

Guest Speaker at St Hilda's Speech Night 2008, **Miss Gemma Beadsworth, St Hilda's Old Scholar (2004)**

Good Evening Archbishop and Mrs Herft, Ms Karen Farley, Chair of Council, Mrs Joy Shepherd, Principal, Staff, Parents, Friends and girls.

First of all I would like to thank Mrs Shepherd for inviting me to speak to you tonight. It is a great honour to be asked back by the School to share with you some of my recent experiences and how they came about. I don't know if some of the girls remember me from school but it wasn't that long ago that I was in the same position that you are in here tonight. Especially the Year 12 girls, this is your last school commitment and then you are free to take whatever path you may choose. For me, I remember having just got back from Rottneest leavers the week before, and I was off to another water polo championship the next day. As a consequence I missed out on another trip with my friends down south. I remember being pretty disappointed at the time, thinking of all the fun they would be having without me. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I realise it was a small sacrifice for me to make to achieve my goal.

Naturally, given the sacrifices briefly mentioned, almost immediately after stepping off the plane from Beijing I was out for dinner with those same girls who, four years earlier, I had seen go on that trip without me. It was interesting to see how the Olympics were portrayed at home, showing it was a big event to more than just the people competing. I was immediately asked 'did I bring my medal?' which was just as well because I was starting to think they wouldn't notice if I just left the medal and went home... this was then followed by 'is it alright if I have a photo wearing it?' And lastly the most important question, 'was Eamon Sullivan upset that he and Stephanie Rice broke up?'

Well, I obliged with answers to all of the above, and I'm sure everyone has read enough about that last question. To be fair though, they did ask a lot of other questions about the games - whether the food was good, which it was, and if I saw a lot of famous people, which I guess I did. It is all a bit surreal when it happens though; half the time they were ten metres in the other direction before I realised, then maybe that is just me.

Before I go into the Olympics, I would just like to share with you the 'journey' that I took to reach Beijing.

I was about 13 when I realised that water polo was something I had potential in. After my first trip interstate, my coach took me aside and told me that I had a lot of potential and that I reminded her of a young Bridgette Gusterson. This was a huge compliment as Bridgette Gusterson was the Captain of 2000 gold-medal-winning Sydney Olympic water polo team. As a 13-year-old in 2000 the most planning ahead I had done was for the next day; making a long term goal for the 2008 Olympics hadn't been on the agenda, so as you can imagine, I was a little daunted by the comparison. At this stage I was still playing other sports outside school, as well as being involved in music and drama. I had what I thought to be a pretty normal Year 8 life.

As I went through school, water polo gradually started taking up more time. By the time I hit Year 11, I was going on about six trips a year and missing a bit of school. I always found

though, the busier you are the better you become at managing your time - you can't really afford not to.

Year 12 came around in no time and it was full on.

Learning how to manage training before and after school was a challenge. As well as missing about four weeks of school, mostly around exams, was also a struggle. On top of that, all the responsibilities that come with being a School Official made Year 12 an interesting year for me, to say the least. I personally do not regret taking so much on. Year 12 for me, although clearly the busiest, was also the most enjoyable of my years at St Hilda's; a notion I'm sure all the girls leaving tonight will testify to.

I made my first Australian team in my first year at university when I was 17, attending the 2005 World Championships in Montreal, Canada. Having relied on my natural ability up until then, it was natural for me to think that I could do the same going into senior level. It was therefore quite a shock to me when I didn't perform to my own expectations or to those of the people around me.

Some athletes go through their careers being good trainers right from the start, but for more laid back people like me, it required a good talking to get me going. When I returned from my first senior trip, this talk that I really needed occurred. My coach at the time was really frustrated with me and she finally let me have it. What she said to me, however reluctant I was to acknowledge it at the time, was entirely justified. The general message was, "you are lazy, you don't push yourself and you're never going to get any better if you don't change that now." This is of course a somewhat censored version of what was actually said.

That discussion shall we call it, despite being a little confronting, was basically all I needed. That little scare made me re-evaluate what I wanted to achieve out of water polo. It made me realise that I wasn't going to be happy if I didn't give it everything. So, from that moment on, my work ethic changed completely.

I am so grateful that my coach said what needed to be said, because I'm not sure if I would have been able to work it out myself. I know if I hadn't changed my attitude towards training and my work ethic, there is no way I would have made any of the senior teams, let alone an Olympics.

