

WLAA GYMNASTICS PREVIEW

Canton solid despite lack of star

BY C.J. RISAK
SPORTS EDITOR

If you're looking for a superstar to lead Plymouth Canton in its pursuit of a state championship in gymnastics, don't bother. There isn't one.

That doesn't mean the Chiefs won't make a run. Few of their competitors will make the mistake of counting Canton out of the race before it begins — not after last season.

For those with faded memories, the Chiefs were not expected to do much after Katey Gilles, a senior in '96 who had won a state individual championship in the all-around two years earlier, decided to quit the sport.

And they weren't. Canton finished seventh out of eight teams at the Western Lakes Activities Association finals and won just two dual meets.

Then at the regionals, the Chiefs blossomed; they tied Westland John Glenn for third and advanced to the state finals.

It was a testament to both Canton's style and coach John Cunningham's coaching. More of the same can be expected this season, minus one important factor: The Chiefs won't be overlooked.

And with good reason. On Thursday, they competed against Ann Arbor Pioneer, Plymouth Salem and Ann Arbor Huron. Canton won all three duals, scoring 132.65 — not far off its state-qualifying score of last year (133.075).

"I'm very pleased with where we are right now," said Cunningham, his team now 4-1 in duals — doubling the number of wins it had all of last season. "It was a decent score, yeah. Technically we didn't have that great a meet."

(Uneven parallel) Bars and

(balance) beam weren't that good. The scores we got don't reflect how good we really are.

"On vault, we maxed out on our score. We haven't done our best stuff on vault yet. That's about as good a score as we could get."

"And I was very pleased with our floor (exercise). It was good, clean and well-prepared. I liked the routines and I liked the performances."

All in all, it means Canton ahead of where Cunningham expected them to be at this point in the season.

Only one key member of last season's team was lost: Beth Muijlaert. Leading the returnees are seniors Nicole Vaagenes, Natalie Wood and Holly Graham; juniors Marcie Emerick and Michelle Farnsworth; and sophomores Liz Fitzgerald.

Emerick tied for third in the all-around at last year's state regionals, while Fitzgerald took fifth. Most of the others contributed as well, with Vaagenes finishing eighth in bars at the

state meet.

What it means is Canton, with a total of 31 athletes on the team, is in position for a strong run to the state tournament.

But first things first, and first there's the WLAA season to contend with. That won't be easy; the conference is certainly the toughest in the state in gymnastics, with at least six of the eight teams contenders to reach the state meet.

The Chiefs are one of those teams, and not just because Cunningham has so many impressive returnees. It helps to have newcomers like Amy Driscoll and Kristen Shilk, both freshmen.

"They're really propped to come onto my team and contribute," the Canton coach said. "They have tremendous attitudes."

"It gives me a typical Canton team. Other than Katey Gilles, we have always been a very consistent team — no superstars, but very good performers."

Will that be good enough to

take the Chiefs to the next level? "The first part of the year we'll find out," said Cunningham. "We start with a meatgrinder type of schedule."

Canton's already competed against Freeland and Pioneer, both talented enough to compete at the state meet. Hartland (Jan. 7) and four-time state champion Holland (Jan. 17) are coming up quickly.

"Because we have Hartland and Northville-(Novi) in our league, we have a tough road to go," said Cunningham. "Right now, I'd say we're No. 3 or 4, behind Brighton. But we'll see what happens."

His team's current level of ability isn't the only thing that impresses Cunningham. "This early in the season, it's surprising to see how well they get along together," he said. "It's Dec. 18 and we don't normally see this in our team until Feb. 18, when we're really confident in what we're doing."



Top Returner: Liz Fitzgerald, a sophomore, is one of Canton's top gymnasts this season.

New coach guides Salem

BY C.J. RISAK
SPORTS EDITOR

If only they allowed player-coaches in high school gymnastics, like they do in pro sports.

Melissa Hopson, the new coach at Plymouth Salem, is bound to hear such suggestions for the rest of this season — and maybe next season, too. After all, she's just 20-years-old.

Heck, some of the present Rocks competed with her when she was an all-state all-arounder for the Rocks (three years ago).

But anyone underestimating her coaching abilities, believing Hopson hasn't the experience or maturity to handle the position, is making a mistake.

For one, Hopson has extensive coaching experience at the club level. And she's served as an assistant coach at Salem under Pam Yockey for the past two seasons.

"I like it," Hopson, a junior at Eastern Michigan who's pursuing her Bachelor's degree in secondary education, said of her new position. "It's different. Yeah, I can do that (demonstrate a skill personally)."

