Panda gymnasts building a dynasty

by Ajay Bhardwaj

Dynasty. The University of Alberta may have one on its hands in the form of the Panda Gymnastics team. They've already won consecutive national championships and they're looking for a third.

Coach Stephanie Bishop has selected nine gymnasts whom she thinks will help the Pandas make a return trip to Calgary. Defending national champion Michelle Hannemann is back to lead the team, as is captain Monica Kmech. Michelle Graham, Michelle Maltais, Dana Albert, and Leeanne Yee round out the nucleus of the team.

A large cog in the Pandas' national championship team for the last two years, Diane Patterson will not return this season, as a gymnast. "We'll use our depth to win," Bishop said. "The girls are working hard. If they keep training hard, they can repeat."
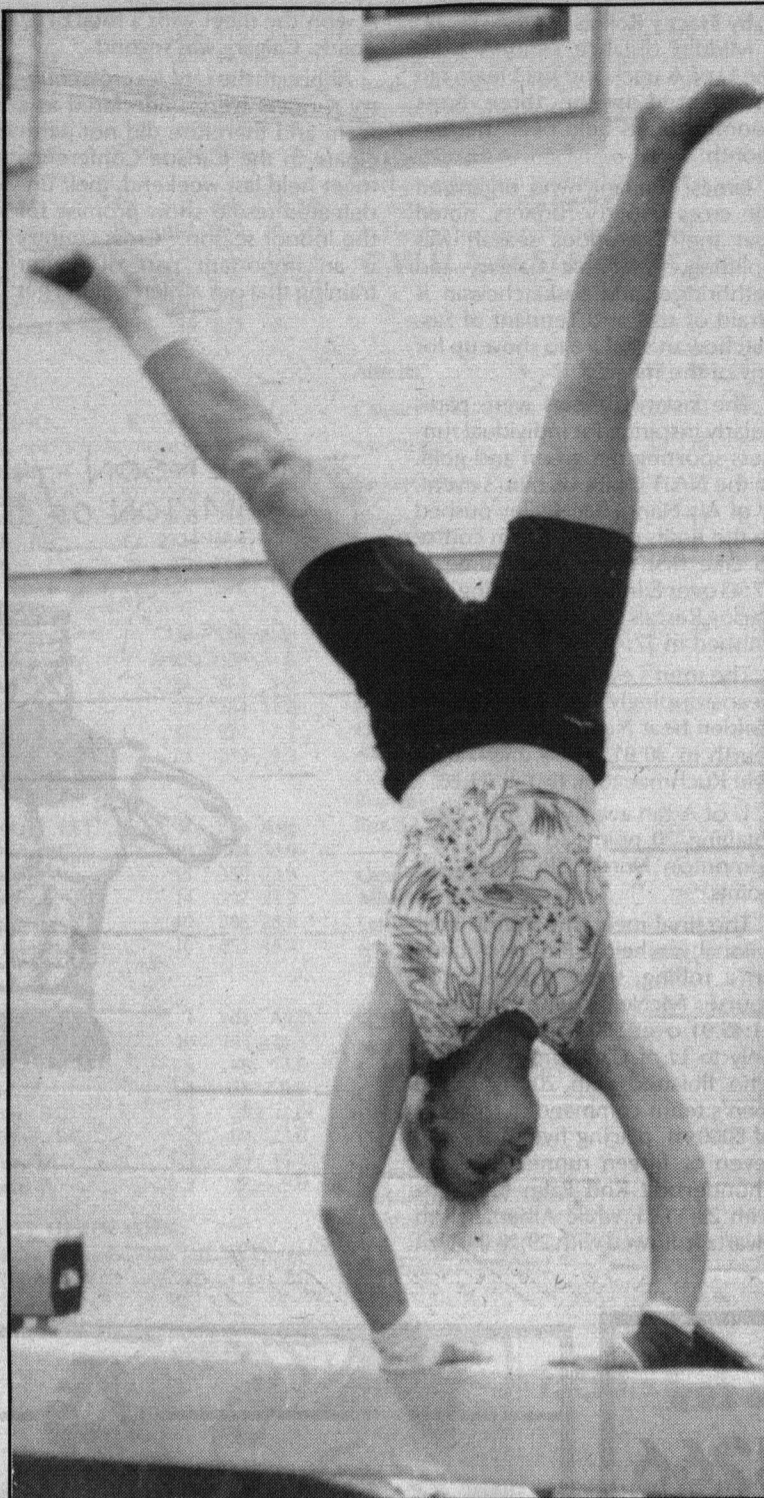
Patterson has returned as an assistant coach, however. "She'll be pushing the girls in practice," Bishop said.

The gap left by Patterson's departure places the onus on Kmech to become the number two gymnast on the team. "Steph didn't come up to me and say 'you have to replace Diane,'" Kmech said. "But the pressure I'm facing is more from myself. My responsibility as captain is to get the other girls going. We all have to produce."

Kmech needs another good season, like last year. "I didn't have any injuries last year. This year I know what it takes to have a good year."

The Pandas had hoped that Cindy 'Hempstead, from the University of Brandon, would join their program this year and replace Patterson. However, Hempstead received a full scholarship from the University of Northern Illinois and headed south. "I knew that if she stayed in Canada, she'd come here." Bishop said.

On Monday, November 27, the Pandas will hold an intersquad meet. "That will make it easy for me to find out who'll travel," Bishop said.

Gymnast Michelle Hannemann works out on the balance beam. Hannemann and the Pandas are hoping to grab their third straight national title.

Howard Gibbins