

A new spin

As serious baton twirlers seek recognition for their sport and appreciation of its rigors, they find themselves fighting an image stuck in the '50s

By Alyson Ward

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PLANO - Early on a Saturday morning, a warm wind and endless sunshine are inspiring spring fever, pulling people out into parks and onto playing fields. In Plano, though, about 50 high school and college baton twirlers are basking in the harsh lights of a high school gym instead.

They're wearing glittery costumes and dramatic makeup. Long hair is piled atop their heads in complicated buns, fastened tightly with bands and sparkly clips. And they relentlessly toss batons high above their heads, catch them in midair, and twirl them into spinning blurs of silver.

It is one of dozens of twirling competitions across the country, contests that keep young baton twirlers traveling around, performing their routines for judges in half-empty gyms Saturday after Saturday. But this particular competition, in Texas this year, was organized by the National Coalition for the Advancement of Baton Twirling, a group of twirlers who want the NCAA to recognize baton twirling as a competitive sport.

The members imagine college twirling teams. Tournaments. Championships. Scholarships. They want twirling - long considered a frivolous pastime, lampooned as a pageant talent, written off as a glorified pep-squad activity - to be recognized as the athletic, serious endeavor it has become. The NCABT's annual competition is just the most visible event in a movement that is slowly picking up steam: the movement to get twirlers recognized as athletes - not just by the governing body of collegiate athletic competition, but by everyone.

Much like cheerleading, baton twirling has stepped up its game in recent years. It has become far more competitive than decorative, as physically demanding as it is visually pleasing. No longer an activity based on the mere ornamentation of a football field, baton twirling now requires serious athletic skill - and, often, a background in dance - to meet its ever-increasing standards.

So what's holding it back? Why hasn't twirling been able to boost its reputation along with its level of performance, to win the respect that other women's sports have achieved? Its image is still stuck sometime around 1955.

At the NCABT's competition, it's hard to believe twirling isn't considered athletic; it is much like rhythmic gymnastics, which has been an Olympic sport since 1984. Two or three at a time, high

school and college twirlers scurry onto the gym floor and, in front of long, tables full of judges, maneuver their way through 2-1/2-minute routines. Their sparkly leotards become colorful streaks as they twirl, flip, dance and spin across the wooden floor, tossing up one, two or three batons.

On the floor, the twirlers demonstrate precise ballet or gymnastic movements. Above their heads, their batons glide perilously close to the gym ceiling lights, spinning end over end. The combination - this fast-moving mix of graceful movement and quick-witted coordination - makes for a giddy, breathless, crowd-pleasing show.

The judges watch with a more critical eye. They're looking at precision of movement, the angle of the foot, the control of the toss, the rotation of the baton. They study body lines and the flow of the performance, deducting points for each drop and imprecise movement. Much like Olympic ice skating, it's a nerve-racking joy to watch.

And it's far removed from what these twirlers' mothers and grandmothers used to do.

"It's become so much more athletic," says Randi Melnick, who started twirling in the early 1970s. Her 17-year-old daughter, Shaina, just finished two rounds of competition in Plano where, in the middle of a double illusion - a dizzying feat that involves a double rotation of the body while the baton spins overhead - Shaina's baton landed squarely on her forehead.

"We didn't do those back when I twirled," says Randi Melnick, who's now a licensed twirling judge. The difficulty of the tricks and the overall level of performance are more demanding than they used to be, she says.

The Melnicks, like a lot of twirling families, take their baton twirling seriously. Shaina, who started at 5, twirls flaming batons at her high school football games. She has traveled to competitions all over the country and to a world contest in Canada. The Melnicks live in Colorado, but her twirling coach is based in Washington, and the family flies her in regularly to work with Shaina.

"It's just like any other sport," Randi Melnick says. Shaina, she says, "goes into the gym and she practices, during the school year, probably two to three hours a day."

DaNae Couch, the feature twirler at Baylor University, remembers spending much of her childhood in the gym. "It's a lonely sport," she says. "The majority of my time I would spend in the gym by myself. It's something that, as a little kid, you learn that you just have to work really, really hard."

Couch tries to travel to at least one competition a month, logging even more time in gyms across the country - tying up her hair, putting on a sparkly green costume and waiting patiently in the bleachers for her 2-1/2-minute turn in front of the judges.

Hope Stockton is in the bleachers, too; she's using an iPhone to record video of her daughter Ashleigh Shafer's performance. Shafer, a freshman at the University of Central Arkansas, has

been twirling since age 3. Her mother was a twirler. So was her aunt. Today, Shafer has a self-adhesive heat pad on her left shoulder.

It's not the first time she has performed through the pain. In high school, at the last game of her sophomore year, Shafer went out on the field in a wheelchair. She'd torn her ACL while twirling, and her knee surgery was scheduled for the next day, but she wasn't going to let that get in the way of her performance.

Stockton coaches twirlers and, for a while, coached her own daughter. What Shafer is doing out on the gym floor, her mother says, is far more physically demanding than what she herself did 20 years ago.

"I think the style of twirling has changed," Stockton says. "It's almost like a staple, if you're going to do baton, to take dance and gymnastics so you can be competitive."

Sandi Wiemers, who started twirling as a young girl in the 1950s, echoes that sentiment.

"When I was twirling," she says, "we were concerned about maneuvering the baton around and looking nice and marching. We concentrated on posture and some simple types of dance steps. Today, these kids have to have a pretty broad background in dance and gymnastics."

