



# Other side of the sport

Olympian Victoria Moors finds her way back to the gym, coaching the next generation of gymnasts

BY DAWN MATHESON

PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

Victoria Moors was on top of the world.

The buzz about her athletic potential, which had started to build at age 12, hit a fever pitch at age 15. She was the darling of the history-making Canadian gymnastics team, rubbing elbows with royalty and looking ahead to the next Olympics.

And then the fire went out. She stopped seriously training when she was 17, and then officially called it quits at age 18 before fading from the limelight.

When your life is “gymnastics, sleep, gymnastics, repeat,” what happens when ‘gymnastics’ is removed from the routine?

Moors says she went through a stage where she didn’t want to have anything to

do with the sport that had been part of her life since she was three years old.

“I felt like people weren’t interested in me, that I had no value now that I’m not Victoria the Olympic gymnast. And I felt that in myself.”

But, in her efforts to discover a new identity, the path she chose to walk has looped around and brought her back to the start. The 20-year-old finds herself spending more hours in the gym as a coach than she did when she was a competitor.

At Dynamo Gymnastics in Cambridge, a facility owned by her parents and her former coach, Moors is helping guide the next generation of potential national team members.

And she says she is loving every minute of it.

Victoria Moors spent the day with the Grand fashion team in a penthouse condo at Arrow Lofts on Benton Street in Kitchener.

Here, she wears a linen sack dress with rope neckline detail, Sarah Pacini, \$650.

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At Dynamo Gymnastics in Cambridge, Victoria Moors now helps guide the next generation of athletes. Taking a break from training to pose with their coach are Adele Parker, top left, and Kayssie Aebersold, top right. In front, from the left, Isabella Moreira, Ashleigh O'Grady, Sierrah Kinart, Ellie Pagan and Peyton Grosveld. The girls range in age from six to eight.

From 2009 to 2014, Moors was one of the most watched promising young gymnasts in the world. Google her and you'll find hundreds of articles, YouTube videos, tweets and thousands of adoring followers cheering her on.

"The Lamb Turns into a Lion" stated the Cambridge Times headline in June of 2009 when Moors, then a 12-year-old at Cambridge Kips gymnastics club, launched into the national stream by winning the Canadian novice title.

With more national wins to follow, Gymnastics Canada was chomping at the bit, pushing for international experience, sending Moors around the world — Puerto Rico, France and Japan — all in preparation for an Olympic run in London, when she would finally be of age to compete for Canada. Gymnasts must at least be turning

16 within the calendar year of the Games in order to compete in senior-level events at the Olympics.

"Moors Gets the Royal Treatment" was the headline in the Waterloo Region Record in a report from London in 2012 after Moors, on an Olympic high, held court with Prince Harry during his visit to Canada Olympic House in Trafalgar Square.

The same report detailed how popular she had become: "U.S. colleges are courting her to sign on for scholarships, when high school graduation is still two years away. The Twitterverse has developed a crush . . . many of them breathlessly gushing about their beloved 'Tori.' "

Moors, at the time a Grade 10 Bishop Macdonell Catholic High School student in Guelph, enrolled in an independent study program designed for elite athletes, was training more than 30 hours a week, with weekends spent at competitions.

Then came "the Moors," the double-twisting, double-layout floor manoeuvre, a move so difficult to perform that the international gymnastics federation had to give it a new rating in the guidebook for judges. Basically, she broke the code.

On the first day of the 2013 world championships in Antwerp, Belgium, Moors attempted the dangerous flip but landed with hands down, injuring her ankle. One day later, she landed it.

"In just two days, I had my worst low and my biggest high," says Moors. "Because I fell the first time, it was even sweeter to land it the second day."

This was the second time the five-foot-tall superstar had landed a new move in competition. The first move to be named after Moors was achieved competing on the bars at the London Olympics in 2012.

The modest Moors recounts: "That only happened because I was terrified of the back dismount. I would close my eyes and try not to pee my pants."

