



Olympics Put Focus On Gymnastics

ARIEL WAITZ / SUN FILE PHOTO

Media attention brings fame to Liukin, Johnson, top gymnasts

By **CORY BENNETT**
Sun Sports Editor

Everyone remembers it. Kerri Strug, grimacing, as she stared down the runway towards the vault that seemed much more intimidating than its height, width and standard-issue brown color would suggest. Strug, who had injured her ankle on a botched landing during her previous vault attempt, gingerly bounced up and down, testing the joint.

Then, with a deep breath, Strug took off and executed a near-perfect vault, sticking essentially a one-footed landing. America won gold. Strug was carried off the vault by her coach and into Olympic history.

"What they didn't tell you was that she didn't even need to go that second time for the U.S. to win the gold," said gymnastics head coach Paul Beckwith.

Indeed, the Americans had already clinched the gold medal at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta.

"Hey, at least it got her on the Wheaties box," Beckwith said with a laugh.

The popularity of Strug illustrates a larger point that befalls gymnastics once every four years when the Summer Olympics roll around. In the eyes of Beckwith, many Olympic gymnasts become marginalized in favor of the media promoting dramatic story lines and a select few gymnasts. Mary Lou Retton in 1984, Strug in 1996; these are just a few of the gymnasts who turned, twisted and tumbled their way into the hearts of Americans. This is often the result, Beckwith suggested, of the media coverage.

Indeed, at the 1996 Games, NBC announcer John Tesh told the public prior to Strug's first vault that she needed a 9.493 to secure gold. Whether bad math, honest mistake, or intentional deception, few tried to correct this perception after

the fact.

This year, the coverage was particularly focused on Nastia Liukin, Shawn Johnson and Alicia Sacramone.

"Show the rest of them," Beckwith said. "You didn't know anything about the other girls on the team. You're going, 'Who is Samantha Peszek?' [a member of the U.S. gymnastics team]. They focus too much on the best kids on the team. ... I want to see the best athletes. I don't care where they're from. I really don't care about all the interviews."

Spoken like a true coach.

This is the inevitable result, however, of trying to get an audience to relate to athletes they have never seen and might never see again. The media is forced to pick out a few athletes to create dramatic story lines. Judging by his quick smile and excited eyes, Beckwith seems more baffled and amused by this phenomenon than angry, however.

Of the 34 sports in the Olympics, the International Olympics Committee only classifies five as "top sports." Gymnastics is one of these.

"As a gymnastics coach, the fact that it seems to have just as much coverage as other sports is a plus. ... [The athletic clubs] love it," he said, stressing the word love. "Everyone thinks, 'oh I want to be a gymnast. I'm small. I'm strong.'"

However, this increased participation does not necessarily translate to the collegiate level.



CHANG W. LEE / THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rare form | Junior Brittany Howse (left) performs her floor exercise for the Red. On the other side of the globe, top gymnasts competed in the Beijing Olympics this summer, popularizing the sport. Shawn Johnson (above) of the U.S. competes on the uneven bars during the women's gymnastics individual all-around in Beijing on Aug. 15.

The NCAA looks at high school participation, not club participation, when choosing how to classify collegiate sports. Because high school basketball and football are so ubiquitous, the NCAA classifies schools into three divisions with individual postseason titles. But with so many logistical issues — primarily money and space — very few high schools have gymnastics teams. Thus, most gymnasts train at private clubs, which is where people will turn after the Olympics.

Therefore, there is little chance that the NCAA will recognize a Division II and III at the collegiate level.

This means the NCAA does not hold a championship for Cornell, and all colleges with varsity gymnastics teams not classified as Division I. Instead, they compete at the U.S.A. Gymnastics Collegiate nationals. Beckwith concedes that the intense media coverage does help boost the visibility of collegiate gymnastics.

"I know gymnastics is the first event to sell out [at the Olympics]," he said. "It's

been gauged the most popular in the summer Olympics. ... It helps college gymnastics. I'm guessing in an Olympic year our attendance numbers will go up."

And it will get Beckwith's team "psyched up" — to use his phrase. But for a sport that is entertaining more for the athletic spectacle than the actual competition, it will be hard to ever expect gymnastics to become much more than a once-an-Olympics phenomenon. Beckwith pointed out that some people come to the Cornell meets not caring who wins, but just to wonder at the physical agility of the athletes.

"It's one of those sports you look at because its really, really amazing what they're doing and making look so easy," he said, his voice building. "It's like watching an acrobat. It's like ... wow! How can you not marvel at some of the things these people are doing? Every year it gets harder."

Cory Bennett can be reached at sports-editor@cornellsun.com.

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Former Red Player Returns as Coach

By **MATTHEW MANACHER**
Sun Senior Editor

With all due respect to Thomas Wolfe, you can go home again. Bill Walkenbach '98 will return to the top step of the Hoy Field dugout this spring as head coach of the baseball team.

Although he assumes the helm of a ball club that finished last in the Gehrig Division each of the past three seasons, Walkenbach hopes to return the program to the same prominence it had attained while he was an assistant coach at Cornell from 2003 to 2005.

The Claremont, Calif. native succeeds Tom Ford, who has transitioned into the role of associate head coach with the program after managing the team for 18 seasons. Walkenbach, a former standout player for the Red, has gotten coaching experience all over the country since he graduated ten years ago.

"You never know what can turn a team around, whether it's the introduction of a new freshman class or the introduction of new philosophies," Walkenbach said. "It's very

difficult to predict. I hope with a fresh start for the team, maybe things will turn around."



WALKENBACH '98

Still in the process of transitioning from Lancaster, Pa., where he was the head coach of Franklin & Marshall, Walkenbach has much to learn about his new team.

"I'm trying to get a general feel for the talent level of the team and figure out where we stand with each position," Walkenbach