

WMGF News

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June 11, 2021

Season Review

by Head Coach Jeff Crockett

As this season ends and I look back at the things this team has accomplished despite the circumstances, I become overwhelmed with all kinds of emotions. I am incredibly sad that we have to say goodbye to five seniors that have given so much of themselves to this team. I am overjoyed that we not only accomplished our one main goal of competing as a team at least once this season, but that we broke a 15-year losing streak against the Sun Devils! Most of all though, I am grateful. I am grateful for the opportunity to help these young men learn what it means to persevere and accomplish amazing things despite all the doubt and uncertainty surrounding this season.

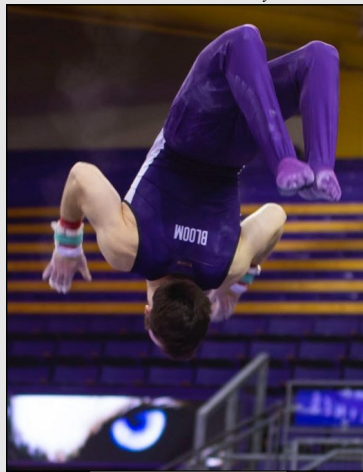
On March 15th, we had our first competition at home in Alaska Airlines Arena vs. our longtime rivals, the Arizona State Sun Devils. As the meet drew closer the guys became more excited as they realized they were finally going to get to compete, and even though the Sun Devils beat us (WA 358.9 – ASU 373.2), and there were no spectators, it was a great experience that reignited that fire inside them that had been all but extinguished by the struggles of the pandemic.

On March 27th, we competed in our very first *virtual* competition, vs. SC United. This was a surreal experience as each team competed from their home gym via live stream. The judges even judged from their own

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The Washington Men's Gymnastics Foundation is a non-profit organization that exists to assist the Men's Gymnastics Team at the University of Washington.

Photo credit: Shelby Schumacher



Senior Ben Bloom

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homes! We came away with our first win of the season (WA 362.7 – SC 326.6) and looked ahead to the next virtual competition, a rematch with the Sun Devils.

On Saturday, April 24th, 2021, we finally did it! We beat our rivals (WA 372.3 – ASU 370.1), breaking a 15-year losing streak, and this was no ordinary win either. The competition was awfully close the entire time, and even though the Sun Devils had more difficult routines, our Dawgs' level of execution was noticeably far and above. This kept the competition close and on the last event the Sun Devils only led by a couple of points. What the Dawgs did on high bar that night will be forever etched into my mind. They hit routine after routine (only having to count one mistake) and we took the lead by just 0.2 with only one athlete left to go. **Ben Bloom**, 5th-year senior, and 2nd-year team captain ended up hitting the routine of his life. Ben caught all four of his enormous releases and stuck his dismount, clinching the win! It was one of the most incredible experiences I have ever been lucky enough to be a part of, and one that everyone on this team will remember for the rest of their lives.

How can a team top that? Right? Well, we still had one competition left. The GymACT Collegiate Nationals on May 15th, against nine other self-funded teams from across the nation: NY Alliance, Georgia United, KC United, Northern Illi-

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Season Review

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nois, SC United, Temple, Rocky Mountain Pride, UIC, and Arizona State. This Nationals was unique as it was held in conjunction with the Junior National Championship. This allowed for the kind of spectator crowd that this team has only seen a few times in the last 40 years.

Despite trying to downplay the pressure to beat ASU again, it was impossible to avoid. We wanted to beat them again, and knew it would take another incredible performance. They competed with everything they had, and even though we came up short of another win against ASU, we placed 2nd as a team and came away with multiple All-Americans and a National Champion!

Here are the Huskies that earned All-American status: **Alex May** – Floor (3rd place), **Luka Sisauri** – Pommel Horse (1st place!), **Joe Mischke** – Rings (5th place), **Jameel Ali** – Rings (2nd place), **Adam Kerwin** – Parallel Bars (3rd place) **Andrew Layman** – Vault (5th place) & All Around (6th place), and **Ben Bloom** – Rings (4th place), High Bar (6th place), & All Around (3rd place).

I am so proud of these young men, for everything they have accomplished both in and outside the gym. I wish the seniors (**Ben Bloom, Alex May, Zak Kuest, Alex Forcos, and Kyle Hendren**) happy and successful lives, and now look forward to another, even better, season! GO DAWGS!!!

