

MAY 1

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1JLhCsH>**SPORTS**

At Their Meets, the Audience Flips, Too

By JOHN BRANCH FEB. 25, 2015

SALT LAKE CITY — Squeezed into the dizzying choreography of a gymnastics meet at the University of Utah on Saturday night came an unplanned plea over the public-address system. It said it all.

It came shortly after fraternity and sorority members competed in a handstand contest on the arena floor (the winning female student might still be upside down if not toppled by the mascot) and after the giant video board became “Simba Cam,” as audience members held babies aloft and presented them, as in “The Lion King.”

And it came just before a Utah gymnast named Georgia Dabritz — whose pose adorned a wall decal handed out to the first 2,500 fans — scored a perfect 10 on the uneven bars, sending the sellout crowd into a clamorous cheer.

As excitement ebbed, the voice from the sound system asked that those seated in the upper bowl scoot together tightly to accommodate everyone trying to get in.

“That’s a nice problem to have,” the meet director Anne Marie Jensen said as thousands shuffled in the upper deck.

Utah’s Huntsman Center holds 15,000. But more than that were squeezing in to watch what was, on the schedule, just an ordinary conference dual meet with Stanford. The standing-room-only attendance was announced at 15,202.

The night after the gymnastics meet, Utah’s women’s basketball team played No. 7 Oregon State in the same arena. Official attendance was 788.

Utah gymnastics has the highest average attendance in women’s college sports nearly every year, beating out the likes of Tennessee and Connecticut basketball, Nebraska and Hawaii volleyball, and Alabama and Georgia gymnastics, most of them quite easily. It vaults past professional women’s sports, too, like the W.N.B.A., where top teams hope to draw 10,000.

The gymnastics team, ranked fourth this season, is averaging 14,682 through four meets. That is on pace to break the team record of 14,376 last year, when only 18 Division I men's basketball teams regularly played in front of bigger crowds. (Utah was not one of them, and will not be again this year, despite a resurgence to national title contender.)

Plenty of other fans watch from home. Women's gymnastics meets are, on average, the third most-viewed events on the Pac-12 Network, behind football and men's basketball.

"And it's not a distant third, either," the network vice president Kirk Reynolds said. "It's right in there with men's basketball."

The popularity of gymnastics at Utah — and, similarly, in the sport's power nexus of the Southeastern Conference — is nothing new. Beginning 40 years ago, Utah and its coach, Greg Marsden, became the best at proving that a women's sport can regularly attract the most fervent, dependable crowds on campus.

But its continued relevance, its growing attendance and the sport's expanding television attention lead to some complex questions: Why Utah, of all places? And if Utah can sell 7,500 season tickets (ranging from \$30 to \$120), attract 15,000 fans to a two-hour meet, and essentially break even financially, why don't more universities do the same thing?

"I don't know why," Utah Athletic Director Chris Hill said. "But it's taken a little while to build that."

In 1975, Marsden was a graduate student from Arkansas, a former college diver teaching physical education classes. Colleges around the country were adding women's sports in response to Title IX legislation, and Utah asked Marsden if he would start a gymnastics team.

"It was really by chance," Marsden said. "I just happened to be here when all that was coming together."

Utah, like others, was looking to fill a quota, not seats. Marsden, who was paid \$1,500, posted fliers around campus looking for would-be gymnasts. At the end of the first season, in 1976, Utah finished 10th in the country. Marsden saw opportunity.

By 1981, the Utes were national champions. They won five more titles in a row through 1986, powered by the three-time individual champion Megan McCunniff. Marsden and McCunniff dated openly during her career and married before her

senior season. Theirs was a romance described at the time as a fairy tale, seen in hindsight by Marsden as a “really, really stupid thing to do” that would now be deemed inappropriate.

But it worked out well. Upon graduation, Megan Marsden became her husband’s longtime assistant, and in 2010 she became co-head coach.

“I’m the driver, the pusher, the disciplinarian,” Greg Marsden said. “She’s the softer side. She’s much more likable than me. She’s the yin to my yang.”

They guided Utah to four more national championships in the early 1990s. By then, Utah was attracting 10,000 or more fans to most home meets, and the Marsdens were experts in both gymnastics and marketing.

“No one is going to care as much about your program as you are,” Greg Marsden said. “You can’t abdicate that responsibility.”

Which is why Marsden, now 64 and in his 40th season, still designs the team leotards, down to the placement of every sparkle. And why he knows where every outlet is in the team’s 18,000-square-foot practice facility, and the reason it was placed there.

And why, in the middle of Saturday’s meet with No. 16 Stanford, Marsden walked over to the Utah marketing director Jennifer White and whispered in her ear. He was annoyed that a scoreboard was not working properly. Even while coaching, he was concerned with marketing.

