

TAKING TO THE FLOOR

Double gymnastics World Champion Beth Tweddle talks of the highs and lows of life in the sporting spotlight.

Words: Fiona Collins

For most 25-year-olds, their career is still a newly-fledged, and precious thing. They have stepped out of the cocoon of the graduate recruit - who are excused all but the most extreme of gaffes - and they might just be embarking on their first tentative solo projects; even gaining a degree of authority. Sometimes, when managers are feeling trusting, or jaded, the mid-twenties-employee might even be asked to pitch their ideas on serious, grown-up business matters!

Never, however, will a 25-year-old find that they are considered the grandmother of their chosen career; wise beyond their years, seasoned, ripe for retirement. That is, unless their chosen career is that of a gymnast.

At 25, Britain's reigning Floor World Champion, Beth Tweddle, is one of the oldest competitors still performing at the very highest level on the international circuit. That said, she is by no means the oldest. Germany's Oksana Chusovitina won a silver medal in the Beijing Olympics in 2008 at the grand old age of 33. However, following a heart-breaking fourth place on her favourite apparatus - the uneven bars - in Beijing, the then-23-year-old

Tweddle could have been forgiven for throwing in the towel.

"Gymnastics is a sport where you have to specialise from such a young age," Tweddle says after consideration. "Most gymnasts start from the ages of five or six, and from day one you're just a gymnast; that's it. I mean, I've been doing it for 18 years now, and I've literally just been doing gymnastics, so maybe people would assume that I've just had enough and would want to try something else."

Not so Tweddle. In her typically stoic way, following what must have been a bitter disappointment in Beijing, she cheerfully told the waiting media, "I was pleased just to be in the final. I am not disappointed with fourth. Now I'll have to leave it to London in 2012 to get a medal." One can only imagine what she must really have felt.

However, despite her knee-jerk reaction in 2008, that she would continue to compete until her home Olympics at London 2012, there has since been much debate as to an impending retirement. Never mind Tweddle's metal fatigue, could her



Beth Tweddle launches The National Lottery's Games Brain quiz to celebrate £500 million being raised by players for London 2012. Photographer Mark Bond



This page: Beth Tweddle launches The National Lottery's Games Brain quiz to celebrate £500 million being raised by players for London 2012. Photographer Mark Bond Opposite page: In the run up to a major competition, Tweddle trains for up to 35 hours a week; here chalking her hands before taking to the bars



Olympics 2012: “I’d rather say I tried to go for it, than I’ve retired and not given it a chance.”

body really withstand another four years of the gruelling training regime, given that even by 2008 she had already undergone multiple surgeries on her ankles and shoulder?

“Obviously there’s a huge impact on your body,” Tweddle admits. “You’re constantly having to take the force of your own bodyweight plus gravity.”

“That’s why I made the decision to go from four piece, down to two piece,” she continues, referring to her decision to retire from the vault and beam events after Beijing, effectively ruling her out of the all around competition as well.

“It was a very hard decision to give up, but I think in the long-run it will be the right decision. My body just wasn’t able to take the constant pounding. I was struggling a lot with the beam. I had a lot of injuries with my feet, and it wasn’t one of my strongest events. I was also having foot injuries with the vault.”

This meant that at last year’s World Championships in London, Tweddle had just two shouts at a medal; in her favoured uneven bars, and in the floor event.

The bars were the first of the two events to take place, and, as a former World Champion on the apparatus in 2006 (this was the first World Championship gold ever won by Britain), Tweddle was the big home hope, not just for a medal, but – when the fans dared to whisper it – maybe for a gold?

The stadium reverberated to the screams of an expectant crowd as Tweddle entered the arena for the qualifying event. Here was the British darling of gymnastics, doing what she did best.

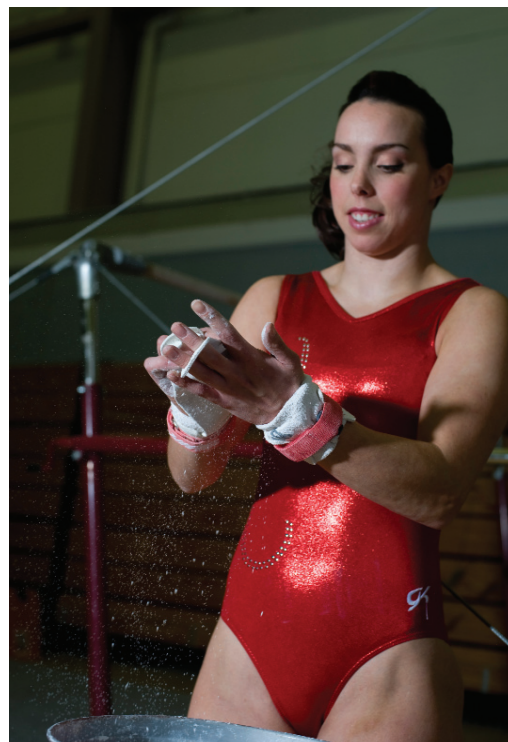
A shocked silence descended as Tweddle crashed to the floor, slipping from the bars during a complicated move, ironically named after her as her signature showpiece (the Tweddle). She left the arena in tears, but was forced to compose herself when her coach almost instantly made her face the media.

“Straight away they (the media) wanted to know how I was feeling. Obviously when you’ve just crashed out of what you were hoping to medal in, it’s not the best feeling in the world,” Tweddle almost smiles at the recollection.

“But my coach said, ‘You’ve got to do the interviews, because you have to take the good with the bad’. I did it, and spoke to the press, which was hard.