W

Your 2020 - 2021 Huskies



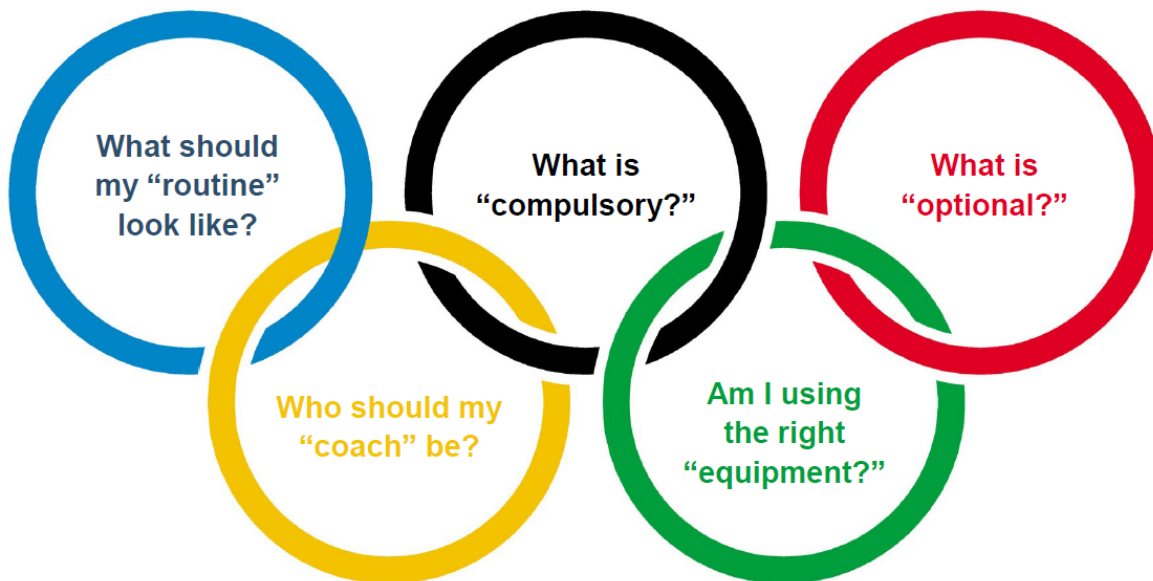
Back row: Head Coach Jeff Crockett, David Roane, Alex May, Ben Bloom, Riley Sutton, Luka Sisauri, Adam Kerwin, Perry Lightfoot, Alex Forcos, Kyle Hendren, Assistant Coach Bob Young

Front row: Andrew Layman, Zak Kuest, Brody Lusk, Connor Pattison, Jameel Ali, Parker Calomiris, Sebastian Barquero, Oscar Hemmert, Joseph Mischke



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Mark K. Oliver
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Former UW Men’s Gymnastics Team Captain

Meet the Team: Thoughts from our Departing Seniors

by Mark Russo



Zak Kuest



Alex May



Ben Bloom



Alex Forcos



Kyle Hendren

Now that you are a senior and have completed your time with the team, how did the actual experience of being on the team compare with your expectations as a freshman?

ZK: As a freshman, I saw the UW team as a way to continue competing after my time in the JO program. I quickly learned that competition is a small fraction of the team's purpose. Between gaining a passion for integrity, hard work and creating life-long relationships, my time on the team has shown me what commitment means.

AM: I had expectations that I would be invited within this friendship circle and my expectations have been exceeded. Relationships with my teammates past and present, coaches, and even Board members have made my time on the team extremely exciting and spontaneous. So much hard work and effort goes into this team and seeing that from a freshman's perspective versus a senior's was a big eye-opener. I've attended several Board meetings and taken the time to get to know the people who work behind the scenes, and am extremely grateful for the skills they bring to this program to further its success.

I was hoping to receive a positive mindset and good work ethic that I could apply to life outside the gym. On top of that I was looking for a group of people to go to for advice as I begin my adult life. Being on this team taught me how to be a leader and I've learned that you really have to read people's emotions and develop trust before you can make an impact. With the coaches it's being comfortable enough to have a conversation with them and create that safe communication space to better your gymnastics.

BB: When I was a freshman I had no idea what to expect, but the experience of being on the team was better than anything I could have hoped for. Traveling, training, and competing with a group of guys all striving for the same goal creates a camaraderie unlike any other. This team will forever be my second family and I know I will look back on my time on this team with memories I will cherish for the rest of my life.

