



# A day in the life of an International Gymnast

To be successful in this sport, you must possess the explosive power of a sprinter, the strength of a weight lifter and the flexibility of an elastic band.

INTERVIEW & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE MITCHELL



**S** **O JUST HOW** do you go about training and preparing your body for a sport where your career is usually over long before your friends have left college. I headed along to Huntingdon Gymnastics Club to meet Louis Smith, the first British gymnast since 1908 to win an individual Olympic medal of any colour when he was awarded a bronze at the 2008 Games and hotly tipped to go even better at the 2012 event, to see for myself.

It's 9.30am when I arrive at the gym and introduce myself to Huntingdon Gymnastic Club's head coach, Paul Hall, a full 30 minutes early for my scheduled meeting with Louis. I am told to make myself at home and Louis will be along at about 10.00am.

Looking around I am drawn to the noticeboard with all of the club's class timetables set out. At the top of the list I am surprised to see a class for six weeks to two years of age... Six weeks! I know sportsmen are getting younger and younger but surely this must be a mistake, so I poke my head into the extremely well equipped gymnasium to see for myself. Although I do not see any tiny babies, there are enough tots around to make me realise if you want to make it to the top in this sport you really do need to start young.

Even at such a tender age you can see the kids being put through drills that will tone and benefit their bodies for a lifetime. It is not unusual to see six-packs and muscles on 10 and 11 year olds that have never lifted a weight in their life, apart from their own bodyweight.

At 10.00am on the dot, Louis arrives with the rest of the elite group, changed and ready to get straight into the day's activities.

First things first, the coach has the gymnasts line up military style in front of him, so that he can outline the week's schedule and inform those that have a competition coming up what he expects from them. Five minutes later and the coach leads the warm-up and stretching routine, watched by mums and tots jumping around and climbing on the various shaped frames and apparatus, completely oblivious to the fact that they are amongst some of the top gymnasts in the world.

After 20 minutes or so of thoroughly warming up, the group split and move onto the various pieces of apparatus that they will use in their competitive routines. Unlike other sports that I have participated in or observed, the training is a little stop and start with each gymnast spending just a minute or so on the piece, before the next gymnast takes his turn. This basically replicates what would happen at a competition: very intense and 100% concentration broken up by sometimes ten minutes of inactivity. This seems to be the one sport that you do not need to train flat out, as it is all about technique and perfection, the latter being the key that drives all of the



gymnasts on. The head coach is on hand to advise and correct when necessary and make sure that the lads stick to their training schedules. This takes us through to the lunch break and the gymnasts head off to the local shop to buy sandwiches and to 'chill out' for an hour or two.

After lunch it is time for the elite gymnasts to join up with a younger age group for a further warm-up and stretching routine on the floor, before practising various tumbles, somersaults, twists and leaps.

The youngsters depart and the elite group moves back to the apparatus, where they practise on the horizontal high bar, parallel bars, vault and the piece that Louis is now famous for, the pommel horse. Being this close up to an Olympic medal-winning gymnast really is an honour. Add that he is a really nice, genuine and likeable guy and I have a memory that will stay with me for a long time. Thank you to all at Huntingdon Gymnastics club for making me so welcome.

**M&F: Most interviews start at the beginning, but if it's ok with you I would like to start at the top. Your career hit an all-time high in Beijing 2008, when you became the first British gymnast since 1908 to win an Olympic medal. Two**

**years on from that historical day for British Gymnastics, how has your life changed?**

**LOUIS SMITH:** So much more expectation, every person I talk to ask if I am going to win gold next time, so as I said the expectation is there, plus I am much more busy, trying to fit in the training, commitments and various charity work but ultimately the most important thing is to keep up my training.

**M&F: You say you are now much busier than before Olympic success, so just what does an average day hold in store for Louis Smith?**

**LS:** When I'm in the gym training, we train for six hours each day, starting at 10.00am and train right through until 1.00pm, breaking for lunch and then back in at around 2.30pm or 3.00pm, training through until 5.00pm to 5.30pm. I might also have to travel into London, as I will do tomorrow, for an appearance or interview for one of my sponsors and then rush back to the gym for an evening session.

