

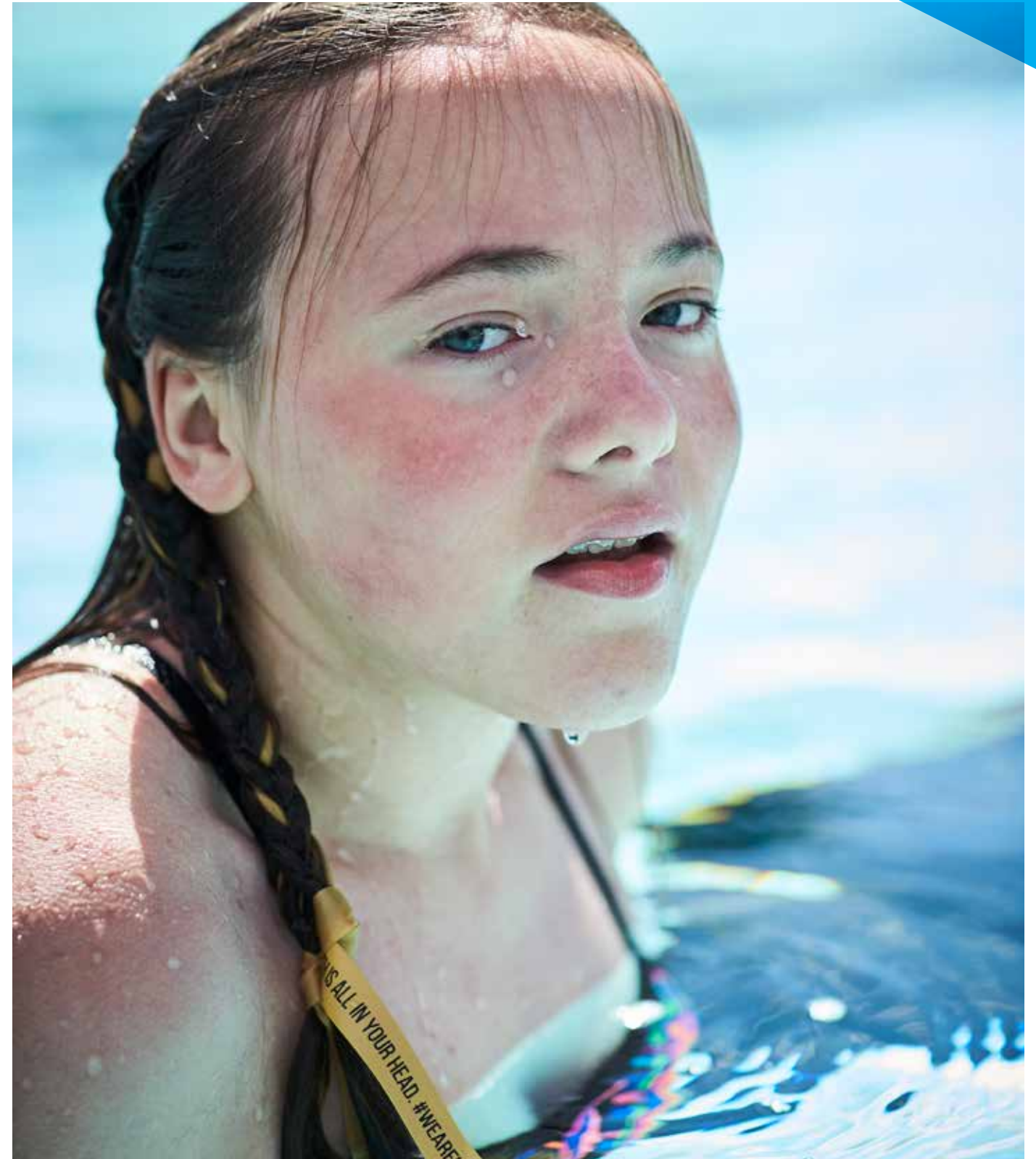
THE GOLDEN RIBBON THAT MAKES TAYLOR UNBREAKABLE

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I wear the ribbon of strength to remind myself that strength is all in my head and, no matter how hard swimming seems some days, I am unbreakable.

