

Beijing bound – Years of preparation are about to pay off for WOGA gymnast

Nastia Liukin

Arms in a “V,” Nastia Liukin salutes the judges before lifting herself onto the balance beam with a straddle press handstand mount. She slowly rolls her hips and legs over her shoulders, then turns her body right side up. Ten toes grip the 4-inch wide apparatus. Quads flexed, back arched, she begins the choreography fluently transitioning from one step to another, like a dancer, except the ground is 4 feet below.

Now her toes are pointed, guiding her legs swiftly through the air like arrows. She executes a layout step-out landing on one foot, forcefully hitting the beam as if knocking the breath out of it.

Of course it is the audience who is left breathless. Bolted upright at the edge of their seats, they sit and watch as Nastia’s teammates yell, “Come on Nast!”

Then, she pauses. Her eyes stare down the beam, 16 feet away, where she’ll muster all the strength left within her for the dismount.

Bam! She sticks it and once again her arms reach into a “V.” Only this time, it’s for victory.



Among her many wins are two world championships and four U.S. titles.



Story by Britney Porter

Photography by Mike Newman



2007 Balance Beam World Champion Anastasia “Nastia” Liukin of Parker will be representing the United States at the 2008 Olympic Games August 8 - 24. Nastia participated last June in the 2008 Visa Championships – USA Gymnastics’ national championships – to qualify for the 2008 U.S. Olympic Team Trials. There, she impressed judges and earned a spot on the Olympic Team, and now her eyes are set on Beijing.

What’s the most challenging part about training for the Olympics? “The day-after-day training feels like you’re doing the same thing over and over,” said Nastia. “Some days you’re just so tired and don’t want to come into the gym; you just want to sleep.”

Nastia trains seven hours a day, six days a week, beginning at 6:30 a.m. “But those are the days that you do need to come,” she continued. “Those are the days that you’re going to get stronger and better. If you can push through it when you’re tired and sore, then when you feel great, it’s going to be easier.”



The four-time U.S. Champion and two-time World Champion

trains at WOGA (World Olympic Gymnastic Academy) in Plano with owner, coach, and dad, Valeri Liukin. Valeri has more than 15 years of coaching experience and was named the USA Gymnastics Coach of the year in 2006.

The year prior proved to be an eventful one for both dad and daughter as Nastia became a Senior International Elite gymnast at WOGA. In July of 2005, she claimed a U.S. Classic title, as well as gold medals on uneven bars and balance beam, impressing judges with a quadruple twist on floor. She became the first American gymnast to ever attempt the skill. (Her dad achieved a similar feat in the ‘80s as the first to complete a triple back flip on floor, a skill that has rarely been seen in competition since.)

Both Valeri and Nastia’s mom, Anna, are former elite gymnasts. “My dad competed at the ‘88 Olympics and won two gold and two silver and my mom is a World Champion,” said Nastia. “They are my role models. They competed back when it was



Beam is a favorite event of Nastia’s. She is a world champion on the 4-inch wide apparatus.



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still the Soviet Union and it was really difficult to make that team. I have two practices a day but when my dad was training and competing, he worked out three times a day. It was definitely harder and more intense.”

Training for the Olympics is so intense that Nastia has put her studies at Southern Methodist University on hold. “I went to two classes but they were pretty strict with attendance. If you miss three classes, your grade automatically drops from an A to a B or a B to a C, and in one semester I would have been gone 10 times,” she said.

Mom said Nastia’s looking forward to going back. “Nastia has always been academically strong,” said Anna. “She had to miss some of her junior and senior year at Spring Creek Academy traveling to competition, so I know she’ll enjoy going to school [regularly] to actually absorb her classes.”

Nastia hopes to pursue a career in international business or acting. She’s appeared in an Adidas commercial and has even done film. “Yeah, I was in the movie *Stick It*,” she said with shoulder bounce and a wide grin. “I didn’t have a big part but it was a lot of fun. So I’ve kind of wanted to do more of that and hopefully after gymnastics, I’ll have time to focus on a career.”

