

Battle for Olympic dream

Two mates and training partners battle for a single spot on gymnastics team, writes Chris Herden

Joshua Jefferis from Marooka and Thomas Pichler from Thornlands are the best of mates. It's a friendship that has strengthened since their first meeting at a gymnastics training camp 16 years ago. "We started training in the same club at Chandler, grew up alongside each other and forged a pretty good relationship as mates," says Pichler. "We've travelled the world together for competitions since 1998 and here we are, 14 years later, hitting it out for an Olympic spot."

They're both in their mid-20s, reaching the prime of their international gymnastics careers under the guidance of supercoach Sergei Chinkar, who led the Soviet gymnasts team towards multiple gold medal wins at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Pichler and Jefferis were members of the first Australian men's gymnastics squad to win gold at a Commonwealth Games (Delhi 2010) and, at time of going to press, were both vying for a place on the Australian Olympic gymnastics team. Unfortunately, only one spot is available,

so qualification victory for one will see the Olympic dream of the other come to an end.

Jefferis' chances were bolstered when he won his third Australian Gymnastics Championships title in Sydney less than a fortnight ago. But securing the privilege to represent his country at London 2012 may prove to be a bittersweet victory for the former Anglican Church Grammar School student as it pits him against his chum and training partner Pichler.

"It's been pretty close and although Josh is probably in front of the eight-ball at the moment, the selectors are taking the past six months of competition into account," says Pichler. The former Holland Park High School student says the reason he and Jefferis end up in each other's pockets so much is because they train together for about 30 hours a week. "Good friendships are built from that I guess. We have coffee now and then, catch up on weekends and we have the same circle of friends from the gymnastics community."

The all-round artistic gymnastics event requires competitors to perform, with technical precision, a series of routines of between 30 to 90 seconds each. Pichler's strength lies within the acrobatics and powerful tumbling of the floor event while Jefferis, since a young age, has been a fan of the predominately in-flight swinging apparatus, rings and parallel bars.

"I was a kid with what you would call behavioural problems and I used to climb up and jump off the roof and run amok," Jefferis says. "The doctor said to mum for me to try gymnastics as it might drain my energy and at least there was some matting for me to fall on."

"He used to live on my kitchen benches, never walked, he always ran," recalls Jefferis' mum Sylvia. "The doctor said to get him a trampoline and one day I saw something fly off the roof - Joshua had climbed up the gate, onto the roof and jumped onto the trampoline."

Regardless of who leaps into the highly-prized Olympic berth, Pichler and Jefferis agree



Joshua Jefferis on the parallel bars at the recent 2012 Australian Gymnastics Championships.

Image: Tracey Neary/AAP

their friendship will endure and they will continue well beyond their competition years to do what they can to build the profile of the sport they love.

"Gymnastics Australia has just brought in a new grassroots program for kids called LaunchPad, which is designed for children trying to get into any sport. If they want to be swimming superstars or football superstars or even race car drivers, gymnastics teaches, at a young age, simple things like flexibility, balance and strength," says Pichler.

"And hopefully we'll get some recognition for the sport and the next cycle of Olympic gymnasts," Jefferis says.

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