TAYLOR WALKER-LEAR

It's 5am and Taylor Walker-Lear's mum is braiding her hair, carefully weaving a golden ribbon through the plait. Handwritten along the ribbon are the words: 'Anything is possible when I set my mind to it'. Taylor is getting ready for one of her thrice weekly training sessions at Leichhardt Aquatic Centre. She's a 14 year-old girl living with cerebral palsy and a paralympic swimmer in the making. "I wear the ribbon of strength to remind myself that strength is all in my head and, no matter how hard swimming seems some days, I am unbreakable," she says.



Taylor Walker-Lear

Photo by Sue Stubbs

“It’s almost like putting on a crown or an armour. Lots of professional athletes braid their hair. Weaving a ribbon into the braid is a great reminder that strength is all in your head.

STEPHANIE DOYLE,
PANTENE BRAND MANAGER

She’s echoing the words of one of her idols, Paralympic gold medalist Ellie Cole, who starred in the Pantene ‘Ribbon of Strength’ campaign when it first launched in late 2018. Taylor is one of thousands of young female athletes who are now braiding their hair with the golden ribbons before partaking in sport.

“It’s almost like putting on a crown or an armour,” explains Stephanie Doyle, Pantene Brand Manager and one of the driving forces behind the Ribbon of Strength campaign. “Lots of professional athletes braid their hair. Weaving a ribbon into the braid is a great reminder that strength is all in your head.”

Pantene has always had ‘strong is beautiful’ as one of their taglines but, back in 2018, they were feeling a disconnect with their audience. When they began exploring women in sport and carried out research that revealed 57% of women stop playing sport by the age of 24 and, digging deeper, that 2 out of 5 of those women drop out because of fear and self-doubt, they saw an opportunity to connect with Australian consumers in a unique and inspiring way.

Partnering with some of Australia’s top female athletes, including the Westfield Matildas, Pantene are encouraging all women to overcome their fears, find their inner strength and actively participate in sport through braiding their hair with the ribbon inscribed with personal messages of motivation. Wearing the ribbon has become a symbol to show the world that women belong on the pitch, at the track, or in the pool.

To date Pantene has distributed over 5,000 ribbons to girls, set up braid bars at sponsored events and is building upon the momentum with a ‘Panteenagers’ campaign where they’re

taking the athletes featured in the campaign into schools to run resilience, exercise and leadership drills.

One of these athletes is Matilda’s midfielder and 2014 AFC Women’s Player of the Year, Katrina Gorry. “We wanted to partner with Katrina as she had an amazing story of strength,” says Stephanie. “She had broken her ankle just before the World Cup and had to work hard to build back not only her physical strength but also emotional strength to get back into the national team.”

Katrina’s ribbon is inscribed with the words: ‘Be Strong, Think Strong, Play Strong’. “I think a lot about our game is a mental thing,” she explains.

“There are so many challenges that you have to face and if you can think strong in those moments, then you play strong.”

Katrina has witnessed first-hand the female drop off from sport estimating that 90% of the girls she played football with at school, who dreamed of becoming professional athletes, no longer play. “The biggest challenge was women’s sport not being as established as the men’s,” she says, citing lack of pathways, second-rate playing fields, facilities and salaries as the biggest issues. “Trying to balance uni, work, training and everything to get by and pay the bills was something we all battled through at the start of our careers.”

Fortunately women’s sport has come a long way, especially in the past two years. “We’ve seen a huge shift in women’s sport across all codes,” she says. “It’s looking really exciting.” In fact 2020 was to be ‘the year of women’s sport’ and there has been much concern about this being derailed due to COVID-19.

Katrina is reflective and, despite the rescheduling of the Olympics and her transfer to play in Norway being put on hold, is optimistic about the future. “COVID-19 probably came at a good time for a lot of our national team players,” she says, adding that the break was welcome after back to back seasons. The Matildas are currently training online and taking part in weekly Zoom sessions. “It’s been a good reset for a lot of us and it will make the fire that bit bigger when we get back out there.”