"But just taking what I learned with the team for four years and teaching it to others — that's what I enjoy."

Hopson learned a lot during her time as a varsity member of the Rocks. Consistently a top-10 finisher at state meet in the all-around, she was instrumental in Salem's state championship run in 1993. As a senior, she tied for fifth individually in the all-around; and the Rocks finished third as a team that season.

Indeed, Salem was a top-five finisher in all four of Hopson's years on the team.

Can she guide the present Rocks to such a level? Perhaps — but probably not this year. The team graduated its three top scorers from last year: Kristin Kosik, Kristin Los and Brooke Kilby. All three finished in the top 30 in the all-around at last year's Western Lakes Activities Association finals; Kosik took second.

So Hopson must rebuild. It's isn't a task she's shrinking from.

"We've got a good team," she said after Salem finished third out of four teams in a quad meet the Rocks hosted last Thursday. Plymouth Canton was first (132.65) and Ann Arbor Pioneer took second (123.35); Salem scored 118.90.

"I'm impressed with that score," said Hopson. "I just wanted the girls to see what they could do. Now we've got 2 1/2 weeks to add some new skills and clean up our current skills, things like that."

One thing that has impressed Hopson about her team is its camaraderie. "They're really strong pulling for each other," she noted.

Despite the losses, the team has some positives. Two veterans Hopson will be counting on are junior all-arounders Lindsey Hawraney, who placed fourth in the quad meet with a 31.85, and Janine Schmedding, who scored 30.85 in the quad.

Hawraney finished 13th in the Division II all-around at last season's state regional. Another all-arounder who should be a big scorer for the Rocks is Allison Bracht, a sophomore who took 14th at the state regional in Division II last season.

Those three, combined with senior Beth Steinhilber — who scored 8.55 on the floor exercise at the quad — newcomer Mahahid Firzadeh, a junior transfer from Dearborn Edsel Ford, and seniors Emily Gaubutz and Kate DeRoche, make up the nucleus of the team.

Gaubutz, DeRoche and Schmedding are the teams co-captains.

How much that first meet revealed is difficult for Hopson to say. "They all have things to work on," she said. "Lindsay and Allison have a lot of talent and will do well."

"But we have a lot of girls with a lot of talent. What we have is a lot of girls who don't have much (high school) experience. So we have a team that will grow."

Could this Salem team be the Canton team of a year ago? The Chiefs won just two dual meets and finished seventh out of eight teams at the WLAA meet, then tied for third at the state regionals to qualify for the state meet.

"It's all in their determination," Hopson said. "How determined they are to succeed. I think this team can compete with every team out there. It's just a matter of pulling together as one, to get us there."

"(Uneven parallel) Bars and (balance) beam are two events that we're really going to have to work on. But it'll come. We'll do fine."

Certainly Hopson knows what goes into making a state champion, from personal experience.

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THE WEEK AHEAD

<p>BOYS BASKETBALL Monday, Dec. 22 King at Bishop Bergess, 7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 26 (River Rouge Tournament) Redford CC vs. DePorse, 6 p.m. River Rouge vs. Coors, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 27 Rough Tournament, 6 & 7:30 p.m. Wayne at Brother Rice, 7:30 p.m. Salem at Grossa Ice Tourney, 7:30 p.m.</p> <p>MEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL Saturday, Dec. 27 Madonna at Findlay (Ohio), 6 & 8 p.m. (Scholarship Holiday Classic) Owens Tech vs. Durham (Ohio), 5 p.m. S'craft vs. George Brown, 7 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 28 Scholarcraft Holiday Classic, 3 & 7 p.m. Madonna at Findlay (Ohio), 1 & 3 p.m.</p> <p>WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL</p>	<p>Saturday, Dec. 27 (Scholarcraft Holiday Classic) Lakeland CC vs. Windsor, 1 p.m. S'craft vs. George Brown, 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 28 S'craft Holiday Classic, 1 & 5 p.m. PEEP HOCKEY Saturday, Dec. 27 RU at U.D. Jesuit Tourney, 5:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 28 U.D. Jesuit Tourney, TBA. ONTARIO HOCKEY LEAGUE Saturday, Dec. 27 Ply. Winter at Windsor, 2 p.m. KIDS VOLLEYBALL Monday, Dec. 22 Ply. Christian at Greater Life, 5 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 27 Ypsi Lincoln Tourney, TBA. UM Dearborn Tourney, TBA. TBA — time to be announced.</p>
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