“It was his formula that turned this into an attendance dynasty,” said White, who is in her sixth year.

Marsden’s mantra is unchanged: Create a fast-moving event with no lulls, keep the audience informed of the score and let fans know that their enthusiasm creates an advantage. (Utah’s all-time home record is 431-26.)

The marketing model mirrors the N.B.A.’s. Utah’s gymnasts — nicknamed the Red Rocks, from a marketing campaign 20 years ago that stuck — are introduced with pyrotechnics, dramatic lighting and bass-heavy video production. (Among the introductory boasts: the nation’s leading grade-point average.)

Performances, done one at a time so the crowd’s attention is focused, move from one to another with little lag time. The warm-up minutes between the four events (vault, bars, beam and floor) are filled with contests on the floor and attention-grabbers on the video board. There are cheerleaders, a pep band and a student section.

When the Utah sophomore Baely Rowe opened Saturday's meet by landing a vault as if she had Velcro on her feet, the crowd erupted as one would in basketball if someone had swished a 3-pointer off the opening tip. (Rowe's feat was worth more: 9.85.)

Dabritz received a standing ovation after her bar routine, and the decibel level jumped when judges awarded a perfect score. Even Marsden, mellowed by time and age, was clearly excited.

Utah won, 198.05 to 195.90. The entire production lasted about 1 hour 45 minutes, perfectly designed for a two-hour television window.

"With how dialed in they are, and how structured their meets are, it's almost like they were waiting for television to arrive," said Will O'Toole, coordinating producer for the Pac-12 Network. "And that scene, with 15,000 people, the pyrotechnics, the video — I thought I was at a Knicks game."

Marsden's quest to streamline the meets has not always endeared him to other coaches. Utah is the only program to reach the national championships every year of its existence, but it frustrates Marsden that the finals are called the Super Six. He has argued that four teams, rotating through four events, would be much easier to follow for fans and better for television. The national championships will be shown live only on ESPN3, the network's online platform, and will attract a far smaller audience than the likes of Utah see each week.

And why, Marsden wondered, do six gymnasts perform each event, if only the top five scores count? Make every routine matter, he said.

"A lot of sports have done what they can to make their events more friendly," he said, citing basketball's adoption of shot clocks and 3-point lines as an example. "Ours has not done that."

Too many programs, he said, are content to glide along, virtually unnoticed, like many other college sports beyond football or men's basketball.

"I just want gymnastics to make a noise," Marsden said.

The sport is loudest in the SEC, which dominates gymnastics similar to the way it does football. Georgia won 10 national championships, including five from 2005 to 2009, under its former coach Suzanne Yoculan. Alabama, a six-time champion under Sarah Patterson, who retired last year, is Utah's nearest rival in attendance, averaging 12,826 fans last season.

"Greg started earliest, and he set the standard," said Patterson, who started

coaching Alabama in 1978. “There were two people I took great advice from at the start of my career. One was Pat Summitt. The other was Greg Marsden.”

Both Marsden and Summitt, the longtime Tennessee women’s basketball coach, stressed the value of marketing the program.

“Getting 12,000 people, that’s as much a goal of mine as winning an SEC championship or a national championship,” Patterson said, echoing Marsden’s philosophy.

Now, as if contagious, gymnastics continues to grow in the SEC, where seven universities were among the top 10 in attendance last year. The SEC Network, part of ESPN, began airing meets live this season, with plans to expand its coverage significantly, a spokeswoman said.

Still, there are only 61 Division I gymnastics programs, and the number has barely budged for a decade. When universities want to add a women’s sport, they look for bigger rosters, less overhead, or both — sports like crew, golf and lacrosse.

“If Greg and Sarah and I could stand up and speak to everybody who is a decision-maker at other schools, I think we could convince them to add gymnastics,” said Yoculan, who retired from Georgia in 2009. Utah gymnastics, with a \$750,000 budget, breaks even, the university said, thanks mostly to arena revenues from its meets and booster contributions that cover the 12 scholarships.

“I’ve always been motivated by fear,” Marsden said. “Fear of not being successful. Fear of not being relevant. Fear of the crowds going away.”

The next night, more than 15,000 people watched Utah record one of the best team scores in program history. The night featured noise and perfect scores and optimism for another national title.

There was room to watch. Everyone just had to scoot over a little.

Correction: February 25, 2015

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misidentified a gymnast warming up with Greg Marsden, the coach of the Utah women’s team. She is Georgia Dabritz, not Tory Wilson.

Correction: February 25, 2015

An earlier version of a picture caption with the accompanying slide show misidentified the apparatus being used by Tory Wilson. It is the balance beam, not the vault.

A version of this article appears in print on February 26, 2015, on page B14 of the New York edition with the

headline: At Their Meets, the Audience Flips, Too.

© 2015 The New York Times Company