

Men's gymnasts mentally aware during routines

By Dan Norton
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

John Brenkus, co-CEO of Base Productions and host of the ESPN show "Sport Science," knows gymnastics is a sport unlike any other.

"In a lot of sports, you're doing one thing and then resting," Brenkus said. "In gymnastics, you're fully engaged the entire time."

Gymnastics calls upon some of the world's most in-shape athletes to tap into reserves most people don't know exist. By the end of a routine, their legs are like jelly and their vision is hazy, but they persevere because they must.

It is a sport requiring intense precision and physicality. Penn State gymnasts can relate to both better than anyone, as they compete for one of the country's top gymnastics programs.

To be precise, they must be mentally aware throughout their entire routine. Even before it starts, they try to be as calm and composed as possible so they can compete to the best of their ability.

"At this point, guys have developed strategies," coach Randy Jepson said. "If they haven't developed those [strategies], they're really at a disadvantage because the more times you can rehearse things mentally, it's just like doing them physically."

Each gymnast prepares for an event differently. Senior captain Matt Albrecht stresses self-confidence.

"In our routines, we have skills that obviously we can do, or else they wouldn't be in our routines," Albrecht said. "I just try to clear my head and let myself know that my body knows what to do."

"Over the years, I've learned that if you fall, you can't let it affect your performance."

Matt Albrecht
senior captain

Albrecht was sidelined with a concussion for three weeks last year after an accident on the high bars during practice. He is healthy this season, and isn't allowing the risk of injury to weigh on his mind during an event.

In fact, Albrecht makes sure his teammates are just as ready as he is before a big performance. Junior Miguel Pineda jokes with playful sarcasm that "team-captain Albrecht" is always keeping the mood light.

"As long as you're laughing or at least somewhat enjoying what's going on, then you're looser and more likely to concentrate on what you actually need to instead of the nerves," Pineda said.

But once the routine begins, it's all business.

Out of the gate, gymnasts rely primarily on their power and strength. During the Nittany Lions' intersquad meet on Nov. 11, their best passes in the floor exercise typically occurred in the first few seconds.

Brenkus attributes the gymnasts' endurance beyond their first pass to the process of cyclic loading, which is the cumulative force that is endured throughout a routine.

He also added that what makes gymnastics so difficult is the combination of length and explosion. Each pass requires 100 percent of a gymnast's power as they lift off the ground and fly through the air, similar to the energy exerted by a weight lifter in a power clean.

However, there can be as many as six passes in a 90-second routine. Gymnasts are usually running on empty before they finish.

While good gymnasts can rely on their strength for awhile, the best gymnasts can earn points with technique when their power is gone.

The more technique diffused through a performance, the less power is needed, sophomore Mackenzie Dow said.

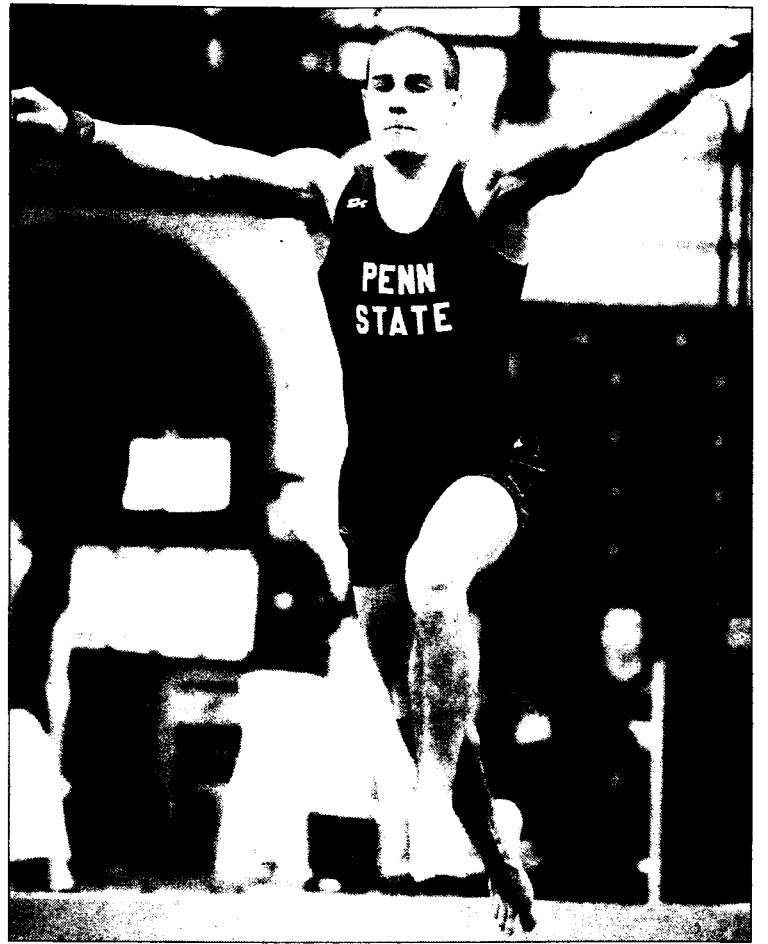
The majority of technical gymnastics occurs in midair. Through years of practice, gymnasts attain a refined sense of proprioception, Brenkus said, which is their awareness of their body's position in space.

