



Commonwealth Games Signal Bright Future For Canadian Gymnastics

Canadian gymnasts, both artistic and rhythmic, went to the 2006 Commonwealth Games with high expectations.

And they didn't disappoint, bringing home a total of 22 medals – 13 in artistic and nine in rhythmic – in a superb overall performance rivaling Canada's best-ever showing in gymnastics at the 1990 Games in Auckland, New Zealand.

In the artistic competition, Canada finished second overall behind Australia with 18 medals. England was a distance third with six medals.

As expected, Olympic and defending Commonwealth champion Kyle Shewfelt led the way on the men's artistic team, while Elyse Hopfner-Hibbs, sparkled in the women's competition.

In rhythmic gymnastics, Alexandra Orlando dazzled spectators and judges alike while leading Canada to victory in the team competition and sweeping all five individual events for a record tying Commonwealth Games total of six Gold Medals.

First to hit the floor at Melbourne's raucous Rod Laver Arena were Shewfelt and teammates Adam Adam Wong, Nathan Gafuik, Grant Golding and David Kikuchi.



Team Gold was the top priority and the high flying Canadians were more than up for the challenge, edging Australia for Canada's first Commonwealth Games team title since the 1994 Games in Victoria.

"It was a lot of fun out there," said Shewfelt, in his first international competition since winning his landmark Gold Medal at the 2004 Athens Olympics. "We were ready to go and everybody hit their routines."

Making the victory that much sweeter was the fact that Shewfelt, Golding and Kikuchi, were all members of the team that had to settle for silver at the last Commonwealth Games four years ago in Manchester, England.

In the women's team competition, Hopfner-Hibbs, Gael Mackie, Alyssa Brown, Jenna Kerbis and Brittnee Habbib, rallied after a shaky start to win the Bronze Medal behind Australia in first and runner up England.





Following the team competition, Hopfner-Hibbs and Gafuik, two of the rising young stars in Canadian gymnastics, kept the medals coming, winning Silver respectively in the men's and women's all around finals.

In the women's all around Hopfner-Hibbs, who trains at Sport Seneca in Toronto, came tantalizingly close to capturing the Gold when she tied for first overall with Australia's Chloe Sims.

Both had identical scores after their four rotations on floor, uneven bars, beam and vault, but Sims was awarded Gold on a tie breaker rule counting the three best events, instead of all four.

Still, Elyse was on cloud nine after the competition, especially after nailing one of the most difficult beam routines in the world for the highest score of the night.

"In the team competition, I fell on my hardest move on beam and it was great to come back and show I could do it."

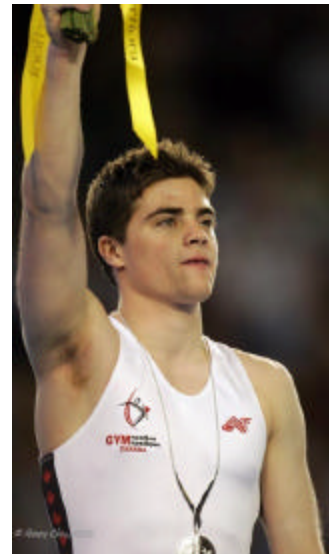
Rounding out a strong performance in the all around were Brown and Mackie who placed sixth and seventh respectively.

In the men's all around Gafuik's Silver Medal was one of the highlights of the meet for Canadian coach Tony Smith.

"I've coached Nathan since he was seven years old, so it was something special to see him come here and do so well," said Smith, who also coaches Shewfelt and Golding at the University of Calgary Gymnastics Centre.

Not far behind Gafuik was Wong who finished fourth all around.

More medals were up for grabs in the individual event finals, with everyone on the men's team in the running in at least one event and Hopfner-Hibbs going for a medal in all four women's finals.



Again, the Canadian squad came through with flying colours. When Kyle faltered defending his Commonwealth title in the floor event, Wong stepped up to win the Gold, a sure sign of the growing depth on the men's team.



Despite the error, Shewfelt's routine – the most difficult in the competition – was good enough for the Bronze Medal.

"Kyle is the man on floor and I didn't expect to have a chance at the Gold if he hit his routine," said Wong, who watched as Shewfelt, the last to compete in the final, under-rotated a flip on his first tumbling line and fell on the landing. "To be on the same team and share the podium with him is a true honour."

The Canadian men chalked up four more medals with Shewfelt earning Gold on vault, Golding, Gold on parallel bars and bronze on pommel horse, and Gafuik, Silver on vault.

While the men's team earned eight of Canada's 13 artistic medals at the Games, it was Hopfner-Hibbs who scored the highest individual total with two Gold, a Silver and a Bronze. Brown, the only other member of the women's team to reach an event final, added a Silver on vault.



Photo by Megan Douglas



The only woman in the competition to compete in all four event finals, Elyse won individual Gold on uneven bars and capped her stellar performance "Down Under" with another Gold on beam on the final day of competition.

Hopfner-Hibbs, who has demonstrated great poise and steadily increasing maturity since moving up to the senior team just over a year ago, summed up the Commonwealth Games as "an amazing experience."

The major lesson learned, she said, is to "stay focused, and keep on pushing hard through every routine, even when you make a mistake."

Shewfelt, showing no signs of rust after his 18-month layoff from international competition, said the Games were a perfect way to start the drive towards the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. "There's a feeling of momentum on our team," says Kyle. "We all feel that we belong on the podium every time we compete."



After a two-day break in the schedule, the Rod Laver Arena roared back to life for the rhythmic gymnastics competition with Canada's Alexandra Orlando as the star attraction.

Orlando, from Ritmika in Toronto, came to the Games hoping for a Gold Medal sweep and that's just what she accomplished over three days of competition, leading Canada to Gold in the team event and then winning the all around and all four individual apparatus finals -- rope, ball, clubs and ribbon -- on the final day of competition.

Alexandra's six Gold Medals equaled a Commonwealth Games record shared by Australian swimming greats Ian Thorpe and Susie O'Neill and Canada's Graham Smith, who all won six medals in the pool at previous Games.



"This has been such a huge rush," said Orlando, who was named Canada's flag bearer for the closing ceremonies.

"It's just been unreal to stand on the top the podium and hear the Canadian anthem played every night. This is definitely the greatest moment in my career."



The competition also marked a high point for Yana Tsikaridze of Montreal who came home with four medals, including Gold in the team event and Silver in the ribbon final.

Rounding out the Canadian results was 16-year-old Carly Orava of Toronto, the youngest member of the Canadian team, who helped win Gold in the team event and qualified for the clubs final.

The Commonwealth Games have traditionally been a high point on the competition calendar for Canadian gymnasts. The 2006 Games in Melbourne were no exception as the veterans on the team combined with stars of the future in a potent display of Canada's potential on the world stage.

Congratulations to all the athletes and coaching staff for keeping the winning tradition alive at the Commonwealth Games.