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Gymnastics a part of Memmel's DNA

Rolled ankle, injuries don't stop Memmel's drive for success

By Robert Falkoff / WCSN.com

Being No. 1 means hitting your peak at precisely the right time. That's what Chellsie Memmel did at the 2005 World Championships and expects to do again when she defends her top ranking in Aarhus this week.

After winning the all-around title at Worlds last year in Melbourne, becoming the first American woman to do so since Shannon Miller in 1994, Memmel has been a focal point in the gymnastics world. With a shoulder injury providing complications in 2006, Memmel has been slowly building her way to optimum level.

If her calculations are correct, the best of Chellsie should be on display over the next several days for all the world to see.

For those who question Memmel because of a slow 2006 to this point, be careful. Champions have a way of rising to the occasion.

"This (World Championships) was the goal," said Memmel, who was fourth at the National Championships. "It wasn't my goal to be at my peak performance there. It's being ready for Worlds right now and I feel like I am."

Martha Karolyi, the national team coordinator for the U.S. women's team, agrees with Memmel's assessment.

"The timing is perfect," Karolyi said. We'd get some questions like 'what's wrong with Chellsie?' I tried to clarify to everybody: Nothing is going wrong with Chellsie. We're talking a very high level of gymnastics. You are not able to stay in top shape all the way through the season.

"You have to plan it wisely and get in optimum shape when it is most important, So, I feel good about the way she is performing now. She is very confident and she has total control over her routines."

With featured teammate Nastia Liukin battling back from an ankle injury, making it unclear how heavy her workload will be in Denmark, the spotlight could shine even brighter on Memmel. Liukin finished second behind Memmel in last year's all-around competition.

The 18-year-old Memmel has responded to the challenge before when the injury bug bit the U.S. women's team as it was entering a World Championship competition. In 2003, Memmel was initially left off the World Championship team. But when injuries and illness hit the American squad, Memmel made an emergency trip from the Pan American Games to boost the U.S. team at Worlds. Considered the third alternate, Memmel performed so well in the clutch that the U.S.A. ended up winning its first gold medal ever at the World Championships.

"This situation is a little bit different. Nastia is still here with us and she is able to train on one event. Hopefully, she'll be able to heal and be able to contribute even more," Memmel said.

As the Americans made the trip to Denmark, the expectation was that Liukin would at least be able to compete in bars.

"That's huge, because her bars is incredibly strong," Memmel said. "It would help the team a lot, especially in the finals. The team really needs her."

Mommel claims she is completely over the shoulder injury and her performance at the recent two-day selection camp indicated as much.

"I completed a double on vault and upgraded my bars a little bit," Memmel said.

Mommel added that she changed some things on her beam performance that might lead her to higher scores.

"I was very happy with both days of my performance," Memmel said.

The U.S. squad has gone through podium training in Denmark as the countdown continues toward the start of the World Championships.

After testing herself with the equipment, Memmel expressed that she's comfortable and confident.

"Podium went really well," she said. "It is always a little different to be on the podium (rather than in the training hall) because you have more adrenaline going. I liked the equipment and I hit what I wanted to do."

By winning the all-around title last year, Memmel became just the third American woman to achieve that feat. Miller won two titles and Kim Zmeskal won one in 1991 at Indianapolis.

Mommel comes from a gymnastics family. Both parents -- Andy and Jeanelle Memmel -- are former gymnasts and Andy is now coaching his daughter.

"I really love being coached by my dad," Memmel said. "We make a really strong team. The communication between us is really good. In the last two years that he has coached me, I haven't had a downside with it. It has been nothing but positive for me."

Step by step, Memmel has been building her way back in 2006 so that it all comes together in perfect harmony at the World Championships. Now, the real show begins.

"She has spaced her preparation very wisely," Karoyli said. "She is on a peak performance level right now when it is the most important."