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At The Finish First Is Finnish

Laconic Mauno Nissinen of the University of Washington left them speechless when he won the All-Around title in the NCAA championships

At the University of Washington, in Seattle, where the winter was green and the air is already sweet with spring, a 21-year-old Finn, born Mauno Aulis Nissinen and once known as Ugh, last week won the All-Around title in the NCAA Gymnastics Championships and demonstrated what the faithful have always known—that the All-Around, with its 12 different events in two days, demands as wide a variety of skills as anything in sport.

Mauno Nissinen, who is nearly as comfortable on his hands as most men are on their feet, is a master of all these skills. Twelve years of grueling workouts have given him grace, agility, balance and strength. Heredity provided him with a body that is nearly perfectly suited to pleasing judges of gymnastics. And fate gave him a childhood in a land where sport is almost a requisite to existence. What do you dream of if you are a boy in Oulu, Finland, 110 miles south of the Arctic Circle? Each year there is a vote to determine the most popular man in Finland, and an athlete usually wins, beating presidents, premiers and movie stars. Mauno always voted with the majority. "My goal was to go higher and higher," he explains seriously, "to make the national team." Penn State Coach Gene Wettstone understands. "If you lived in Finland what would you live for?" he asks. "All you've got are pine forests, skiing and probably a cold gymnasium. Those kids devote their wonderful youth to sport."

Nissinen's family didn't discourage him. "They never ask me if I do my homework," he says. "They just allow me to go to meets. I make my own decisions from very young age. It was good that my parents never told me what to do." In more ways than one. The gymnast is a spiritual individualist. He is all alone on the floor, and if he can't cope with independence he doesn't succeed.

Mauno Nissinen's sport is obviously an extension of his life style. At 15 he was traveling around Europe by himself, going to meets. "I learned to get along by myself," he says. "I do not need to depend on anyone else." He also doesn't need to converse. "He's an incredibly quiet person," says one of the few people he occasionally speaks to. It's unusual that he speaks so well, because he hardly ever gets any practice. "In Finland," Mauno says, "unless you know a person well you do not say hello to him." Because he often omits his definite and indefinite articles he was called Ugh at the Sigma Nu fraternity house, where he lived for a while after arriving in this country. "I go to gym now," he'd say, or, "He do good high bar routine." Mauno is really not shy, though when talking he looks away dreamily at times, and one gets the feeling that he would rather be alone. However, he is probably just thinking about gymnastics, for which he gave up a medical career. Pre-med studies cut into practice sessions, so before the last Olympics he switched to phys ed. "I was not ready to leave gymnastics," he says. "I had been thinking about Mexico for too long. And there were many meets to come after that."

The Olympics was the most important event of his life, although he knew he stood little chance of winning a medal. Unlike the Japanese and Russians, Finnish athletes receive no state support or scholarships, and Nissinen was aware that the differences in training would be telling. He performed better than any American, but came in 17th in the All-Around. Five Japanese and six Russians were among those who finished ahead of him. However, he took his 17th place philosophically. "I am young yet," he says. "I just try to do my best. If I do my best and still lose I am not disappointed, because I have really won."

At the NCAA's, however, he did his best, and really, really won. There was no doubt about the outcome after the compulsory routines on opening day. Nissinen's chief rival, Penn State's Bob Emery, who has a 25-inch waist and wears a size 40 jacket, was undone by the side horse, a harmless looking apparatus that is

the sport's leading heart-breaker. The Russian, Mikhail Voronin, lost an Olympic gold medal at Mexico City because of a slip on it. Extend the concentration required of a champion diver or pole vaulter to 35 or 40 seconds and you get an idea of what is needed to survive what its victims call "the animal." Emery sat down in the middle of his routine, a major point break, and four events later he missed his high-bar dismount. "I never did that before, not even in practice," he said in his room that night.

The compulsories are the bane of American gymnastics, and none of the competitors was sorry when the first day ended. The latest routines have been around for nearly four months, but sometimes a Western boy learns them slightly differently from his Eastern counterpart, and there is only one right way, points being subtracted for departures. In Russia and Japan the finest gymnasts attend school and train together, and every two years, when an international committee issues the new compulsory routines, ambiguities are quickly ironed out.

The gymnasts looked forward to the second day's optional routines, which would give them a chance to express themselves. It is here that the vast complexity of gymnastics unfolds: the floor exercise, with its tumbling and twisting and brutal tests of the gymnast's balance, agility and strength; the side horse or "the animal"; and the rings, predominantly a test of strength that develops biceps like grapefruit halves. The rigors of training do strange things to a gymnast's body. At the Olympics, a medical research team found that, as a group, gymnasts have a lower percentage of body fat than any other athletes, only 12%.

