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## Atkinson stars on mat and in classroom

Gymnastics Sports



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QUADRUPLE THREAT: ASU junior Mary Atkinson has been the Sun Devils' most consistent all-around competitor this year. She is also in Barrett, the Honors College and is the co-vice president of the Student-Athletic Advisory Committee. (Photo by Michael Arellano)

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There are over 380,000 student-athletes, and just about every one of them should strive to be a little more like Mary Atkinson.

The ASU junior gymnast exemplifies what a student-athlete should be both on and off the mat.

Rising up from relative obscurity, Atkinson is now the team's best performer and most consistent all-arounder.

"I started taking tot classes when I was three," Atkinson said. "My older sister did gymnastics too, but she was never competitive."

During her high school career, Atkinson became Virginia's most decorated and top recruit. She was the commonwealth's level 10 state champion in 2005 and 2007, all the while garnering such honors as the Virginia "Spirit of 7" Sportsmanship Award and Hugh O'Brian Leadership Award.

No wonder her accolades attracted ASU coach John Spini.

"I loved her the first time I saw her on film," Spini said. "I felt she had great lines and was going to be a very strong athlete. Mary was one of those recruits you see just once, and then you start to track her."

Luckily for the Sun Devils, the feeling was mutual.

"I committed before I even took any official visits," Atkinson said. "I took one unofficial to Stanford and one to [North Carolina] State, but when ASU offered, they were my first choice."

Once on campus, Atkinson made an immediate impact on the program. As a true freshman, she competed on vault and uneven bars nearly every meet of the season.

"That was probably a tough year for her, trying to make everything work," Spini said. "She didn't have her best dual-meet season, but she had a great postseason. She's one of those kids that really, really focuses on success."

Atkinson's sophomore season provided similar results, as she competed mostly on vault and floor exercise.

This year, however, after the team suffered losses to graduation and injury, there were shoes that needed to be filled.

Atkinson answered the call, to say the least.

In just four meets this season, she has posted career-highs in all four events, as well as the all-around. She is currently ranked No. 21 on vault and No. 10 on the uneven bars in the nation.

One event in particular has the junior the most excited.

"When I was recruited, I was actually told that I would probably never make the beam team," Atkinson said. "So making it into the beam lineup would have to be my biggest accomplishment."

Even with her boom in success, Atkinson is still humble about her place on the team.

"I guess in some ways I'm a leader, especially for the freshmen because we don't have very many all-arounders," Atkinson said. "But my main goal is just to get us back to nationals and be a top-12 school again."

Her teammates might see it differently.

"She's so important to us, just have her anchor all of the events," ASU junior Francesca Mercurio said. "She gives a lot of support to everyone else. Even before she goes, she still cheers. She's really great."

Atkinson credits Spini for a lot of her success.

"He's been a wonderful coach for me," Atkinson said. "I think halfway through the season last year, he finally figured out how to coach me, realizing that it wasn't so much numbers that helped me do better, but maybe fewer repetitions and working on the details more."

The most important edge Atkinson has over other gymnasts is her ability to not let the mental aspects of her sport control her.

"A lot of girls have [the distance] measured out to the inch when they jump on the board for beam or bars," Atkinson said. "I kind of look at it and say, 'Oh, that looks about right.' But I find that it's a good thing, because when you go to different schools, the equipment isn't going to be exactly the same. So, if you are flexible, then it doesn't get into your mind and you can really focus on doing your routine and not worry if the mat's a different color."

Outside of the gym, the standout is equally impressive. A student at Barrett, the Honors College, Atkinson was Second-Team Pac-10 All-Academic last season.

"I personally care a great deal for an intelligent athlete," Spini said. "She really wants to be good at everything she touches, be it in the classroom or gym."

In addition, after every home meet, she and her fellow Sun Devils stay late and mingle with young fans.

"A lot of the girls that come up to get autographs are girls that have come to our summer and winter camps that I've coached at," Atkinson said. "They really look up to you and they remember you, so I try my best to remember them too. It's different because there wasn't really a [Division I] school around with gymnastics where I'm from, so it's not like I ever had the opportunity to watch a college meet as a compulsory gymnast."

As if that's not enough, Atkinson is also involved with the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee.

"I'm co-vice president with [ASU sophomore football cornerback] Josh Jordan," Atkinson said. "The committee itself works as a liaison between the student-athletes and the athletic administration. I personally oversee both the student-athlete welfare and the events committees."

So what does this Wonder Woman want to do in her post-collegiate life?

“I want to go to dental school,” Atkinson said. “But I’ll always be a Sun Devil. I’ll always been involved with the program on some level, even if that’s just coming to meets whenever I can.”

Coach Spini summed up his star perfectly: “What I really enjoy about Mary is not only her intelligence, but her elegance too.”

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