

Tylah Lotter,
future star and anti-gravity
expert, shares her secrets.



Text: Rick de Villiers Images: Reg Caldecott

Something Sprightly



They say you know that you're a gymnast when you spend as much time on your hands as on your feet. But Tylah Lotter obviously doesn't follow the tweets of the anonymous "they", since the bulk of her day is spent in the air.

It's an hour into the October school break, and for the purposes of our chat she temporarily quits the stratosphere. As the word "sprightly" only half-conceals the word "sprite", sitting only half-conceals her buoyancy. The 15 year-old gymnast has fiery red hair, a shy sparkle in her eyes, and a gentle, giggly way of speaking.

But watch one of her recorded competition performances on YouTube and you'll notice a difference. She still has the same unmistakable red hair, but the gentleness gives way to graceful attack, the shyness to surety.

As one of the top u/16 South African gymnasts, Tylah has reason enough to be confident. In her short life she has travelled to four continents, competing at international level. At the start of the year she was part of an elite training camp at the Western Australian Institute of Sport where she

got to see Olympic athletes preparing for London. In April she showed her mettle at the African Championships in Tunisia, snatching an individual bronze on beam and a silver as part of the junior team. Later in the year she will be representing South Africa at the Voronin Cup in Moscow.

It's one thing being a professional athlete and jet-setting across the world to compete at the highest level. But to train for six hours each day, squeeze in eight periods of school and sharpen your own pencil is another matter entirely. And yet, Tylah pulls it off: if there is one thing the Grade 10 student will boast about, it's her diligence.

"It's not too hard," she explains. "We have regular study time in the evenings, so it helps you get through your work. I came to TuksSport High School exactly because they understand what you need, and that's why I was so happy when I finally got here in Grade 8."

Though Tylah's parents live in Pretoria, she stays at the HPC during the week. From the moment she wakes up, her day follows a seamless circle: training, school, training, homework, sleep.

Over weekends she goes home and spends time with her family and, in particular, her twin sister Ashlee, who is older and wiser by a whole minute. "I love having a twin sister," Tylah beams. "She knows what I'm going to say even before I say it." During these getaways Tylah shops, runs and sometimes gives into her greatest weakness, Milkybar.

But this surrender occurs very seldom, because Tylah has one goal in mind: Brazil 2016. She admits that there are days when she feels demotivated, days when a big "Why?" clings to every effort.

"It's a difficult sport. There are huge mental blocks, and sometimes they're difficult to overcome. But I always realise, even when I fall, that this is what I love doing. And when you eventually get a difficult skill perfectly right, something that you've been struggling with, there is no better feeling. It's also a pretty good feeling being interviewed for *The Medalist* – I've dreamt about being in the magazine since Grade 8!"