

penn state

Nine titles show Penn State has experience

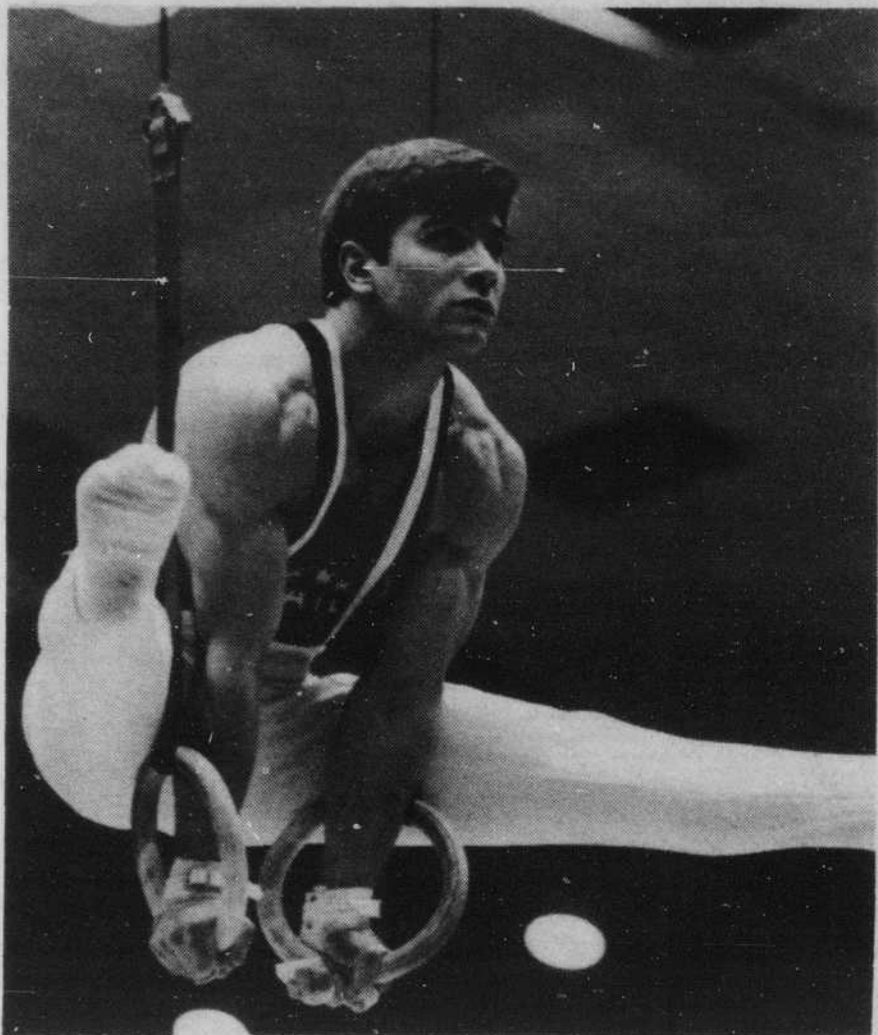


Photo courtesy Penn State

Paul Simon, here on the still rings, teams with Bob Desiderio for a tough all-around duo at Penn State. Simon won the East Regional's parallel bars competition.

By STEVE JETT
Of the Emerald

When confronted face to face with the traditional dilemma of youth and inexperience, Penn State men's gymnastic coach Paul Schwenzfeier took the experimental approach.

Eventually he reaped in the benefits, which is why his gymnast team is in Eugene this week for the NCAA gymnastic championships to be staged at Mac Court. Now he goes searching for the biggest prize of them all, the NCAA title.

The experiment began last fall when Schwenzfeier faced a team that consisted of merely one senior, but an abundance of talent.

"We were not overly worried about the inexperience and youth because we had many individual talents. But we allowed the team to explore into various things and experiment. We let them experiment with various routines and maneuvers and we had been changing up to only three weeks ago," said Schwenzfeier from State College, Pa., last week.

The Nittany Lions, winners of the Eastern Regional Championships staged at Penn State March 24-25, will be joined in the NCAA meet by seven other regional winners. Schwenzfeier is not scared to admit that his squad should be tagged as the meet favorite.

"It looks toward us as the possible favorite, but there is also seven other teams who could definitely win the meet starting with Minnesota and going right on up the list," said Schwenzfeier, in his second season as the Penn State coach.

But Schwenzfeier quickly

added that this year's NCAA meet has a different dimension, as "probably the most wide-open meet for the championship in a long time."

Penn State can hardly be called a stranger to NCAA gymnastic championships. They hold more titles than any school with nine.

"We go to the championships every year in one form or another, either as a team or as individuals," said Schwenzfeier. But last season could hardly be called prosperous, more like painful.

"Last year we were injured and eventually finished second to Indiana State, who went on to finish tied for the championship. This year we are healthy again and hopefully we will be able to go all the way."

Going all the way rests on two particular Lions, team captain Bob Desiderio and Paul Simon. Desiderio and Simon finished first and second in the Eastern Regionals. Schwenzfeier does not have to be told that these two steer the Penn State success.

Last year once again provides the evidence.

Simon suffered from a severely stiff neck, which affected both arms, leading to temporary paralysis. As for Desiderio, he was hampered by recuperation from a broken ankle, but now "he is really cooking."

"They both are performing extremely well and are just reaching their peak," Schwenzfeier said. "Unfortunately, last year they both missed the NCAA because of their injuries."

Simon excels in the parallel bars, the event he won at the regionals and had a team best score of 9.25 this season.

During the course of the season, Simon recorded a 9.45 in the

floor exercise and took third at the regionals. Finally, the junior grabbed third in the parallel bars, which was won by Desiderio.

Desiderio made deep tracks at the regionals. Last year as a sophomore he finished fifth in the Eastern Regionals. This year he swept top honors in the high bar, with a team best score of 9.55. The junior, a former Pennsylvanian high school all-around champion, also finished runnerup in the vault and third in the parallel bars.

All in all, Desiderio and Simon seem to balance out. Simon had the best optional all-around score of 54.95 on the team while Desiderio had the best score for the compulsory all-around with 53.35.

Along with senior pommel horse performer Gary Ross will be a moderate cast of others. Freshman Tom Gray won the floor exercise at the regionals despite what Schwenzfeier referred to as "severe judging." Teammate Vic Trivino finished behind Gray in the floor exercise, using a 9.30 score. Tom Forster finished fourth in the vault while Tony Muffoletto was runnerup in the regional still rings with a 9.55 score. Another is Pat Besong in the Pommel Horse, who Schwenzfeier thinks is "capable of scores in the nines."

Former New York high school champion Kurt Weissend promises to turn heads. Weissend finished seventh in vaulting and ninth on the horizontal bar last year at the Eastern Regionals as a freshman. Weissend, whose father is a former Penn State gymnastics captain, has the second best team score in the vault and third for the parallel bars and horizontal bar.

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