Almost three years from that moment, the Olympic team was announced on 24 June. Finally, I was 100% sure that I would be going. The anticipation from that moment was almost overwhelming and, on the 8 August, I experienced one of the greatest events of the Games - the opening ceremony. I'm so glad our coach allowed us to go because going to something like that is what makes the Olympics special.

The night began with all the countries assembled in the gymnasium, which was about 500m from the main stadium. We were second last because of the Chinese translation of Australia and we had been lining up in a massive queue to the stadium for at least a couple of hours. Usually, if I'm waiting in a line for ten minutes, I'm getting frustrated, but this was something I could wait for. Getting ready to walk out, the whole team dressed in satin jackets, there was a buzz and the atmosphere was electric. All the girls were having photos

with anyone who was remotely famous and, as we walked out, the crowd went crazy. Imagine walking out to 100,000 people, lights flashing everywhere, with thousands of people cheering for you; it was unbelievable. That was the moment when I realised 'I'm actually here.'

After that it was back to business, back to the village and to focusing on the task at hand. Living in the village is like living in a huge bubble. You become quite self-absorbed, you forget what is going on in the outside world, and you don't really hear or care about it at the time. That may sound selfish, but an athlete at that level has to be selfish to an extent. To be able to get the best out of yourself and to reach your potential, a lot of focus has to be on you as an individual.

Our competition went for ten days and it was intense. I have never been that nervous before a game in my life. I just remember thinking before the game, I'm so ready for this; I just wanted the game to start. We had been preparing for this tournament for four years and I was ready to play. When the game finally began it was a relief in a way, the build-up was over, I forgot my expectations of me, and I just enjoyed playing the game that I had played for the last eight years.

When you have dedicated years of your life to this one event you want to look back on it and be happy.

Whether you get the result you wanted or not, the Olympics is more than just about playing sport, and, while you can be disappointed about not performing well, you can still salvage what is left and have a good time at the games. For some people it may be difficult to understand that going to an Olympics can be a bad experience. But for many people, it can be. The Russian Women's Water Polo Team is a prime example of this.

Going into the Olympics, they had won the two biggest competitions - the European Championships and World League. They were definitely medal contenders and they were in good form. To cut a long story short, they lost games they should have won and they finished 7<sup>th</sup> out of a possible eight.

Now, their attitude towards the Olympics was purely water polo. They didn't attend the Opening Ceremony, they didn't stay at the village and they didn't embrace the Olympic Spirit. When they won their last game for 7<sup>th</sup> place, they were on the next plane home. I can only imagine what those girls would have been feeling, but really, it is difficult to have much sympathy; in my opinion, their attitude going into the Olympics was the wrong one and, as a result, they didn't get what they wanted out of the Games.

Our coach really wanted us to really experience the Olympics, no matter what happened in the pool, so we could look back on Beijing and say it was one of the best experiences of our lives, if not for water polo, but for life in general. I am proud to say that it was the best experience of my life to date and I don't know if I'll ever experience anything like it again.

While I was so incredibly happy with my Bronze Medal and the way in which we won it, if I retired now at 21 I think I would regret it; I know I would. I'd miss playing too much, I'd

miss hanging out with all the girls, travelling all around the world and I'd miss the fact that it makes me different from everyone else.

As a 21-year-old, only four years older than some of you girls here tonight, I don't pretend for a second to know everything about the world. I have learnt, often the hard way, during my four years out of school, a number of important lessons from the stories shared with you.

Too often as young girls we want to be like our friends too much and we often work it out too late, that it is good to have something different about you, to have something that you are passionate about. Over the years I have missed many 18<sup>th</sup>s and 21<sup>st</sup>s and trips down south, yet I still have that same group of girls that I counted as my friends when I left school in 2004. You soon learn that your friends appreciate your difference. I could hardly believe it when I arrived home and was informed that my group of let's say 'unsporty' friends were gathered round the TV for each of my games, yelling and screaming.

This is not the only lesson I learnt from the road I took to the Olympics. None more important was that discussion I had with my coach in 2005. The message that transcends sport is that, if you are going to do something, you might as well do it well. Whether it is university, work, travelling or whatever option you decide to pursue after school, there is no point just cruising through. Sometimes, a small change in attitude, which is what happened with me, can lead to a more fulfilling experience.

My closing message was clearly demonstrated by the Russian Women's Water Polo Team; you must enjoy yourself. If I stopped enjoying my water polo, I would quit straight away and put more time into other aspects of my life. The times post-school can be so much fun; don't waste them on something you don't enjoy.