



Feature twirler to continue passion after graduation

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When she could not hit a tennis ball at 3 years old, her parents thought she would never be an athlete. Twenty years later, she has won more than 30 national baton twirling championships, 17 international gold medals and two national collegiate championships.

Savannah Miller, a senior and the Razorback Marching Band feature twirler, will graduate in December with a Bachelor of Arts in journalism and hopes to pursue a career as a news or digital media producer. Although her final football season has come to a close, Miller's twirling career is far from over. She plans to compete on Team USA for one more year after she graduates.

Miller's most intense training season will begin in January, when she will practice for 4-6 hours every day. She will compete at least once a month leading up to Team USA selections at the end of March, and if she makes the national team, she will compete April-August of 2020.

A typical training session for Miller begins with 30 minutes of stretching, followed by technical warm-ups to get her hands and body moving, she said. Miller then spends the next two-six hours practicing her routines until she feels satisfied, and she finishes out each training session with more stretches.

Training for a twirling competition is different

than training for a halftime performance because crowd members at a football game are not as familiar with Miller's skill set as judges at a competition, said Miller's head coach, Dale White, 60, from Dayton, Ohio.

On and off the field, Miller strives for perfection and regards herself as her toughest critic, she said.

"I think my parents and my coaches can attest to this: I am the hardest person on myself," Miller said. "I will come off the field or after a performance and I will be like, 'Wow, that was terrible.' I think about all the little negative things that even the judges aren't noticing."

White thinks that while Miller is critical of her own performances, her standards reflect the nature of the competition and her deep history with the sport of twirling.

"She's very realistic in that regard," Miller said. "She knows what her weaknesses are, and she also knows her strengths."

Miller got her start in twirling at the age of 3 when her parents enrolled her in dance classes at a studio in her hometown of Kansas City, Missouri. Her dance instructor, a former twirler hoping to keep the sport alive, placed a baton in each child's hand at the end of every class and let them try their hands at twirling.

"I was instantly hooked," Miller said. "I remember throwing a tantrum in the lobby of the dance studio. I kicked my shoes off because I wanted to stay and take baton class."

Within a year, Miller joined Team USA, competing

as the youngest in her age group.

Miller comes from an athletics-driven family with two brothers active in sports, she said. While her parents never intended to put her in twirling, they knew they wanted her to get involved in a sport at a young age.

"My dad originally thought that I was going to be a tennis player," Miller said. "He went to the store and bought me a super expensive racket, and he took me downstairs – at 3 (years old), mind you – and tried to teach me how to hit a tennis ball, and I was not having it. He told my mom that I would never have an athletic bone in my body."

Miller derives motivation from the crowds of cheering Razorbacks fans and wants to give them "something to look forward to when the Hogs are losing," she said.

The Arkansas Razorback football team lost 10 out of 12 games during the 2019 season.

Whether she is in line at CVS or the campus Starbucks Coffee, Miller said fans recognize her on almost a daily basis, she said. Sometimes people approach her, and other times, she can hear them whispering about her. Miller considers this both a blessing and a curse, she said.

"I never really noticed until this past semester how much my journey has impacted so many other people," Miller said.

When Miller graduates,

she will pass on the feature twirling position to sophomore Isabella Udouj.

Udouj, who has been twirling since she was 6 years old, came to the UofA with a childhood dream of being feature twirler. Having competed through her senior year of high school, she is eager to get back on the field and continue her passion, she said.

"It's kind of just been really cool to see how everything has played out," Udouj said. "I'm just so excited to be back to perform for the crowd."

Miller is spreading her passion for baton twirling to younger generations of twirlers worldwide through her role as an international choreographer and clinic instructor. She has taught at clinics in several countries, including Spain, France and the Czech Republic.

"I never thought in a million years that I would have the opportunity to travel all over the world to compete for baton twirling and

now that I'm a little bit older and more experienced, the opportunity to teach twirlers from all over the world, which is a really cool thing that I have absolutely fallen in love with," Miller said.



Sadie Rucker Staff Photographer
Arkansas feature twirler Savannah Miller twirls batons with fire Aug. 31 at a pep rally before the season-opening football game against Portland State.

Quidditch players find friendship, competition through club sport

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Even without magical broomsticks and Hogwarts robes, students from a variety of backgrounds have joined the UA Quidditch Club to play a version of the Harry Potter sport since the group's founding in 2010.

At the American collegiate level, Quidditch is a mixed-gender contact sport that mixes elements from rugby, dodgeball and tag while incorporating the terms and rules used in the Harry Potter books, according to the U.S. Quidditch organization.

UA Quidditch Club President Rachel Provence, a junior, joined the team as a freshman when she was struggling to adapt to college life. Through Quidditch, Provence found community and friendship.

"Everything turned around for me, my grades, my emotional health -- everything," Provence said.

Provence likes that she gets the chance to shake off her duties while playing, she said.

"Getting to play the sport is fun. You lose yourself in it," Provence said.

LJ Williams, UA Quidditch Club vice president, a junior, thinks many people think of Quidditch as purely a Harry Potter thing and an element of "nerd culture," he said,

but he considers it to be very athletic.

The seven teammates – three Chasers, two Beaters, one Keeper and one Seeker – play the sport using PVC pipes instead of riding broomsticks -- a difficult task but one the players get used to, said UA Quidditch Club Treasurer Cordelia Underwood, a senior.

The Chasers score goals by throwing balls into hoops, the Beaters work together to distract opposing players and the Keeper guards the hoops from opposing chasers, according to the U.S. Quidditch organization.

Near the end of the game, the Golden Snitch is released, but it is not a golden ball with wings. Instead, it is a neutral player wearing yellow with a velcro tail. When one team's Seeker captures the Snitch by pulling the tail, the game ends.

