

Twin City Twister gymnast prepares for Olympic Games

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today, but the person I am as well," Nichols said.

Very quickly, Nichols had turned into one of the best gymnasts the Champlin business has ever produced. She was on the United States World Championship team in 2015 and was a top candidate to make the 2016 Olympic team in Rio de Janeiro until she tore cartilage in her knee three months before the U.S. Trials. While she battled through the injury at trials, she was not selected to be on the team, even as an alternate. "That was devastating," Hunger said, who was on the floor with Nichols and fellow coach Sarah Jantzi as the U.S. team was chosen.

As stunning as the choice to leave Nichols off the team was for Hunger, it ended up changing the course of his short-term future at his gym. Before the trials in 2016, Hunger was ready to leave the sport. His two children, also gymnasts, were finished with their competing careers and he had his eyes set on semi-retiring. But after the shocking result of Nichols being left off the Olympic team, Hunger changed his mind. "I told Sarah [Jantzi], 'I'll stick around for one more cycle to help you out,'" he said.

About the time Nichols was competing for a spot on the Olympic team, a new face arrived at TCT. After training at a gym in Forest Lake for many years, this 13-year-old girl came in with a raw and sloppy form but was determined to get better and better. Her name? Grace McCallum.

OLYMPIAN GRACE MCCALLUM

"Grace was pretty raw and really talented, but a sloppy gymnast," Hunger said. "She could do a lot of skills but none of them looked pretty."

"She wasn't scared," Jantzi, her personal coach,



Sarah Jantzi (left) talks with Elite-level gymnast Levi Jung-Ruivivar. Jantzi began working at Twin City Twisters in Champlin in 2005 and has been the coach of the Elite program for about 10 years. (Photo by Sam Johnson)

said. "She had good air sense and body awareness, but she had bad form."

When McCallum first started at TCT, she was shocked. After being the best gymnast at her old gym in Forest Lake, the Isanti native said she went to "the absolute worst on the team."

"At first, the transition was hard because the caliber of gymnastics was so high here compared to other gyms in Minnesota," McCallum said. "But I think it is exactly what I needed because it pushed me to become a better gymnast. It helped me reach my full potential." Like Nichols did when she turned 13 years old, McCallum soon grew close with Jantzi, not only as her personal coach but a trusted confidante. "I always feel supported by her no matter what, even in the bad days," McCallum said. "She is always there for me and if I'm struggling she'll be like, 'Hey what do we need to do today so you can walk out feeling like you accomplished something and feel good about it and feel successful?'"

Hours upon hours, McCallum trained and worked to perfect her craft in the Champlin gym. While most gyms have the mindset of working at least 30 hours a week, Hunger and the TCT staff have a different philosophy.

"We try to cram into 20 hours a week what other clubs might train in 30 hours," Hunger said. "We try to do it fast and give the gymnasts a life outside the gym. But it is incredibly hard. Our whole staff has had to buy into that."

Efficiency is the name of the game and athletes like McCallum have bought into that culture at TCT. "If you're moving faster through those 20 hours and if you can do it when you're tired, it's going to be that much easier when you go to a competition," Hunger added. "When you're here, you work hard. But when you're done, go. That's been our philosophy since day one."

Coaches, like athletes, have embraced Hunger's efficient mindset. During the past 16 years, Jantzi has been with Hunger every step of the way inside the four walls of TCT. A gymnast herself growing up, Jantzi competed at Central Michigan University, where got a degree in education. After college, she served as a lower-level coach for one year at an action sports camp in Cable, Wisconsin, but realized she didn't want to live out in the "middle of nowhere" permanently. As she searched for coaching opportunities, the Duluth native reached out to Hunger, who she knew previously through her aunt, a gymnastics coach, and friend of Hunger's.

Jantzi asked if there was a spot for her at his gym, to which Hunger replied, "let me see what I can do."

In 2005, Jantzi officially started working at Twin City Twisters. While not a full-time employee, Jantzi wore many hats in her first several years. She was in charge of cleaning the building, vacuuming, and moving the mats, but her favorite role was being the coach of the lower-level gymnasts.

Then when Nichols, 13 years old at the time, arrived on the scene nearly 10 years ago, Jantzi took an increased role at the gym, ascending to the Elite program, which consists of Olympic-caliber athletes. "It takes a lot of extra time," Jantzi said. "But for me, I just loved gymnastics so I was like, 'More time in the gym? Ok, sure I'll do it.'"

'FIVE YEARS OF REDEMPTION'

Fast forward to the 2021 U.S. Team Trials in June down in St. Louis. After being postponed a year earlier due to the COVID-19 pandemic, athletes and coaches alike were anxious to see if an extra year of training and waiting helped or hurt the competitors. Had the trials taken place in 2020, Hunger said he thought McCallum, who looked as good as ever last year, would have been a lock on the team. But six

months before the 2021 trials, McCallum broke her hand, which impacted her performance during the World Championships two weeks before the U.S. Trials.

But she pushed through any discomfort or pain and put on a show in the Gateway City. At the Olympic Trials, McCallum recorded an all-around score of 114.63, which earned her fourth place, two points ahead of fifth-place MyKayla Skinner. But as Hunger and Jantzi knew first-hand, the selection committee had the ultimate sovereignty in deciding who would be on the team.

"I knew that I did everything I could and it was in [the committee's] hands," McCallum said. "I had a good feeling going into the meet but also you never know. Any of us could have gotten that last spot. But I did feel a little stressed and sick to my stomach knowing that in the next couple of minutes I'll know if my dreams came true or if my dreams are shattered."

Her coach felt similar angst. "It was a rough time watching the trials," Hunger said. "We were cautiously optimistic." After the competition concluded, the most agonizing half-hour for every coach, athlete, and parent began. All Hunger and Jantzi could think about was what happened five

years ago, being in the same situation with Nichols. "We don't take anything for granted after seeing how close Maggie got and didn't make it," Hunger said. "It was a pretty excruciating 30 minutes."

But amid doubt and worry, Jantzi had an innate sense that things were going to be different this time around. "I felt Grace was going to make it."

And then the announcement came: McCallum made the team.

"I won't soon forget that feeling," Hunger said, who was sitting in the stands when the team was announced. "It felt like five years of redemption."

For Jantzi, McCallum's accomplishment wasn't merely reflective of her individual success. It was for Nichols. "It was always my goal to get an Olympian," she said. "It's like I did it for two athletes. This is for Maggie too."

REPRESENTING MINNESOTA

When the Olympic Games in Tokyo begin July 23, Hunger will be watching from the comfort of his home in Utah with his wife, two kids, and two grandkids, although he said it will be up to his wife whether or not they watch the events live in the early morning or on tape delay.

Jantzi, however, will

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