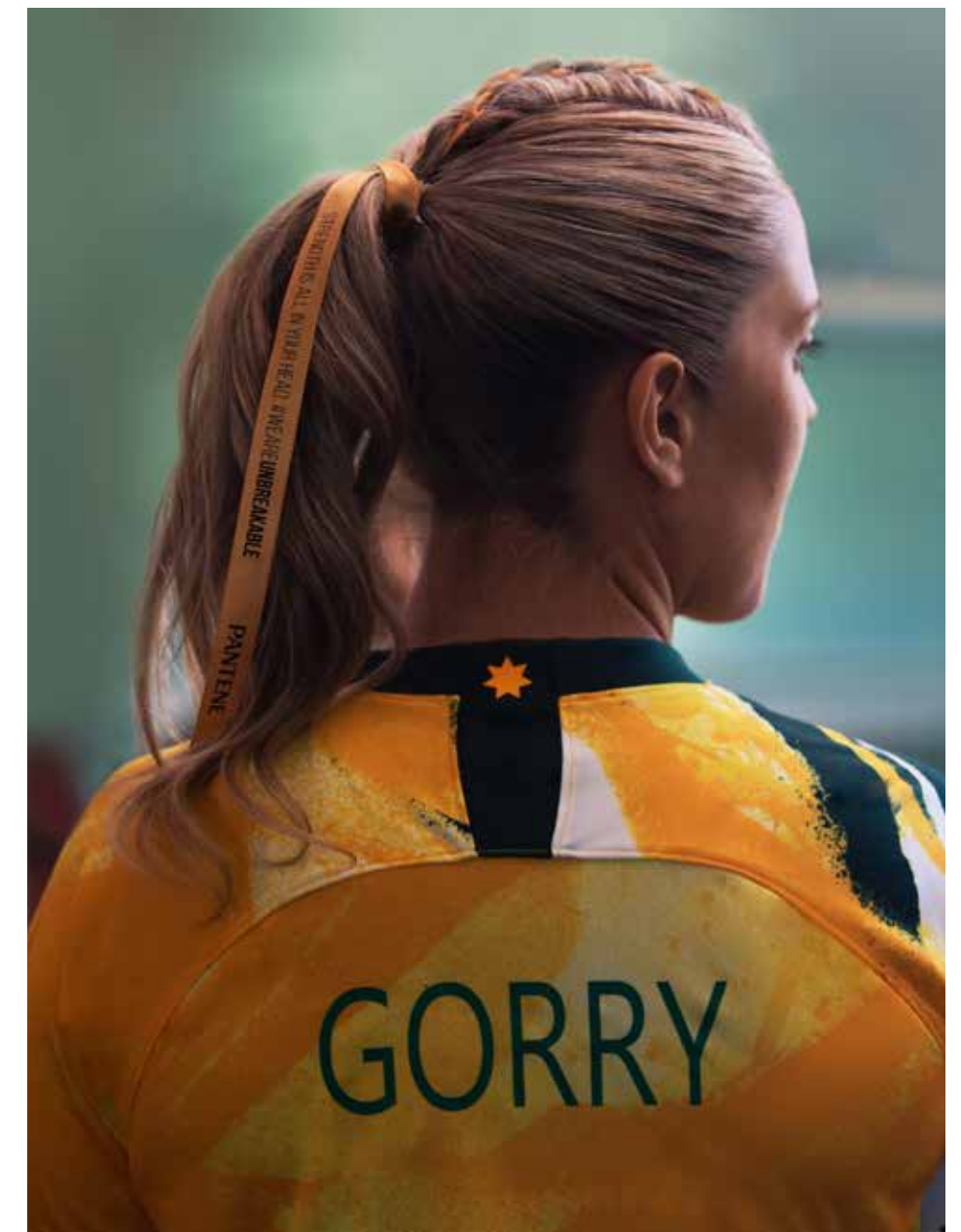
For the Ribbon of Strength campaign, COVID-19 has been a period of ideation and adaptation. “2020 would have been such a strong year for women’s sport with the Olympics and

all the sponsorship and positive coverage around women’s sport,” says Stephanie. “But we’re still optimistic and building momentum and I’m glad to be a part of that messaging.”

Stephanie loves hearing from future sporting stars, like Taylor, about how the Ribbon of Strength campaign is helping them and spurring them on.

“At the end of the day we are a hair care brand, so it’s lovely when consumers reach out and say that this campaign has had such a big impact on their lives.”

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, Taylor was unable to train in the pool for more than 12 weeks which took a toll on her mentally and physically. Fortunately her pool has re-opened and she’s back doing laps. “It’s my happy place,” she says. “I felt like I’d returned home.” The fourteen year old remains focused on her goal - to one day win Paralympic medals the same colour as the gold ribbon in her hair.



Kat Gorry