I don't know, I got stage fright or something".

And I thought, "Gee, I don't want to look like a goose like him", so I opened up my third bottle of water, finished that and felt very confident that I could do my test. In fact I remember standing up and feeling and hearing my stomach go, "Bloop, bloop, bloop" with all the water. They gave me my beaker. I'll be honest with you, it's about the same size as that glass and I'm looking at my beaker and I looked back at the three empty one litre bottles of water and thought, "This is going to be too easy".

And I was about to do my test when the chaperone, who is standing next to me, says, "Brennon, can you make sure that your shirt is off and your pants are down by your ankles". I said, "What?" He said, "I have to make sure you don't have any extra tubes or anything". I went, "Okay, no tubes". I took the shirt off, pants down by the ankles, I was looking at the beaker thinking, "I'm really going to overflow this thing" when the chaperone who hasn't left my side then does this – now, I'd never been that close to a guy before. In fact, ladies and gentleman, I'm not bragging, but he was so close, if I had of flicked my hips, I could have hit him in the eye. That's how close he was.

I'm standing there, I'm going up and down on the toes, heavy breathing, even started whistling. This chaperone hasn't moved, he's still just like this. So I thought, "This is very tense, I've got to really relax the situation. I know, I'll talk to him". So I looked down and said, "So, how are you enjoying the Commonwealth Games so far?" "It's great watching all the athletes". I thought, "Okay, that was the wrong question, I've got to ask him another one quickly". So I said, "Gee, what a bummer you got stuck with this job". "Oh, no, I volunteered". I was out with my empty beaker.

I told that story a couple of years ago to a group of Paralympians, amazing athletes to be able to do what they can with their disabilities. And this one gentleman was an arm amputee. He came up to me and said, "Brennon, I am so glad that I never got that drug test chaperone". And I said, "Well, why is that?" He said, "Well, just before my test I have to turn to my chaperone and say, 'Well, mate, you've got two choices. The first choice is you can hold the beaker, the second choice is' – 'I'll hold the beaker thanks mate". He said, in his entire career, he never got through the second choice.

So it's very easy for me, standing in front of you this morning, talking about some of the things that enabled me to have my successful career. It's very easy to talk about, it's obviously a lot harder to put into practice. If anything in life is worth striving for, then trust me, it's going to take a lot of hard work. But that hard work may be frustrating sometimes, but if you persevere through that hard work, when you do eventually get to that goal, it is so much more rewarding and satisfying once you accomplish it. And because of all that drive that you've put in, the beauty of reaching that goal is not only can you celebrate and give yourselves a pat on the back, but you then can even aim higher the following year.

Some of the things I hope you take away with you from this morning's session, building on strong foundations. To begin with it'll take you longer if those foundations are set properly but they will enable you to climb that ladder to those goals you've set. If something does go wrong,

as long as those foundations are solid, that means you don't have to go all the way back to the beginning and start again. You only have to go back to that previous foundation.

The National Rural Health Alliance has built already on strong foundations. But one of those strong foundations is all of its members. All of you out there have to work together, strive together to continue the great work that you're all doing.

In fact, the next point that I want you to take away is self belief. If you don't believe in yourselves and believe that you can do something, then you won't be able to. Perhaps some of you might even try putting in that extra 15 minutes. Now, I know already you would have very long days. But if you allocate during your busy days 15 minutes that you promise yourselves that you will work on things that you don't like doing, but you will work more diligently, harder on these things during that 15 minutes, then I promise you at the end of one year, you will see amazing results.

But the thing I hope you take away with you, the most important thing, is teamwork as individuals. Because all of you out there have your individual tasks in this wonderful Alliance but if you work together, learn from one another, not only will the National Rural Health Alliance grow, but your own individual careers will grow as well. And you don't win gold medals, you get something far better, and that is, giving people in this country a better quality of life. And I believe that is far greater than any medal or things that people might get.

To prove this point I'm going to finish up by doing one more thing on the pommel horse for you. I'm actually going to finish up by doing a strength routine. Now, as gymnasts, we've got a pretty good strength to weight ratio. So I'm going to ask for your help. Basically I'm going to show you that strength is a great asset to have, by doing some static type of strength moves. But then I'm going to finish up by doing some push-ups.

Now, I know all of you out there can do push-ups so I thought I'd do my push-ups in the handstand position. Where you come in is that I want you to treat me as your newest member, your newest team member. I want you to support me. How you will support me is basically, the more noise you make, the more strength I'm going to be able to do for you. Some of you may not like doing this but believe me, you start clapping and cheering, you'll feel good and it's going to really help me. If you make a lot of noise, I think I can do maybe five or six handstand push-ups. If you really get behind me and show me what you're capable of, I don't think there's any reason why I can't get seven or eight.

My record in any presentation is 10 handstand push-ups. So please help me in this. But before I get up there, I'd like to wish you all the very best for the remainder of this conference. Network with one another, learn from one another, take in as much as you can from the wonderful sessions that you're attending.

For this Alliance to work, you really need a central commitment. And all of you out there I know will be striving for that imaginary gold medal. Rate yourselves at least a 9.9. But I know that all of you are very talented people but you have that other attribute which is even more important and that is determination. If you can marry up your talent with your determination, then you can go after the ultimate. And the ultimate is the perfect 10. The perfect 10, helping even more Australians have a better quality of life.

So good luck everyone and now, please, help me in this strength routine. Let's see how we can go. Okay, starting off very slowly. Maybe some music, Paul, would help. That one's pretty hard. Okay, now we're going to start handstand push-ups. Thank you. Thank you very much everyone. Good luck for the year. Good luck for the remainder of the conference. Thank you.

FACILITATOR: Thank you, Brennon. Let's hear it for Brennon. inspirational.