

# SPORTS

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## Springing forward

Lifelong Springer Gwillam excited about leading next chapter of gymnastics club

By Steve LeBlanc

CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Shannon Gwillam wasn't the easiest gymnast to coach.

"She had a strong individual personality, and often you'd have to work to get her on your side," recalled Janet Campbell, who recently retired after 30 years at the helm of the Milton Springers. "You'd have to win her over."

Campbell offered that recollection not to be critical, but rather complimentary — since in her opinion that same strong will that occasionally made her job more challenging is also what makes Gwillam her ideal successor.

"Shannon definitely exhibited leadership as an athlete and there's no question we needed someone with a clear vision for the club, in terms of programs and atmosphere. She was the perfect person (to take over). Actually I'd viewed her as a possible replacement about five years ago when we started making long-term plans."

### First test awaits

While signing on as the Springers' new head coach back in July, Gwillam's unofficial christening comes this weekend in Orangeville, with the first Ontario championship qualifier for her three provincial level gymnasts.

To say there's some anxiety about this initial test would be putting it mildly, although she's not placing any undue pressure — or specific expectations — on her students.

"Obviously we hope to do well, but the real goal is for them just to do their best and try to have fun," said the 24-year-old.

Although still in the early stages of her



**HELPING HAND:** New Springers' head coach Shannon Gwillam instructs 11-year-old Emily Homer on the beam.

GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

new post, Gwillam is the furthest thing from a newcomer to the local gymnastics club — having been part of it since the tender age of two, through the Parent and Tot program.

She brings a great deal of coaching experience to the table as well, having instructed at just about every level over the past decade — during which she absorbed plenty of valuable lessons from her seasoned predecessor.

Said Gwillam, "Probably the most important thing Janet taught me was just to have patience with the athletes. That's really the key."

The new coach admits she had some reservations about assuming the overall mantle of leadership of a club she's seen grow to include three dozen coaches and more than 1,000 gymnasts. But in the end, her passion for the sport and immense loyalty to the Springers convinced her to answer when opportunity came knocking.

"I just want to be the person to take the Springers to the next level."

Gwillam has already taken steps toward that end with the newly-implemented Petite Elite program — a twice-a-week class for five-year-olds with competitive aspirations.

"We've also got a number of seven and eight-year-olds who've been identified as having provincial-level potential," she said. "We're looking to beef up the competitive side of the club."

Given how much the sport has changed since her time as a pint-size participant, Gwillam expects to do as much learning as her young students over the coming years. Her commitment to that was evidenced this past summer, when she took part in the Level 3 National Coaching Certification Program.

"I want to grow with the club," she said.

Added club administrator and Springette instructor Linda Massel, "That's (certification training) another example of Shannon's loyalty and commitment. She has so much enthusiasm and is willing to put in the time needed to succeed. And having been with us

for so long, the transition (of having a new coach) has been pretty smooth."

Be that as it may, Gwillam doesn't deny that the latest chapter in her lifelong tenure as a Springer has been more challenging than she anticipated.

"Yeah it's been tougher than I thought. You've got to wear so many hats here. But I've got a lot of determination, and having taken a community development program at college has really helped me understand the non-profit end of the club."

So what advice does Campbell have for her success on the eve of her first provincial qualifier?

"I guess just to remember all the work that's put in during practice and realize that the meet is only one day."

Gwillam seems ready to take that notion to heart.

"Yes success is great, but our goal is to develop the whole person, not just the athlete," she stressed.



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