**M&F: You all look extremely toned and in good physical condition. Do any of your routines involve weights?**

**LS:** No we don't do much weights at all. We have got a few dumbbells but apart from that we don't use weights, just our own body strength.

**M&F: So how would your week's training break down?**

**LS:** Starting on a Monday, if we are preparing for a competition, we do elements and combinations from the routine and on the Tuesday we do the actual routines, that is the routines on floor, pommel, vault, parallel bars and high bar; it would probably be two routines on the floor, three on pommel, two on rings, four on vault, two on parallel bar and two on high bar. Wednesday is a recovery day, so we concentrate on parts that we may have made mistakes in on Monday and Tuesday. Thursday is a half day. Friday is a repeat of Tuesday, going through the routines, as it is all about preparation. Saturday is my day off and Sunday we train from 10.00am until 2.00pm. As I said this is in preparation for a competition and we would ease off two weeks out.

**M&F: That sounds pretty intense, so what do you get up to on your off-time?**

**LS:** Saturday is my day off, so I try to spend that time with my girlfriend, going out for a meal or to the cinema and switching off. If I am not in training for a competition I might go out with my mates, but generally you won't see me out a lot!

**M&F: That all adds up to around 33 hours each week, just on gym work. Do you have a strict routine that you follow, as I see a few of the other gymnasts walking around with sheets of paper, which I assume is their training schedule?**

**LS:** Yes, we have programmes that our coach sets and he will change it slightly if needed, or when we're building up to a competition. It will be more intense eight weeks out, easing up around the two weeks out stage.