"If it is a close game, that Snitch catch will make or break the score," Underwood said.

The Snitch is worth 30 points, according to the U.S. Quidditch organization.

Underwood joined the UA Quidditch Club her junior year as a way to make friends, challenge herself and improve her physical abilities, she

said. She is now roommates with three other players on the team, none of whom she knew before joining.

"It's brought me a lot of good friendships," Underwood said. "It's also pushed me in a lot of different ways."

Williams joined the team as a Beater after transferring to the UofA in spring 2018. He first heard about the team as a sophomore in high school while on a campus tour when his campus ambassador mentioned it, he said.

Williams also serves as a trainer for the team and would like to someday open a CrossFit-style gym, he said. He enjoys the chance to create the team workouts and help players, he said.

"It is like bonding over trying to take somebody to the next level. Nobody thinks they can really do it until they do it," Williams said.

One of Williams' favorite memories with the team was a tournament trip to New Orleans. The trip was one of his first experiences with the team and he loved getting to travel and bond with the other players, he said.

The team has traveled to Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska and Kansas this season.

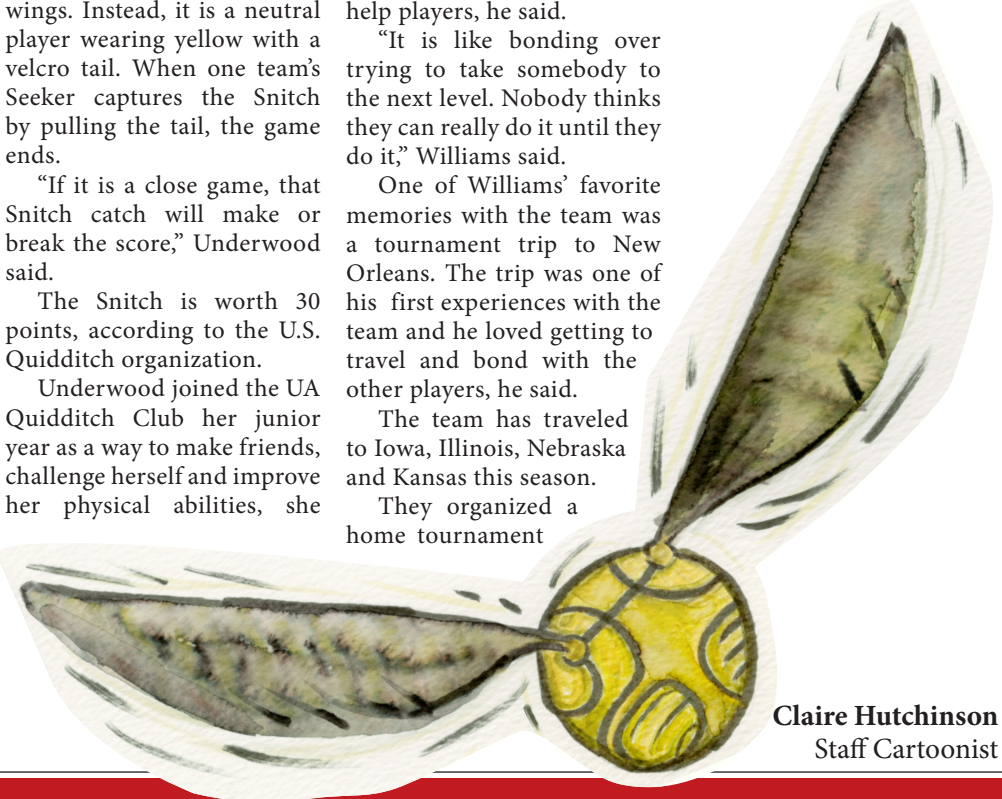
They organized a home tournament

in Fayetteville in early September, inviting teams from Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma.

Partnered with the Wichita State University Quidditch club, the team scored 50 points against Mizzou, the number one Quidditch team in the region, at the Midwest Regional Championship on Nov. 9-10 in Papillon, Nebraska. The Mizzou team scored 160 points.

Underwood always gets nervous before games, but knowing that the team has practiced a lot eases her worries, she said.

The team practices Thursdays and Sundays at the University Recreation Sports Complex.



Claire Hutchinson
Staff Cartoonist

New head coach pushes for change

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practices, but also caring about what's going on outside of the gym," Shaffer said. "It's easy to want to work hard for them."

While she achieved many victories during her career, Wieber also experienced something she said has been a systemic problem in elite sports. Starting at age 14, Wieber was sexually abused by Larry Nassar, former U.S. Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor and convicted serial child molester.

Wieber came forward with her story during Nassar's seven-day sentencing hearing in January 2018, giving one of 156 victim impact statements. In her testimony, she criticized USA Gymnastics leadership for enabling the abuse by creating a culture of isolation, fear and poor treatment of athletes.

"When you really look back,

we were kids, and the adults around us were supposed to protect us," Wieber said. "Many people turned a blind eye. Many powerful people protected other powerful people."

Wieber continues to advocate for systemic changes in elite sports to protect athletes, such as mandated supervision during training, treatments and overseas travel.

As the 2020 season nears, Wieber and her athletes are eager for fans to fill the stands, especially the student section, at home meets, she said.

The gymnastics program staff are making changes for 2020 meets, including moving the performance floor closer to the student section, Wieber said.

The first home gymnastics meet of the 2020 season will be 7 p.m. Jan. 17 in Barnhill Arena. A free "Meet the Gymbacks" event, both an intrasquad meet and pep rally, will be 2 p.m. Dec. 8.



Aleena Garcia Staff Photographer
Jordyn Wieber, head coach of the Arkansas Women's Gymnastics program, demonstrates proper technique to freshman Carissa Patton on Dec. 3.

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