

Raisman to return

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

PITTSBURGH — Aly Raisman knows the doubters are out there.

She's 20 years old and has been absent from competitive gymnastics for two years. As the Needham native prepares for her first national monitoring camp in October since 2012, she has something to say to those who claim she might not be able to mount a comeback.

"I think it's ridiculous," said Raisman prior to a weekend full of appearances at the 2014 U.S. Gymnastics Championships in Pittsburgh. "I am older, but I am more confident. I'm wiser because I'm older."

The two-time Olympic gold medalist returned

Olympic champ sets sights on 2016 Games

to Burlington's Brestyan's Gymnastics last September, and her coaches, Mihai and Silvia Brestyan, paced her appropriately. After all, there may be no better gym in the nation for a gymnast to train for her second act.

The husband and wife duo trained Winchester's Alicia Sacramone to two World Team selections and a solid bid for the 2012 Olympic team after her 2008 appearance. Their work with Sacramone has impressed USA Gymnastics' national team coordinator, Marta Karolyi.

"Mihai, Silvia and Marta have been working really closely with each other," said Raisman. "I got back in the gym in September, and they have wanted my training to be very slow and steady."

Said the Texas-based Karolyi: "Mihai has been showing me little videos of (Raisman's) training, and I am very happy."

Karolyi is quick to point out that when Raisman returns to active status for October's national mentoring camp, her resume will earn her no special treatment.

"It's really up to the girls to how much determination they have, because they have to compete with everybody else," Karolyi said. "We really respect the results that (she) had, but when it comes to selection, it doesn't go by titles."

Raisman's comeback could not be better timed. Due to injury and retirements, only eight senior women competed in the all-around at Saturday night's championships. The selection pool for senior international competition has never been more in need of gymnasts with experience.

Raisman's biggest foe when she returns, Simone Biles, reigned above that depleted field for a second straight year, earning a second national championship Saturday with a total score of 122.550. Biles won with a dominant 4.25 margin, the largest since 2011.

The two share a specialty: floor exercise. The reigning world champion's score in the event Saturday night was as sky high as her tumbling: 15.5, including a difficulty of 6.4 and an execution of 9.1.

That is only a tenth below Raisman's Olympic floor exercise score of a 15.6 (6.5 execution, 9.1 execution.) Biles also competes in the same vault Raisman did in London, an Amanar.

However, scoring has changed slightly since Raisman's last competition, and those vaults and tumbling skills are worth a bit less than they were in 2012. Upgrading skills on both events could become key to Raisman's comeback.

Raisman will also face competition from Olympic teammate Kyla Ross, who was the national runner-up for a second time. Ross never left competition and has built a reputation for her elegant style, something Raisman struggled with as a teenager. Two-time U.S. bronze medalist Maggie Nichols, a rock-solid all-arounder in the mold of Raisman herself, will also push her.

But Raisman's competition for another Olympic team spot could emerge from the junior ranks. All three of Saturday's junior all-around medalists are eligible for the 2016 Games.

Raisman knows that her comeback won't be a cakewalk, but she feels that maturity will benefit her.

"It was the perfect amount of time to be away from the gym," Raisman said. "Now I am feeling really hungry for competition."



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