**M&F: Do you have a set diet, to accompany your training schedule, or do you eat what you like and burn it off?**

## LOUIS ANTOINE SMITH

**NAME:** Louis Antoine Smith

**DATE OF BIRTH:** 22nd April, 1989

**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Peterborough, England

**LIVES:** Eye near Peterborough, England

**HEIGHT:** 179 cms (5'-10")

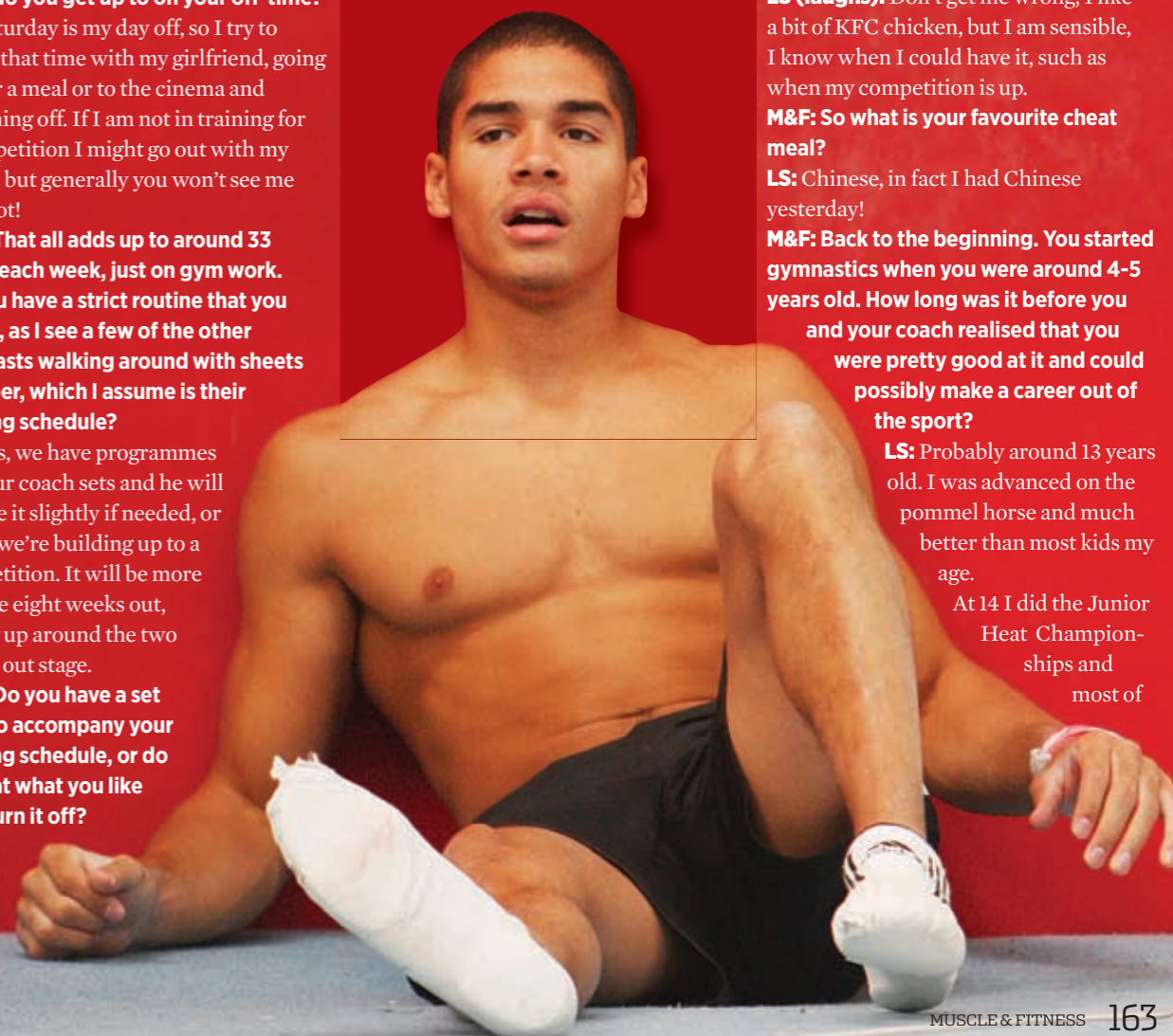
**WEIGHT:** 76 kg

**DISCIPLINE:** Men's artistic gymnastics

**STRONGEST EVENT:** Pommel horse  
Club: Huntingdon Olympic Gymnastics Club

**HEAD COACH:** Paul Hall

**HIGHLIGHTS:** He won a bronze medal for pommel horse in both the 2007 World Championship in Stuttgart and the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing



**LS:** The thing with gymnastics is that, unlike a boxer we don't have to be a certain weight so our diet is not so strict and a bit more relaxed. I don't go out and eat junk food all the time, though. I like to eat good meals, veg and stuff and I try not to eat too late, not too many carbs.

**M&F: So you basically set your own diet. Sounds ideal! You put in a lot of hours in the gym – what supplements do you take?**

**LS:** Well I like my Lucozade products (Louis is an Ambassador for Lucozade Sports), the protein bars are great for keeping me going throughout the day and keeping me topped up and because it takes me around 30 to 40 minutes to get home from the gym, I will have a protein shake drink in the car.

**M&F: Talking of diet and healthy eating, there was a rumour that you were one of the only athletes walking around the Beijing Olympic village eating McDonalds!**

**LS (laughs):** Don't get me wrong, I like a bit of KFC chicken, but I am sensible, I know when I could have it, such as when my competition is up.

**M&F: So what is your favourite cheat meal?**

**LS:** Chinese, in fact I had Chinese yesterday!

**M&F: Back to the beginning. You started gymnastics when you were around 4-5 years old. How long was it before you and your coach realised that you were pretty good at it and could possibly make a career out of the sport?**

**LS:** Probably around 13 years old. I was advanced on the pommel horse and much better than most kids my age.

At 14 I did the Junior Heat Championships and most of



my team mates were around 16, 17, 18, so I was well behind in terms of age, but I managed to get a gold medal and I think it was then that I realised what I wanted to do.

**M&F: Were you then pulled aside and advised, fast tracked or did you carry on as normal at your regular gym?**

**LS:** I came back here, same routine, as I was still at school, but I only did one session per day, which kept me ticking over until I was about 16 and I had to make the decision to continue with my education or stop and focus on the Olympic Games.

**M&F: Good choice so far?**

**Louis;** Yeah

**M&F: Is gymnastics still fun, or has it become more of a job now?**

**LS:** Yeah, it is fun. I am still learning. If I had plateaued and I wasn't learning any more skills it probably would be a little boring, but I am only 21 years old, still learning new skills, still improving, still got much more to learn and I think I could be in the sport for quite a long time.

