

Touch the sky

Star gymnast Max Whitlock competed in the Commonwealth Games in Australia with his wife and family alongside him - including his coach and brother-in-law Scott Hann. Rosie Mullender meets the gymnastic-mad foursome



PAID CONTENT

The day Max Whitlock walked into the South Essex Gymnastics Club in Basildon, he made an instant impression. At first, Scott Hann, a coach at the club, didn't realise the potential of the shy 12-year-old with a passion for gymnastics. But Max's personality shone through - and that day changed the lives of Scott, and of club regulars Leah and Jamie Hickton, irrevocably.

Today, Max is the UK's first male gymnastics double Olympic and double World Champion, and has been awarded an MBE. He's now married to Leah, while Scott is married to Leah's sister, Jamie. It's a fascinating dynamic that has seen a uniquely strong bond develop between the four - one which has propelled him to success, and to this year's Commonwealth Games on Australia's Gold Coast.

"Being family means Scott and I have a stronger connection than the usual between a gymnast and his coach," Max says. "It's not just about Scott wanting me to do well - we care for each other on a different level."

Max's stunning win at the World Gymnastics Championships in 2015 - being the first British man in 112 years to win gold - was partly the result of this intense bond.

"We'd agreed to keep Max's routines well within his capabilities to build up his confidence for the Olympics in Rio," Scott says. "As the last gymnast to compete, he was warming up in the back room when I saw on Twitter that Louis Smith was leading on the pommel horse with 16.033 - an incredible score. Max prefers not to see other athletes' results, so I debated with myself - should I tell him? But in the end, I decided he'd want the chance to fight. Bold decisions win medals, so we agreed to add an extra move into his routine, even though he hadn't practised it for months. It gave him the edge he needed to win, with a score of 16.133 - and it's our close relationship which allowed us to make that decision so quickly."

Max adds: "Just a few words passed between us as I walked into the arena, but we understand each other so well, that's all it took. It's rare to find a relationship between coach and gymnast like ours. We know each other inside out, which helps me relax - and that's when I perform my best."

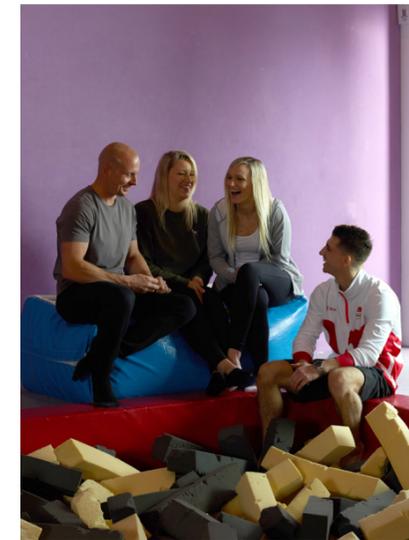
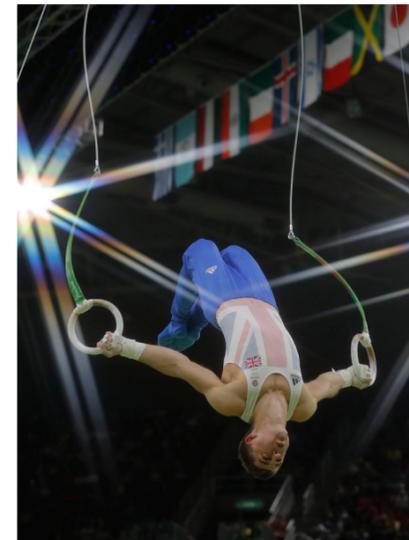
However, Scott admits the pair have made mistakes. "After Max took five medals home from the 2014 Commonwealth Games, we went to the World Artistic Gymnastics Championships in China with so much expectation. I got caught up in it, and found myself saying: 'Let's push for medals.' But that pressure put too much on Max's shoulders. He fell three times in the qualifiers and didn't get through, which was a disaster - the lowest point in his career."

An injury suffered by one of Team GB's qualifying gymnasts saw Max eventually stepping up to compete. "Max was in a bad place," Scott says. "We were still in China, but he hadn't been training - he'd been eating chocolate and staying up until 3am talking to Leah."

"I told him: 'This is an opportunity - there's no stress, just enjoy it.' And he came out of the competition second in the world. It was a significant learning moment - pressure is inevitable at this level, but we found out that the way in which it's managed is key to Max's performance."

The pair's partnership is strengthened by the support of Leah and older sister, Jamie. Scott and

Left to right from main: Max training at the South Essex Gymnastics Club; competing at the Rio Olympics 2016; and with Scott, Leah and Jamie



'We know each other inside out, which helps me relax - that's when I perform best'

Jamie had been dating for a year when Max and Leah got together, a moment Scott describes as "everything falling into place". Today the sisters both coach gymnastics at the South Essex Gymnastics Club.

"It's great to have been part of Max's journey right from the beginning, and Scott and Jamie being together too has made us a really close-knit unit," Leah says. "I've been there through good and bad times, which is part of being someone's other half. I'll always tell Max the truth, and we always listen to each other. If Max has had a bad day, we try not to dwell on it. If he has to rest for a competition, I'll do the housework, and when I'm busy at work, he'll cook."

"Although I could probably do a bit more ..." Max admits. "Leah has good and bad sessions too - if a gymnast has a bad day, the coach has a bad day too, so we'll talk through how to solve any problems. Hearing things from Leah's point of view helps me understand what Scott goes through as well - it's hard not being the one in control."

As well as sharing advice, the four share a social life with the friends they grew up with at the gym. "We still all go on nights out together," Jamie says. "We're always round each other's houses, or at my mum's. You'd never think Max was a double-gold Olympian - I feel as passionately about Max's career as Leah does, but we treat him the same as we did before. He hasn't changed at all."

Max and Leah's enthusiasm for gymnastics has seen them opening two Max Whitlock Gymnastics clubs, in Colchester and Southend-on-Sea, Essex. "It's been a dream of ours for five years," Leah says. "A lot of the time, when big names front projects like this, they don't have much involvement - but Max is so passionate. We've found ourselves packing membership kits in the early hours of the morning."

"I want to help kids get a foot in the door in the best sport in the world," Max says. "Gymnastics has brought me a lot of confidence - it's a sport that can do that for kids. It teaches them about their bodies, and about respect and discipline. And if I can give something back to the community too, that's an amazing feeling."

npower - proud sponsors of Team England and their official anthem for the 2018 Commonwealth Games, Jerusalem. Visit npower.com/teamengland and theguardian.com/the-home-team. Follow #powerofsupport for updates

PAID FOR BY