For most of my gymnastics life I didn't have many teammates my age to train alongside. As a freshman joining the team I was most excited about finally having a community of people all with the desire to be the best gymnast they could be. Having this second family gives the feeling of having a place where you belong, like you are a part of the pack, enabling you to accomplish so much more than what you ever thought was possible.

I learned firsthand that working in a group like this is the most motivating experience for me. Having teammates to fall back on when you are in the gym and maybe not having the best day, and hearing your teammate say one positive thing or seeing a teammate push through something they have been struggling with can be the turning point of your practice to put you back into that positive mental place.

AF: Coming onto the team, I was excited to experience a team atmosphere with such high energy. Competitions definitely seemed way more intense and high-stakes, and it was a learning experience to figure out how to compete with the added pressure. I think through the last four years, I learned a lot about myself as a gymnast and athlete, and feel that I'm able to train smarter than my freshman year.

KH: In my first year on the team, I was not entirely sure what to expect and was primarily hoping to gain confidence and build more skills. Before joining, I had seen videos of high-level team gymnasts performing difficult skills, making me wonder if I would fit in or have any chance at competing. I worried I would stick out in practices and fall short of completing the assignments. However, my experience was a lot more enriching than I expected. I

managed to make the competitive lineup each year, even the years I was returning from injuries or seasons during the pandemic. Further, I learned how to get along with all kinds of people, adapt to variable commitments, overcome failure, and work toward accomplishing team goals.

What was your favorite part of practice? Competitions? Fundraising? What made each of these your favorite?

ZK: My favorite part of practice was the relief of meeting a frustrating goal after months of hard work. My favorite part of competitions was the high-energy environment that we created as a team. For fundraising, the best part is the team we come out as after such intense work and reliance on one another.

AM: My favorite part of practice was dismount day. I have always enjoyed a high-energy dismount day with everyone yelling their heads off. Competitions? My favorite part is being the person who can huddle everyone up and get them excited and confident to perform. I think the reason why these two things are my favorite is that I'm going to look back on and be proud of them.

BB: My favorite part of practice is when I find the flow of a certain skill or sequence that hasn't been working and it finally clicks and everything just feels effortless. When gymnastics feels effortless I know my training has paid off and that feeling plus the inherent enjoyment of the skill is so rewarding. My favorite part of competitions is getting to pop off after hitting a really good routine. Also I love getting to scream the Go-Dawgs chant when my teammates stick a landing after hitting a clean set. Some of my favorite moments from fundraising were at the end of a long weekend after the team had worked two or three moves and had a competition in between. Everyone is completely exhausted and delirious. There is a weird energy that you get after working that hard. Everyone just starts acting silly because you've been working for so long and so hard that you are on the brink of going crazy. And when you finally finish everything that needs to be done for the weekend, the feeling of accomplishment is especially rewarding.

AF: My favorite part of practice was always working on the details of my routines, really focusing on my form, handstands, and sticks. It always gave me a clear goal of what to work toward, and I enjoyed the challenge. My favorite part of competitions was being able to travel and see the other teams. It gave us an opportunity to show what we had been working so hard for. For fundraising events, I was always just entertained by how the team found ways to make equipment moves fun. It felt like there was always something chaotic happening.

KH: My favorite part of practice was getting to train with such a high-level team. I loved learning new skills and working toward competition shape with experienced coaches. Also, I enjoyed feeling like I was a part of something bigger than myself. My favorite part about competitions was traveling and competing as a team, instead of as an individual. I liked visiting new states and getting to know my teammates better, grateful that I was able to contribute to the team score. My favorite part about fundraising was getting to know the team outside the gym. I enjoyed visiting different gyms and new meet venues while feeling like I was contributing tangibly to the team.

As unfortunate as the last two seasons were, did you find any silver linings? What do you miss most from before?

ZK: On the team side, my silver lining has been getting the gym to ourselves during practice. We definitely don't get enough hours, but having access to all the equipment while in the gym helped immensely. What I missed most was traveling with the team. I didn't get to travel much until last season, which was cut short.

AM: Yes; I did make some new hobbies and spent most of the COVID summer hiking, fishing, and camping. I managed to put on a good tan and catch some Coho salmon with Mark. What I missed most while being in Colorado was my team in Washington. I don't have family in the state, so the team was my family.

