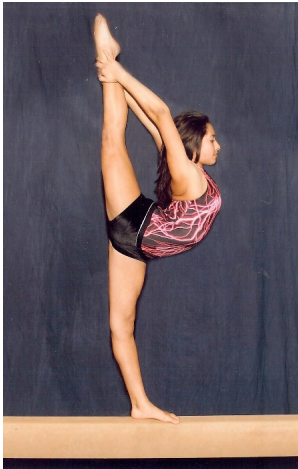


Reaching pinnacle of Iowa gymnastics

Written by Sher Jasperse

Sunday, 01 April 2012 21:13 - Last Updated Sunday, 01 April 2012 22:01



She may be one of the best local athletes you've never heard of or seen in action.

One of the top gymnasts in the state of Iowa, Kennedy senior Allie Sindlinger has powered her way to the highest rung in a sport that arguably requires more effort and garners less attention than any of the multiple sports offered through her high school.

Saturday, she capped off a stellar career by winning the balance beam competition and placing second in the floor exercise at the state meet in Ames. For the third year in a row, her performance earned her a spot among a small cadre of Iowa gymnasts who will go on to compete in the seven-state regional competition in Minneapolis in April.

At last year's regional meet, Sindlinger won the Level 8 balance beam competition in a face-off with girls from a host of larger cities around the Midwest. This year she's competing at Level 9 – the highest tier of gymnastic performance short of collegiate and Olympic-level competition.

Locally, Sindlinger and Twisters Club teammate Colette Miller, a sophomore at Xavier, are among only a handful of girls competing at Level 9, which requires a fusion of advanced skills with eye-catching original routines.

Defying the long odds that dog everyone who participates in the highly demanding sport, Sindlinger was honored at this year's state meet in Ames as one of only four high school seniors in the competition.

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It was the culmination of a long and arduous journey, but one she says has been worth every bit of the pain and sacrifice that have made her one of the most accomplished gymnasts to emerge from Cedar Rapids and the Twisters Gymnastics Club that has been her home away from home for the last 14 years.

Early promise

Like most top gymnasts, Sindlinger started tumbling as a pre-schooler. "I had a bunch of energy and needed to channel it," she says. "I started doing it and loved it, so I kept doing it."

Twisters owner John Mangold, who has coached Sindlinger since she was six, remembers her first appearance at the gym.

"The first time she came in for an open house day, she climbed the rope like 50 times. We knew right away that she wasn't afraid of anything and had that strength already."

That strength – mental and physical – has allowed the fearless 4-year-old to develop into one of the most advanced gymnasts Mangold has coached, he says, combining her natural athletic gifts with perseverance and coachability.

She has also been able to beat back what Mangold calls "the fear factor" in a sport that mercilessly doles out falls and injuries. "There is no other sport that matches it," he says. "It's not like taking a shot with a basketball. You can't ever space out while you're doing it."

Gymnastics wins out

Along the way, Sindlinger has tried numerous other sports, she says. First came soccer, following the footsteps of older brother Tucker, who competed on regional and national soccer teams and went on to play Division I soccer at Creighton University.

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Sisterhood and support

There are plenty of reasons why there were only four senior girls competing at the state meet this weekend, Sindlinger explains. Many gymnasts succumb to injuries before they reach that level, and some burn out or are unwilling to pay the social price.



“Your senior year, there are so many other things going on, like dances and football games on Friday nights. We have practice those nights,” she says – for a sport that many of her classmates are barely aware of.

“My close friends understand the time I put into it,” she says. “Personally, it’s how I wanted to succeed. I don’t need anyone else’s approval, and I have my friends and family behind me.”

Her parents, Bill and Ann Sindlinger, have always been available to talk about her joys and frustrations, as well as to drive as many as 16 hours back and forth to competitions around the Midwest.

“They love that I love it, and they’re a huge part of it. Tucker encourages me too. We talk and text a lot.”

Sindlinger also relishes the camaraderie of the intense sport. “My teammates are my sisters,” she states. “They’re my family, and I would do anything for them.” As the club’s senior gymnast, she loves being able to encourage the younger girls.

The school of gymnastics

A 3.8 GPA student who is also on the editorial board for Kennedy's student newspaper, Sindlinger says she mulled the question of whether to pursue her sport at the collegiate level for the last two years before making the difficult decision to focus exclusively on her studies.

"I am going to be a nurse," she says with quiet resolve. "I just really have this passion for helping people, and I can't think of a better way to incorporate that into my daily life than being a nurse."

As she makes her choice between nursing programs at Creighton and St. Louis Universities, she has also begun facing the reality of life without gymnastics. It will be an adjustment, she affirms, but she'll take with her the gifts of her sport.

"Gymnastics has helped me in so many different aspects of my life," she says. "Time management and getting my schoolwork done are number one. It helped me mature early and learn self-control, self-discipline, listening to your coaches, eating healthy and staying active. That transcends gymnastics and will help me in everything I do."

"I have learned to work on something until it's perfect," she adds. "You fall, you get back up. You fall time and again, but those times you succeed overpower the times when you're knocked down."