



## THE WORLD'S MOST DIFFICULT SPORT

### WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS CHALLENGES BODY AND MIND

Visit a women's gymnastics meet at the Air Force Academy and chances are good that you'll develop a new appreciation for the amount of skill, speed and strength it takes to compete at one of the most difficult sports in human history. From the vault to the uneven bars, performing under the scrutiny of judges who are searching for the most minute imperfection brings new meaning to the term "under pressure."

Doug Day is head coach of the women's varsity squad at the Academy. In his experience, this team has the hardest working cadets at USAFA. Day explains, "The whole philosophy behind the Air Force Academy is founded upon leadership and

teamwork. Athletics plays a strong role in that philosophy. You're part of a family when you join this team. The Academy has also been called an athletic laboratory because of those teamwork philosophies."

Team captain Aftan Boudreaux, Class of 2010, is proud to be a part of USAFA's athletics laboratory. For her, the sport is about more than just physical training, it's about being prepared for anything life can throw at her. "The program has instilled a lot of discipline in all of us," she proclaims. "We know what hard work is. Being a part of this team has also helped me with time management. We have three hours of practice every day, and we

Lisa Wong on balance beam.



## WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEWIS CARLYLE

have to fit that in with homework. When we don't have practice, I have extra time on my hands which enables me to help others in my squad."

Coach Day echoes his captain's sentiments. "Their workload is so intense, it's amazing these kids do as well as they do. Most of the kids who come here are in the top five percent of their high school graduating class. Gymnastics is very demanding on our cadets. There's a lot of time taken away from studies, so it's important for our kids to be good at time management skills. Our team is typically in the top five percentile of all varsity sports with regard to grade-point average. We don't just have great athletes we have great scholars."

As with all athletic programs at USAFA, preparation and commitment are a way of life for the cadets who compete. Coach Day understands the challenges the Academy places on its students, and firmly believes in the work ethic this sport instills in his cadets. "Gymnastics is a beautiful sport," he says proudly. "But it's also a very demanding sport with a lot of inherent risk. After four years in this program, these kids really understand what respect means. Furthermore, we're not just learning gymnastics here, we're learning good core values. Anyone who graduates from this program is going to be successful in life." ▷





Brittany Dutton on uneven bars.



Tara Harris on balance beam.

In addition to the thrill of competition, all of the girls on the varsity squad will agree that the most rewarding part of the program is the friendships they have gained. Boudreaux beams with a smile as she describes her fellow cadets. “My favorite thing about this team is the girls. We’re like a family here. I know everything about every one of my teammates (probably more than their own family members know). We tell each other everything. We’re very trusting and honest with each other.”

Trust is an essential component to a sport which entails such tremendous risk. “In this sport,” Day says, “every time these kids come into this gym, they take their lives into their own hands. It’s kind of a scary thing to say, but if you aren’t completely focused, your life could come to an end. As a coach, you have to be very attentive to each individual. If someone is dragging her feet or hasn’t gotten enough sleep, I immediately alter the workout to help mitigate risk.”

As captain, Boudreaux is no stranger to risk. The sport she loves has definitely taken its toll on her body over the years, provid-

ing yet another life lesson: the importance of perseverance. “It’s definitely hard to stay motivated,” Boudreaux says. “I’ve had some pretty serious injuries since I joined this team. I tore my ACL freshman year and I tore it again three months ago. I went from being an all-around gymnast to someone who only competes in one event. The girls are such wonderful motivators though, and with their help I’ve been able to stay with it.”

Overcoming adversity is something that all athletes must endure at some point in their lives. Who could ever forget the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, when a limping Kerri Strug landed a perfect vault on a sprained ankle to clench the team gold for USA? And in recent history, downhill skier Lindsey Vonn battled her way through an excruciating shin injury to take the gold in Vancouver. The stories of triumph are something that every athlete aspires toward.

Day explains, “Most of the people who witness a gymnastics meet are completely in awe of what these athletes are capable of. That’s why it’s been the number-one spectator sport in every



Jenna Dudley on uneven bars.

summer Olympics for the past 25 years. Gymnastics is a sport where everything is on the line. Everything is done on an individual basis; on any given day, if you have a bad event, you're not moving on to the next level. A confident, consistent performer is going to go on to become an all-American, national team member or even an Olympian."

Self confidence is among the most invaluable traits that an officer can have. A sport which builds confidence into these young athletes is a tremendous resource to the Air Force. And the program is only getting better. "My goal," Day says, "is to become a top 20 team in the nation. It all comes down to recruiting and coaching. We need to attract kids who are competing at the junior national level, and until that happens, it's going to be very difficult to break into that top 20."

Boudreaux agrees that the varsity squad is a rising force. "I'm hoping the program keeps building," she says. "The team has gotten ten times better since I first arrived, and we continue to improve every day. I hope to watch Air Force someday at the

NCAA nationals. Coach Day has recruited some amazing athletes and this team is really going to improve in the future."

The future of the program depends heavily on the next generation of athletes who come to USAFA. For young girls looking to compete at the collegiate level, Boudreaux offers some good advice. "Don't let yourself get frustrated. I'm not a naturally talented gymnast, I just worked really hard to make it here. A lot of girls give up in high school, but it definitely pays to stay with it and go on to compete at the collegiate level. If this is something you love doing, you have to stick with it."

Coach Day is proud of the program these cadets have built. There are many challenges ahead, but nothing will stop the team from producing the best of the best among the Air Force's young officer core. Day says thoughtfully, "Everyone who leaves this Academy goes on to do great things. I can honestly say that the kids who come out of the gymnastics program are among the top leaders, top pilots, top physicians. They're just a cut above the rest." ❑