

The World-Beating Jarrod Wood

The Air New Zealand line engineer may have won gold at a global work skills competition, but he's "still learning every day".

Eleven years ago, Jarrod Wood told his grandfather that he didn't have the smarts for aircraft maintenance.

"I thought it was literally some form of rocket science. But Grandad – who was with me at a careers night at school – said, 'You're here now, you may as well go and talk to those air force engineers'."

In October 2017, the now 25-year old became the first New Zealander to win the aircraft maintenance category at the biennial WorldSkills competition in Abu Dhabi.

"When they called out 'New Zealand' (co-winning with Finland), I could see the Kivis down the corner of the stadium going absolutely nuts," Jarrod says.

"Because, in 10 years with WorldSkills, it was the first aircraft maintenance gold that they'd had, and all the experts in the New Zealand contingent were crying. It was a massive deal for them.

"It felt like winning the Olympics."

Jarrod credits his Air New Zealand workmates and mentors for much of his world-beating expertise.

"I work alongside people I believe to be among the best engineers in the world, so I'm still learning every day. We're a close-knit team, and everyone's there to lend a hand as soon as there's a situation – like four, five people will turn up and you have all this expertise to call on.

"It's trained into us and built into us that aviation safety is the highest priority there is. All the guys I work alongside, we're all here for the same reason – to keep everyone safe.

"I follow 'the book' 100 per cent. The book's the Bible. Everyone develops their own way of doing things, but I think winning the tournament was a good reflection of following the procedures I've been trained in over the years.

"At Abu Dhabi, I heard another competitor say that we're all in this game because what we do keeps everyone safe. It was great to hear that same high perspective from another country."

The pressure in Abu Dhabi was huge. Four days of competition; seven skills tested (from composite repair to fabricating a wiring loom); 125,000 spectators, compared with about six in Hamilton; food poisoning on 'sheet metal repair day'; and 16 competitors, many of whom to Jarrod seemed way more confident and at home in the competitive atmosphere than he felt.

"It was the most mentally and physically drained I'd ever been," says this former New Zealand ice hockey rep. "But each day, my WorldSkills mentor, Mike Naus, would say, 'You're tracking well. Just focus, follow our plan'."

"I thought Ireland had probably won. I thought I might get sixth or seventh. I told myself I was really rapt just to be there.

"Then they called all medal winners onto the stage. So I knew I'd won something and just assumed it was bronze.

"When they said, 'And the bronze medal goes to...' I started to move forward. And they said '...Korea'. I was really shocked. Silver! That's awesome!

"Then they announced the co-gold winners as New Zealand and Finland. And the place erupted..."

Despite winning a world title at such a young age, Jarrod says life is full of goals. He can't compete in WorldSkills again, but would like to stay involved, perhaps as a mentor. This year he wants to get an aircraft rating.

"I'm really lucky to have found a career I'm passionate about," he says. "Aircraft engineering is exactly the right path for me right now."

Good old Grandad. ■

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