



USA
GYMNASTICS
Begin Here, Go Anywhere

THINK SNOW

U.S. SKI TEAM INVITES GYMNASTS TO COME FLY AWAY

By Tim Sprinkle

Imagine launching yourself 50 feet up into the air, twisting 720 degrees to the right as you come around for the first of three back flips. Sound like some sort of zero gravity gymnastics routine? It could, or maybe the very real sport of inverted aerials, a high-flying subset of freestyle skiing that features snow-covered ramps and some of the most hair-raising acrobatics in the world today.

The sport has grown by leaps and bounds ever since it first appeared as an exhibition event at the 1988 Calgary Olympics. From its roots in slope side hot-dogging, aerial skiing has become the bold, brassy cousin of more traditional ski events like downhill and slalom. And since it is characterized by complex, twisting aerial maneuvers, it's also becoming a popular alternative for gymnasts looking for a new challenge and another chance at international competition.

"There's really nothing that compares to the kind of air you can get on skis; it's an incredible feeling," says Brian Lake, Aerials Development Coach with the U.S. Ski Team. "And, in the acrobatic sense, with the aerial awareness that's involved, the two sports are very similar."

So similar, in fact, that in 2003 the United States Ski & Snowboard Association (USSA) launched an advertising campaign specifically designed to recruit former gymnasts to the U.S. Ski Team. Featuring the slogan, "Fly With Us," the effort has brought thousands of new faces out to the slopes and launched several high-flying careers. The program, held every summer at the USSA's training camps in Utah and New York, stresses that no prior skiing experience is necessary. And don't worry; novices spend a long time perfecting their form on the water ramp and trampoline before ever hitting

the snow.

"We only had five girls competing at the 2002 U.S. National Championships," Lake, a one-time gymnast himself, says, "and we've since grown to more than 15, almost all from gymnastics. It's usually a pretty easy transition for them, it just takes an acrobatic background and a little fearlessness."

It worked for Nikki Stone, who struck gold at the 1998 Nagano Olympics after trading in her chalk dust for a pair of skis. She credits her success to 20 years of gym training, and recommends the sport to gymnasts who are finished with their gymnastics careers.

"After gymnastics I saw this chance to get outside, be in the sun, and have music playing while I was basically just out having fun on the ramp. What's not to like?"

She has since retired from competition, but has nothing but good things to say about her transition from gym to snow.

"Aerials offered a new freedom for me," she says. "It was fun, it was exhilarating, and you're basically getting higher in the air than any sport other than sky diving. I just fell in love with it. And for gymnasts, it's something fun and exciting to try before giving up on sports all together."

So far, the "Fly With Us" program has been a success for the USSA, boosting the U.S. team in the face of growing competition from China and former Eastern bloc countries like Russia and Belarus. In light of this growth, officials will be extending the program to diving specialists this year, as well.

Interested in giving aerial skiing a try? Many ski areas now offer weekend workshops designed to give beginners a taste of the high-flying experience. These courses generally focus on simple moves off of a water ramp, but they are a great way to get some exposure to the sport without risking a huge time commitment. From there, it's on to the USSA camps and their full-scale development programs. The sky, quite literally, is the limit.

"The gymnasts that come to our workshops have the new challenge to learn skiing," says Chris Haslock, a former World Cup skier and U.S. team coach who now heads up the freestyle program at Utah Olympic Park in Park City, "but since they already have the balance and athletic ability, they often pick it up very quickly. Just look at the current makeup of the U.S. team. Almost all of the girls were involved in gymnastics in one way or the other before coming to aerials."

Another thing that Haslock, who works on the front lines of U.S. aerial development, has noticed, is that the gymnasts in his freestyle workshops are starting to stick with the sport for the long haul.

"The women's program is definitely on the rise right now," he says. "We're not truly there yet, but there's a new guard coming in and things are looking very good for the future."

This article is a perfect example of the USA Gymnastics slogan, "Begin Here. Go Anywhere." Gymnastics is a great foundation and can lead you in many unique and exciting directions.

For more information about the Fly With Us program and aerial skiing in general, visit the USSA's web site at usskiteam.com/flywithus.



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