

Oregon

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Sports

High School Sports

Heritage High gymnast hopes to add to her six state titles

By **Nick Daschel, Special to The Oregonian**

on January 31, 2013 at 9:00 AM, updated February 04, 2013 at 8:49 AM

View full size Britni Atwell, a senior at Heritage High School, is hoping to land state gymnastics titles in floor and vault at the state meet Feb. 16. If she does, she'll finish high school with eight career state championships. *Heritage High School*

In two weeks, **Heritage High School's** Britni Atwell has a chance to put herself in a special place among the state's high school gymnasts.

The Timberwolves senior is a three-time state champion in **vault** and **floor exercise**. Should Atwell win a title in either floor or vault at this year's **state meet** Feb. 16 in the Tacoma Dome, she would become Washington's first four-time state champion in that event. Win in both events, and Atwell would have eight state titles and would be tied at second in state history for number of career gymnastics championships.

No pressure, right?

"I do feel like there's a lot of pressure on me," Atwell said. "It's a very big deal."

Coaches and athletes often prefer to sidestep talking about milestone accomplishments before the fact, but that is not the case at Heritage.

"To get a state title three years in a row and not get it in your senior year, that would be hard. She would be very, very sad," Timberwolves coach Rachel Tamayo said. "It's a lot of pressure, but she's someone who does well under pressure."

Atwell dove headfirst into high school gymnastics as a freshman when competing in club gymnastics became too expensive. Atwell grew up as a club gymnast, reaching level 10 -- the second-highest youth level -- and won a state club beam title in eighth grade.

Atwell wishes there wasn't such a high cost to competing in club and says she would have enjoyed the challenge of continuing. But Atwell also doesn't look back.

"I am very blessed that I got to enjoy four years of high school gymnastics. It is the greatest experience and still is the greatest experience of my life," Atwell said.

Atwell credits Tamayo with enriching her high school gymnastics experience. On the team's Senior Night on Jan. 26, Atwell said she gave Tamayo flowers, but skipped the speech.

"I couldn't even talk about her on Senior Night because I would have bawled my eyes out. The thought of leaving her is like the thought of graduating and leaving school," Atwell said.

Tamayo has similarly glowing things to say about Atwell, who she says "put Heritage on the map." Tamayo hopes the Timberwolves can help cap Atwell's career by qualifying the team for state this year. Heritage went to state in 2002 and 2003. *(An earlier version of this post incorrectly said Heritage has never been to state.)*

Atwell became a champion in vault and floor because she's a powerful dancer with incredible will. To illustrate Atwell's determination, Tamayo said that during Atwell's freshman year, she suffered a hard fall on the balance beam during competition. Tamayo told Atwell to take off the rest of the meet.

"She looked at me like I was crazy. Then she went over to floor and got a 9.5," Tamayo said. "You have to want it, and she wants it. She is so determined, nothing stops her."

Vault is a natural for gymnasts with power, so it works well for Atwell. But she believes floor is her best event.

"I love to dance, I'm powerful and I'm energetic. It's one of those events I can have fun at and do well at the same time," Atwell said.

As much as Atwell is focused on winning a fourth state title in vault and floor, she would like to do well in a couple of events that have escaped her. Foremost is balance beam, an event that has bedeviled Atwell throughout her career. She made it to state in beam as a freshman, then suffered falls the past two years during regional qualifying meets.

"My nerves just seem to get me," Atwell says of beam.

The test of a truly elite gymnast is all-around, which compiles scores of the four gymnastics events: vault, floor, beam and uneven bars. Atwell has made it to state once in all-around, finishing 14th last year.

Tamayo and Atwell admit bars is her challenge. It's an arms-driven event, and Atwell says she has a bad shoulder. Still, Atwell has a lifetime best of 37.75 -- out of a possible 40 -- in all-around. A score equal to that at state would place Atwell among the top three, if not win state.

If ever there was a season when Atwell was capable of winning more than two state titles, this one is it, she says.

"I am at my best this year."

- Nick Daschel