

INDUCTEE PROFILE



Nadine participated on the beam and uneven bars for Penn State's Top 10 gymnastics program from 1983-85.

Flexible determination

DeLeo blazed trail for Blair County gymnasts

By Jim Lane
Altoona Mirror

Most gymnasts who attain any level of success begin at a young age. Nadine DeLeo was no different.

After taking various types of dance lessons, DeLeo ventured into gymnastics. With her parents, Sue and Joe, providing transportation and, more importantly, giving support for trips all over the country, DeLeo developed into an elite gymnast.

She competed in numerous U.S. Federation tournaments and won a PIAA state championship in the floor exercise and four District 6 titles in the 1982 meet while competing for Bishop Guilfoyle High School.

Those successes eventually saw her become the

first — and still the only — Blair County girl to earn a Division I gymnastics scholarship.

Even though a back injury limited her to three years of college competition, DeLeo had a successful career at Penn State. She was a member of Penn State teams from 1983-85 that won NCAA Regional championships and finished as high as No. 7 in the country.

After marrying and settling in the Pittsburgh area, DeLeo coached the North Allegheny High School girls to a pair of WPIAL championships and a pair of PIAA silver medals.

The culmination of an extraordinary ride in the sport of gymnastics comes with DeLeo's induction into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

"This is such a great honor," she said. "I never real-

ly thought it would happen. Just to be the first female gymnast from Blair County to earn a Division I scholarship was great.

"I'm really excited to be selected to the Blair County Hall of Fame."

It all began for DeLeo at the Sigel's School of Dance in Altoona.

"I started taking tap, ballet and acrobatics when I was about 5," she said.

She moved on to gymnastics, and it was at State College where she met Suzanne Yoculan, who was running the Woodward Academy, a training ground for young, aspiring gymnasts. Through the urging and support of people like the DeLeo family, Yoculan eventually started Gemini Gymnastics in Altoona where she continued to coach and train Nadine.

"I think I was about 10 or 11 when she came to Altoona," DeLeo said of Yoculan. "With her help, I continued to grow in the sport."

DeLeo, now 43, began competing in U.S. Gymnastics Federation meets at the area, state, regional and national levels, with Yoculan as her coach, and later at Bishop Guilfoyle High School.

"BG didn't have a team, so I competed independently, and Suzanne was my coach," DeLeo said. "She was such a driven coach and that kind of transferred onto her gymnasts. It definitely transferred onto me. She put a lot of heart and soul into me."

After leaving Gemini Gymnastics, Yoculan went on to coach the University of Georgia gymnastics team, and she's become one of the top collegiate coaches in the country, winning eight national titles.

She will serve as DeLeo's presenter at the Hall of Fame induction.

"It was almost 35 years ago when I coached Nadine," Yoculan said, "but I remember her well as a very talented gymnast, a motivated and intense individual, and a positive, happy kid. I remember the terrific support from her mom, Sue, and the commitment the

whole family made to Nadine's gymnastics."

Because of her success in the USGF and high school meets, DeLeo sent tapes to several college coaches, including Penn State, Nebraska and Pitt, and Penn State offered her a scholarship — the first-ever for a Blair County high school gymnast.

At Penn State, where she was coached by Judi Avenier, DeLeo battled through back injuries but still earned three letters.

Some 20 years later, Avenier, now Judi Markell, said DeLeo's determination separated her.

"By the time she got to college, she had a severe back problem that really held her back," Markell said. "She always had to adjust. She was a very, very

While competing as an independent (Bishop Guilfoyle which didn't have a gym team) Nadine won a PIAA championship in 1982.

from coaching, recalled a meeting with PSU doctors and DeLeo's parents concerning Nadine's physical struggles.

"There were quite a few people who did not think she should do gymnastics anymore, that she might risk future damage," Markell said. "We wanted to make sure her parents understood the risk. But Nadine was just so determined, she was going to do it. Nothing was going to stop her. She really had great spirit."

DeLeo said the opportunity to compete at Penn State outweighed the physical demands.

"My goal had always been to be a Penn State gymnast," she said. "It was something I always wanted to be. I think the injury gave me the perseverance not to quit. My injury was a setback, but it was still definitely worth it."

DeLeo, though, could not compete as a senior and spent the year as a student assistant coach.

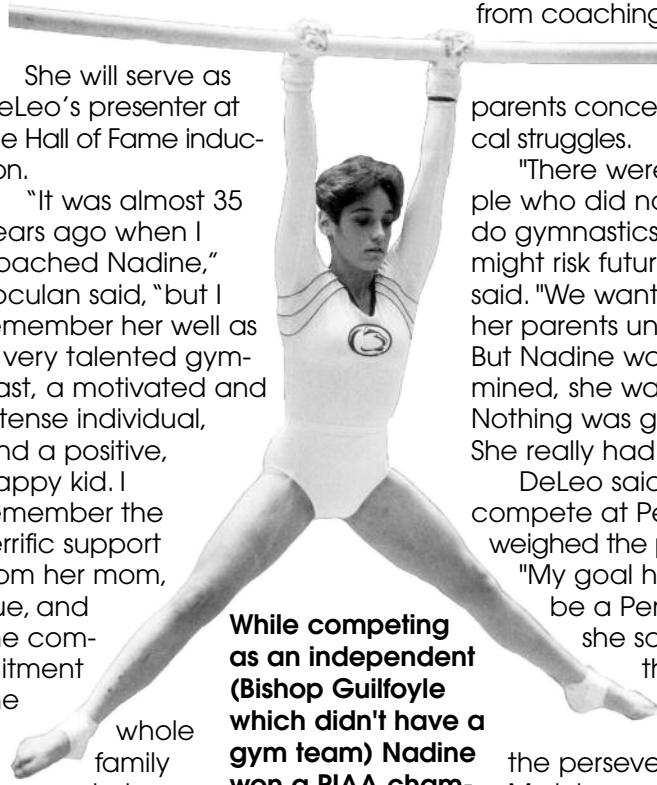
"I have always felt regret for her because she never got to show what she could have been capable of," Markell said. "I feel sure she could have been an All-American on the beam and the bars. That's the regret I have for her ... that you just never know."

DeLeo earned a masters degree in social work at Pitt and has lived in the Pittsburgh area since 1990. She is married to Scott Buchanan, a Somerset native who is director of physical therapy for Tri-State Orthopedics. The couple has two daughters — Sydney, 10, and Madyson, 8.

"They both take gymnastics, and my hope for them is to have fun and enjoy it," DeLeo said. "If they choose to go on and be competitive, I'll certainly support them."

DeLeo said her parents' support helped her succeed in the sport.

"All the time and energy they gave is a real tribute to them," she said. "They were a huge part of my success, and that's why the selection to the Blair County Hall of Fame is such a great honor."



DeLeo bio

Sport: Gymnastics

High school: Bishop Guilfoyle

College: Penn State

Hall of Fame achievement: Three-year letterwinner on the Penn State gymnastics team (1983-85) when Lady Lions were ranked in Top 10 nationally.

Current residence: Valencia, PA

tough girl physically. She endured quite a bit of pain." Markell, who went from Penn State to the University of Florida and is now retired