

PRAISE FOR *MAKE IT HAPPEN*:

“*Make It Happen* has made a positive impact in the way I approach training, competition, and life. Kyle blazed a new trail for Canadian gymnasts and showed us all that reaching the top of an Olympic podium is actually possible. He has been a difference maker in my life and his book continually filled me with new insights and fresh inspiration. I believe every athlete can benefit from reading it!”

- **Ellie Black**, 2x Olympian, 2017 World AA Silver Medalist, 6x Commonwealth and 10x PanAm Medalist

“*Make It Happen* is a must read for all athletes, parents and coaches. Kyle’s journey is a great example of what it means to be athlete driven and parent/coach supported. I loved the honesty in which he shares his inner dialogue as he progressed and matured from a young tumbler to a world-class gymnast. This story is as much about Kyle’s journey as a person as it is about his journey as an Olympic Champion.”

- **Marnie McBean**, OC OLY 3x Olympic Rowing Champion

“Kyle Shewfelt is the only Canadian to become an Olympic champion in (what I consider) the world’s most difficult athletic endeavour. In *Make It Happen*, he takes us on a very personal journey which led him to discover the enduring and undeniable power of sport.”

- **Scott Russell**, CBC Olympic Host

“Kyle’s account of a life in sport is honest and raw. It brought laughter, surprise, excitement, tears, and above all, hope. . . The glimpses of his parents’ pragmatic and unwavering support, coupled with their commitment to raising a young man rather than an elite athlete, impacted me more than any how-to book on the same topic could ever accomplish. *Make It Happen* is compulsory reading for today’s sport parent.”

- **Krista Thompson**, Parent

“A refreshing account of self-discovery through sport. A true testament to how good coaching, honesty and resilience can lead to becoming one of the best in the world.”

- **Wayne McNeil**, Co-Founder of Respect Group
(providers of Respect in Sport)

“Kyle Shewfelt’s story is honest and engaging. I couldn’t wait to turn the page to find out what happened next. This book is about so much more than gymnastics. It’s about the strength of the human spirit, chasing big goals and believing in yourself to *make it happen*. Whether you’re an athlete targeting the Olympics or someone aiming to complete their first 5KM on their path to becoming a runner, this book is full of valuable takeaways that can help everyone in their quest to cross their personal finish line.”

-**Kirsten-ElLEN Fleming**, Executive Director, Run Calgary

“Kyle is an inspiration to all. His raw candour about the challenges of the adolescent years, the complexity and sacrifice of high-performance sport, and the incredible reward of perseverance are all woven into this autobiography. It’s clear that his coaches made a profound impact on his life and the stories of their positive approach are a valuable resource for the entire coaching community.”

- **Lorraine Lafrenière**, CEO, Coaching Association of Canada

make it happen

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My Story of Gymnastics, the Olympics,
and the Positive Power of Sport

KYLE SHEWFELT

with Blythe Lawrence

Make It Happen

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The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from his memories of them. In some instances, conversations may not represent word-for-word transcripts. The author has tried to retell them in a way that evokes the feeling and meaning of what was said and, in all instances, he believes the essence of the dialogue to be accurate.

For information on special discounts for bulk purchases and fundraising, please contact info@kyleshewfelt.com.

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To Nora

*Through it all, I'll be right there to support you.
I love you more than I love gymnastics.*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK WAS A WORK IN PROGRESS FOR THE better part of a decade. I began the writing process in 2010, but lost my momentum because I didn't have a clear reason why I was writing it. Sure, I had a fun collection of reflections and memories, but a central theme was missing. Then, in January 2019, things became clearer: sport has had a positive impact on my life and illuminating the experiences and people that helped shape that perspective is important. And with this overarching purpose secure in my mind, the book came together like a great floor routine. I truly hope that my story can ignite a conversation about the positive power of sport.

When I was a kid, I craved behind-the-scenes stories from my Olympic idols. I'd wonder: *What did they do the day they won the Olympics? How did they deal with the pressure and expectations? How did they stay motivated? Did they ever act out or want to quit? What happened at all those after-parties?* I'm sharing my journey in hopes that others can learn from it and that I can give something back. If one person reads this book and is brought a step closer to achieving their goal(s), then my mission has been accomplished.

As a father, the only wish I have for my daughter is that she finds the thing that makes her heart smile, whatever that may be. When I finally found gymnastics and declared that I wanted to be an Olympic champion, my parents never questioned that dream. They supported it and I look back on their dedication with deep appreciation. I plan on revisiting these pages throughout my own parenting journey to be reminded of the incredible example my parents set for me. They were always encouraging, yet they also allowed me to experience failure. I hope I've captured the importance of their unwavering commitment. If one parent reads this book and discovers a new strategy to help their child, then my mission has been accomplished.

