

## Russo's bronzed moment



Australian Monette Russo in action on the floor, which provided her with her highest score in the women's all around final.

Photo: *AFP*

By Linda Pearce  
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Monette Russo has the bronze medal she had coveted, and Australia has its first women's top-three placing in an individual gymnastics event at a world or Olympic championship. Russo last night finished third behind American superstars Chellsie Memmel and Nastia Liukin in the women's all-around final before a near-capacity home crowd of 10,000 at Rod Laver Arena.

Australia won the women's team bronze at the Anaheim world titles two year ago, and Phil Rizzo took silver on the men's high bar in Ghent in 2001. But there was something missing from the front row of the trophy cabinet, and finally, at the 38th world gymnastics championships, a 17-year-old schoolgirl from Heathmont has supplied it.

"I felt really ready and prepared, and excited to come out here," said Russo, whose effort bettered the fourth place of Allana Slater at the 2001 world titles. "Finally all the hard work is paying off, and it's a great reward."

Russo, who was 12th two years ago in California, had qualified third behind Liukin and Memmel, surpassing any previous preliminary effort by an Australian. But the scores do not carry over into the final, meaning the benefit to Russo related more to her confidence and reputation.

"I know I'm up there now with the big gymnasts in the world, and I'm just going to go there for apparatus finals and just try and do my best," she said

Still, every little bit helps. Russo started with a competent 9.187 on vault - penalised for a slight lack of amplitude and a step on landing but still placing third in the supergroup from which the winner would inevitably come. She was in fourth place after earning 9.362 on bars, and rose to third with 9.362 on the balance beam, a score bettered by only two others all night.

The scriptwriters placed Russo, Liukin and Memmel as the final three competitors on the last apparatus, the floor, and the Victorian was 0.400 out of first place, but had a 0.449 break on France's fourth-placed Emilie Le Pennec. Russo completed her new routine with only minor deductions for a 9.387 that sealed her position on the individual dais for the first time.

That left Memmel and Liukin to contest the gold, and it came down to the narrowest margin - 0.001 - on the final routine, after the computerised rounding of the judges' scores. Liukin

received only 9.512 from a start value of 9.900. Memmel was awarded 9.537 out of 10.

Interestingly, Memmel is both top dog and second banana in the all-star US team - its only active world champion, yet one who competes in the growing shadow of Liukin, the young superstar. Yet last night the glory was Memmel's, as experience prevailed by one-thousandth of a point. Only the 1985 deadheat between Yelena Shushunova and Oksana Omelianchik has been closer.

Mommel was a member of the gold medal-winning US team at the previous world titles in California, and shared the uneven bars title with countrywoman Holly Vise. A broken foot cost Memmel a start in Athens, but she has responded with her first major all-around gold.

The 17-year-old is the first US woman to wear the world all-around crown since Shannon Miller defended her title in Brisbane in 1994. The interesting sub-plot to this is that Miller was coached by Peggy Liddick, who met her fiance, Australian George Tatai, during those championships. Liddick emigrated to Melbourne and was appointed national women's coach in 1997. Her star pupil is Russo, beaten last night by the first-ever US queen.

All three placegetters will be back, but expect the most to be heard of Liukin, for last night did little to dispute the view that the Russian-born daughter of a dual Olympic gold medallist and a former world rhythmic champion was born to one day rule women's artistic gymnastics. That day has not come quite yet, but a silver medal on her international debut is a sign that it soon will.

Only the sport's strict age rules have delayed Liukin's emergence until now, and the hype proved justified when, in August, she won the US championship on her senior debut. The 16-year-old has a lean, long-limbed body, and such elegance that she is considered by many to be perfect, artistically and aesthetically. The unknown was how she would fare in her first major international competition. She emerged with distinction, and still has three apparatus to come over the final two days. Both Memmel and Russo have two.

As a Commonwealth Games preview, it was intriguing. British No. 1 Beth Tweddle had qualified just one place below Russo, but faltered slightly on the beam and finished fourth. The pair will be reunited in today's uneven bars final, which Tweddle enters ranked No. 1 in the world, and Russo as her country's first multiple apparatus finalist. Russo's program ends with Sunday's balance beam decider, the event rated pre-championships as her best medal chance.

Australia has two apparatus contenders this weekend: Prashanth Sellathurai, who will contest today'sommel horse final, and Damian Iстриa, whose horizontal bar final tomorrow is the last of the championships.