

Week-end Interview with Alexandra Barac

“I had the chance to work with amazing coaches”

Alexandra Barac was a very talented gymnast who was supposed to compete for Romania in 2001 at the World Championships in Ghent but her career was cut short due to a serious back injury.

Alexandra moved to Canada a few years ago where I had the chance to meet up with her during a visit to Canada and talk about her career as a gymnast, how it all started, but also about her present life in Canada, where she coaches young kids at Oakville Gymnastics Club, inspiring them as she was inspired, even showing them handstands and how to do it perfectly.

Can you tell me something about how you got into gymnastics and did you enjoy it straight away or were you scared?

Alexandra: ‘I started when I was 4 years old. I was selected from kindergarten when a coach came to the school to look for kids who were interested in doing gymnastics. I started training with Nicoleta Zaharia, Raluca Bugner and Lucian Sandu. At the start, I only did 2 hours but once I started to get closer to competition age when I was 7 years old, I trained 4 hours a day and I think it was at least 3 days a week and it just got more and more. I did enjoy it straight away but I was scared on beam, I think every kid has this beam problem but as time passed and I started competing and winning more and started to get way better, I was more willing to try harder to win more medals.’

At what age did you or your coaches realise that you were really talented?

Alexandra: ‘I think the coaches realised it sooner than I did. I think the point when I realised that I could really do this was when I won the finals on vault and beam at the Junior National Championships and beam was my weak event so I could see the potential.’

So when did you get selected for the junior team?

Alexandra: ‘I was selected in 1997 at the age of 12 and I was in Onesti for a year. It was difficult at the start because I was so young when I had to leave home. I was really home sick to start with and my parents could only come once a month because the journey from Sibiu, where I come from, to Onesti was so far. I talked to my parents on the phone, about every 2 days I think and you get used to it because we were in the gym so many hours a day and you were so busy, you barely had time to think about stuff, right, but it was difficult when we were going to bed and my mother wasn’t there to wish me goodnight but other than that, we all got used to it pretty fast.’

Alexandra started to achieve good results and in 1998 she became the National junior champion on vault and beam, competing against the well known names like Sabina Cojocar, Silvia Stroescu, Melina Druta and Carmen Ionescu.

Were you selected for Deva based on these results?

Alexandra: 'Yeh, it was funny because we were still in Onesti and Sabina Cojocar, Silvia Stroescu, Carmen Ionescu and I heard that Octavian Bellu wanted to see us so we left Onesti and went to Deva just to have a try out. I remember I was so intimidated by him, he was such a big guy and we were so tiny. We were used to a quiet and calm training although we still worked really hard so when Bellu showed up, everybody stood up straight and listened carefully to him and we tried to do the best we could. After the try out we went back to Onesti and after a week or so they decided that they wanted us in Deva so all 4 of us went there. It was exciting. At that point I really wanted to be in the big Olympic team, I didn't feel like a junior anymore and it was a big thing happening for us so we really wanted it and we were really excited plus we were closer to home, for Sabina and me, it was easier to see our parents so it was really good for us there. I shared a room with Sabina at first and then a little while with Andreea Ulmeanu and with Carmen (Ionescu) so we kept on changing roommates, who ever the coaches put us with.'

So what do you remember from that time?

Alexandra: 'My coaches were Octavian Bellu, Mariana Bitang, Lucian Sandu who moved to Deva from Onesti and I also worked with Adrian and Lenuta Boboc. I had the chance to work with them and all of them are amazing coaches. I remember a lot of stuff, like those stairs where you run up to the ruins of Deva, running all the way up. It was a fun experience but at the same time hard. It was way different than Onesti and at this point it got very serious, serious gymnastics. You knew that you had a chance of going to the Olympics so you worked twice as much and twice as hard and the pressure was on at that point, it was pretty tough.'

You competed in America in 2000 and 2001 and you were in great shape but what happened next?

Alexandra: 'During a friendly competition against Great Britain in 2001, I landed my second tumbling line and I landed twisted. I did a triple twist and my feet landed straight but my upper body was still twisting so my spine just shifted. At that point I knew that there was something wrong as I didn't feel anything from the waist down so I stopped in the middle of my routine and I just stood there, even if it was for a few seconds but I knew it was bad. I went to see a lot of doctors to see if I could keep on going, at least for bars but it was too risky so I had to make the decision to retire.'

Was your decision to retire really difficult because up until then, your whole life was about gymnastics.

Alexandra: 'Two weeks later, after I injured myself, I left Deva and it was tough going home, not having the every day routine that you have done for so many years in the gym. I watched the girls compete at the 2001 World Championships (on tv). I watched them getting on the rostrum and receiving their gold medals but as soon as it was over, I started to cry and I couldn't stop for a few hours but I cheered for them and I felt as if I was there with them. I felt part of the team but I just wasn't there so it was a very tough year. Just getting adjusted to real life was hard because we were so close at Deva, it was

like having a lot of sisters. Once I got home, I had these kids I didn't know, around me at school and I didn't know how to act around them because I was so used to my teammates and so used to talking to them, so it was different. I had to learn so many new things and it was tough after those 4 years away from home to know what to do now but I had the support of my family, my mum and my sister and my dad, they were amazing and they helped me out. My mum did everything she could to get medical care for my back, we went to see so many doctors and I'm better now. I still wear a back brace every now and again when I'm in pain. It's not that I'm in pain when I do stuff, it's after and I put it on when I spot harder skills and when I know I'm going to be in pain after, I put the brace on to protect it a little bit.

