



BRENDAN READ

Scott Zeller

Cup-winning cabinet-maker

LAST FEBRUARY, Scott Zeller's life seemed to be in fast forward. He turned 21, got his tradesman's licence and was crowned best Australian cabinet-maker under the age of 22 – all in the same week.

"I was driving back from Melbourne [where he received his Australian Youth Skills Olympic award] with a great big smile on my face, thinking this is great!"

But the smile didn't last long as Zeller began the hard training necessary for the International Youth Skills Olympics being held in Taiwan this month.

There, Zeller and 34 other Australian champions – with skills ranging from cookery to welding – will compete against tradespeople from 24 other nations.

"Basically, the Taiwanese are going to be my toughest competition," explains Zeller from his makeshift workshop in his parents' garage at Normanhurst in Sydney's north-west. "If they don't win, it's considered a national disgrace, but I'm told that if they do, they get a job for life and land and a house."

Zeller decided to become a cabinet-maker while at school and was apprenticed to an antique restoration company.

"It was the best place I could have gone, because my boss was pedantic and it had to be perfect, so I adopted that style and that standard of workmanship."

It also gave him his interest in restoration and an appreciation of beautiful antiques, although the work is painstaking.

"I'll always be working in the very fine

end of the market, the traditional way. What those artisans could produce 100 years ago is pretty phenomenal, so I figure that if they can do it, I can too. It's a lot of work, but that's what I like."

In the meantime, he wants to set up his own company.

"I'm stony broke at the moment because I've got to get the tools and set up my own business. I'll have to sell my car and buy a ute, which is definitely not my image at all."

He says, laughing, "I suppose I'll have to buy a couple of flannies [flannelette shirts] and start wolf-whistling at girls, too."

But he's optimistic about his company's prospects. "It might be quiet every now and then, but it's never going to die because it's a specialised field."

And if the strain of crafting minute details becomes too much, Zeller can get out his electric guitar – note the beautiful finish on the woodwork – and strum a few relaxing bars. □

CATHERINE OSBORNE

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