

# Fairport graduate set for U.S. men's gymnastics championships

Kat Hasenauer Cornetta 12:20 p.m. EDT August 22, 2014



(Photo: John Cheng/ USA Gymnastics)

PITTSBURGH – Fairport graduate Eddie Penev has hit a stride.

He will enter the senior men's competition at Friday's U.S. Gymnastics Championships with new levels of confidence and determination that comes from defeating some of the best gymnasts in the world.

Penev won the floor exercise and vault titles at the Anadia World Cup event in Portugal in June, beating not just some of the world's best gymnasts, but also countryman Sam Mikulak, the reigning national all-around champion. The success earned him the title of U.S. Olympic Committee Athlete of the Month for June — a rare honor for a male gymnast.

The 24-year-old is not unfamiliar with international competition — he competed for his birth country, Bulgaria, at the World Championships in 2007, 2009 and 2010 — but finishing on the podium clad in the stars and stripes was a new feeling.

"In terms of my international experience, it really helped," said Penev prior to training at the Consol Energy Center on Wednesday night. "I have done well domestically you could say, but internationally, I haven't had that kind of big competition. I have been to a few, but I hadn't medaled, and to come out of that meet with two golds on my best events is just more than I could have ever imagined."

Penev defeating the usually unstoppable Mikulak did raise some eyebrows among the gymnastics community, save for Penev himself. He focused more on the international gymnasts he beat.

"It's hard to think I beat (Sam), because it's so much fun just to be out there with him," said Penev. "I guess it was a confidence booster, in some ways, but I never really saw Sam as the competition," he said. "I saw everybody else as the competition. We just had a great time with it."

Penev's finish at the World Cup affirmed the training plan he set in place for his first year out of collegiate gymnastics. He and his coaches in Stanford, California, worked on making him a better all-around gymnast, focusing on improving on pommel horse and high bar. That work propelled him to 10th place in qualifications on the high bar at the World Cup, just shy of making the finals. Penev plans on showing even more improvements on high bar this weekend.

His focus on pommel horse will not just boost his all-around score, but fill a need on future U.S. teams sent to international events. It is considered the weakest apparatus in the current crop of men, so Penev has turned his focus to it.

"I'm really trying to be a good pommel horse person," Penev said. "I think that is where Team USA needs some help, and I have those two great events, but I definitely have the capabilities to be a good pommel horse worker too. So we've been working, really hammering the execution, and seeing if I can get that up."

During Wednesday's training at the National Championships, Penev's determination to improve on his weakest events was evident. Even though he is quick to admit, "rings are never going to be my event," he spent the most time on the apparatus, working until he hit a clean routine even though it cut into his practice time on vault.

Penev's floor exercise routine remains one of the most difficult in the country, with a 6.8 start value. His tumbling passes include a whip half randi and a whip triple full.

At this point in his career, Penev is enjoying the stride he has hit.

"I have never done gymnastics for the results, or for anyone else but myself. The way I have been looking at it, the Olympics is the last big goal, but it is also not the be all, end all. I feel like I could walk away from it happy today, so I'm treating every day as a bonus."

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