"Your body has all kinds of mechanisms built in to tell when it is perfectly balanced," he said. "When you're in a sport like gymnastics where you're intentionally [unbalanced] because your head is going against your feet, you have to have a keen sense as to how you will be balanced when you come out [of a pass]."

But not even a gymnast's proprioception is perfect all the time, and when it fails, they fall.

Brenkus says the key to landing instead of falling is to distribute the force throughout the whole body.

That is easier said than done for the Penn State men's gymnastics team. Falling may not be the most graceful process, but recovering from a fall is an art. The Nittany Lions know it is going to happen



Andrew Dunheimer/Collegian

Matt Albrecht performs on the floor exercise vs. Illinois last season.

eventually, so they are taught to have amnesia.

"Over the years, I've learned that if you fall, you can't let it affect your performance," Albrecht said. "You have to get back up -- clear your mind, clean slate -- because every 10th [of a point] counts."

Finishing a routine is essential, even if it has been tainted by a fall. The individual score will not be a

personal best, but any score at all is better for the team than a disqualification.

Pineda was one of the few Nittany Lions who finished his floor exercise strong at the intrasquad meet.

"I was just trying to remember that two minutes after the floor routine, I'm going to feel just fine," he said.

Lions ready to compete after completing fall training

By Steven Petrella
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

In 178 days, the NCAA men's volleyball champion will be crowned at Penn State's Rec Hall.



Goas serves vs. Juniata last season.

Although it's months away, junior co-captain setter Edgardo Goas and his teammates couldn't be more excited to start the season and work toward celebrating a title on May 7.

In 2010, Penn State upset Cal State Northridge in the Final Four before falling to Stanford in the title game at Maples Pavilion, the Cardinal's home court.

"Seeing Stanford enjoy that national title last year with their friends and family, it would be a dream come true," Goas said about winning at Rec Hall.

"All my good friends, Will Price, Max Lipsitz, are jealous they never got to play for a national title on our home court."

After capping off fall training the week before Thanksgiving break with an unofficial scrimmage against Ohio State, the Nittany Lions are getting ready to travel to Honolulu, Hawaii on Jan. 14 to take on UCLA, the University of Hawaii and Ball State.

NCAA rules permit teams to practice only two hours a week in the gym from now until after winter break.

Coach Mark Pavlik said he likes where his team is at several weeks before the trip to Honolulu and the three matches will help his team gauge its place at the national level.

"[The trip] shows us where we're at against some pretty good teams," Pavlik said.

"It gives us a good benchmark to see where we need to be in May."

Goas said although the team is young, they continue to improve and work hard.

"I feel like [fall training] was really productive," Goas said.

"I feel excited about the season coming up and I think we're only going to get better."

Goas said winning a national title on his home court would be a dream come true and something he never expected to happen prior to his arrival on the Penn State campus.

Pavlik said he is focusing on one match at a time and is just concerned about being 1-

0 after the Lions' first match in January.

He said he is looking for his players to prepare to improve each day and play simple and fundamental volleyball.

"We need to strive to be better at the pass, set and hit game," Pavlik said.

"We've got to have ball control. We're never going to stop working on any one of those."

Goas said the loss of hitters such as Price and Lipsitz to graduation has slightly changed the team's style of play for this season.

"We're not a physical team, we don't have

all the big hitters," Goas said.

"We have to make sure we're on the same page and effective with serving and passing. We have to play as a team."

Although he's taking the season day by day, Pavlik said he wants his team to take care of the EIVA first so the Lions are able to qualify for the NCAA Final Four on their home court.

"I know the kids want to [win the title] in front of their friends and family," Pavlik said.

"But we want to make sure we're using our locker room and not somebody else."



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