“Then I went out to the main entrance. There were all these little kids there waiting for autographs, which put it all into perspective. My two little twin cousins came running up to me saying that I was amazing, and that they couldn’t believe that I had fallen...‘we can’t wait to see you on the floor.’ And so I thought ‘Yes, I’ve fallen on bars, but at least I have something to aim for’. Really it was the kids who put things into perspective.”

If Tweddle felt the pressure, as she came out four days later to try and give her fans something to cheer about, by gaining a respectable placing in the



eight-women floor final, she didn’t show it. She was the first of the girls to take centre-stage, and, after stumbling on her first tumble in the earlier qualifying event, the crowd held their breath as they waited for her to begin.

With a practiced flick of the wrist to acknowledge the judges, Tweddle was off...spinning, tumbling and flipping across the mat. The routine was inch perfect and the crowd, who clapped along to her foot-tapping display, jumped to their feet as Tweddle scored 14.650 for a flawless effort.

What ensued, was forty of the most agonising minutes of Tweddle’s career, as she paced the floor with her

coach, Amanda Reddin, watching as one, then another of her fellow competitors failed to eclipse her score. Finally, to a standing ovation, Tweddle was confirmed as the new World Champion.

Needless to say, the ecstasy of Tweddle’s ensuing press conference was the antithesis of the one reluctantly given before the flashbulbs four days earlier. Reddin’s insistence that her protégée take the good with the bad had proven to be prophetic.

“Winning the bars (World) title in 2006 was really good, but with this being on home soil and not in my signature event, it is probably my best ever achievement,” a jubilant Tweddle said, post-event.

The stunning victory, and the fairytale nature of the win, helped to further increase Tweddle’s public profile in the UK, and earned her her second nomination for the BBC’s Sports Personality of the Year; an award eventually won by footballer Ryan Giggs, with the runner-up spot going to F1 World Champion Jenson Button. It is an ironic aside that Button and Tweddle were both crowned World Champions on the same day, but only the former received a congratulatory phone call from then Prime Minister Gordon Brown; something which Tweddle laughed off at the time saying, “Maybe the letter’s got lost in the post?”

The truth is though, that until Tweddle’s rise to prominence, gymnastics was a sport largely ignored in this country, and she - almost single-handedly - has propelled it (both in terms of profile, and the funding it receives) to its current standing.

Those behind Tweddle in the team have now begun to follow the path that she has forged, with the men’s team particularly helping to lift some of the pressure from Tweddle’s shoulders. Last year, Daniel Keatings (20) won silver in the all around event at the World Championships, bettering by one position the Olympic bronze won by Louis Smith (21) on the pommel horse in Beijing a year earlier. Despite being Britain’s first Olympic medal in 80 years, the momentum in the current squad means that British Gymnastics have been tasked with bringing home at least two medals in 2012.

Tweddle is obviously enjoying Britain’s newfound success in her sport. “It takes the pressure away from me,” she says, smiling again. “It’s not just what will Beth do, but now it’s a case of what British gymnastics will do at the Worlds or Europeans.”

Someone else who has watched with interest as British gymnastics has emerged from obscurity, is Tweddle’s long-time coach Reddin. “I’ve had the same coach since I was twelve,” Tweddle says with obvious →

Tweddle flies through the air during a practice session in the gym. Photography by Sean Malyon



affection, “and she’s basically like my second mum.” She pauses. “In fact, she probably knows me better than my mum!”

“Leading up to a major international, I train six days a week, 30 to 35 hours a week, and my life is entirely focussed around training. My life revolves around what time Amanda wants me in the gym, and it can be intense, but from the age of seven I haven’t known any different.”

Tweddle’s current focus is the 2010 World Championships, which kick off in mid-October in Rotterdam, and so the gruelling regime is currently in full flow. But Tweddle is not one to moan, and comes across as a very grounded and matter-of-fact individual, not given to self pity. Perhaps this is another thing instilled in her by Reddin, of whom Tweddle says: “The only thing that she says to me prior to a major event is ‘Go and do what you do in training, and if it works, it works, but if it doesn’t, then we have to work on it some more when we get back to training.’” One suspects that it is this calm pragmatism that has allowed Tweddle to find the

mental energy to continue with her sport for so long. That Tweddle is a model sportswoman is unquestioned – dedicated, hard working, and honest. What still remains a question mark however is her participation at London 2012. Although nothing is a given in her gruelling sport, and with uncertainty still surrounding her ability to continue competing for another two years, I am surprised that Tweddle takes no time in coming up with an answer: “Yes. The Olympics in London are the main target now. That’s the one thing that I haven’t achieved yet,” she is matter of fact once again.

“Ever since Beijing, it’s been taking one competition at a time and seeing how I go, and really, that’s still the mentality. But the qualifiers start this October (at the World Championships in Rotterdam), so I guess I’m getting towards it now.”

“I think that’s the one thing that I’m still chasing. I’ve got every other title to my name and obviously I would love to come home with any Olympic medal...naturally gold,” this time she doesn’t laugh.

She pauses, and then adds, “I’d rather say I’d tried to go for it, rather than I’ve retired and not given it a chance. And at least I can look back at my career and what I have achieved knowing that I’ve tried.”

Back in 2006, following her first World title, and in the lead up to Beijing, Tweddle was asked whether she would consider continuing to compete until London 2012. Then, she had laughed and dismissed it out of hand: “I’ll simply be too old by then. What I hope is that winning the World Championship will inspire other young gymnasts, and there are some really good ones coming along aged 12 to 14. These are the kids we should be looking at for 2012.”

Four years on, with the focus very firmly on London, I’m sure I would have gained a similar response had I asked Tweddle about Rio 2016. But, by then, Tweddle will only be 31...two years younger than Beijing’s silver medallist Chusovitina...so really, as I say, nothing is a given in this gruelling sport!