

Golden Bears gymnastics — the school of hard knocks

Golden Bears at UBC

Heading out to Vancouver for their final seasonal meet against the University of British Columbia, the Golden Bear gymnastics team have to be licking their chops.

Already having qualified four gymnasts for the CIAU meet at the University of McMaster in a month, the Alberta men can do no worse than last year, when they sent just three members to the Nationals, finishing 6th.

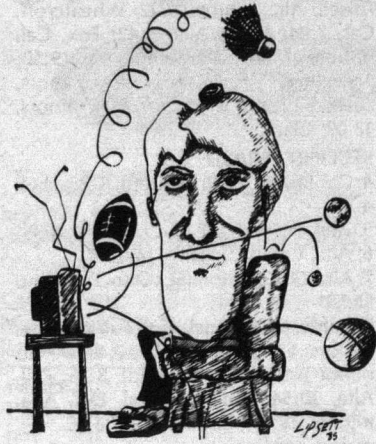
With the CWUAA Championships in two weeks time plus the B.C. meet, things might just get better still.

"At the Nationals, only your top three scores count," explains captain Russell Sluchinski, "so with only three people there you just can't make a mistake."

And this is a team that has made their share of mistakes, as the senior members were tossed into competition with precious little experience in their rookie year. Just recently have they begun a Junior program whereby some High School and first year University gymnasts can train before taking part in the high pressure intercollegiate meets.

"They won't get thrust into it like us," assures Sluchinski. "We were left as senior members in our second year."

But if it was detrimental to coach Francis Tally's Bears at the start, it is beneficial now. Of the four that have qualified for CIAU's so far, Ron McLeod, Malcolm Dunford, and Gary Kapitza are all four year veterans, while Brad Law is still a sophomore.



Mark Spector

Tally's training has obviously paid off. Second only to Clare Drake in coaching tenure here at the U of A, Tally has guided the Golden Bear gymnasts for 17 seasons. After competing on Alberta's CIAU championship team in 1969, he led them to the title again the following year as coach. But since then it has been a long drought.

Of the last 14 years, York University has been national champs a total of 13 times (the last 11 years). Alberta has won Canada West four times in that span, but has managed only a 2nd, 3rd, and 4th at Nationals.

In the last four years, the men have finished 5th once, and 4th three times in Canada West. They are hoping that this will be their year.

"We had probably the best summer training that we've ever had, and some of the other teams have lost a few key gymnasts," states Sluchinski

who, in his third year last season, was awarded the Alumni Trophy as Most Outstanding Contributor.

Practising in the Gym room alongside the Pandas has a little to do with the resurgence of this team as well. The women have dominated the CWUAA, winning nine of the last 13 crowns. Last season they placed third in the country, after winning their second CIAU flag the previous year.

"They always do have a strong team," admits Sluchinski. "But they also have a better feeder system than we do. We've got four or five guys who never even started gymnastics until their first year of University." Thus the junior program.

But the job at hand for the Golden Bears is on the west coast, and by the sounds of things they are ready for it.

"We crushed them here," states the Bears captain of UBC. "They don't have as much depth. (T-Birds Kevin) Seburn won the All Around but after that they're not as deep as we are."

Sound confident? Sluchinski agrees. "Now we're not intimidated, we've been around for awhile."

And even though this is University competition, there is something to be said for the school of hard knocks.

The Golden Bears are sending four gymnasts to the CIAU meet at McMaster University next month.

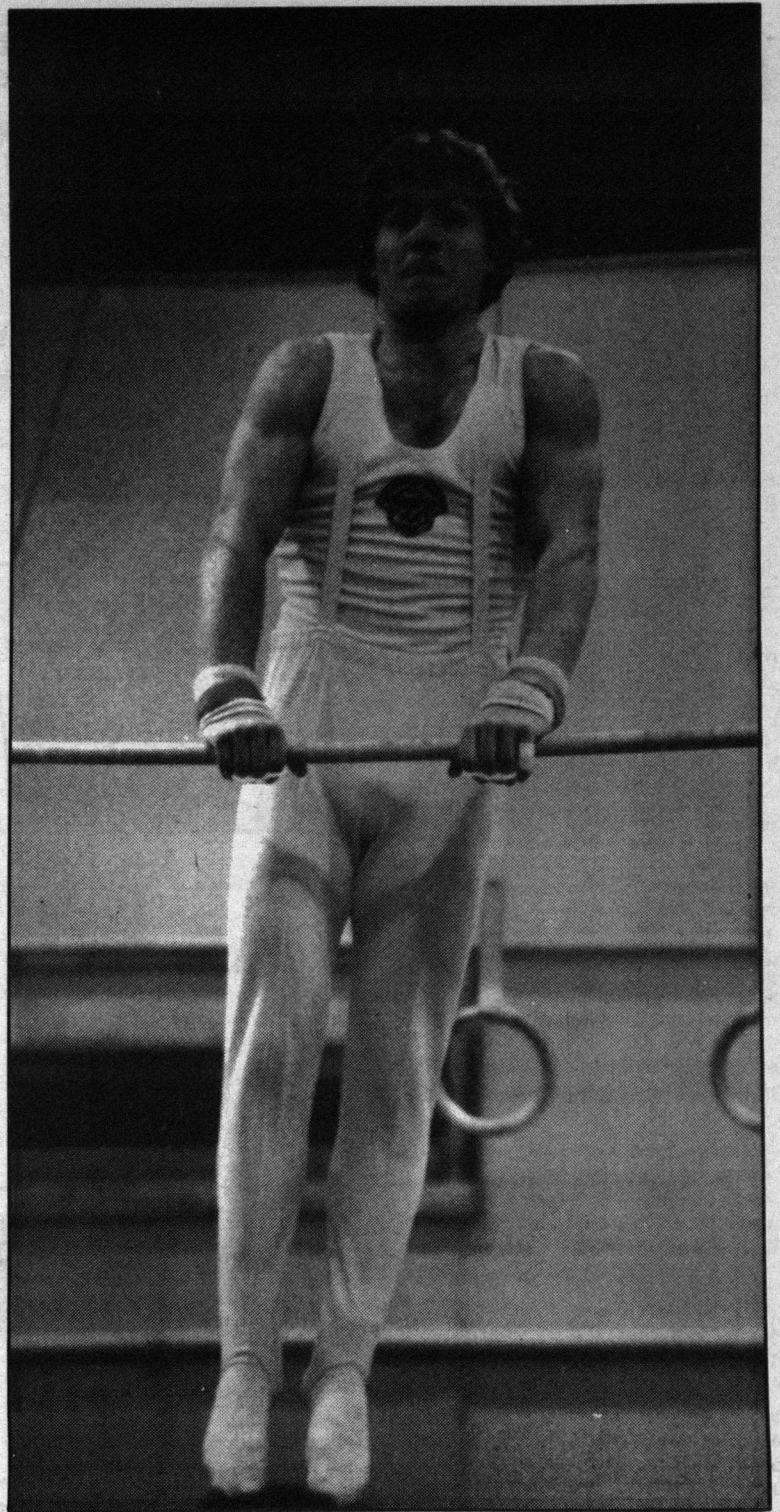


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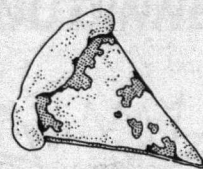
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