I was surrounded by many special coaches during my career, including my long-time personal coach, Kelly Manjak. He and I still talk frequently, and he is one of the first people I call when I have news to share or a problem to solve. To me, Kelly is everything a coach should aim to be: a friend, a mentor, a motivator, an advocate, and a source of accountability. I hope his magic shines through and that the coaching philosophies featured here encourage others to take a similar athlete-centred approach. If one coach reads this book and can see a new path, then my mission has been accomplished.

Building this project has been an adventure and paying tribute to many of the difference makers in my life has been so rewarding. Thank you to everyone for your endless support!

Kyle Shewfelt

Calgary, 2020

PROLOGUE: THE LANDING

Stuttgart, Germany
World Gymnastics Championships
August 27, 2007

BY 9 A.M. THE TRAINING GYM WAS ALIVE WITH quiet activity. Gymnasts from different countries were warming up: swinging on the high bar, circling around the pommel horse, and flying down the vault runway. Lined up around the apparatus and awaiting their turn, some joked quietly with their teammates, but for the most part everyone was serious and focused on their routines. The *pat-pat-pat* of running footsteps, the crack of the springboard, the thud of feet landing on stiff mats, and the hiss of hand grips on the high bar as guys swung into their dismounts were the only sounds to be heard.

Hovering off to the side of landing mats, tight-lipped coaches in national team tracksuits observed each gymnast closely as he moved through his routine. Every now and then, one would quietly confer with an athlete, then the gymnast would nod and get back in line. The gym, part of a big athletic dome, had high concrete ceilings and fluorescent lights. Almost imperceptibly, small flakes of chalk dust rose into the air, floating softly toward the ceiling.

We were training at 9 a.m. because we would be competing at 9 a.m. It was always like that at big competitions. The theory is that the body gets used to doing a certain thing at a certain time every day, which is important when you're launching yourself ten feet into the air several times in the space of seventy seconds.

Edouard Iarov, the Canadian national coach, gave us two days to get acclimated to the seven-hour time difference between our pre-Worlds training-camp base in Calgary and Germany. On the third, he called for full routines. That morning each of us warmed up and signalled to Edouard when we were ready to show a full set. His penetrating gaze added an extra layer of pressure. If you could do it with Edouard watching, you knew you could do it in competition when it really mattered.

When I felt fully warmed up, I showed Edouard my floor routine. It was a good one, among the best I'd done since the Athens Olympics three years earlier. As I landed my dismount, a smattering of applause echoed off the concrete walls and I felt a little rush of pride. In training, everyone watches others with half a mind, focusing on what they need to do. Those spontaneous bursts of applause only happen when someone does something really impressive.

I knew the routine had been good. I'd gotten into a nice groove leading up to the World Championships. Everything was falling into place, I reflected happily over breakfast that morning. After the post-Olympic roller coaster, I struggled to manage the new expectations placed on my shoulders, but I was finally back where I was most comfortable: chasing a dream. *I may be the Olympic champion, but I'm not the reigning world champion*, I told myself. *Here's my chance.*

But to achieve that goal, the routine I'd just done might not be enough. If I performed a harder variation of my opening Arabian double front tumbling pass, I knew I'd bank more difficulty points with the judges. Keeping my body straight in the air as opposed to piking it changed the whole dynamic of the skill, making it about five times harder. More of the body's surface area would be exposed to air drag, slowing down rotation. Additionally, my head would be arched back, so I'd be landing "blind," meaning I wouldn't see the floor before my feet touched ground. It was officially called a Tamayo, first performed by Charles Tamayo of Cuba, and only a handful of gymnasts had ever attempted this skill.

The reward for all this risk would be an additional 0.1 added to my difficulty score, but I knew from experience that this small margin could make the difference between winning a world title and walking away empty-handed. "Edouard," I called. "I'm going to do a couple of Arabian double layouts." He nodded. Though it had been good, the routine I'd just shown was playing it safe, and we both knew it. It was time to go for broke.

I stepped into the corner of the floor and raised my arms. *Ready.* I took four quick steps and hurdled into my roundoff, snapping my arms up over my head. *Set.* The gym whirled around as I flipped into the back handspring. Floor, ceiling, and floor again whizzed by in a blur and I punched hard off the mat, launching into the big skill. *Go!*

That's when I made the mistake.

As I lifted off the ground and turned my body over, I was just a little bit lower than I'd intended—an inch, two at the most—but I didn't know it as I took off, and wouldn't realize it

for another second, the time it took for me to collide with the mat, heels first.

I expected to float back down to earth in complete control, landing like I was sitting in an invisible chair. The actual landing came as a terrible jolt. My legs jammed into the floor with the force of a car crash. The awful thud of bone impacting bone and the sickening crack of my knees hyperextending reverberated straight up my spine and into my brain. My head snapped forward and my chin thudded hard into my chest as I crumpled to the floor in a heap. Somewhere very far away I heard people gasp.