BB: Traveling with the team was what I missed the most. Traveling to competitions in other states, all expenses paid, is a special feeling. It feels like you have made it; like your gymnastics is important and has value. My silver lining came from the second quarantine in November, when my ankle injury was fresh and I was able to rest it for three months without feeling like I was missing out on much.

AF: I think one silver lining that came out of the changes these past two seasons is the new virtual competition format. I think it's really cool how we were able to work around travel restrictions and develop a new way for com-

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Meet the Team: Departing Seniors

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petitions to take place online, which could possibly be a useful tool for the future. Although, I do miss getting to travel as a team and getting to explore the different areas that we visited.

KH: The last two seasons were tumultuous, and I missed going into the gym regularly. However, the challenges helped me become more adaptable, and the time away from the gym reminded me how much I love gymnastics. I also realized gymnastics is really "just gymnastics," there are many more important things going on around us.

Compare your academic learning to your team learning. Which do you prefer, and why?

ZK: I didn't realize it before joining the team, but I was hungry for this kind of team environment. Team learning came quickly to me. Academic learning did not come as easily, but I am enjoying the challenge.

AM: Well, my academics were all over the place. I didn't know who I was or feel comfortable with what I wanted to do until this past year. So for the majority of time spent on this team I preferred the gym, because quite simply I enjoyed the sport. The team gave me the confidence to do what I love.

BB: Both academic learning and team learning had their challenges. My struggle in academics was that often I would leave things to the last minute, which was stressful because then I'd basically have to spend an entire day and possibly night to catch up. Unfortunately it was hard to break the habit because I would still get a good grade on the assignment or test even though I procrastinated, so I didn't feel like I needed to change anything.

Team learning was a different kind of stressful because the assignment is always due at the end of the day; no matter what, you're always racing against the clock to finish what you're supposed to get done that day. It also takes a tremendous amount of mental energy and focus to get your body to do what you want it to in gymnastics.

Both academic learning and team learning are rewarding; seeing your work pay off with an A on a test or a stuck dismount at the end of a routine feels really good. I have to say even though team learning stresses me out more often than academic learning, team learning feels even more rewarding because I have to push myself further out of my comfort zone to succeed.

AF: Academic and team learning are very different with the lessons they teach, but both taught me to be patient and to keep working at it, despite the challenges.

KH: At the University of Washington, I learned how to study, think critically, and relate positively to my surroundings. With Washington Men's Gymnastics, I learned to work with a team, adapt to new situations, and overcome obstacles. I am grateful to both learning experiences for helping make me the person I am today.

What do you plan on doing next year?

ZK: I've applied to UW and plan to continue my academic career if I am accepted. If not, I'm planning on working as a physical therapy assistant to get some experience.

AM: I will be finishing up my audio engineering, mixing, and mastering studies, and plan to move back to Colorado to be with my siblings and parents.

BB: I am applying to graduate schools for physical therapy which will start in 2022. Next year I will be working as a PT aide, coaching, teaching dance classes, and possibly looking into becoming a judge.

AF: I plan to finish my degree at UW this fall, then take a gap year before possibly applying to grad schools.

KH: In the coming year, I plan on taking the MCAT, completing a post-baccalaureate program, and volunteering at my local hospital and food bank. At the end of the year, I will be applying to medical schools and hopefully working a clinical job.

Is your life path any clearer now than when you began college and joined the team?

ZK: Yes. Joining the team, I had little expectation for myself and figured I would work on an AA since I needed to take classes to be on the team. I now have an AAS and am on my way to becoming a PT. I would not be in this

pursuit if not for the support of the team and the characteristics I have gained.

AM: Yes; I've learned that I don't need to work an office job and work to live. I can choose to do what I'm passionate about and live to work.

BB: Unfortunately, I think it's become less clear for me now that I am facing such a wide array of possibilities. Before I joined the team, my scope was narrow with gymnastics and school: I knew I wanted, and had to, do both. Now I feel as if it's widened like I could go anywhere and do anything, and it's hard to narrow down what I want to do. Do I want to stay on the path that I have been on or work toward something new?

AF: I'm excited for a new stage in my life where I can explore other opportunities, but plan to keep gymnastics in my life in some form.