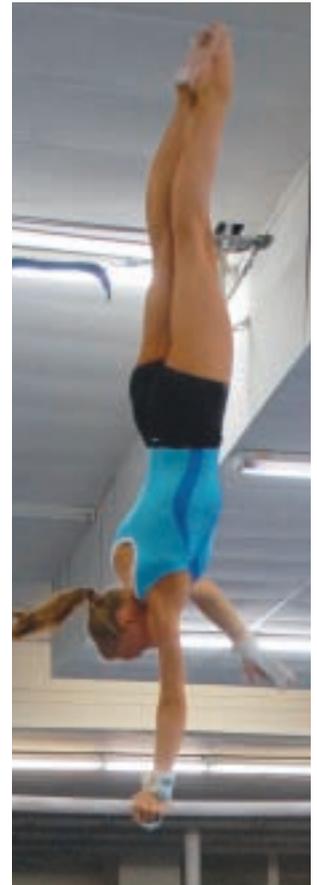
Alongside athletes Amanda Beard (swimming), Tyson Gay (track and field), and Reese Hoffa (track and field), Nastia is gracing the cover of the Beijing 2008™ Olympic video game, too. The game releases July 8 and features an authentic simulation of over 35 events (the most of any Olympic video game), giving gamers an early look at the official venues.

Meanwhile, Nastia is training for the biggest game of her life. “Training takes up so much time,” she said. “Gymnastics, in my opinion, is one of the hardest sports in the world. It’s one of those sports where missing one day of training feels like you’ve missed about three days; your body feels so different.”

The 5’2” gymnast is 18 years old, and like any teenager, enjoys time off sleeping in, relaxing, and chatting with her friends online. Friends and fans keep up with her on MySpace at www.myspace.com/nastialiukin, where she signs off “xoxo <3 nast,” or on her Web site, www.nastialiukin.com.

Born on October 30, 1989 in Moscow, Russia, Nastia came to the United States when she was 2-and-a-half years old. The Liukins called Plano home for 12 years beginning in 1993, and relocated to Parker a few years ago.

When Anna looks at her daughter, she stands a little taller and smiles. No one could be more proud. “I feel really honored and happy that Nastia also fell in love with gymnastics,” she said.



Bars and beam are Nastia's favorite events. In 2005, she was the uneven bars and balance beam World Champion. In 2006 and 2007, she was the World Silver Medalist on uneven bars.

Bars and beam may be the hardest of the four events (bars, beam, vault, and floor). They test a gymnast's strength, control and flexibility. Uneven bars require circling skills, sometimes on one arm, where gymnasts tighten their core, point their toes, and extend their legs throughout the entire routine to maintain control. They wear chalk-covered leather grips to secure a firm hold (and protect their hands from rips) during pirouettes, releases, and re-catches from one bar to the other.

"Gymnastics teaches you control and awareness of your body," said Anna. "In fact we receive a lot of compliments from tennis, cheerleading and swimming coaches when they get a gymnast. They say, 'Wow, they're so disciplined; they know about their body. Send us more!'"

She added, "I want Nastia to do well because that's what she's striving for. As a mom, it doesn't make my child any better or worse whether she gets a gold medal or not. There's just so much to love the way I see it. She's a good girl and she has a good heart; she's helpful to others; and I think that's what I'm mostly proud of. Gymnastics is like a cherry on top."

Nastia's other interests include swimming and tennis. "I just haven't had the time," she said. "My dad plays tennis and he's pretty good, so I'd like to learn."

For now, the dad and daughter duo are focusing on what father knows best – gymnastics. Together, their devotion has

garnered Nastia numerous titles and medals. Earlier this year, she won the all-around titles at the 2008 Tyson American Cup and the 2008 Pacific Rim Gymnastics Championships. She has won nine world medals, including four gold, matching the world medal mark held by Shannon Miller.

With such a reputation for a young athlete, does Nastia get nervous? "Uhm, yeah ... no ... well," she paused. "I get nervous 'cause I want to perform up to my capabilities and do the best that I can, especially when I work so hard, I just want everything to pay off."

All in all, performing for a crowd is fun, Nastia said, but she doesn't really hear them cheering until her landing. "The only voice I hear during my routine is my dad. If he says, 'Come on, you can do it,' I hear that, but any other voice, I pretty much just block out."

Along with Valeri cheering Nastia on at the Olympics will be Martha Karoly, head coach for the U.S. National Team. Family and friends in Plano and Parker will be among the 4 billion television viewers watching. Will she land a gold medal?

"Gymnastics isn't all about the medals and the money and the sponsors," said Nastia. "That's something that I've learned at a young age from both of my parents. Winning gold medals is definitely cool and fun, but you have to work so hard to get to that level. I do gymnastics because I have a passion for the sport. And, it pays off when you win."



Gymnastics is truly in Nastia's blood. Her father, Valeri, was an Olympic champion and her mom, Anna, was twice a world champion. Today, Valeri's an award-winning coach and keeps a close eye on Nastia's workouts, spotting (opposite) for her uneven bar routine.



Surrounded by possible champions-to-be, Nastia shuts it all out and concentrates on her beam routine.