

London calling... Eloise Amberger

Alex Bernard profiles one of Brisbane's Olympic athletes

The countdown to the London Olympic Games has begun and one of the first teams to book their tickets is the Australian Synchronised swimming team - eight of the nine members are from Queensland. It will be the second trip to an Olympic Games for Eloise Amberger, 25, who also competed in the team that went to Beijing where they placed in the top 20. Since then she has placed in the top eight in the duet competition with partner Sarah Bombell, 28, and the duo won a bronze medal at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi.



Synchronised swimmer Eloise Amberger

At 25 and 28, Amberger and Bombell may seem like veterans in Olympic sport, but according to the team coach Marina Tholod, synchronised swimmers peak at around age 25.

It's been a long road for Amberger who has been a competitive synchronised swimmer since the age of 11 and when she made her first national team at 15 she started training six days a week. Still today she trains an average four to eight hours a day but in the lead-up to a major event that increases to nine hours. It doesn't allow for much leisure time. "I did go to Schoolies a few years ago, but I trained every day I was there," says Amberger. And she did have Christmas Day and Boxing Day off, even if she is in training for the Olympics, and generally she has Sundays off.

Amberger is a member of the Gold Coast Mermaids club which boasts the eight Queenslanders on the London Olympic team and every week she drives from Everton Hills to the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre for six training sessions. She goes to another two sessions at Chandler.

Synchronised swimming has been an Olympic sport since 1984 and is one of the most popular to watch for its grace and precision, if not its speed or strength. But while it appears glamorous on the surface, it's a tough sport with its own risk of injury.

"I've got a hip injury at the moment, so I'm off to get my shot so I can keep training. We get the odd broken toe but its lots of muscular injuries in synchro. In the teams event, you've got eight girls all within close proximity, kicking, pointing, shooting limbs, so you're often covered in bruises," says Amberger.

Amberger's coach Marina Tholod is an

Olympian formerly with the Ukraine synchronised swimming team. She moved to Brisbane in 2005 and has coached the Gold Coast Mermaids ever since. "These girls are good; they're improving all the time. They're in the top 20 and for a sport that gets so little funding, that's really great," says Tholod.

While synchronised swimmers in the powerhouse nations such as Russia, China and Spain are employed full-time by their governments to train and compete, their education

is paid for and their families are taken care of, in Australia the athletes bear the bulk of the cost burden. The girls' costumes alone can cost \$1000 each. "It's not cheap to be an Olympian, but all the girls have always known this is the case, so we all just do our best," says Tholod.

Amberger lives at home with her parents Elma and Wayne, who are keen sports lovers, and younger brother Josh, 23, who is a professional triathlete.

"Eloise sells jewellery on a party plan to earn petrol money, but she's training so much and away with competitions in the lead-up to the Games so she's not really able to work. She's also finishing her degree in applied science (majoring in forensics and biochemistry) at QUT but we're lucky that we are able to support her," says Elma.

Amberger's parents have never questioned their daughter's commitment to her sport. "Eloise has become very independent and focused, so after synchro we've no doubt she will go on to do anything she sets her mind to. It's been a really good grounding for life in a way, the challenges you face as an athlete," she says.

Amberger concedes to achieve her goals has meant sacrifice. There's not much room for a social life, she rarely drinks, she eats takeaway only once a year on her birthday and there's no time for romance. "I'd love to go on to another Olympics but we'll see. I need to finish my degree and move out of home at some stage," she laughs.

The Queensland Olympic Committee will host a farewell lunch for our Olympians on 25 May, 12-4pm at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. Tickets from \$200 each or \$3000 per table with an Olympian as a table guest. See www.olympics.com.au/qld for details.



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