

W. Rockhill Gymnast Competes Where The 'Elite' Meet - At Last

April 12, 1984 | by Sonya Sharp, The Morning Call

It took seven years and more than 5,000 hours of training for Pennridge High School sophomore Tanya Schuler to reach the goal she had set for herself - the Elite Gymnast title.

The elite medal came for the 15-year-old Feb. 19, after three unsuccessful tries in earlier years, and was won at the Region 7 qualifying meet of the United States Gymnastics Foundation on the University of Maryland campus. To qualify as an elite gymnast Tanya had to receive a 9.0 average in eight categories tested, or 72.0 points. She managed with a strong creative routine bringing up the scores on her compulsory presentation.

Her heavy gold medal has joined a hoard of trophies, medals and ribbons won in earlier years. They are now displayed in trophy cases and on Tanya's desk in her bedroom at the family's Valley Road home, West Rockhill Township. The elite medal marks her as one of about 50 elite, or top-ranking, women gymnasts in the country.

It also put her into national competition two weeks later.

With longtime coach Bob Schultz, of the Central Bucks School of Gymnastics, with whom she trains from 2:30-7:30 p.m. weekdays and on whose team she has competed for five years, Tanya traveled to San Francisco Mar. 2-4, to compete against 50 of the county's top women gymnasts. The event was the National Qualifying Meet for the United States Gymnastics Team. After several more meets, a team of six or eight will be chosen.

In her first try at national competition, Tanya came in 37th, something of a disappointment to her, but not to her coach, who said he thought it "wasn't bad" for a first competitive experience at that level.

She found herself in pretty heady company - competing with Mary Lou Retton (classed as first place all-around and, some think, the U.S. hope for a gold medal in the the 1984 Summer Olympics), Kathy Johnson (second place), Lucy Wenner (third place), Michelle Dusserre and Tracy Talavera (tied for fourth place). Traci Butler of the Allentown Parkettes placed sixth.

It was enough to make a 15-year-old nervous; and she suffered some breaks while doing a compulsory routine on the balance beam that dropped her score to 44th in that event.

The five-foot, 95-pound Schuler has a ready smile and a determined look in her large, dark eyes. "She's gifted and naturally strong, Schultz says.

"Her biggest problem is flexibility," he added. "The compulsory routines on the balance beam are made up for the more flexible gymnasts."

The experience of working beside 17-year-old Retton, who preceeded her in the competition, fired her determination to continue to work hard to polish the weak spots in the next four years, with an eye toward a place on the National Gymnastics Team in 1988 and the athlete's dream of an Olympic medal.

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Obviously in awe of Retton, Schuler's eyes light up when she relates how impressive the other gymnast was.

The next test for Schuler comes April 14 at the Second Elite Nationals in Niagara Falls, N.Y. It will be the final meet before the U.S. Nationals in Chicago in May and the selection of the 1984 Olympic Team members.

Schultz and Schuler's other biggest booster, her dad (Dennis Schuler, manager of Union National Bank's Sellersville branch) both feel her goal in Niagara Falls should be to finish in the first 20.