

gymnastics

Tom Truedson: After years in shadows he's got his own spotlight

By MIKE MARINO
Emerald Sports Editor

Recruiting is a funny business. Coaches tell high school athletes to choose their team because, they promise, when the kid is a senior he'll be the number one man.

The merits of this claim can be argued until all are blue-in-the-face, but for Oregon gymnast Tom Truedson, they've all rung true.

"It's kinda nice," the senior grinned. "The last time I was the number one man was my senior year in high school."

For most of his pommel horse career, Truedson has been in the shadow of other greats. At Hinsdale High School near Chicago, he was in the background behind some guys named Ted Marcy, Chuck Walters and Curt Rodgers. Marcy, who later starred at Stanford, is considered by many to have been the greatest horseman this country ever produced. Walters was the 1976 NCAA champion.

But it was Rodgers, who as a senior at Oregon was named an All-American on the pommel horse for the second straight year last season, whom Truedson ended up following.

"I came here not only because of Curt but because of the competition," he said. "When somebody is better than you, you improve with them."

At Oregon in 1975, Truedson found himself third behind Rodgers and Joe Percival, Oregon's "number one" who was to be voted All-America later that year. "Joe really motivated me in my freshman year," he continued. "He wasn't afraid to tell me what he thought of my routines, and he gave me a lot of pride."

"I decided then that when I was a senior, I would be number one, even if they brought somebody else in."

Which was pretty bold for a guy who almost never got started. He was told by his high school coach that as a freshman, he wouldn't make it. "I tried out and he cut

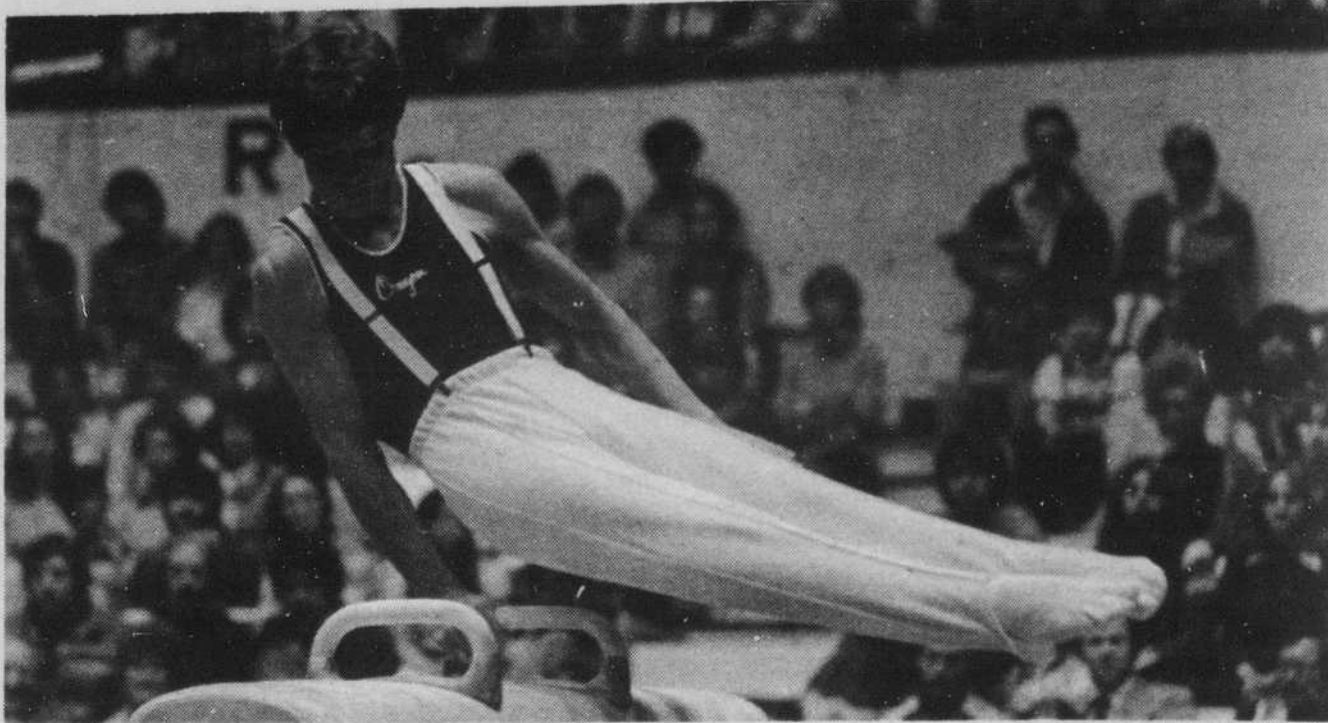


Photo by Steve Schneider

This performance against Arizona State Friday night brought Tom Truedson a 9.7, the top score in the country so far this year. After a few years of being "the other guy" on the pommel horse, Truedson is now acknowledged as the top man in the country, if not the world.

me," Truedson recalled, "but I told him I thought I had what he was looking for. I had run cross-country but didn't like it, and wanted to try gymnastics."

"But then he told me, 'Tom, you don't have any talent.'"

That might have been the whole ball of wax right there, but he stayed with it. And at that, he was

somewhat forced on to the pommel horse. "I really did have no talent," he laughed. "I got dizzy when I tumbled and I wasn't strong enough for the rings, so I couldn't be an all-around man. That left the horse."

The apparatus looks sedate enough, but most will agree it's likely the hardest event of all. Truedson, though, makes it look easy. After beginning his routine rather slowly, Truedson will fly into a series of leg kicks, or scissors, that vaguely resemble a helicopter in a stiff wind.

"I've been told I do things flashy," he said. "And a lot of times I'll pick up my kicks if I think I need to boost my set."

The excitement has various results. One is that some picture him as a creature with extremely long legs, resembling a circus clown on stilts. More to the point, though, the kicks usually get the audiences going.

"I love it when people go nuts," he mused. "The noise doesn't bother me, because my coach in high school used to have 35 freshmen scream at me in practice. But I do like the applause—I get disappointed when I don't get it."

Some added disappointment may lie ahead. For unlike Olympic sports, specialists in gymnastics are not allowed to compete internationally.

"It's really unfair when you think about it," he sniffed. "In track they have the decathlete and the specialist, but in gymnastics there's only the all-around guys. I had a friend who wrote a letter complaining about that, but it was probably lost."

So was Truedson when he came to Oregon. "It was all sort of hectic with college and gymnastics, but everyone kept telling me that it would all fall together in my senior year."

And thus it has. A marketing major, Truedson may be an assistant for coach Bill Ballester next season. But for now, he's looking forward to the NCAA championships to be held at Mac Court come April.

"I sat down one day and figured it out," he said. "And the possibility of finishing your senior year with the NCAA meet at home is just nearly impossible."

With a 9.7 registered against Arizona State last weekend, Truedson currently stands as the top side horse-man in the nation. After finishing well in the NCAA last Spring, he and his Duck teammates have a chance for titles at home.

"I could have won an NCAA title if I'd gone to another school," he said. "It came down to going to either Oregon, Oklahoma, or (Cal-) Berkeley. But this (Oregon) was close to the way my high school program worked, and I have a lot of respect for Bill Ballester."

"Plus I'm not envious of anything."

Still, that national title looks mighty inviting. "I want it — not really bad, but I still want it," he said. "I just say that I have to do my best, and right now I feel I'm really close to my potential."

"Besides, I sorta feel like my time has come."

And that's as well-deserved as you can get.

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