

boys? Cakes? Cars? no, Monette



Then in March, Monette will be gold medal favourite and a name on everyone's lips at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

It is heady stuff, scary even, but the thought of starring in her home town lights up her big brown eyes much more than the mention of a tasty birthday cake.

For the record, Monette last nibbled cake on Christmas Day, and she can't remember (or isn't saying) if fast food has ever slipped between her lips.

Boyfriend? Her coaches won't allow it.

"They're too much hassle," Monette says.

"My parents are happy about it. That's one thing they don't have to think about."

THE monastic routine of a gymnast's life makes a familiar tale but the reality stares you in the face when you walk into the Victorian Institute of Sport gymnasium.

Kinder gym is in full swing and babes aged six, but looking half that, are bouncing around on the floor, beginning the long stretch that might culminate in a decade or more.

Monette was six when she started the pursuit of excellence.

At nine, talent spotters were impressed by her co-ordination and quick-twitch muscles. She was tapped for stardom.

At 14, Monette made an astonishing international debut in the 2003 world championships.

She finished 12th in the all-round competition, qualified for the beam final, and helped Australia to win its first ever team medal (bronze) in gymnastics.

Attrition occurs at a remarkable rate in gymnastics. With every

Olympics, a new generation passes through.

In one year Monette has gone from team baby to elder.

With the retirement of most of the generation who competed in Athens and injuries to those who want to go on, she finds herself the face of Australian gymnastics in its most critical year.

When she won her first senior all-round event at the Australian championships in May, pundits were already talking up the prospects of two 15-year-olds who are likely to team with Monette in the 2008 Olympics.

For this interview, we met in the VIS gym last Monday evening, immediately after she had walked off the floor from a three-hour training session.

Monette had 40 minutes before her next appointment, which was on the massage table.

During her training routines she felt tightness in her hip, and her coach wanted the physiotherapist to treat it before it became an issue.

Injuries are the bane of gymnasts. As well as the shin stress fracture, Monette had to come back from a knee injury which forced her to miss the 2004 Olympic trials, and an earlier elbow injury.

Her schedule is relentless. School and 34 hours a week of training leave no time for growing up.

Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5.30am: Get up.

6am: Mum drives her from Heathmont home to VIS gym in Prahran.

7am-10.30am: Gymnastics training at VIS.

10.30am: Bus to Melbourne Girls College, Richmond.

2.30pm: Bus collects girls from school.

3pm-6.30pm: Gymnastics training at VIS.

6.40pm: Dad (Peter) drives Monette home.

7.45pm: Dinner.

8.30pm: Get ready for next day.

9.30pm: Bed.

Wednesday and Fridays, 7am: Go direct to school.

1pm: Bus to gym.

1.45pm-5.30pm: Training.

6pm: Massage.

Saturday, 8am-noon: Training at VIS gym.

Sunday: day off.

The VIS has an arrangement with schools so that its gymnasts spend reduced hours in the classroom.

Monette admits her school work comes second.

Most days she makes only two classes, with lunch between them.

This year Monette is in Year 11, but studying Year 10 level in maths and English.

She has missed too much to keep up, even with the help of a private tutor every Friday morning.

When exam time comes around in November, Monette will be lining up at Rod Laver Arena for the qualifying on November 23 and, hopefully, the women's all-round final on November 25.

All VIS gymnasts do VCE over three years, instead of two.

"I'm always catching up, but you have to sacrifice," Monette says.

"There's always time for other things when (gymnastics) is over."

CONNIE says she only wanted Monette to burn energy when she started gym and had no thoughts of an international career.

Now she says she enforces the discipline because it is essential for Monette to achieve her goals.

Monette will be eligible to drive a car next August, but Connie won't let her.

If she drives, mum figures, she will be able to break her routine.

"No boys!" mum insists. This pleases the coaches.

The lives of Connie and Peter are dictated by Monette's gymnastics.

Peter starts work at 4.00 every morning in a Mulgrave warehouse.

He comes home after work, has a lie down, then makes the two-hour round trip to bring his daughter home from the Prahran gym.

Connie says they have paid about \$5000 every year in gymnasium fees, just so she can have the best coaching and opportunities.

Peter tried to work a second job to make ends meet, but he got too tired to go on.

Now Connie is a shift-worker at an aged care centre.

Her earnings help pay Monette's gym fees and put fuel in their cars for the 200km they cover each week.

Monette has no sponsor and there is no prizemoney. The best outcome will be if she gets a coaching position after her career ends, which she hopes to do.

The Russos put themselves through it, Connie says, because Monette wants so badly to be the best gymnast she can be.

A fortnight ago the family sneaked away to Sydney for two days, including a long-awaited Bridge walk.

On the first day Monette got a call on her mobile from the VIS, telling her a visiting Romanian choreographer had arrived early and was only available the next day.

The Russos promptly changed their flights and abandoned the second day of their break.

Above: eyes only for the gold. Monette Russo limbers up.

Picture: ANDREW TAUBER

Opposite page: Monette performs on the uneven bars before falling in Athens.

The choreography could be critical in the world championships, because Monette has developed a new routine for the beam, which only a few girls in the world can do.

HER idol is Lance Armstrong. Her mother recorded every day of his seventh Tour de France win last month and she will play the tapes whenever she needs inspiration in the months ahead.

"I read his books, about how he approached everything, and I thought that's the attitude I must have," Monette says.

"He won because he prepared better and pushed through. He believed all the time that he would be the winner."

Asked what makes a golden girl at gymnastics, she says: "Passion".

"Everyone can be a really good jumper, but the winner is the one who works the hardest, stays focused and pushes through."

For this weekend, though, Netty is a woman-child celebrating her 17th birthday.

This morning she'll open two gifts she had asked for — a pair of jeans and a hair straightener.

Her mother agrees it's odd that she would want a hair straightener, seeing her beautiful, wavy hair.

But Connie says Monette knows what she wants, so she can have it. She just can't eat cake.

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