

Redefining Gymnastics: How Temple University's Coed Gymnastics Club separates itself from the norm

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For a sport known by its intensity, focused athletes and desire for perfection, the athletes of Temple University's Coed Gymnastics Club describe the environment as calm and relaxed.

Gymnasium 143 is eerily quiet moments before the doors open.

Pictures of former gymnasts and championship banners are scattered along the walls. Chalkboards dictate the gymnasts' event assignments for the day, and the chalk-covered apparatuses remain untouched.

Led by volunteer coach Jesse Kitzen, the Men Gymnastics Club begin their warm-ups and conditioning before the Coed Gymnastics Club trickles in one-by-one for their practice beginning at 5:30. President Tobias Warren is normally the first to arrive.

In its 11th year, the Coed Gymnastics club has remained true to its roots by upholding one unique policy: No tryouts and an open door to all.

"This is a great outlet to gain professional development, a source of friendship, and a relaxed environment," Warren said. "You make what you want of it and everyone is welcome."

This policy allows both seasoned gymnasts and students with no experience to participate together in weekly practices and even local and national competitions. There's even a Spanish professor from Temple who joined the club this year.

"I think it's so cool to be able to introduce new people to gymnastics," Warren said. "It can be one of those things where you're like, 'Oh I never did it, but it would be so cool to learn to do a cartwheel or handstand.' People are just afraid to do it."

Sophomores Alexis Kelly and David Myers both joined the club their freshman year after finding its booth at the TempleFest during Temple University's Welcome Week events.

Kelly, a high-level gymnast who competed for 12 years, was looking for something more laidback.

"I looked at colleges that had gymnastics, but were not necessarily a D-I level," Kelly said. "They're a big time commitment. I wanted something a bit more relaxed and fun."

Myers on the other hand, used his interest in acrobatics to drive his college gymnastics experience.

“I’ve only known gymnastics for two years now. I only did soccer and track growing up,” Myers said. “Flipping was always cool to me. I learned how to do a front flip and backflip from YouTube, and I would try it in my living room.”

Despite differences in skill level, members embrace the opportunities that come with an open-door policy. Even as a newer gymnast, Myers is able to compete in local and national competitions with the club.

“It’s definitely benefited me,” Myers said when talking about his competition experiences. “At first it was hard performing in front of other people, but I enjoy it.”

“My goal every year is to make sure everything runs smoothly, obviously,” Warren said. “But I really want to make sure the members who aren’t competing feel included in this environment.”

Warren fosters this inclusive environment with his question of the day attendance sheets. The club is able to accommodate a large number of students through its open gym hours.

Monday through Thursday, members have access to the gym from 6-8 p.m., and they share the gym with the Men’s Gymnastics Club, which practices from 4-7 each night. Typically, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays have the highest attendance rates.

The club currently operates with 79 active members, and membership has increased over the past few years. This has generated close to \$5,000 in revenue through membership fees this past year.

Membership fees aren’t the only way the club raises funds. They also raised \$3,500 in 2018-2019 through fundraising, according to Assistant Director of Programs, Pete Vincent. Vincent oversees the executive boards and fiscal operations of student sports clubs.

Flips for Tips frequently endorses the club’s fun atmosphere with this annual fundraiser at the bell tower. It’s the club’s most successful fundraising effort, and it goes beyond the financial aspect.

The camaraderie is reflected in all aspects of the club, after all.

“As a freshman coming in, you tend to stick with other freshmen, because you’re afraid,” Kelly said. “Then as the year goes on, you get closer with more people. Everyone is just friends with everyone and it’s a great time. I would come in here after a stressful day or a long day of classes for exercise. I like to come here and get all that stress out before I go home and do more homework.”

Around the gym, Kelly practiced her tumbling passes encompassing a round-off punch front layout.

Davis split from his peers to focus on his skillset.

Two former CAPA dancers introduced themselves to Warren, as they attended their first open gym.

Across the mat, a freshman repeatedly attempted to throw a round-off backflip but battled his fears.

“If you don’t do it, I’m leaving,” Katie Hoey, joked to the freshman. The occasional teasing, loud clapping, and cheering bring about a familial atmosphere to the gym.

With a sport so regimented, the Coed Gymnastics club prides itself on diversity in skill level, personality, and gender. At the end of the day, it’s about welcoming people and bringing them together for fun and the love of a sport.