For a split second, I couldn't feel anything below my hips. *I've fallen into a hole*, I thought, dazed. *Why is there a hole in the floor?*

Then, like cylinders firing through an engine, pain exploded through the lower half of my body.

A still, terrifying silence settled over the training gym as everyone stopped and turned to look at me lying on the ground. Vaguely, it occurred to me that there would be no applause for what I'd just done.

The pain was excruciating. Instinctively, my body curled into the fetal position. I was able to bend my legs to my chest, but they locked up and wouldn't move after that. I whimpered and moaned, feeling my eyes rolling around in my head. Concerned faces moved in and out of my line of vision, blocking the glare of the fluorescent lights high above. Edouard. Then my personal coach, Tony Smith, and the team's red-haired physical therapist, Susan Massitti. Then our massage therapist, Ed Louie. Finally, a German doctor and a small battalion of volunteers, all wearing

matching baby-blue polo shirts. In my peripheral vision my teammates looked on, anxiety written all over their faces.

It took Susan, Ed, and the doctor five minutes to straighten my legs, and every millimetre of movement was torture. My legs felt like they were made of metal. With each small amount of progress, expletives fell from my lips as I stifled screams. Inside my head, thoughts appeared and disappeared as though as they were being fed through one of those red View-Master toys from my childhood.

I'm never going to walk again. Click.

No, I'll be fine, I probably just need some ice. Click.

This is the Olympic team qualifier. The Olympics are eleven months away. Click.

I have to compete. Click.

If Canada doesn't qualify to the Games it will be all my fault.
Click.

I'm walking out of here. Click.

Holy sh--, this hurts!

After several minutes they managed to hoist me into a sitting position. Two people stepped up and put my arms around their shoulders, then carried me to a bench beside the floor. My legs dangled uselessly beneath me. They felt very hot.

Very gently, the doctor pressed a wand-like instrument against my knees. "This is a mini-ultrasound machine," he explained. "It will indicate damage to the ACL and MCL, the important ligaments in the knees." He and Susan conferred in low tones as he read the results.

"They're going to call a car to take you to the hospital for more tests," Susan announced. "Someone's going to bring a wheelchair. They'll wheel you out."

“No,” I said. I couldn’t bear to leave the training gym in a wheelchair. Foolish or not, I wasn’t going to be defeated by what had happened.

“I don’t want a wheelchair,” I told her. “I’m walking out of here.” Suddenly, that seemed so important. If I could just walk out of the gym, whatever I’d done couldn’t be that bad. Susan shook her head, but as a Canadian Olympic speedskater herself, she understood that I was desperately trying to gain the upper hand.

My legs felt twangy as they touched the ground. Out of nowhere, crutches appeared under my armpits. Susan and the doctor supported me as I inched my way out of the gym. Just before reaching the door, I glanced back. The last thing I saw was my teammates strapping on their wrist guards and preparing to move to the next event. They still had a job to do. Canada’s Olympic qualification hung in the balance.

. . .

By the time they slid me into the tube-like MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) machine, my legs were swelling. *At this rate, they’re going to get so big I’ll be stuck in here.* I lay there for the next twenty minutes, oscillating between optimism and disbelief.

My mind ran through all potential scenarios. *This is just a minor blip on the radar. I’ll be good in a couple of days and still be able to compete. What if this was the last day I ever tumble? What about my team? What about Beijing?* I tried to visualize my routines, but the pain pulsating through my legs was just too distracting.

They propped me up on a table beside the MRI machine while an orthopaedic doctor looked at the scans. When another wheelchair appeared I made a move to get up, but someone's arm held me back. "I don't want that," I objected. "I want to walk."

"You shouldn't have walked in here," the doctor replied. "And I'm sorry, but you're not walking out. You've broken both of your legs. You will definitely not be competing here in Germany."

Both of my legs? The impact of the landing had made the two bones around my kneecaps hyperextend and crash into each other, he explained. In each knee, the top bone had hit the bottom one, fracturing the tibia. The force of the diagnosis hit me as hard as the landing, and suddenly I couldn't hold back the tears. Susan rubbed my back sympathetically as tears began streaming down my cheeks and my shoulders heaved with sobs.

After the 2004 Olympics, I'd struggled to find the motivation to continue gymnastics. You're on top of the world when you win gold and after that there's nowhere to go but down. Before Athens, I'd been the chaser, my dream of becoming an Olympic champion pulling me through every minute of every day. But after, I'd just felt afraid: afraid of making mistakes, afraid of letting everyone down.

It took breaking both of my legs to free me of that. The moment I received the diagnosis, I realized just how much I wanted to go back to the Olympics. *This can't be the way my story ends*, I thought. I am going to go out and get it—again.

Just as soon as I can stand up and walk.

