

WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

World champs Hurd, Memmel eye big picture at U.S. Classic

BY WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

Morgan Hurd can feel when the pressure creeps up on her. The pressure — the kind that comes with the territory when you have the title “world champion” on your resume — isn’t just external. It’s internal. She has been one of the best gymnasts on the planet for years. The only thing the 19-year-old Hurd hasn’t done is make an Olympic team, a by-product of the calendar more than anything else. Her first year competing as a senior came in 2017 when she practically willed herself to a world all-around title in Montreal.



Morgan Hurd performs on the floor during the American Cup gymnastics competition in Milwaukee in 2020. Hurd, the 2017 world champion, will take the competition floor for the first time in more than a year on Saturday at the U.S. Classic in Indianapolis.

Having a shot at the 2020 Olympics was always part of the plan. Hurd seemed to be on her way last March when she won the American Cup in what was supposed to be the first major step toward the 2020 Tokyo Games following an occasionally difficult 2019 competition season.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The Olympics were pushed back 12 months. And all the momentum vanished.

In that way, things have been no different for Hurd than for most of the other women hoping to make the U.S. team when it heads to Japan in July.

In one very real way, however, there is a significant difference.

Only Hurd, Simone Biles and Chellsie Memmel will take the floor at the U.S. Classic in Indianapolis on Saturday with a world all-around medal (or in Biles’ case, five of them) stashed away somewhere. Of those

three, Hurd is the only one without an Olympic medal.

For Biles, the next two months could very well serve as a victory lap of sorts. For the 32-year-old Memmel — the 2005 world champion and a member of the silver-medal-winning 2008 U.S. Olympic team — this weekend is simply the next surprising step in an improbable comeback.

For Hurd, who lives and trains in Delaware, this is her first and possibly only opportunity to make the Games. And she knows it. And she knows others do too.

“I really have expectations for myself and I know everyone else has too because of what I’ve done in the past,” Hurd said Friday. “But at the same time, I really have to remind myself

and constantly tell myself this, “That that was how many years ago?”

Almost four, which can be a lifetime at the sport’s elite level. The miles — and the injuries (three surgeries on her right elbow alone) — have added up.

“I was a fresh senior (in 2017),” Hurd said. “You know, my body was holding up better. I had been an athlete a lot less time. So I just have to keep reminding myself that where I am now, I’m doing the best that I can do now.”

Hurd plans to use the meet as a foundation she hopes she can build on heading into a busy stretch that includes the U.S. Championships in two weeks and the Olympic Trials at the end of June. She won’t compete on uneven bars this weekend and her rou-

tines on other events will be watered down with an eye toward upping the difficulty in time for Trials.

“My gymnastics may not be up to par as much as I would like, but I honestly have never felt better,” Hurd said. “Just being out there has really boosted my whole morale and gave me a lot of confidence already.”

Regardless of what happens over the next five weeks, Hurd finds herself — and the world — in a different place than when she stood atop the podium at Olympic Stadium in Montreal.

Hurd, born in China before being adopted and brought to the U.S., has become an increasingly vocal supporter of social justice initiatives. She spoke at a “Stop Asian Hate” rally in New York last month. On Friday she wore a T-shirt with “Stop Asian Hate” on one sleeve and “BLM” (Black Lives Matter) on the other. She credited her

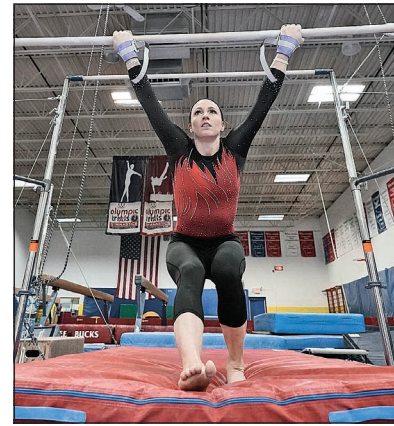
more public advocacy to the bravery of fellow gymnasts who came forward to detail the abuse they suffered during their careers.

“(They) paved the way and opened up the floor to be able to use my voice,” Hurd said. “And I just really thought to myself, too, that all of these things are so much bigger than gymnastics and if gymnastics disappeared tomorrow, these problems would still be there. And I’m a person first and a gymnast second.”

It’s a mentality echoed by Memmel, who retired in the fall of 2012 and had no real plans on returning until the COVID-19 shutdown last spring gave her copious amounts of time on her hands. What started with a simple foray into “adult gymnastics” evolved into something far more serious. There were nerves on Friday when she walked into the arena to practice on the same floor with young women half her age.

She admitted the jitters were “silly” because ultimately she knows she’s playing with house money.

“I think that’s the cool part this time around, that gymnastics is a huge part of my life, but it’s not the only part of my life,” said Memmel, who will compete in two events on Saturday but hopes to expand to all four if she successfully petitions her way into the U.S. Championships. “So if I don’t do well, I’m still a wife and I still have two amazing kids and an amazing family and just this incredible, incredible support system that, you know, has just meant so much to me. So, you know, either way it goes ... I still win.”



Gymnast Chellsie Memmel trains in New Berlin, Wisconsin, in February.

Blazers

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“This is where I should be. I should be in the postseason. That’s just me speaking from the heart and genuinely. If I’m not in the postseason, then it should be a problem,” he said.

Anthony was drafted by the Nuggets with the third overall pick in the 2003 NBA draft. He played in Denver for seven-plus seasons, helping the team reach the Western Conference Finals following the 2008-09 season.

He was traded in 2011 to the New York Knicks, where he spent more

than six seasons. Anthony also had stops in Oklahoma and Houston, but in early 2019 he was traded to Chicago and the Bulls cut him before he played a game.

Anthony hadn’t played for a year when he was signed by the Trail Blazers in November 2019. He instantly sparked the team and developed a chemistry with his teammates while also providing veteran leadership.

This season he’s come off the bench, leading the Blazers’ second unit with an average of 13.4 points per game.

“What he’s done for us in a year and a half has been what we needed.

“This is where I should be. I should be in the postseason. That’s just me speaking from the heart and genuinely. If I’m not in the postseason, then it should be a problem.”

— Carmelo Anthony, Blazers forward

This year, the role that he’s had off the bench has been a big part of the reason why we are where we are,” Blazers coach Terry Stotts said.

Anthony wasn’t with the Blazers yet when they last faced the Nuggets in the playoffs in 2019. Portland won in seven games to advance to the Western Conference Finals, but fell in four games to Golden State.

Likewise, the personnel in Denver has turned over since Anthony left. But the Nuggets are still very aware of the danger Anthony poses.

“You have arguably one of the greatest one-on-one scorers in NBA history in Carmelo Anthony, who’s still doing it at a high level at this stage of his career, which is really impressive,” Denver coach Michael Malone said.

The Blazers are riding momentum into the playoffs, having won 10 of their final 12 regular-season games.

“Mentally, when we’re in a good space as a unit, as a team, we’re in a good space. Confidence-wise we’re in a good space. These are all things that you want to have clicking for you going into the postseason,” Anthony said. “I think right now we have a lot of those things working in our favor heading into this postseason. So we’ve got to stay with that, continue to believe in ourselves, understand what we are up against, understand how hard we worked to get to this point.”

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