KH: I went into college as a pre-med student. However, I was scared of the commitment and briefly switched to engineering. Before transferring to the University of Washington and joining the team, I switched back to pre-med. At the University of Washington, I volunteered at the campus hospital and shadowed doctors, solidifying my desire to remain pre-med and major in biology. Managing all the time commitments that came with the team, schoolwork, and extracurriculars showed me that I could handle the rigors of studying medicine.

What would you say to an incoming freshman eager to join the team? What would you say to one who is not?

ZK: To the eager freshman coming in: Buckle up, you are in for a fun and bumpy ride. It will be a tough journey, but you are right to be eager, it's worth every minute. To the not-so-eager freshman: Joining this team is a huge change, and it may take some time to adapt. Trust your peers; they all have reasons they are still on the team, you will discover yours soon enough.

AM: I would say to the one eager to join that they are going to have the time of their life. To the individual not so eager, that they would be missing out on an amazing lifetime experience that will shape the adult they become.

I'd also just like to thank the Board members and all the coaches I've had while on this team. Thank you Mark, Giancarlo, Jeff, and Bob. I'm excited to stay in touch and keep getting updates on the guys. Lastly, to my team thank you for the opportunity to lead you all. I've grown so much as an individual being in a captain position, and to the next captains let me know if you need some advice. I love all you guys. -Alex, aka "Papa"

BB: To a freshman eager to join the team I would say keep asking yourself what you want to achieve from your gymnastics career. Having a goal and constantly asking yourself if your actions align with that goal will keep your motivation up so that you can work as hard as you possibly can everyday in the gym because your time on the team goes by way faster than you think.

To a freshman who has heard of the team, but maybe thinks that this team or gymnastics in general isn't the path for them, I would say that this sport and this team will push you to your limits and that is where you will find the most growth. It's "easy" to grow in the sport of gymnastics and especially on this team because gymnastics will always demand the most effort, sacrifice, and dedication from you. There will always be adversity for you to overcome because gymnastics challenges you every time you walk into the gym and each challenge you overcome will grow you as a person.

AF: I would tell any freshman joining the team to give it time for you to adjust. Freshman year can be the hardest, balancing intense workouts with college-level classes. You shouldn't expect to fully know how to deal with it at first, but over your four years on the team, you'll get better at it and gain valuable life skills for the future.

KH: To an incoming freshman who is eager to join the team, I would advise them not to burden themselves with large expectations. I would encourage them to trust the process and turn to their upperclassmen for advice and help. Further, I would remind them to enjoy the ride because the time passes very quickly. To an incoming freshman who is anxious about joining the team, I would tell them to try not to worry. If they love gymnastics and are willing to work hard to continue doing it in college, the experience can be extremely rewarding.

Thank you, Washington Men's Gymnastics, for giving me a chance to continue the sport I love in college and for being such a big part of my college experience. **W**

Where Are They Now? An Update on Husky alum **Erik Huntzicker**

by Mark Russo

Through the virtual world, I caught up with Class of '92 UW gymnast Erik Huntzicker, the most flexible gymnast I have ever coached! I asked him some questions and below are some of his responses. One of my favorite moments with Erik, which he alludes to below, had to be the time at Santa Monica beach when, without any sort of warm-up or notice, Erik grabbed some sand and "chalked up" with it. Then he hopped up on one of several beach high bars and proceeded to perform five beautiful Stalders in-a-row with no grips!! Needless to say, many onlookers and team members were blown away by his casual display!

I also have to add his original half pirouette on parallel bars in splits. No big deal, right? But Erik was so flexible that when the pirouette was performed, he was able to rotate through his hips effortlessly so that his legs did not move creating a definite optical illusion. It was a classic Erik Huntzicker move and it's good to see that Erik retains the class he showed while on the team. Thank you Erik, for being such a vital member of the teams of Huskies!

First off, tell us what you are currently doing?

I currently live in Newark, California, a small town at the eastern end of the Dumbarton Bridge in the San Francisco Bay Area. My home, which I share with two German Shepherds (who permit me the illusion of owning the place) is about equidistant from San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose, so you might say I live in the middle of the Bay Area and just on the edge of Silicon Valley. I do not, however, work in the high-tech industry. Rather, I somehow managed to find a relevant application for my Biology degree from UW and have worked as a scientist in the biotech and pharmaceutical industry for the past 25 years. Most of my days are spent in the surprisingly mundane tasks of managing a team of scientists working to develop new cancer treatments. When I am not working, I may be found out walking the dogs, pruning the roses, running a 10K every now and then, or making road trips to a bit of the high desert of New Mexico, where I plan to retire one day.

