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Canton

# Observerland boasts best gymnasts in state

By C.J. RISK  
AND DAN O'MEARA  
STAFF WRITERS

Plymouth Salem finished third at this year's state gymnastics final. Plymouth Canton tied for fifth.

So is it any wonder these two teams dominate the Observer's all-area team, filling seven of the 10 first-team spots?

The talent isn't limited to those two schools, not by a long way. But when one school boasts the top all-around gymnast in the state, and the other has five of the top six all-arounders at the state regional meet — well, the evidence is obvious.

It makes it difficult to compete against such ability. Salem had more Division I all-arounders (five) than the rest of the area's teams combined.

Still, possessing the talent is one thing, doing something with it is another. The Rocks had a young squad (two seniors among its top five) that improved enough to come within 1 1/2 points of repeating as state champ.

But perhaps the true test of an all-area team is this: If you took away Canton's all-around champ and the four first-team Salem picks, you'd still have a pretty impressive team.

Here it is.

## ALL-AREA TEAM

Katey Gilles, freshman, Canton: Gilles won the Division I all-around state championship and also placed first on vault, second on beam, fourth on bars and fifth on floor exercise.

She was the WJAA vault and all-around champion as well, placing second on bars, tied on beam and seventh on floor at that meet. She was undefeated in all-around competition, which included 12 dual meets and five invitations.

Gilles set school records on vault (9.65), bars (9.6), floor (9.65) and all-around (37.8). Her best score on beam was 9.4. She is the second Elite All-American at Canton but the first to win that honor on every event.

"Her accomplishments stand by itself," coach John Cunningham said, "but the next thing about Katey is she's a wonderful individual. She's the best gymnast Canton has ever had to compete at the high school level, but I think it's a higher accomplishment when people make comments like that."

Melissa Hopson, junior, Salem: Hop-

son came into the season burdened by the pressure of expectation. Kim Mober and Courtney Gonyea were gone; Hopson was the Rocks' top returnee.

She handled the situation extremely well, according to coach John Anderson. "A lot was expected of her," Anderson said, "and she really came through."

Her best event? The all-around, actually. "She's strong in all events," Anderson said, "it's hard to pick one, but if I had to I'd say the balance beam."

Indeed, Hopson had the area's best score on the beam: 9.5. Canton's Gilles had the top scores in every other event.

Hopson performed well at both the regional (second in the all-around, 36.80) and at state meet (tied for fifth in the all-around, 36.85). She had the area's second-best score in the all-around (36.85) and floor exercise (9.50).

Sarah Makins, senior, Salem: "She improved every meet," Anderson said of the gymnast who supplied a lot of surprise this season.

Like at the state finals: "I didn't expect her to get to the (individual) finals on beam and she did," Anderson said (she finished 10th). And then there was the Western Lakes Activities Association meet: "She won the conference on bars, which was really surprising."

But the event which seemed to illustrate Makins' attitude best was the beam. "She improved the most on the balance beam," said Anderson. "She's very aggressive, doesn't let fear get to her. She's fallen very hard during warm-up right before she has to compete, but she doesn't drop a thing from her routine."

Makins finished 17th at state (35.45) and fourth at the regional (35.45) in the all-around. She had the area's third-best

score in the bars (9.3) and was fourth in the floor (9.35).

Kristen Kosik, freshman, Salem: Kosik will find herself stepping into a situation like Hopson's in the near future. She has the ability to rank among the state's premier gymnasts.

"It's amazing how we got more and more out of her as the season wore on," said Anderson. "At our first dual meet she was shaking like a leaf, but by our last meet she was controlling her nerves much, much better."

"She really improved throughout the season. She was one of our top four girls all year, which is hard for a freshman. I think she handled it very well. She has very light form; she's a very clean gymnast. I'd compare her to Melissa Hopson. They have a lot of similarities in form."

Kosik's best event: the vault. She posted the second-best score in the area (9.30). She was also 19th in the state (35.15) and sixth in the regional (34.65) in the all-around. Kosik placed eighth in the vault at the individual state finals (17.45).

