

Gymnastics team adds national flair to campus

by Vanessa Virbitsky - Tuesday, January 15, 2008

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Behind the Kolf Sports Center is a surprising cluster of non-Wisconsin license plates lined up in the parking lot. This is especially unexpected at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, where out-of-state students account for less than 2 percent of the total student population.

These foreign plates most likely belong to the Titan gymnasts, whose 2008 roster features 13 non-Wisconsin student-athletes, nearly 72 percent of their team.

“We have kids from almost every region of the country,” head coach and 2006 UW-Oshkosh alumnae Lauren Mareno said, “and while we like to make fun of how everyone talks, especially in regard to the word ‘bag,’ no one leaves the team without appreciating Wisconsin.”

The only region unaccounted for on this year’s team is the Pacific Northwest. States represented on the Titan roster include Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The team’s flair for out-of-state recruiting began with former head coach Kerrie Beach in 2002 and has remained an Oshkosh trademark ever since.

The first states that Beach looked to were Minnesota and Illinois, but she quickly branched out and began recruiting from states as far away as California and Maryland. Recent Oshkosh graduate and New Jersey native Kim Edson recalls her surprise at being recruited by Beach.

“While I had considered going to school out-of-state, I never even thought about going to Wisconsin,” Edson said. “As for Oshkosh, besides the overalls, I didn’t even know this place existed.”

Sophomore gymnast Stefanie Armstrong of Atlanta agreed with Edson.

“I had no idea the temperature could drop below 32 degrees,” said Armstrong, who has been nicknamed “Georgia” by her teammates, “and as for Oshkosh, I had no clue.”

Nadalie Walsh, Beach’s successor and the current head gymnastics coach at Ball State University, mimicked the state-crossing recruitment practice that undoubtedly helped the Titans to claim the 2007 National Collegiate Gymnastics Association Championship. This was the Titans’ second national gymnastics title in school history and the first since Madonna’s hit “Like a Prayer” made it big in 1989.

“I think that being from all over the country has added a level of closeness to our team that no other team has, and it definitely played a part in last season’s success,” team captain and Minneapolis native Anne Austad said. “We’re lucky if we get to see our parents for two weeks during the school year, so our teammates become our family and Oshkosh is most definitely our home away from home.”

While the Oshkosh team has led this recruiting trend, other Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference teams are beginning to branch out to other parts of the country as well. The Hamline University (Minn.) gymnastics team has freshmen from California, New Mexico, Oregon and South Dakota, and Winona State University (Minn.) is represented by nine states.

The main factor causing WIAC schools to look to all areas of the country for its gymnasts is the nature of Division III gymnastics. It's much different than sports such as basketball and football, which are represented by hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country.

In Division III gymnastics, its participants must choose from just 16 schools nationwide. This choice includes eight schools in the Northeast and eight in the Midwest, six of which are private institutions such as Hamline and Gustavus Adolphus University (Minn.). The Division II gymnastics program is even smaller and has only five schools.

"Unless you're talking about powerhouse Division I teams like Georgia and UCLA, the difference between Division I and Division III gymnastics is not that big," Oshkosh gymnast and transfer student from Northern Illinois University Brynn Dorsey said. Dorsey, who graduated from Lourdes High School in Oshkosh, competed for two years as a Huskie before returning to Oshkosh to compete on her hometown's team.

"There's something special about Division III gymnastics that I can't get enough of, especially here" Dorsey said. "And I love that my teammates are from all over the country because I know that wherever I end up after college, there will most likely be a familiar face nearby."

Many of the Oshkosh gymnasts also feel this way about Division III gymnastics.

"I looked at and was recruited by Division I schools on the East Coast," freshman Kelsey Deitz from Manassas, Va said. "But Oshkosh and Division III just felt right. I don't feel owned and I can concentrate more on school."

When Deitz arrived in Oshkosh, she was often asked why she had selected the institution. Her answer and the response of her teammates is always "gymnastics."

"All I really knew before I came to school here was that I wanted to do college gymnastics, and Oshkosh was giving me that chance," said freshman Stacie Jenkins from Peoria, Ariz. "I do miss my family, but after my first semester and first meet on the team, I know I made the right decision for me."

Where will the gymnastics team find its next bunch of recruits? Mareno is currently looking to Idaho and Florida to expand the team's repertoire.

"I like the fact that these girls come from all over because it adds an element of respect that you can't find on all in-state teams," Mareno said. "From bowling on the weekends to rooming together to team trips, they spend a lot of time together and really become family."