**M&F: The 2009 World Championships didn't quite go to plan. You were trying out a new routine, said to be the hardest in the world to do at that time and a tumble from the pommel ruined your chance of taking the predicted gold medal.**



**LS:** Yeah, I tried it and failed miserably!

**M&F: It is said you will perform the same routine at the 2012 Olympics. Will you be sticking with this, bearing in mind what happened at the World Championships?**

**LS:** Yes I will. In fact I have made it even harder since and tried it out in a trial competition last Saturday for the World Championships and smashed it, but will still give it a few tweaks.

**M&F: Gymnastics must be one of the only sports where a little wobble can be the difference between first and last place. Do you think by choosing such a difficult routine you have added even more pressure on yourself?**

**LS:** Definitely, but I don't just want to play safe or be known as the person that gets bronze all the time.

**M&F: So you are a bit of a gambler then, as I believe the Chinese gymnast that won gold did so with a relatively easy routine.**

**LS:** Yes he did, but I can't do that. Technically my circle isn't as good as the Chinese guy, so I have to do a lot more.

**M&F: Obviously everything you do is building up to the 2012 Olympics, where there is so much at stake for you, not only in the present time, but in life and**

**a career after you retire from sport. Is there a niggling thought in the back of your mind that an injury now or at any stage of the build-up could end your dream? Do you therefore find yourself holding back slightly in competition and training?**

**LS:** It's a fine line I am living in the moment, so I have to think what training I need to do to get an Olympic medal. You could sit and think, well if I rest I won't get injured, but if I don't do enough then I am not going to be able to produce the goods. My coach (Paul Hall) is one of the best at setting the programme and I trust him 100% and know that I will not be doing too much or too little

**M&F:** Things went a lot better for you in April of this year when you won the silver medal at the European Artistic Gymnastics Championships, held in Birmingham, which was great news for British gymnastics, especially as the gold was won by your club and international team mate Daniel Keatings.

**M&F:** Most international sportsmen and women usually have their main rival from another country but yours, it seems, is a club mate that you train alongside six days of the week. What is your relationship like with Daniel?

**LS:** It's good. I have said a million times, I would rather be beaten by him than someone else.

**M&F:** So does that spur you on, or do you both find yourselves looking over your shoulders, checking out what the other is doing, or do you just do your own thing?

**LS:** I kind of spur him on, as he is still trying to beat me all the time. He keeps me on my toes, but he is not quite in my league yet!

**M&F:** Million dollar question: can you put into words how it felt to be standing on the podium at the Olympic Games waiting to be presented with a medal?

**LS:** It is just an unbelievable feeling, to think that 16, 17 years of training came down to 50 seconds on the pommel horse. You know, it was such relief too, because it hadn't just been me working, it'd been my coach, and my mum, who used to take me to training every day. It was just an opportunity to say thanks to all the people that had helped me.

**M&F:** was your mum out in Beijing with you?

**LS:** Yes, but I couldn't see her in the crowd. She did come down to the front and was crying and stuff.

**M&F:** After 2012, what do you see

yourself doing. Will you retire, or stay in the sport?

**LS:** I'm not sure at the minute. I would like to try and get some sort of business up and running, in terms of going into schools and getting active with the kids, carrying on with the sport. But I will have to see what happens and what my body is telling me to do.

**M&F:** Sorry but I can't finish the interview without bringing this up. You auditioned for it The X Factor. Is music something you see yourself pursuing once you have retired from gymnastics?

