

UW gymnasts toil anonymously

No glamour or perks for this team

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Check out UW gymnast Jeff Crockett's remarkable high-bar move, "The Crockett," and other highlights. Go to YouTube.com and enter "Jeff Crockett" in the search field.

Some of the nation's most accomplished collegiate gymnasts can be found at University of Washington women's gymnastics meets -- setting up and tearing down equipment.

Unlike the women's team, the UW men's gymnastics team is not officially recognized by the university's athletic department, so it doesn't get the perks - such as all-expenses-paid travel to competitions - other teams might take for granted.

Hence the work moving equipment, ushering at home football games and renting out gymnastics scoring systems. The money earned goes to pay for this year's trips to meets at Arizona State, Stanford and the Air Force Academy, among others.

It may not have the glamour of Huskies football, but team members said it doesn't matter.

"All my life I've been in gymnastics," said Kevin Perkins, now in his fourth year with the team. "I never let it go. I have to be a part of gymnastics."

"I like the work," junior Jeff Crockett added. "It's kind of nice not to have something handed to you."

Crockett, a 19-time All-American who won the all-around competition at the 2006 National Collegiate Championships, could be considered one of the most successful male UW gymnasts in a decade, head coach Mark Russo said.

Crockett's signature maneuver -- a release move where he lets go of the high bar and performs a laid-out front somersault with two twists before catching the bar again -- has never been done by any other gymnast. His goal is to represent the U.S. at a World Championships, where the move, if performed correctly, would be named after him.

Crockett isn't the first UW gymnast to do something no one else has done before. In 1993, Mike Williams became the first U.S. man to perform a triple back somersault in the floor exercise, a move few gymnasts in the world have ever attempted.

Crockett said he isn't put out that his team is virtually unknown among UW students. More frustrating to him is that men's gymnastics programs all over the country are drying up.

In 2001, there were 24 U.S. colleges and universities that had men's gymnastics programs. This year there will be 17, the result of Title IX compliance and budget cuts. Expensive equipment and strong but relatively small fan bases mean NCAA gymnastics is not financially lucrative. In 2007, James Madison University in Virginia cut its men's team, joining a long list that includes UCLA, Michigan and Brigham Young.

In that respect, the UW men's program was ahead of the curve. The university funded the team during the 1960s and '70s, but withdrew its support in 1980.

"Athletic departments are really businesses," Russo said at a recent team practice at Cascade Elite Gymnastics in Mountlake Terrace. "If they would only come out and say that, it would be a lot more clear."

Men's gymnastics was considered a recreational sport at Washington after 1980, but the team's competitiveness with Division I schools, not to mention the enormous training time commitment, didn't fit the definition. In 1998, the team became a registered student organization, keeping its affiliation with the university but dropping its recreational status.

"To get to this level, you have to be a certain type of person; you have to be committed," Russo said. "If you don't like to work hard, there are other programs."

Russo also started the Washington Men's Gymnastics Foundation, whose board of directors meets monthly to discuss fundraising opportunities. The foundation helps pay Russo's salary and for scholarships for in-state students.

But there are limits. The team doesn't get to compete at the Division I NCAA Championships, although it can enter smaller competitions, including the National Collegiate Championships, which are geared toward smaller teams and include some Division II schools.

"We're like gypsies," Russo said. "We go where people allow us to be."