Arel Wins Highest Division III Gymnastics Award

By Catherine Rocchio

Three MIT women gymnasts participated in the the National Collegiate Gymnastics Association Division III championships March 6-7 at Cortland State University in Cortland, N.Y. All won awards — Kortney Leabourne ’92 and Julie Lyren ’93 were voted Academic All-Americans, while Lisa Arel ’92, stepping up an amazing career in MIT gymnastics, was voted Outstanding Senior Gymnast of the Year, the highest honor Division III gymnastics offers.

Eight teams qualified for the championships, as did the top eight individuals from colleges that did not qualify as a team. The teams that qualified were from Gustavus Adolphus College and Hamline College in Minnesota; Oshkosh, LaCrosse, and River Falls Universities from Wisconsin; and Ithaca College and the State Universities of New York at Brockport and Cortland. Individual qualifiers represented MIT, Linus College, and the Universities of Wisconsin at Eau Clair, Stout, and Superior. The three women MIT sent represented the best showing MIT has ever made at the national championships.

Leabourne, competing in her second national championship, had an excellent meet. She gave her best performance of the year in the floor exercise, performing a full-twisting layout somersault in her second tumbling pass for the first time in her college career. The difficulty of her routine and her energetic dance style were rewarded with a score of 8.6. Leabourne finished up the meet and her last competitive moment on her favorite event, vaulting, and stood up a beautiful handspring full-twist for a score of 8.3.

Competing in her first national championship, Julie Lyren had the best overall score among MIT women, finishing in eighth place. Lyren’s hard work over the past year paid off, as every event looked polished and smooth. Floor exercise was Lyren’s first event, where difficult tumbling combined with dynamic leaps and jumps earned an 8.9. Lyren qualified for the finals on the balance beam, where two back handsprings, straddle jumps, and a roundoff-back somersault dismount earned a score of 9.05. Lyren received a medal for her total score of 34.8.

Arel qualified for the finals in both floor exercise and balance beam, but a bad break on the uneven bars cost her a shot at an overall medal. She performed her difficult floor exercise with grace, beautiful style, and flexibility. Her marvelous routine earned a score of 9.1, securing her a spot in the finals the next day.

But Arel’s luck turned in the next two events. Her powerful and well-executed full-twist handspring in the vault received a lower than expected score of 9.0. And she fell on an even more disappointing pitfall on the uneven bars, where she lost her grip on the lower bar in the middle of a move she’s done thousands of times in competition and practice. The fall cost Arel her spot in the all-around standings as her routine received only an 8.1.

Despite her bad luck, Arel shook off her disappointment and competed superbly on the balance beam, where her routine earned an 8.85 and qualified her for the finals. The finals were held on Saturday, where the top twelve gymnasts on each event from the previous day’s competition competed again for the six All-American titles and medals on each event. Arel had perhaps the best beam routine of her life and earned an 8.8, a score that moved her from twelfth place on the event to fifth for an All-American title. Her floor exercise was again outstanding and received a score of 9.05, landing her in seventh place overall for that event.

Lyren, the last competitor on the balance beam, suffered a few wobbles after the tension of the long wait but fought and succeeded in staying on the apparatus, earning an 8.35 and placing eighth overall.

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