

“Beacon of goodness”: NCAA women’s gymnastics is booming

By Will Graves
AP Sports Writer

Sunisa Lee and the rest of the Auburn women’s gymnastics team filed out of Stegeman Coliseum on Georgia’s campus in mid-February, equal parts exhausted and giddy. A happy three-hour trip home awaited after the Tigers edged the Gymdogs on the road for just the second time in program history.

Then the doors to the parking lot swung open and what is normally a low-key part of every away meet became something else entirely. A group of 300 or so fans surrounded the Auburn bus, many hoping to grab Lee, the reigning Olympic all-around champion, or one of her teammates for a selfie. Or a signature. Or a wave. Maybe a smile.

“It’s like we were in a boy band,” longtime Auburn coach Jeff Graba said. “It took us an hour to get out of Georgia. It’s exciting.”

And it’s all part of the show in women’s college gymnastics, a sport whose profile is rising with every perfect score. Every packed house. Every viral floor routine. Every TV broadcast. Certainly at every university — from Clemson (student population 23,000-plus) to Fisk (less than 1,000) — looking to join a movement that is very much having a moment.

While elite programs have been struggling in recent years — the U.S., Canada, England, and Australia are among the countries whose national governing bodies are scrambling to emerge from the cloud of what athletes say is a “toxic culture” — NCAA gymnastics has become a safe space where young women can reclaim control of their careers and in some cases, regain their passion for a sport that can often take far more than it gives.

“It’s more like a positive kind of place,” said Lee, who last August became the sixth American to win the Olympic all-around title.

It’s one of the main reasons Lee stuck to her commitment to Auburn even after her star turn in Tokyo. The relaxation of name, image, and likeness guidelines that let Lee and Olympic teammates Jordan Chiles (UCLA), Jade Carey (Oregon State), and Grace McCallum (Utah) compete in college without forfeiting the chance to cash in on their newfound fame didn’t hurt.

The influx of high-profile Olympians truly began after the 2004 games, though Lee is the first Olympic champion to compete collegiately. The boom is fuelled by something else, too: Competing in



“BEACON OF GOODNESS.” Auburn gymnast Sunisa Lee performs during a meet at the University of Michigan on March 12, 2022 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A record crowd came out to watch Lee, the reigning Olympic champion, and Auburn take on defending national champion Michigan. The arrival of Lee and several of her Olympic teammates at the collegiate level is helping fuel a spike in interest and participation in NCAA women’s gymnastics. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

college plays in stark contrast to the elite world of gymnastics emerging from a torrent of allegations of physical, mental, and emotional abuse.

“We are sort of the beacon of goodness in our sport right now,” LSU coach Jay Clark said. “Our sport has taken so many negative hits for various reasons over the last 5-6 years, people look at college gymnastics as the saving grace.”

This all comes as outlets like the SEC, Big Ten, and ACC Network over the last decade have given women’s gymnastics a level of exposure that didn’t exist a generation ago.

ABC aired the national championships on broadcast television for the first time in a decade last April. This season, ESPN aired more than 60 hours of gymnastics and ABC televised a regular-season meet for the first time when SEC power Florida hosted Alabama. ABC will also broadcast the NCAA finals on April 16 and last week’s four regional meets were all carried on ESPN-plus, with national semifinals returning to ESPN2 on April 14.

“It just goes to show if you put gymnastics on a place that’s accessible instead of some obscure livestream that’s impossible to find, people are going to watch and support it,” said Michigan senior Natalie Wojcik, who helped the Wolverines capture the program’s first NCAA title last spring.

A new approach in the way TV covers the sport has helped. SEC dual meets are packed into taut 90-minute windows on the ESPN-operated SEC Network, with a running score chyron in the corner of the screen to immediately get viewers invested. Throw in school fan base support

— a layer the elite level lacks outside of major international competitions — and the ingredients are there to create a connection even if the casual fan wouldn’t know the difference between a wolf turn and a Yurchenko full. (Pro tip: wolf turns are spins done on balance beam or floor exercise and Yurchenko full is a vault.)

What the casual fan does know, however, is that 10.0 still means perfect. While the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) — the sport’s governing international body — eliminated the 10.0-system in 2006 in favor of one that divides the scores into difficulty and execution and combines the two, the 10.0 remains very much a thing in the NCAA. The idea of attaining perfection is one of the reasons Lee wanted to compete collegiately.

When she received her first 10 for a sublime uneven bars set against LSU in February, the adrenaline rush as she was mobbed by her teammates was real. So was the communal joy.

“We all celebrated it together,” Lee said.

The performance found its way onto SportCenter’s “Top 10,” and bounced from

social media platform to social media platform, another way in which the college gymnasts have been able to spread the sport’s footprint in a way that was unavailable 20 years ago.

LSU sophomore Livvy Dunne’s Instagram and TikTok accounts reach a combined 6.6 million followers and serve, in part, as hype machines for the Tigers. The 19-year-old Dunne understands not everyone who comes to an LSU meet is there because they are focused on the score. She laughs while talking about the young men at a meet this season who wore t-shirts scrawled with invitations to prom on them.

Hey, they’re in the building, right? The bars specialist called helping raise awareness of her sport a “mission.”

“Bringing it to more fans is incredible,” said Dunne, who averaged 9.834 on uneven bars this season for the Tigers, including two scores of 9.90 or better. “Especially for the future. Hopefully, when I’m not here anymore, the fans will still be around.”

They’re certainly there now. LSU led the nation in average attendance (11,691) for the first time in program history while Auburn sold out every home meet this season. Michigan drew a record crowd (12,707) when Lee and the Tigers visited in March. Arkansas moved a home meet to Bud Walton Arena — where the Razorbacks basketball team plays — for the first time when it hosted Auburn.

There have always been strong pockets of support, particularly in places such as UCLA, Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama, and Utah, but the growth is no longer limited to

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