



ASSIGNMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

GOLDEN GIRL

Olympic swimmer Bronte Barratt's love of swimming started at a very early age. Her sport has now taken her all over the world but she loves to return to the place where it all started – her parents' backyard pool.

By Joanne Hawkins

Left: Bronte Barratt takes a moment to relax after many hours of hard training.

Below: Barratt in full swing doing what she likes best: competing.



If anyone meets the definition of “waterbaby”, it’s Bronte Barratt. In fact, she can’t remember a time when she wasn’t in the pool.

As a toddler, Bronte moved with her parents and two older brothers into a large house in Brisbane’s outer northern suburbs, complete with the ubiquitous backyard pool. Before long, the young Bronte was spending every possible moment in that pool, sparking a love of swimming that would eventually lead to a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics.

Of course, Bronte didn’t see herself as an Olympian. Back then, the pool was just where she had fun with friends and family – and a means to escape the harsh Queensland summers.

“I pretty much spent my whole childhood in that pool,” says Bronte. “Brisbane gets so hot in the summer that I used to run home from school and jump in the pool, sometimes in my school uniform. I am just so used to the water and always have been.”

GOALS ACHIEVED

It wasn’t long before splashing around in the pool made way for something more serious. When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, Bronte wrote in her grade seven yearbook that she wanted to be an “Olympic swimmer”.

But unlike most kids who dream of following in the footsteps of their favourite sporting idol (in Bronte’s case, her heroine was Susie O’Neill), Bronte actually made it happen. By the age of 15, the freestyler had won nine national swimming titles, and made her Australian senior team debut in 2005 when she swam in the Fina World Championships in Montreal.



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FUN TO BE FIT

Bronte also credits swimming as a positive influence on her health and well-being. From a young age, her sporting endeavours (she also played netball and hockey but swimming was always her “primary sport”) have also been accompanied by healthy eating.

“It goes with the lifestyle,” she explains. “You exercise, you eat well. It sets you up for life.”

In fact, keeping active is a message she is keen to spread, especially with obesity rates for children and teens continuing to climb. “Starting good habits from a young age is so important. And keeping fit is great fun too.”

Healthy, beautiful and talented, from the outside it looks as if Bronte’s life has been charmed. But her climb to the top of swimming’s ladder has not been without its challenges. (And for the record, Bronte doesn’t think she’s there yet, saying she won’t deserve her ‘golden girl’ tag until she’s scooped an individual Olympic gold medal, hopefully in London in 2012).

HOME AND HAPPY

In 2009, the Queensland swimmer struggled with a shoulder injury that affected her ability to train, culminating in surgery at the end of that

year. She was also miserable living in Canberra, where she had moved so she could work with Ian Thorpe’s former coach Tracey Menzies at the AIS (Australian Institute of Sport).

So she took the plunge and moved back to Brisbane at the start of 2011, and couldn’t be happier. “I just felt a bit lonely down there,” she explains. “I really missed Brisbane and all my friends and family because I’m really close to them. You swim better when you’re happy and realised I would be happier if I moved back to Brisbane. It’s also much easier getting up for training when it’s 20°C instead of 2°C!”

Bronte, who juggles her swimming with studies at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), is now training with her close friend and fellow freestyler Stephanie Rice, who has also struggled with her own shoulder injuries in the past few months. “She’s coming back from her surgery, too, so it’s good to have someone to talk to who knows exactly what you are going through,” Bronte muses.

The return to Queensland also meant that the swimmer briefly moved back into her parents’ home, where the backyard pool still looks pretty much the same as it did 20 years ago. Bronte admits she doesn’t get in there as much as used to (“I train six days a week so the last thing I really want to do when I’m not training is go for a swim,” she laughs), but the pool still becomes the focal point of family celebrations such as Christmas. “All our family pretty much spends the whole of Christmas Day in the pool, which is great fun,” she smiles. “It’s been like that for every Christmas I’ve ever known. It’s a much-loved pool.”

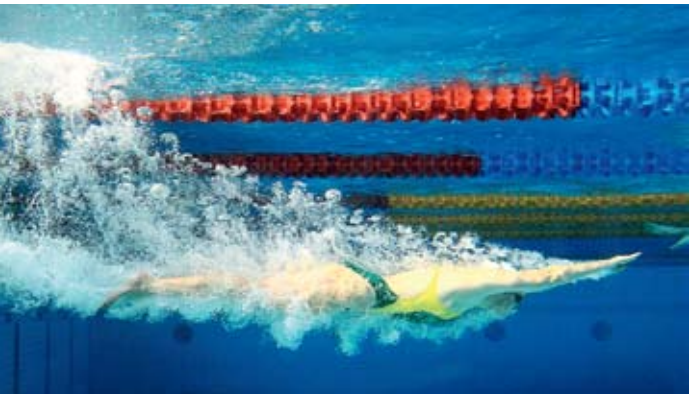
Bronte now lives closer to training in Brisbane (“It means I can have a lie in until 5am instead of 4.30,” she smiles) and dreams of the day she can buy her own place. And as you may expect, her own pool will be a must-have.

“I’d love a big one, maybe with a diving board and a spa. That would be the ultimate. I don’t want a lap pool though; I think I’ve done enough laps to last me a lifetime.”

And unlike former Australian swim team colleague turned TV presenter Gianni Rooney – who admitted last year that she’d be quite happy never to set foot in a pool again – Bronte says she can’t imagine life without being able to swim. “I love the feeling of being in the water, I feel at one with it. There’s nothing like going for a dip first thing in the morning. It sets you up for the rest of the day.” ■

Commonwealth gold followed in Melbourne in 2006, but it was her gold-medal winning – not to mention world-record breaking – swim alongside Stephanie Rice, Kylie Palmer and Linda Mackenzie in the 4 x 200m freestyle relay at the Beijing Olympics, that is still the highlight of her career. “That was the best day of my life so far,” she beams.

Asked what she gets out of swimming, Bronte is emphatic. “I just love it,” she smiles. “The places I’ve travelled and the people I’ve met are irreplaceable. Most of my best friends are swimmers. It’s such a good life and has treated me very well over the years,” she continues, sounding much older than her 22 years. “I’ve had so many amazing life experiences through swimming.”



Clockwise from left: Bronte Barratt has been competing professionally since childhood; a very young Bronte in the family pool; the Beijing Olympic gold medal freestyle relay team.



FEATURED POOL

For more details on the beautiful swimming pool where Bronte was photographed, please turn to the Majestic Pools showcase on p.82.