

Oakville acrobatic gymnasts to represent Canada at world age groups in China

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Perched on her hands, Tessa Hickey carefully draws her legs back, raising them slowly. The 13-year-old's arms tremble slightly as she points her toes skyward.

Under normal circumstances, a headstand might not be a noteworthy feat for a gymnast, except that Hickey is seven feet above gym floor. And performing the move while balancing on the knees of teammate Kelsey Horn, who is also upside down. Horn is holding herself up with her hands on the knees of Sophie Lake, who is leaning back at a gravity defying 60-degree angle, only keeping herself upright by holding on to Horn's feet.

It looks like a graceful game of human Jenga, where one wrong move could bring their tower crashing to the ground.

If you don't immediately recognize it as acrobatic gymnastics, well, you wouldn't be alone.

"I didn't even know it existed," Lake said. "I was in the recreational gymnastics program and a coach came up to me and asked me if I wanted to try it. I really didn't know what it was."

Though the first world championships were held in 1974, acrobatic gymnastics is still relatively new in Canada. It was only recognized as an official discipline in 2009, and the Oakville Gymnastics Club started a program soon after.

And now, others at the club are taking notice.

"I did artistic (gymnastics), but I would watch the routines they were doing in acro," said 10-year-old Juliana Summers. "I really wanted to try it. They were balancing on people. It was so cool."

Lake and Summers are among the gymnasts that will compete at the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group Competition in Putian, China in March. Canada will send an 18-member team, with 14 of them Oakville Gymnastics Club. Five Oakville teams were chosen following a selection event in December.

Acrobatic teams perform two types of routines, a balance routine where athletes demonstrate strength, poise and flexibility and a dynamic routine, which incorporates throws, somersaults and catches. Older age groups perform a third routine which combines elements of the other two.

Don Holmes, the club's head coach who had been overseeing both the tumbling and acrobatics program, brought Scott Middleton, a former coach with the United Kingdom's acrobatics team, and Greg Boosey, a former tumbler and Cirque du Soleil performer, to coach Oakville's acrobatic team.

The athletes train 23 hours a week, six days a week. Middleton said it is a tough training schedule but it has paid off in the athlete's strength and conditioning, which has allowed them to expand their skills.

"It is a lot of hours, especially when you're in school," said Horn, a Grade 11 student at Oakville Trafalgar High School. "It can be hard finding the motivation when you're having trouble with (a skill), but you just have to keep pushing, knowing it will pay off."

"And once you get it," Hickey said. "It's a really nice feeling."

Horn was competing in power tumbling when Holmes suggested trying acro. It was unconventional skills that sold Horn on the change.



Fourteen members of the Oakville gymnastics were named to the Canadian team for the Acrobatic Gymnastics Age Group Competition in China: Juliana Summers, Theodore Rots-Chan, Allison Attard, Ally Swanepoel, Emma Shenko, Tessa Chiricosta, Daniela Mendoza, Jenelle Coutinho, Charlotte Penner, Alexandra D'Souza, Erin Oswald, Tessa Hickey, Kelsey Horn and Sophie Lake.



Theodore Rots-Chan balances Juliana Summers on his hands. They have made the Canadian team for the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group competition in Putian, China in March.



Alexandrea D'Souza, Erin Oswald and Charlotte Penner practise their routine in preparation for the the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group Competition in China in March.

"I liked it better than tumbling," she said. "I like the wow factor it has."

The 14 athletes going to worlds will also be going to Belgium in three weeks in order to get some experience competing at an international competition. Horn and Lake competed together in Portugal last year, but Hickey is a newcomer to the group, having joined them in the summer as their new 'top.'

Summers' partner in the mixed pair, Theodore Rots-Chan, has been training in acrobatics for three years, twice as long as his partner. He was involved in dance when his younger brother convinced him to try the sport. While his brother has since moved to tumbling, Rots-Chan, a Grade 7 student at St. Dominic, is finding success in acro.

While the 12-year-old hasn't competed internationally before, he got a taste of performing under pressure as part of the opening ceremonies for the Pan Am Games.

"I don't think I'll be as nervous," he said. "I sort of have experience performing in front a million people."

Oakville will also be sending Allison Attard, Ally Swanepoel and Emma Shemko (women's group 11-16); Tessa Chiricosta, Daniela Mendoza and Jenelle Coutinho (women's group 11-16) and Charlotte Penner, Alexandra D'Souza and Erin Oswald (women's group 12-18)

Middleton said the competition in Belgium will be important preparation for worlds.

"The more they do their routines, the more it becomes muscle memory," he said. "And if they can get used to doing it on a big stage, it's going to help them in China."

The club will be holding a fundraiser for its athletes going to worlds Tuesday, Feb. 2 at the Oakville Club, 56 Water St. in Oakville from 7-9:30 p.m. Athletes will demonstrated their skills, there will a silent auction and food will be served. Tickets are \$50 and include one beverage ticket. For tickets, contact sghorn@stikeman.com or visit the club at 1415 Third Line, Oakville.

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Daniela Mendoza and Jenelle Coutinho use their legs to support Tessa Chiricosta as they train for the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group Competition in China Mar. 23-29.



Sophie Lake forms the base balancing teammates Kelsey Horn and Tessa Hickey, top, as they prepare for the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group Competition in China in March.



Emma Shemko, Ally Swanepoel and Allison Attard are among the 14 members of the Oakville Gymnastics Club that will compete at the March to Acrobatic Gymnastics World Age Group Competition in China March 23-29.