

GYMNASTS RELAX, ENJOY MIXED PAIRS

Johnson, Mills Victorious



Anja Wilhelm of the Federal Republic of Germany, has the desire to return to the United States to attend college on a scholarship.

(Right) In his first visit to the United States, Kroll is all smiles. (USGF photos © 1987, by Dave Black and Susan Polakoff)

By Susan Polakoff

The heat was off. The 1987 McDonald's American Cup was history and gymnasts competing in the Cup's sister meet, the McDonald's International Mixed Pairs in Norfolk, Virginia, could finally breathe a little easier.

The serious, intense and hectic pace of the previous week was altered to a more relaxed tone. Competitors could finally take time to enjoy new-found friendships.

One of those gymnasts who felt at home in the U.S. was Anja Wilhelm of the Federal Republic of Germany. Wilhelm, 18, was easily recognized by her dramatic style and individual flair, in and out of the gym.

In the gym, Wilhelm's uneven bars routine opened a few eyes

and earned a few gasps from spectators. During her routine, she stood on the high bar and performed a front with a half twist, catching the high bar, then dismounted by again standing on the high bar and completing a back sommersault with a double twist over the low bar. (Reminiscent of Olga Korbut's spectacular move.) "It's not as difficult as it looks, it's just totally different and no one else does those things," she said.

Not surprisingly, Korbut's style made a memorable impression on Wilhelm. "The first time I saw her, I was only four years old. That's when I began gymnastics." The fact that her parents are her coaches helped spawn her interest in the sport as well.

"The three of us collaborate on my routines," she said. Anja's youthful-looking father accompanied her on the trip. "Everybody asks if he is my brother," she laughed. "I

think it's good to have a father who is your coach. He really knows me, especially if I tell him I'm having trouble or if I can't do something," she said.

Wilhelm was easily recognized by her punkish-hair cut and neon-bright leotards and ultra-modern floor music. "I want to show people how much I love gymnastics. If I like my routine and am having fun—it shows," she said.

"My biggest aim is to return to the Olympics," she said. She competed in Los Angeles in 1984, the same year she was her country's national champion. (She repeated the title in 1985.) A German national team member for six years, Wilhelm faces the European and national championships in May.

"I really have enjoyed this competition, especially the Mixed Pairs. It's been quite fun





and I think everyone is more relaxed," she said. "I would like to return to the U.S. to go to college on a gymnastics scholarship. Of course a school in California would be great," she grinned.

Also grinning throughout much of the Mixed Pairs meet were the team of Phoebe Mills and Scott Johnson. Mills and Johnson won the competition, just behind the USSR's Olga Strazheva and Vladimir Gogoladze. Romania's Augustina Badea and Marian Rizan won the bronze medal.

"We felt very confident," Johnson said after the competition. "Phoebe clinched it for us." Mills returned the praise, "We both wanted to finish on a good note. I'm glad Scott was my partner, we were both psyched."

Sylvio Kroll, of the German Democratic Republic, performed exhibitions during breaks in the competition. Kroll, a familiar name in the

sport for years, was on his first visit to the U.S. "This has been a good trip," said the soft-spoken 22-year-old. The 1985 World Champion on the parallel bars, Kroll also enjoyed sightseeing in Washington D.C. "The monuments were very beautiful. I didn't know how nice this city is," he said during a break at the Jefferson Memorial. Like most athletes, Kroll loosened up in Norfolk while his confidence in his English-speaking ability grew.

At the end of the two-week American Cup/Mixed Pairs competition, gymnasts, coaches, interpreters and staff members were reminded of the sometimes not-so-obvious benefits and probably forgotten-too-often reason for international athletic competition—friendship.



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