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Fierce Five juggles fame, competition

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A balancing act

Other

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HARTFORD — If any of the young gymnastics fans pouring into the XL Center this weekend expected to see all of the gymnasts who captured their attention at last summer's London Olympics, some may have been disappointed.

Only two members of that gold medal-winning U.S. women's gymnastics team competed in this weekend's senior women's division at the national championships here. Olympic vault silver medalist McKayla Maroney and steadfast, team tablesetter Kyla Ross took the floor, but 2012 teammates Aly Raisman of Needham, Jordyn Wieber and Gabrielle Douglas are taking the year off from competition.

Such it is with one of the Summer Games' most popular and highest-rated sports. The lure of endorsements and media appearances is strong after a gold medal win, especially given the ephemeral nature of an Olympic athlete's popularity. And given the small window of a female gymnast's career — prime age is between 16-20, usually limiting them to just one Olympiad — and the attraction of tours, media appearances and endorsements can be undeniable.

To wit, four of the five members of the "Fierce Five" took significant time off from training after the London Games, putting them behind the eight ball when it comes to competing again.

"For the first couple of months back, you condition, and then you work to get your skills back," said Raisman, who also won individual medals — a floor exercise gold and balance beam bronze — in London.

Douglas agreed. The Olympic all-around gold medalist has been back in training since May, but has not even attempted to put together competitive routines.

"I haven't started routines yet, just getting in my Olympic shape and getting skills

back,” Douglas said at her USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame induction Friday night.

Endorsements and press kept both Douglas and Raisman from training for most of the past year. Raisman has hit the promotional circuit for Poland Spring water and Pandora jewelry. She and Douglas have designed their own line of leotards and workout apparel for gymnastics clothing giant GK, and that line now goes head-to-head with an addias brand designed by Maroney and Wieber.

Those around Raisman — especially her coaches in Ashland, Mihai and Silvia Brestyan — understand that she needs to capitalize now.

“A few months ago, when we talked about it, Mihai said that it’s up to me when I come back, that it’s my decision, which has been great,” said Raisman. “They’ve been so supportive and so great. They want me to have fun and get everything out of my system, so that when I’m back, I’m really back.”

The more time she spends out of the gym, the more training and competition seems alluring, said Raisman.

“Actually being (at the championships) this week, it’s so crazy and so overwhelming being on the other side,” she said Friday night. “It’s exciting to be back, but it kills me to not be on the floor competing.”

Douglas has found a balance between returning to training and building on her media appeal.

“After the Olympics, I was running around doing a lot of media appearances,” said Douglas. “Once I returned to the gym, that had to be shut down. I can do media appearances, but they have to come to me so they don’t affect my training schedule, which I’m very thankful for.”

A strong presence

Despite three of their absences from the score sheet, the Fierce Five’s imprint is on the U.S. Championships, which the business side of gymnastics welcomes.

The team’s photo was splashed all over the city leading up to the event. Team members’ likenesses hung from lightposts on banners. And though Maroney and Ross are the only ones competing, fans could purchase a wide variety of Fierce Five shirts and memorabilia.

Bob Mancino, president of Philadelphia-based apparatus builder Mancino Manufacturing, said that the Fierce Five’s popularity came at a perfect time for his business.

“The last three or four Olympics, there has been a bump in business after the games,” he said. “The sport gets more attention, the schools get more registrations, and they buy more equipment.”

“But in my personal observation, our industry was in a real slump before the (London) Olympics thanks to the poor economy. This last Olympics gave us more of a bump

than usual. We're busier than ever now."

While Mancino remains hopeful, other manufacturers and business people worry. Extreme sports such as parkour, developed out of military obstacle course training, continue to draw those young athletes who would have previously given gymnastics a try. Parkour even had a booth at the championship's trade show.

In addition, public schools continue to decrease physical education activities, which was many gymnasts' first exposure to the sport. Some manufacturers noted that while their full-size equipment orders stayed steady or grew, equipment sales marketed toward school systems is slowly on the decline.

Role models still

As traditional exposure to the sport decreases, Olympic bumps in popularity may have less of an effect no matter how charismatic the gymnasts are.

But Maroney, whose facial disappointment upon winning a silver medal at the Olympics spurred an Internet fad that even President Obama took part in, has the charisma that has overcome many of the challenges facing gymnastics. She recognizes her role inspiring children all over the country to take up the sport.

"Honestly, that's the thing that makes me happiest," said Maroney. "I was that little girl who watched the Olympics and I got into gymnastics thinking, 'I want to go to the Olympics someday.' I had no clue what went into it, but I wanted to do it. That's why it means so much to me, because I was them once."

Raisman also relishes the chance to be an athlete youngsters admire — though it's made this year's trip to the championships much different than past years.

"Before, some people would ask for autographs at events like this," said Raisman. "But now, we're in the hotel and every single kid is asking for autographs, so it's crazy."

Despite the competitive nature that spurred on Douglas' Olympic success, she didn't mind taking off these nationals.

"I am happy just to be in a low-key training mode," said Douglas. "All of these amazing juniors can have their time to shine."

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