

# GymACT Is Growing

Jim Holt

How to save men's club collegiate gymnastics!

THE longtime contraction and presumed demise of men's collegiate gymnastics in the USA is a recurring topic of discussion in the sport. Today, there are only fifteen NCAA sponsored programs, down from 100-plus men's varsity teams in the 1970s,

Despite lack of Athletic Department sponsorship, a number of programs are successfully bucking the trend and today men's gymnastics at the highest level collegiately is growing.

Ground breakers Washington and Arizona State have been joined recently by Temple, Northern Illinois, amalgamated programs SoCal United, New York Alliance, and NorCal Condors to form "GymACT." The organization's purpose is to "foster the growth of men's collegiate gymnastics programs, strengthen and raise the level of the sport, and protect the relationships and integrity of men's collegiate gymnastics."

IG interviewed the GymACT coaches in order to get a better insight into how these programs work and their thoughts on the future.

What are your views on the future of men's college gymnastics?

Scott Barclay, Arizona State: It is being held in the balance at this time. But unless someone or some organization steps up to work in a unified fashion with all affected parties it will continue to struggle for many years. But I do believe it will continue on because of the great sport that it is inherently.

Giancarlo Mora, Washington: As much as I strongly believe that it should be every student's right to have his sport activity of choice be paid by his college or university, I do not see it happening at the moment. In the USA, teams will have to be sponsored in order to secure the survival of highly competitive gymnastics. Today, programs like ours are the starting steps down that road. If we want something we have never had, we have to do something we have never done.

Josh Levin, Northern Illinois: The future should be in GymACT scholarships being partially funded by taxing head counts at JO meets — \$10 per head and should go to kids who will go on to compete for GymACT and the USAG collegiate nationals.

Fabricio Olsen, NorCal Condors: NCAA is the current standard of competitive excellence, but its strict rules and restrictions limit the number of athletes able to join their teams. College

gymnastics needs to be guided by a strong, yet malleable organization. GymACT supports both well-established gymnastics programs as well as new-and-developing teams. Increasing participation is a key element to adapting to the changing demands of a shifting educational landscape.

What do you see as the goals for the association? Short-term and long-term?

Barclay: I would say our long-term main goal is to secure a national championship for college gymnastics in the event the NCAA and/or the USAG discontinued their support of a national championship for one reason or another. We felt we needed to organize in response to the problems that USAG was experiencing at the same time the NCAA was continuing to drop programs. Our short-term goal would be to increase opportunities for male gymnasts to compete on a coached level.

Mora: Grandpa always said, "Expect the best, but be ready for the worst." GymACT isn't waiting, but acting. Today this organization is a safety net for high quality gymnasts that want to continue the sport during college even if they weren't chosen by D1 programs.

Olsen: In less than one year we have already become the platform of choice for every college team looking to compete in a high-level competitive arena. We want more teams, more athletes, longer gymnastics careers and higher quality gymnastics competition.

Do you have strategies on how to "create and grow" additional programs and if so, how?

Olsen: Creating and growing additional programs relies greatly on our ability to clearly communicate the message: college gymnastics IS healthy and growing. Not a belief, but fact. We have been doing it and we can help you start one in your area.

Mora: We do workshops and clinics. Coaches participate in camps all over the place (JO, NAIGC, High Schools) and share information on starting new programs. We meet with members of sister organizations (NCAA, CGA, NAIGC, USAG) at championships. What's already being done? What's working? What needs to change?

Jesse Kitzen-Abelsen, Temple: Building/reviving a team takes a specific set of circumstances (facility, coach to lead, funds to operate, etc.) to be successful. There must be a highly dedicated individual that is willing to sacrifice a lot of time, effort and money to get things started and keep the fire burning, regardless of any obstacles. As long as there is a place to train and a dedicated person with a vision, a team can start to form.

What are the differences between NCAA teams and GymACT teams?

Olsen: Each NCAA team is affiliated with and funded by a single university and are fully supported in every aspect. GymACT programs, on the other hand, are self-funded (donations, volunteers).

Kitsen-Abelsen: GymACT programs are self-funded. Athletic departments may offer certain benefits (facility for training and competition) but the athletic department financial support is typically minimal (actually zero).

How does your team fund itself?

Barclay: We rent and set up equipment for competitions all over the Southwest; we have a close-knit alumni group that assists with tax-deductible donations.

Kitzen-Abelsen: My team teaches at clinics, set up equipment at meets, data entry at meets, alumni donations, stick pledge, selling apparel, raffles. We hosted our first meet fundraiser on April 13, which was a huge success and hope we can grow it in coming years.

Mora: Our team's biggest fundraising source are donors. In addition to donations, team members continue to work ushering Husky football games and setting up events for JO programs.

Summary:

GymACT coaches emphasize that their goal is not to replace existing NCAA programs, but in the current environment, it is clear that attempting to grow programs within the NCAA structure is not a good use of time and resources. For many years the bulk of discussion regarding men's college teams was how to turn back the clock to the time when non-revenue sports were broadly subsidized.

GymACT's long-term strategy is to build and sustain self-sufficient college programs capable of competing at the highest levels. Arizona State and Washington qualify athletes to the USAG Senior Championships on a semi-regular basis (ASU's Kiwan Watts finished 15th in all-around in 2018, Kevin Perkins from UW placed on rings a few years back, and Jeff Johnson, from UW, made event finals at the 2002 Worlds in Debrecen, Hungary (he placed 8th on rings).

In addition to sustainability and high performance, GymACT strives for growth. The organization is expecting two or three new teams in 2020, and is projecting a membership of 20 GymACT teams by 2025-26.

The GymACT organization might well be the vanguard that augers in a new era of prosperity for men's collegiate gymnastics. Here's hoping to success!