The high bar, more than eight feet above the ground, is the most dangerous apparatus in gymnastics and the setting for the most spectacular routines. Those who are best on it look like human windmills, hurling themselves into orbit, and seemingly defy a number of the laws of physics. One of these days someone will probably leave his arms on the bar. The tricky moves also require great courage. Abe Grossfeld, coach at Southern Connecticut State and a member of the 1956 and 1960 Olympic teams, compares the event with high-tower diving. "I once asked one of those circus guys why he never landed wrong," Grossfeld says. " 'We don't, that's all,' he said. It's the same in the high bar. When you do a somersault off it you just don't land on any-think but your feet." The high bar, side horse and parallel bars are Mauno Nissinen's favorite events. In the optionals, his double-backward somersault, which wound up his P-bars routine, left spectators gasping, despite the fact that he fell on hitting the mat and had a fraction of a point deducted. On arising, Nissinen's icy calm broke for the first time in the meet, and he almost frowned. Mauno had known it was coming. "I should have slopped at my handstand," he said immediately afterward. "I felt a little dizzy and I leaned too much backward."

By the final afternoon all but three teams—Penn State. Iowa State and Iowa—had been eliminated from competition for the team championship, and Bob Emery had just missed the happiest day of his life. He performed magnificently in each of six exercises, successfully completing a breathtaking 1? turn, twisting somersault dismount from the high bar; then he received the Nissen Award, given each year to a senior gymnast for "excellence in gymnastics, scholarship and sportsmanship." But the big prize eluded him; Penn State finished second. Iowa won the NCAA title, led by Bob Dickson, who breakfasted on four beers and has, to date, broken both ankles, both wrists and a toe, dislocated both elbows and suffered from bursitis in a shoulder, arthritis in his fingers and a bad back. "We'll win with wine, women and song," he had said, half kidding. "Well," he added, "it depends on what song. The wedding march has ruined a lot of good athletes."

That evening in the individualists' competition, Mauno Nissinen took third in a contest with high-bar specialists, an event that is roughly equivalent to Bill Toomey pole-vaulting against Bob Seagren. It was the last event of the meet. Many of the gymnasts spoke of laying off their routines for a while. Mauno was amazed. "I can only believe that some people here are just after scholarships or trips," he said. "If you want to be a gymnast you do it 365 days a year. Gymnastics has never been a way for me to get some material benefit. I would quit if I reached that point, but I just cannot live without it. Most guys here lay off and lose their shape after season. But then is time when they are in best shape and should learn new routines for next season."

This spring, at the end of his junior year, Mauno Nissinen will return home, and next fall he expects to enroll in a Finnish university. The U.S. remains a puzzle to him. It might as well be another planet. Just picture this scene. The ascetic Finn, silent and sober and craving quiet, arrives at the University of

Washington, and the athletic department finds him living quarters in a plush fraternity house on Greek Row. He keeps strange hours and talks to no one. Each morning at 7 he is in the hall outside his room, doing stunts on chairs, walking up and down the stairs on his hands. The brothers whisper about him. Soon it is spring. Many new faces appear in the house, dusting the furniture, washing the floors. One night he is awakened by ungodly screams and chants in the cellar. White-faced, he rushes across the hall, wakes someone up. "There is strange things going on," he whispers. "Go back to sleep, Mauno," he hears. "It's Hell Week." He is puzzled. A few nights later he comes home from a workout that he has sandwiched between classes and part-time jobs. "All these new guys were standing against wall with hands up," he recalls, "and brothers are kicking them in their butts. Those guys were only one year older than pledges, and they are telling them that they should change their attitudes, how they should study. I think that people old enough to go to college they should know what's best for them. Most of guys in house seemed very childish. Impression I got was they were away from home for first time. Their parents have overprotected them."

When the NCAA tournament broke up, a friend offered to finance a call to Finland so Mauno could break the news to his parents. "Maybe I'll fool them," he said, grinning. "I'll tell them I'm at Oulu airport." Evidently his parents thought it was a trick. After all, a call from America? "Mauno," he insisted. "Mauno." They finally spoke for about seven minutes. After he hung up he seemed dumfounded. As soon as his mother had recognized his voice, she congratulated him. Everyone in Oulu had already read the tournament results in the newspaper. Later Nissinen bumped into a Japanese teammate. "Menkaamme oluelle," the Japanese said. It was a Finnish phrase Mauno had taught him. Nissinen nodded assent. "What does that mean?" he was asked. "Let's go get a beer," he replied, putting on his coat. One beer—then to bed before midnight. It would be a very big celebration for Mauno Nissinen.