Describe why you chose to go to Washington and how you were recruited, as well as your perceptions of the team while you were here.

My connection to the UW Men's Gymnastics team goes back to the late 1970's and early '80's when I was a young gymnast in Oregon. No one in Northwest gymnastics

did NOT know about the UW Men's team back then. Especially after the team became a club sport, there were always one or two meets each year where we saw the UW men competing alongside us younger fellows. It was a time in men's gymnastics when many college programs, including the UW program, had been defunded and only well-funded programs like Nebraska, Stanford, and UCLA dominated the scene. I was struck by the UW men who seemed to be doing gymnastics only for the love of the sport. Little did I know then that I would one day be a part of that team.

I eventually ended up at UW in much the same way I have ended it up in any other situation in my life: not because I planned it, but because that's the way it happened. Stanford refused to grant me acceptance, Oregon didn't have a gymnastics team, so Washington it was. I was certainly never an elite gymnast and never even made it to Class I, so it's doubtful I would have found a place on any other team. But somehow, the UW team seemed happy to have me, and so began a very important chapter in my life, one that I will never forget.

My original impression of the UW team from boyhood was confirmed when I arrived in Seattle in September of 1987. The UW men did gymnastics because of their love of the sport. They certainly didn't do it for fame or money. From the University, they had, at most, grudging tolerance and certainly no financial support. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and I wouldn't have understood it if someone had explained it to me. I had to live it to understand.

In coming to UW at that particular time, I met a group of men from all walks of life who were working for a common purpose: to carve out a space (in a little corner of Hec Ed) to do the best gymnastics they could as a team. We worked at improving our skills, but we worked equally hard at supporting the team: ushering football games, moving equipment for the women's meets, begging for money, all while dreaming of breaking the 240 barrier at the PAC-10 Championship. I know scoring has changed since then, but trust me, that was a big deal for us. (*Ed. note: That was when 10.0 was still the maximum routine score.*)

Describe a memorable moment or incident that occurred while you were on the team.

There were a lot of very memorable things that happened along the way from impressing tourists and locals alike with some impromptu ring and high bar routines at

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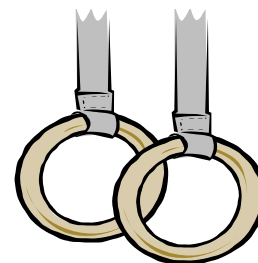
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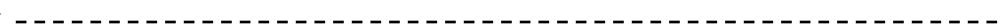
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Where Are They Now: Erik Huntzicker

Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, to getting stuck in The-Middle-of-Nowhere, California on our way to PAC-10's at Berkeley when our borrowed RV broke down and then having to sleep on someone's floor in San Francisco, to navigating the drunken crowds around UCSB in a rented station wagon and sleeping on someone else's floor in Isla Vista because we couldn't afford a hotel, to getting in a three car pile-up in the middle of a blizzard on the way back from a meet in Vancouver, BC. And that's just the tame stuff. I didn't even mention the Great Husky Stadium Riot of 1989.

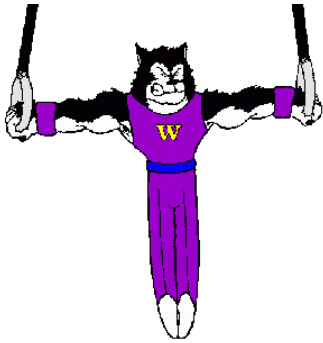
Perhaps more important to me, though, are the memories of all the everyday things: getting up at 5AM in the dark of a Seattle winter and staggering into Hec Ed past the life-size picture of Detlef Schrempf in order to subject ourselves to Mark Russo's infamous Enduro workouts, all those endless hours of sticking drills, the never ending quest for a "C" move we could actually do, cheapskate team dinners at China First on the Ave, summer workouts followed by a dive into Lake Washington down at the Boathouse. We didn't have much, but we made the most of it and we did it as a team.

Why do you continue to support the team?

I definitely wouldn't be the person I am today without my time on the team. I would like for young men at UW to have the same opportunity I had to pursue something objectively good – excellence in sport – while being part of a group of men working toward a common goal.



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In This Issue...

Season Review, Alumni Update, and more...

June 11, 2021

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