Her coach, Elvira Saadi, realized Moors' fear wouldn't let up so they got "creative"

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Victoria Moors lands one of the moves named after her during the floor exercise competition at the 2013 world championships. VIRGINIA MAYO, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Prince Harry chats with the Moors family while visiting Canada Olympic House during the 2012 Olympic Games in London. FIONA HANSON, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

and built an even more difficult dismount off bars never done before.

So with the gymnastics world wondering what would come next, where Moors could possibly take the Olympic team in Rio in 2016, she shocked her followers in the spring of 2015 with an Instagram post announcing her retirement.

She wrote that her gymnastics career had been a long haul, a tough road with challenges she couldn't overcome. She had learned a lot about life and made lifelong friends.

"This has been one of the toughest decisions that I've had to make, but I have to look out for myself and do what's best for me," she wrote.

The post went viral. Speculation as to what really went down ran amok . . . but just for a few weeks, then nothing.

Moors' time in the limelight was over.

"We usually go under the radar," Moors says without bitterness, referring to the end of her stint as media darling. "Once you're

out of the spotlight, athletes stop being talked about. Sports suck that way. If you aren't first, you're last."

So what happened?

Simply put, she was done.

"One morning I was trying to do something here at Dynamo, and I physically couldn't do it. Like, it was a simple endurance exercise on bars. I was pissed so I went home."

Moors says she figured it just wasn't her day. So, she returned to the gym again on a different day, and then another, and another. She took a two-month break, and still, the fire wasn't there.

"Even Elvira said there was nothing else I could do in the sport. . . . I'd already accomplished so much," says Moors. "I mean, Elvira can make a mountain move, and I wasn't moving."

Moors says she has always grappled with her mindset. She is fiercely stubborn, which can work both in her favour and against her.

"Make sure your worst enemy doesn't live between your two ears" is the quote she recently had tattooed down the length of her spine.

"That is my daily challenge," she says.

Moors has a deep connection with Saadi, who is a two-time Olympic gold medallist and International Gymnastics Hall of Fame inductee. Moors refers to her as her "second mom," and one of her other tattoos bears witness to their bond: "Strong Love," written in Saadi's native language, Russian, is inked on Moors' hip.

"She is very tough on me . . . because she knew what I was capable of," Moors says. "And she always tells me she loves me."

When she retired, with a year of high school still to finish, Moors had to figure out life without coaches, nutritionists, osteopaths and a routine that packed in training, exercising, eating and sleeping to prepare for competitions around the world.

"To be blunt, I sat on my ass for a while."

Who could blame her? Certainly not her parents.

"Victoria doesn't owe anyone anything," says Moors' mother, Lisa Rutledge. "She had accomplished more by the time she was 17 than most do in a lifetime of sport."

Rutledge says she felt a sense of relief once her daughter had made her exit decision.

"Competitive sports take a big toll on a family. It is a life, not just a sport," says Rutledge. "Our family couldn't go on vacations — athletes lose muscles quickly, they need to keep training — and there were no birthday parties or things like that."

Rutledge says she and her husband, Chris Moors, made a concerted effort when Victoria was a competitor to not interfere with their daughter and her coach, in whom they had complete trust.

"We are not qualified to be coaching her. . . . We sit in the stands and cheer and cry and celebrate. That is our role: parents only."

However, there is no denying the careers of the parents were extremely influenced by their daughter's early success as they teamed up with Saadi in 2011 to open Dynamo, a 23,000-square-foot facility near Highway 401 and Townline Road in Cambridge.

And the retirement of Victoria did not bring an end to the family's days on the competition circuit. Victoria's sister, Brooklyn, 16, is on the senior national team.

After retiring, with no interest in post-secondary schooling, Moors says she felt weak and vulnerable, surprising for someone who is so often described as a fearless, determined individual.

"It's kind of all a blur. I don't even remember what happened that first year."

