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Olympic gold medallist Kyle Shewfelt launches own gymnastics centre in Calgary

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CALGARY - One of the riskiest high bar elements Kyle Shewfelt performed during his gymnastics career was a one-and-a-half twisting back flip off a release and then catching the bar again.

Opening his own gymnastics centre in his hometown of Calgary feels a little like that move. The only Canadian to win an Olympic gold medal in the sport intends to open the doors to Kyle Shewfelt Gymnastics this fall.

"This actually feels right now like I'm in the process of learning that skill," Shewfelt said Wednesday.

"I feel like I'm immersed in that fun and awkward phase of learning where you let go of one trapeze and you're flipping and twisting. It's exhilarating and scary."

Shewfelt won gold with his floor routine at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens. Despite breaking both legs less than a year out from the 2008 Olympics, Shewfelt competed in Beijing. He finished ninth in the vault and 11th in the floor routine.

He declared upon his retirement in 2009 that he wanted to one day open a gymnastics centre in Calgary. Shewfelt studied business and entrepreneurship at Mount Royal University and built a business plan.

After providing television commentary for gymnastics at last year's Summer Games in London, Shewfelt felt it was time to launch his plan.

"I really wanted to combine my love for Calgary with my love of gymnastics and my love of entrepreneurship, so I started putting the plans in motion," he said. "Not just thinking about it, but diligently building out the business plan and starting to build a team around me. It's been almost a year of planning to get it to this point."

The 31-year-old has leased a 1,000-square-metre warehouse in southeast Calgary. Registration opens in September followed by a "soft launch" in October. His objective is to start registered programs Oct. 28.

"Our primary programming is going to be focused on youth from two years old to 12, but we're going to have a really awesome multi-disciplinary cross-training appeal," Shewfelt explained.

"We feel that gymnastics is a sport that gives people an edge in other sports. You work on strength, flexibility, co-ordination, air awareness, agility, which are all things gymnastics provides. We're not going to be a high-performance centre. We're not going to have a competitive offering. We're going to be focused on the foundation of the sport."

Shewfelt has designed a gymnastics program he believes can assist young athletes in traditional sports.

"It's not just the acrobatic sports," he said. "There are so many young people in the city playing hockey and I've developed a program called Up Your Game and it's going to be able to help hockey, soccer, baseball, football, all these sports that need the quick twitch, speed power and flexibility."

The installation of offices, a birthday-party room, multi-purpose space, a parent-viewing lounge, a foam landing pit and two in-ground trampolines still has to happen before equipment arrives in September, Shewfelt said.

"We are still seeking a few of the last investors to come on board, but right now, we're at a point where we can move forward and make it great, but it's always good to have a little cash on hand, especially when you're starting up," he said.

"I have a great bookkeeper, a great accountant, a great lawyer and an incredible team of investors who really believe in this dream. I've signed a lot of papers saying I owe people a lot of money if things don't go right. That makes me nervous, but I feel so blessed to be able to grow up in a city like Calgary that supported my career."

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