Wiemers was president of the United States Twirling Association for 12 years; she's now president of the World Baton Twirling Federation. She's also one of the primary movers behind the NCABT and the push for NCAA recognition.

"Twirling has had a difficult time emerging, I believe, out of the 1950s or '60s," she says, "when it was primarily something that people viewed in parades, on football fields, as that sort of entertainment."

A lot has happened since those days. Twirling is primarily practiced by young women, though not exclusively. And in schools across the country, girls have more options now. When Title IX was enacted in 1972, it required gender equity in athletics at federally funded schools. Over the years, girls have found more options open to them: If they're athletic, they don't have to be cheerleaders or twirlers.

Participation in twirling has gone down, Wiemers says; more girls are opting for volleyball, softball, tennis. But because of that, those who still twirl have taken the sport to a whole new, competitive level.

"I think those in my generation are the pioneers who said, 'Hey, look, we want to do something more with this' and began to form it into a competitive sport," Wiemers says. Later generations have fine-tuned twirling, adding in more dance, more gymnastics, more difficulty.

Twirling isn't dying, she says. It's becoming more competitive but - at the same time - less visible.

"We went inside," Wiemers says. "We went in the gym. People still have that perspective that we're on the street or at the football field."

Wiemers wants the rest of the world to see what happens in those half-empty gyms every weekend all over the country. And she's determined to help twirling earn a place as a full-fledged, 21st-century sport.

In the 1990s, Wiemers met with Olympic officials to find out how twirling could increase its visibility - with an eye, of course, to paving the way for Olympic twirling. She next met with the NCAA to find out how twirling might qualify as an official collegiate sport. NCAA recognition would mean more than just greater visibility for twirling: It could mean funding and scholarships through the athletic department. It would mean competitions and national college championships that might be televised. It might lead to high school programs with coaches and course credit, which could lead to more interest from young athletes headed for college.

Wiemers, along with some other leaders in twirling, founded the NCABT. The group's primary goal is to push for certification as an NCAA sport through Emerging Sports for Women, the association's program that, since 1994, has so far launched women's rowing, bowling, ice hockey and water polo as official NCAA sports.

"The NCAA is like Fort Knox," Wiemers says - it won't be easy to qualify. To be considered for recognition as an Emerging Sport for Women, twirling will need 20 established clubs on college campuses. Right now, after years of effort, there are between eight and 12, most with no more than a couple of members. Twirling is such an individual activity, it's difficult to find more than a couple of twirlers on a campus - so it's a struggle to maintain the existing organizations, much less build the numbers.

And, as twirling struggles to gain respect, it doesn't help that parts of the twirling world still embrace its old-fashioned image. The National Baton Twirling Association - one of the two major twirling organizations in the United States - still includes in its competition a Miss Majorette title, a pageant that includes twirling, strutting and modeling. The competition focuses on athleticism *and* pageant competition.

While some organizations have done away with pageants, the NBTA has kept them for several reasons, says Janice Jackson Seamands, a twirling coach who has studios in Rockwall and Conway, Ark.

"Different segments of that pageant offer our young ladies the chance to learn self-presentation, self-confidence, interview skills and public speaking," she says. And while that doesn't sound like the goal of your average basketball or tennis coach, there's a difference, Seamands says. "When you perform for the public, part of your job is to entertain," she says. A basketball player isn't entertaining in the same way.

"As far as twirling being a sport," Seamands says, "I think it's 100 percent a sport, but I think it can be described as a very artistic sport."

Twirling, then, is caught in between. It is both a throwback to the 1950s and a modern competitive sport that requires training and dedication, conditioning and practice. As it pushes forward to be classified as a competitive sport, one that takes the dedication of hours in the gym and weekends in the car, it still embraces its former focus on rhinestones, makeup, pageant poise and smiling, smiling, smiling.

But if people don't understand twirling, that's mainly because they don't see what's really going on, says Coral Noonan-Terry, who was the feature twirler at the University of Texas from 1993 to 2001.

"I believe it's a serious sport," Noonan-Terry says. "I also feel like, maybe because it hasn't had as much exposure as other sports ... people aren't able to see the competitive side of it, which is more athletic."

Until baton twirling competitions are regularly on TV, until twirling is an Olympic event, until it's recognized by the NCAA, twirlers say their sport will be misunderstood.

No one's sure exactly how long it'll be before twirling can hope to be recognized by the NCAA.

"I think the image will catch up," Seamands says, "and I feel like the key ... is to get more public exposure."

And that can come one audience at a time.

"What I find," Seamands says, "is that when the public sees a good baton twirler, they are fascinated and they are enthralled." She makes it a point to get her students out there, performing at parades and talent shows, community festivals, football games, basketball games, "any opportunity they get."

Two of her students - Baylor twirler Couch and Kendall Morris, feature twirler at Texas Christian University - are pushing for the same solution.

"People don't see competitive twirling," Couch says. "They see girls out on the football field or at talent shows, or they see the *Miss Congeniality*-type movies that portray twirling as a novelty-gag act."

But there's potential, Couch says, especially if more people start to see what twirling has become.

"You have girls who have trained all their lives going to colleges and doing some of the harder material on the football field," Couch says. "Once some of this stuff from the competition floor can translate out onto a football field, I think people will see that it's definitely more athletic."

Morris says she tries to use her position, her visibility at TCU, "to tell everyone: 'Hey, this is baton twirling. It's not what your mother used to do back in the day in high school.' It's completely different; it's a competitive sport."

She and others are hoping that, someday soon, the NCAA will agree.

ALYSON WARD, 817-390-7988