Blue skies, a warm breeze, a morning jog along the Brisbane River followed by a ferry ride to work is how Rachel Stewart begins her weekday mornings in Queensland, Australia. The Ohio State senior from Loveland, Ohio is majoring in exercise science in the College of Education and Human Ecology and has embarked on her first experience abroad to complete a 450 hour internship that she found with UQ Sports Academy located 9,100 miles away from the Buckeye state. UQ Sports Academy is a strength and conditioning company based at the University of Queensland that provides services to both the campus and local community.

Stewart is one of two students from Ohio State awarded the prestigious Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, to participate in a study abroad or international internship program. Gilman Scholars receive up to $5,000 to apply towards their study abroad program or internship costs.

“With this internship, I get to work with all types of athletes at all different competition levels, in regards to their strength and conditioning training components,” Stewart said. “This study abroad experience allows me to apply what I have learned in the classroom.”

On a typical day, Stewart usually has a two to three hour training session with the Australian Paralympic
wheelchair rugby team then heads back to the office to complete data entry, program planning and research. Another block of training is scheduled for early evenings, where she might be working with a rowing team, swimming club, rugby league team or Paralympic boccia players. As part of her internship, Stewart runs lab tests on athletes – the same ones completed in the classroom – and she is able to apply what she learned in her exercise physiology class when helping design strength and conditioning programs for different athletes. “My favorite part of the internship has been getting to work with incredible people, not just my coworkers – who have been in the business for a long time – but the athletes as well. I even got to hold an Olympic gold medal, and it was much heavier than it looked.”

With her four month stay in Australia, Stewart is basking in a myriad of cultural experiences. Her roommates are from Ecuador, Indonesia, Japan and Austria. She has become aware of popular sports in Australia: rugby, boccia, netball and cricket. Stewart admits that she continues to remind herself to walk on the left side of the sidewalk rather than the right side as is done in the United States. And, she has finally adapted to the Australian accent and has even begun to understand many of the slang words commonly used in this part of the world. “Overall, this experience has been amazing and I wouldn’t trade it for anything,” she said. “Because I didn’t come here through a traditional study abroad program, it has taught me how independent I am, and how capable I am of doing whatever I set my mind to.”

Because of the extensive hours she is working at her internship, she will have a few weeks to explore and travel throughout Australia before returning home. A road trip is planned that will take her from Cairns to Melbourne and a few places in between. As she prepares to graduate from Ohio State in May, Stewart plans to continue her studies and become a licensed physical therapist. “The knowledge I have gained from the strength and conditioning aspect,” she explained, “as well as interacting with a wide variety of people and populations, can all be directly incorporated into what I will be doing as a PT.”

But at least for the next few weeks as Stewart completes her internship, she will concentrate on learning as much as possible. “Being here has taught me to not take anything for granted so I jump at every opportunity that arises, whether it’s work, travel or personal,” she said. “When you realize how big the country is and all you want to do or see...the time you have just never seems to be enough.”