Just to make a few extra dollars while she "figured things out," Moors says she

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started to help out at her parents’ gym. “I never wanted to coach. That was like not even a Plan B or Plan C. I had no plans.” But Moors hadn’t expected how her little students would make her feel. She started posting about them on Instagram. One photo of six girls standing mat-side carried the caption: “What goofballs ... so glad I get to spend my Friday night with my lil princesses.” Moors began to get high from gymnastics again, in a very different way. “I have a real soft spot for my girls now. I feel so happy seeing them happy with their accomplishments,” says Moors, back in the gym for more than eight hours a day. Some days she spends even more time on the mat than when she was in training herself. Moors describes coaching as akin to art,

sculpting a gymnast, not just physically but mentally. “I’m training my girls to be brave,” says Moors, who says she is learning the skills of coaching every day. She describes how she used to keep the little ones safe by preventing them from jumping off high blocks. “Now I put down a squishy mat and say ‘Go for it.’” “Victoria was such a bouncy, fearless free-spirited kid. She did all these physical moves almost naturally,” her mom recalls. “She didn’t really even quite understand how she was doing them when she was so little.” Coach Saadi, who recognized Moors’ talent early on, described Moors as cat-like, a gymnast who always knew where she was in the air. Now Moors is learning the development of the sport all over, from the other side: teaching skills and determination, logistics

of the flips and how to learn. “It’s amazing for us to watch. It’s like she is living through a second childhood in the gym,” Rutledge says. “And to see her and Elvira together again like this, grooming her now as a coach.” Rutledge recounts Saadi saying that everything she knows about gymnastics is already inside Victoria’s head. She doesn’t have to explain herself, making Moors an ideal student under Saadi in the senior competitive class. Online fans are returning for Moors, this time in love with her as a coach. One of Moors’ own “goofballs,” Ashleigh O’Grady, 6, is one of them. The Guelph girl spends nine hours a week training with Moors then Googles her coach on Saturday mornings, searching YouTube for routines. “She’s an amazing inspiration,” O’Grady’s mom, Tara, says of Moors.

“And she’s really nice,” adds Ashleigh. Tara says they used to watch Moors train for the Olympics when Ashleigh first started at the gym. “Since she’s done it herself, Victoria makes getting to the Olympics seem attainable for our girls.” And Moors has two tattoos that act as visible reminders. Her very first tattoo — the five rings of the Olympics — is inked on the inside of her left forearm. And she recently added, to the inside of her right ankle, the judges’ scoring symbol that depicts the floor move named after her. The close friendships Moors made as a gymnast have endured her departure from competition. Olympian Ellie Black, who placed fifth in Rio in the women’s individual all-around for the country’s best ever Olympic result

in the event, is still Moors’ best friend. They represented Canada together in London in 2012. Black says Moors is like a sister — a sister who loves cats and who knows how to make her laugh. “I happily supported Victoria with her choice to retire from gymnastics. The most important thing for me was Victoria being happy,” Black says. “She accomplished so much as an athlete that she can be very proud of for the rest of her life. Now she can inspire and pass on her knowledge, experience and passion with the next generation of gymnasts as a coach.” Moors also finds herself in a position to coach friends at the end of their careers. She recently took a holiday to help another fellow gymnast, a friend who is in the same predicament Moors found herself in two years ago: an abrupt end to everything she

knew — her daily life, her identity as a gymnast, her reputation. Moors went to just be there for her, to help her get through the “mental stuff.” “There is nothing that I can do to change her view of life right now,” Moors says. “All I could say is ‘life is a bitch.’ She has to go through it and she will, and she’ll come out of it, but right now life for her is hell.” Moors has made it through. She has even discovered something called ‘hobbies.’ She is saving up money from her coaching for a record player — and maybe an easel, too. On Saturday nights she enjoys a glass of wine and colours in her adult colouring book. One day, she plans to travel more, and not for sport only. “I’m not saying I promise I’ll work at Dynamo for the rest of my life,” Moors says, “but actually I kind of want to . . . and Elvira is getting me there.”

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