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Somersaults and Seminoles

Years ago, the biggest athletic stars at FSU were gymnasts

By Gerald Ensley
DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

They won Florida State's first five national sports championships.

They won 22 individual national championships, and nine members were Olympians.

They were the first FSU team to play — and beat — a University of Florida team.

They appeared on television shows and movie shorts and staged one of the most famous annual shows in FSU history.

They helped their coach start the Tallahassee Tumbling Tots, which has produced three Olympians.

They created the character of Sammy Seminole, who delighted FSU football fans for 18 seasons.

Yet for more than 30 years, the members of FSU's gymnastics program have been largely forgotten. Their program was dropped. Their trophies were lost.

This weekend, FSU is paying official tribute to the program. The university held a reception Friday night at the Varsity Club. Today, the gymnasts will be saluted on the field at halftime of the Chattanooga-FSU football game. Efforts are under way to create a gymnastics statue along FSU's Legacy Walk.

The former gymnasts are smiling.

"Some of us got bitter over the years. We did all we did and (FSU) pretended we never existed," said FSU Hall of Fame gymnast Jack Miles. "But I'm encouraged by the way the new generation is treating us."

FSU Associate Athletics Director Rob Wilson said school officials have never forgotten the gymnastics program: Seven of them, plus their coach, are in the FSU Hall of Fame, and their championships are listed on a banner in Moore Athletic Center commemorating all FSU championships. But Wilson agreed the average fan may be unaware of their achievements "unless they're a good student of history."

"It's important to us as an athletic department to remember all our student-athletes," Wilson said. "The gymnastics program was such a significant part of early FSU history that it is natural to honor them."

Miles is one of two dozen former gymnasts expected to attend this weekend's celebration. Many of them have been gathering for the past several years at self-organized reunions. They have established a Web site. Miles publishes a twice-monthly newsletter.

Men's gymnastics was an FSU varsity program from 1949 to 1961 and continued as a self-supported club sport until 1972. FSU also was home to several nationally ranked women gymnasts in the 1950s, as well as a school-supported program from 1961 to 1970.

The men gymnasts claimed FSU's first national championship — the first national championship for any college or university in Florida — in 1951, when they won the NCAA title. That same year they beat the University of Florida in a dual meet that marked the first sports contest between the schools.

FSU followed with a second NCAA title in 1952, while winning the then-more-prestigious AAU national championship in 1951, 1953 and 1955.

That gave FSU five national championships over five years. From 1950 to 1958, they also won 37 team titles in meets against other universities plus the Swedish, Swiss and Cuban national teams.

Two-time Olympian Bill Roetzheim was the biggest star: Roetzheim won all but one of the points that gave FSU the 1951 NCAA championship. But Miles, Dick Gutting, Chick Cicio, Don Holder, Jack Sharp and Jamile Ashmore were nearly as dominant and joined Roetzheim in the FSU Hall of Fame. Other stars, such as Joe and Carmine Regna, Raphael Lecuona, Joe Calvetti, Gene Rabbit, Jack Ryder and Al Ruda, were equally notable.

"Roetzheim was every bit as big in gymnastics as Charlie Ward was in football," said Ed Fernald, former gymnast and retired FSU vice president, who has been the team's advocate on the Hall of Fame committee. "Many of these guys were as good in their sport as any All-American we've ever had."

The gymnasts were drawn to FSU by legendary coach Hartley Price, who had won six national gymnastics championships at the University of Illinois before founding FSU's program. Price was renowned as a great recruiter and promoter. He created the Tallahassee Tumbling Tots (1949) to promote youth gymnastics in the South. He inaugurated the annual Gymkana, in which FSU gymnasts, Tumbling Tots and other gymnasts wowed crowds with circus-like stunts.

In 1953, the Tumbling Tots program was ceded to the city of Tallahassee, where FSU gymnasts such as Miles, Gutting, Tallahassee artist Ed Jonas and Randy Trousdell, retired Tallahassee parks and recreation director, helped coach future Olympians Ron Galimore, Carrie Englert Zimmerman and Brandy Johnson. The wildly popular Gymkana was held in Tallahassee and other cities from 1949 to 1971.

Price's gifts as a promoter gave rise to the impression he was not a hands-on coach. Certainly FSU gymnasts were a talented, tight-knit group who helped coach each other, but Price, who died in 1977, didn't produce 11 national-championship teams without knowing something about technique.

"Not only could he coach, but he *did* coach," Gutting said. "Price got great athletes after they were good and polished them up."

Gutting was responsible for a famous bit of PR for the program: In 1953, he approached new FSU football coach Tom Nugent and proposed leading the football team onto the field before home games by turning back flips down the field. Nugent, a canny promoter himself, readily agreed — and Sammy Seminole was born.

Actually, the alliterative title was first applied to Gutting's successor, Chick Cicio, in 1956. But members of the gymnastics team served as Sammy Seminole until 1970, when the costumed mascot was eliminated because of concerns about political correctness.

"I was just looking for a free meal," said Gutting, who ate with the football team on Saturdays. "I was never called Sammy anything."

In the 1950s, the gymnasts were stars on campus. They filmed an RKO movie short on Landis Green, "Gym College," that played in theaters around the nation. They appeared on television shows such as the "Ted Mack Amateur Hour," "Dinah Shore Show" and NBC "Morning Show."

"You could walk across campus and more people knew us than the football team," said Joe Taylor, who helped win two AAU national championships. "When RKO made that movie (1955), it was pretty

unusual; other (gymnastics) schools weren't getting that kind of attention."

It is an article of faith among many former gymnasts that jealousy about their success led to the elimination of the program by a football-oriented athletic administration. Miles, noting that the program divvied up fewer than three full scholarships among all team members but traveled extensively, wants to believe it was just a financial decision.

"They disbanded the nationally ranked (men's) volleyball team at the same time," Miles said. "It's just that the university wanted to put more emphasis on major sports."

The former gymnasts concede their performances pale in comparison with those of today's gymnasts, who have the advantage of better equipment, finances and training: "My most difficult routine (on the trampoline) was simpler than the simplest routine today," Gutting said. And most have come to terms with their forgotten role in FSU history: "That's one of the things age softens a bit," Taylor said. "We had pretty good recognition (at the time)."

The thing that does still "stick in our craw," said Gutting, is the apparent loss of the team's trophies. Team members remember dozens of trophies filling Price's office and a Tully Gym display case. FSU has none today. Wilson said the school has searched for them but fears they were tossed out after a 1980s flood in Tully Gym.

Though the gymnasts have been raising money for an \$80,000-plus Legacy Walk statue, Gutting suggests a better memorial: a trophy listing all the program's accomplishments, placed in the Moore Athletic Center. Wilson said FSU officials would "certainly entertain" the idea.

"Since we have none at all, one good trophy might do the job," Gutting said. "It could stand for all we did. That seems worthwhile."