Zoe Yockey, sophomore, Salem: Night and day — that's how Anderson described Yockey's emergence.

"She's a completely different gymnast from last year," the Salem coach said. "She went from very sloppy, with terrible form, to a very controlled performer."

"I think it's maturity."

Yockey didn't just refine her routines, but added more difficult tricks, too. "Floor is her strongest event," said Anderson. "Her tumbling has gotten so much better. She has a lot of original dance in her routine that others don't do."

Yockey was 22nd in the state's all-around (34.50) after placing fifth at the regional (34.90). Her 9.25 was the area's seventh-best score in the floor exercise.

If she matches this year's improvement next year, Salem will again find itself among the state's elite teams.

Michelle Tsai, senior, N. Farmington: Tsai was seventh in the state among Division II all-arounders. She also placed sixth on bars, 11th on vault and floor and 18th on beam at state.

Tsai was a regional champion on vault, placed sixth on bars and beam and finished third in the all-around. Competing against Division I girls at the WJAA meet, she was second on vault and fourth on bars and floor.

Her best scores ranked her among the top 10 in the area in each event: 9.05 on

vault, 9.4 on bars, 8.65 on beam, 9.25 on floor and 35.95 in the all-around.

"I'm glad her career ended the way it did, because she worked all year round and it was a nice way to go out," North coach Jeff Dwyer said. "The all-around is indicative of true gymnastics ability."

Elyse Turner, senior, N. Farmington: Turner also was a four-year member of the North Farmington team and a steady, consistent performer for the Raiders. She was one of the top all-around gymnasts in Observerland with a season best of 34.65. Coming out of a difficult regional, she qualified for state on beam. Her scores 8.85 on vault and 8.9 on beam placed her among the best in the area.

Brie Wall, junior, Canton: Wall qualified for state as an all-arounder and placed 22nd in Division II. She was fifth on bars and beam at the WJAA meet while competing against some of the best Division I gymnasts in the state. Wall had season bests of 8.7 on bars, 8.65 on beam and 34.25 as an all-arounder.

"If the season had been a month longer, Brie would have had some wonderful accomplishments," Cunningham said, adding Wall hadn't done gymnastics in three years and missed the first month of practice because she was a diver on the Canton swim team.

"It took her awhile to build up her skills and get her confidence back. If she had another month, I have the feeling Brie would have been a (state finals) qualifier in two or three events, easily. We're going to see some fantastic things from Brie next year."

Kim Nowak, sophomore, Canton: Nowak competed as a team member at the state meet in three events and qualified into finals on floor, finishing 12th. She scored a season best 9.4 and placed third on floor at the WJAA meet. She also was seventh on bars in the league, also against Division I competition, and had a high score of 8.5.

"Kim and Brie are like gymnastics times bombs," Cunningham said. "They were excited about getting into the finals and realized what they have to do to get better."

"Kim has the ability to be one of the best floor exercise people in the state. I was pleased with what she accomplished this year, but I'm looking forward to what she can accomplish next year."

Shelley Underwood, sophomore, John Glenn: Underwood qualified for state as an all-arounder, finishing 16th in Division

II. She made the finals on floor and placed sixth. She was a regional champion on floor and beam, and she was second in the all-around.

At the WJAA meet, Underwood placed eighth on beam and floor, competing against some of the best Division I gymnasts in the state. She had season bests of 8.5 on vault, 9.2 on bars, 9.15 on beam, 9.3 on floor and 34.75 all-around.

"I really enjoyed working with Shelley," Glen coach Debbie Tomasko said. "She's very dedicated and talented, and I think she'll go far."

"She had to find her place this year, being a sophomore coming from the junior high. She had a hard time at the beginning and was testing things out. But she came out on top at the end of the season, and I'm really proud of her."

Handling the pressure: With Salem coming off a state championship season, Melissa Hopson found herself in an unenviable position: being the team's top returning gymnast. She shouldered the burden well.



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