So when did you decide to go to Canada and how did it all come about?

Alexandra: 'After I had been to The States to compete, I told my mother that I would like to live there. I didn't know how I would get there but that was my dream. Maria Olaru, who is my best friend, found out that Lenuta (Mela) Russ (former Romanian gymnast of the 80's) and her husband Mihai were looking for a coach for their gym club (Gym Magic) in Canada. Maria called me and asked if I wanted to go there and I said 'Sure!' as coaching sounded a good idea because after I retired from gymnastics, I didn't think of coaching, in fact I was studying accountancy, but gymnastics is my passion so I wanted to give it a try. I didn't come to Canada with the thought of living here, I wanted to live up to my contract for a year and then go back home but things started to work out for me and three years later I'm still here, planning to stay here. I'm trying to get my qualifications for coaching and my first course was learning how to have fun with the kids. It's not like in Romania when the kids see a beam, they want to do gymnastics, to get on the National team and work hard. Here in Canada it is about having exercise and fun. The first week when I started as a coach, this lady dropped off her daughter at the gym and she said 'Ok, see you in a little bit, have fun' and I'm like 'What do you mean have fun?' so then after the course I saw that you should be a fun coach if you want a future here so bit by bit I'm still learning because I'm used to a system where hard work takes you where you want to go but here the kids want to have fun and enjoy it, not all of them have that long term goal to go to the Olympics.'

What do you remember of your first year in Canada?

Alexandra: 'The first year was really tough. I had to leave home again, I was 22 this time but it was different. I was in a different country, I didn't know the language, I didn't know the people. I lived with Mela and Mihai for 4 months and then moved out to live with a friend who also worked at the gym and then I started to feel like I was in Canada and I started to go out more, there was more to do in the town I moved to. I went to see Niagara Falls with friends, it was so exciting to drive through Toronto, to see all those big buildings, it was impressive. I was so happy to be there and then I started to feel at home. It takes time and patience and I'm not a patient girl at all, I have to learn how to be patient and I'm still trying. It was a good learning experience and a growing up experience and I can't believe I've been here for 3 years now but I love it. I'm starting to build the foundation of my life, I'm 25 and I see that things are starting to move for me. I do miss the Romanian food though and I miss my family, those are the 2 things that I miss most. I miss my dad's food, he makes such good sausages. I also miss family

holidays because I know that my family is together then but I love it here too because it's different, all the lights that I see, I'm so excited just to see the lights lit up and it's the Christmas spirit that I love here.

So you left Gym Magic, how did you get to the Oakville Gymnastics Club which is a very good club?

Alexandra: 'Oakville came just at the right time for me. I found out that they needed a coach and I went to check it out and I fell in love with it. At the time I didn't realise this club was club of the year for 2 years running from 2007 to 2009. It is the greatest gym in Ontario and Kelly Manjak who coached Kyle Shewfelt to Olympic gold on floor in Athens 2004, worked there too. Kelly and his wife Susan are co-head coaches of the women's artistic program there and it has both Provincial and National level gymnastics programs. It's a huge gym and I was so excited to be there, it's the perfect thing at the right time so I'm really happy I got a coaching position there.'

What level do you coach and do you teach the girls the same way that you were taught?

Alexandra: 'I am currently coaching pre-comp (children between the age of 4-8) as well as Provincial gymnasts (age 9 and up). I do have that Romanian blood in me and Romanian gymnastics is still there and I do work hard on conditioning and flexibility, those are my 2 things because if you have those, you can do anything you want. I have a look when I'm harsh but I have to be that way too, I can't just be smiles because then you never get anywhere but I do make sure that they get that smile and a hug and a high five and I tell them they did a great job all the time. As long as you do your best, I'm happy because I don't want them to be upset because they didn't try their best.'

Do you still follow the Romanian team?

Alexandra: 'I'm trying to. I read the papers to catch up with the latest news. I cheer for everyone, I cheer for good gymnastics, it doesn't matter where they are from, I think all gymnasts work hard. Just because I'm from Romania, it doesn't mean the Romanians have to win, so if someone from The States is that good, I say 'Good for you'. I love gymnastics wherever it's from.'

Alexandra goes back into the gym, working with a smile on her face, loving every moment of being in the gym, her little pupils listening carefully what she tells them. She's proud of having had the opportunity to be on the Romanian National team and to have had the opportunity to work with great coaches in Onesti and Deva.

By **Nicole Citroen** – September, 2010, Canada