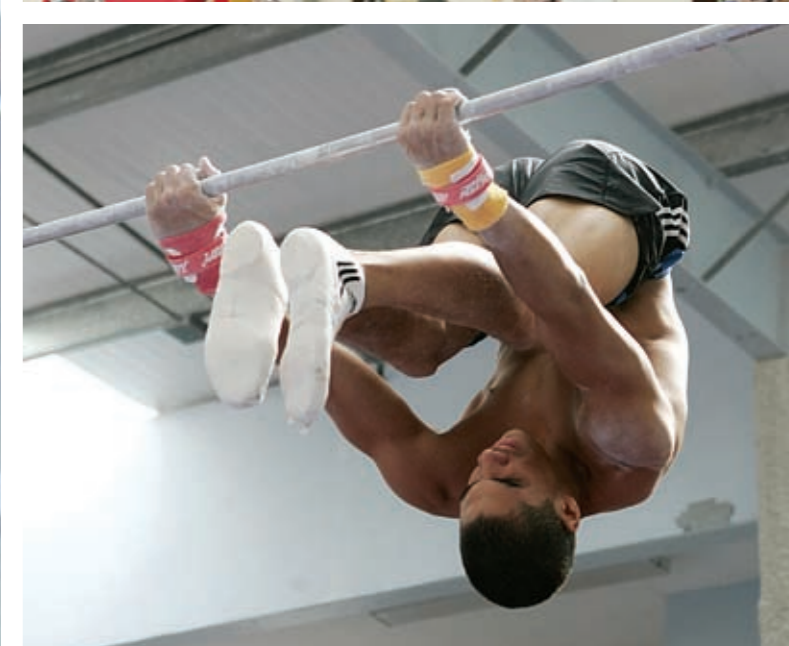
**LS:** No, it was just a bit of fun. I had some free time and wondered what it would be like. I always watch it on TV and I wanted to have a go.

**An Agent's view**

Whilst waiting for Louis to come back from lunch, I took the opportunity to ask Louis's agent Gab Stone, from GSE Management, just how marketable an Olympic gymnast is.

**M&F:** Gab, you started working with Louis, just after his success out in Beijing. With the economy as it is, just how marketable is Louis?

**GAB STONE:** As with any sport, I think a personality or icon can do a huge amount for that sport. I used to work a lot in track and field and you see how times have changed. Now things are getting a little better but in recent years, there have not necessarily been the icons that there were. Back in the early 90s you had the likes of Linford Christie and Colin Jackson and those two amongst others did lots of good for their sport. So now you have Louis representing gymnastics both as a success and a personality which has done a huge amount for both him and the sport. Marketing an everyday gymnast would not be easy, as it is not a mainstream sport, such as football, rugby or cricket, but what Louis is representing is a 2012 hopeful, which everyone is on the lookout for, especially on the back of Beijing and especially now in the build-up to the next Olympics. I think these personalities are coming out of the lesser known sports and it is an exciting time for these athletes to benefit commercially, as well as through their performances in the gym.



**M&F: What sort of companies have shown commercial interest in Louis? Is it just those already associated with sport, or is gymnastics reaching a wider commercial client base, through Louis's success?**

**LS:** Some, some not. Louis is sponsored by Adidas, Lucozade and most recently Links of London (jewellers). So you see that two are partners of the Olympics and one isn't particularly associated with sport, but recognises the importance of ambassadors and wants ambassadors for their brand.

**M&F: As the interest and excitement builds in the run up to 2012, what do you have in store for Louis?**

**LS:** it's a tough one, because as I always say to him, as much as we want to maximise his commercial potential in the run-up to the Olympics, if he doesn't do the most important bit, which is the work in the gym, then there is only so much that I can do. The most important thing is that he performs to his absolute best and that is what any current sponsor wants to see from him. So it is a matter of balancing the two. Interest in him will grow in the run-up but as I have said, it has to be balanced.

**M&F: From speaking to Louis, it seems likely that he will retire from the sport after the Olympics. Are you planning his career for the next step after the games?**

**LS:** It is not so much about the Olympics but other landmarks along the way. We have the World Championships in Rotterdam in October and then the Europeans. Everyone thinks it is about the Olympics, but there is much more he needs to achieve as part of the process. I think what Louis does will be on a step-by-step basis. He has had a long career in gymnastics starting at the age of 4, but a lot will depend on how he does in London.

**M&F: Have you started talking to TV companies about the possibility of Louis commentating on the sport, as Suzanne Dando has gone on to do?**

**GS:** whatever the outcome in London 2012 he won't have any problem developing his career away from gymnastics when the time is right for him to do so, if that is what he wishes to do. **M&F**

