

# The History of Arizona State Men's Gymnastics

*The Phoenix Sun's Gorilla, as well as the mascots for the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, Indiana Pacers and Houston Rockets are all former ASU gymnasts, making Don Robinson the only coach to place four individuals under 5-7 in the NBA!*



Norris Steverson is the answer to numerous ASU sports trivia questions – such as who is the only person to ever coach basketball, football, rodeo, boxing and gymnastics at Arizona State?

Steverson became the founding father of ASU gymnastics in 1955, when he was appointed the school's club coach. The program was elevated to intercollegiate status in 1958 and Steverson guided it through the inaugural decade of competition (1958-68).

Norris Steverson was also ASU's first football player to receive post-season recognition, and was the initial Sun Devil athlete to sign a professional contract – Chicago Bears, 1934.

In 1962, Arizona State entered the Western Athletic Conference where it got off to a fine start. The Sun Devils posted a 7-2 dual record, finished second at the WAC meet and 17th at the NCAA Championship – ASU's first appearance at the NAAs. In addition, ASU had four individual conference titlists.

Two years later, Chris Evans became the initial ASU all-America gymnast and NCAA champ when he captured the 1964 NCAA still rings crown.

Steverson's athletic expertise enabled the program to develop and solidify before the arrival of current ASU head coach Don Robinson, who took over for the retiring Steverson. For Steverson, it marked the end of 30-plus years of active association with ASU athletics. In all, Steverson, ASU's jack-of-all-trades, coached 15 conference individual champions during his gymnastics coaching career.

Robinson took over the reins of the program in 1968. In 1972, Gary Alexander (floor exercise) and Dick Dalton (horizontal bar) earned all-America distinction en route to ASU's initial undefeated season (12-0). Two years later, Arizona State claimed the first of its five successive WAC Championships (1974-78). In addition, they were 1974 NCAA runners-up. That began a string of 10 consecutive top 10 NCAA finishes including another runner-up finish in 1978.

Arizona State hosted the 1977 NCAA Championships at the University Activity Center, marking the first NCAA Championship held on the ASU campus. The Sun Devils finished seventh at that meet.

Among Robinson's top pupils during the 1970s were all-Americas Alexander, L.J. Larson and Kent Brown. Alexander and Larson combined for seven WAC titles, while Brown was the 1975 NCAA floor exercise champion.

Current ASU assistant coach Scott Barclay also starred during the late '70s, as he garnered all-America honors in the all-around and parallel bars.

From a gymnastics standpoint, the decade of the 80s marked one of the finest chapters in the history of ASU athletics, culminating in the 1986 national championship. Seven NCAA individual champions, 15 all-Americas and 10 Pac-10 titlists were the results of Robinson's teaching. The Sun Devil duo of David Branch and Donnie Hinton shared the NCAA floor exercise title in 1983.

In 1985, the most famous pair of ASU gymnasts, twins Dan and Dennis Hayden, brought the program to the forefront of the collegiate ranks and was instrumental towards ASU's 1985 Pac-10 and 1986 NCAA championships. Dan reaped all-America status in four events during both of his two seasons at ASU, while Dennis recorded all-America acclaim in 1986. ASU edged host Nebraska for the national championship by three-tenths of a point (283.9-283.6). Dan Hayden won the NCAA parallel bars and horizontal bar titles, and finished second and third, respectively, in the pommel horse and all-around competition. Jerry Burrell tied for first-place honors in the floor exercise (9.8) and John Sweeney was the vault runner-up (9.575) to power ASU's balanced attack.

Dan Hayden, the 1986 USOC gymnast of the year, barely missed out on his ultimate goal – the 1988 Olympic Games, but was considered one of America's most exciting and talented performers.

Other notable gymnasts during the 1980s include all-Americas Burrell, Sweeney, Paul Linne and Jody Newman. Those four student-athletes were among the most dynamic talents in ASU chronicles. Linne became the first ASU gymnast to record a score of '10', when he received the perfect score after his horizontal bar routine at the '87 Southwest Cup, while Newman became the first American gymnast since Kurt Thomas in 1978 to win a gold medal (floor exercise) at the Romanian Invitational. He has carried the tradition over into the 90's as well, as he earned all-America honors in the all-around and on pommel horse last season.

Academic excellence has also been constant at ASU. Brown received an NCAA post-graduate scholarship in 1975, while Sweeney (1986) and Brad Rot (1985) were Pac-10 Medalists for excelling in both the classroom and gymnasium.

Now in his third decade as head coach, Don Robinson has guided the Sun Devils to 13 top 10 NCAA finishes and six conference titles, as well as directing 36 conference and eight NCAA champion gymnasts. He will look to Newman, Chris Smith and Geoff Eaton, all NCAA qualifiers last season, to carry the torch of excellence passed on to them from ASU gymnasts past.