

McCool is HOT in Greece

By Luan Peszek

Courtney McCool turned 16 on April 1 – an April Fool’s Kid. But, there’s no fooling with the success she’s experiencing in 2004. She came into the Visa American Cup as the underdog and left as the talk of the town, taking second all-around to Carly Patterson. More recently she traveled to Greece for the Olympic Test event and made her mark there, too, winning the all-around gold, a silver on vault and a bronze on bars.

"It was so cool going there and seeing everything," said McCool. "It makes me very confident to know that I can do it. It will be just as hard in August (during the Games), but now I have a little more confidence."

When asked how it felt to win the meet, she said, "Winning was so great. Plus I got to compete in finals, too. The experience was like no other. This was by far my best experience in gymnastics! My confidence is up and I'm hoping I can do the same thing (at U.S. Championships and Olympic Trials) so that I can make the Olympic Team."



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The Visa American Cup in late February was Courtney's first experience at the senior level. She said, "It was the first time I had competed with such a big audience. Plus the format was a little different than what I was used to so it was a good learning experience for me."

McCool said that she relies on her coaches to help her deal with the pressure at competitions. "Both Al and Armine (Fong) were with me at the Visa American Cup and that helped a lot. Al tells me that he's right there and that I should do my routines just like in practice. Armine tells me to take it one step at a time and she helps me calm down. Once I'm out there competing it's so exciting and my nerves calm down."

McCool trains at Great American Gymnastics Express in Blue Spring, Missouri, with her coaches Al and Armine (pronounced Ar men a) Fong as well as two other top elites Terin Humphrey and Sarah Shire. The gymnasts are a close knit group and not only push one another but also support one another, too. When asked what makes the three of them so successful, Shire said,

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"All three of us in the gym together pushing each other is great. We're all really supportive of one another."

"I have three viable candidates for the Olympic Team (Shire, McCool and Humphrey)," said Al Fong. "We have a microcosm of the national team. They're all three very competitive, want to make the Olympic Team and are training side by side. It's an environment that you can only dream of. It didn't happen by accident. We found these three gymnasts early on and trained them together for several years. They've had the goal of making the Olympic Team from day one. We've designed our entire program around it!"

Al talked about Courtney saying, "She's a rare gymnast because she's very powerful and explosive yet is as graceful as a New York ballerina. Armine is the one who has developed all the choreography for all three girls. All of their positions are by design. I feel that Armine is the best choreographer in the world – and there are many that would agree with me."

The elites at Great American Gymnastics Express train from 1:00-7:00 p.m. each day as well as practice on Saturday. McCool said, "I go to Lee's Summit North High School from 7:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. then grab lunch and head to the gym."

Courtney was quick to point out that she'll soon be driving herself to practice! In fact, when she returned from her successful trip in Greece, her family greeted her with a congratulations present and an early birthday gift. "My sister handed me this little box and inside the box was a Greece Olympic Games keychain along with a key to my new Toyota Corolla," said McCool. "It was great."

McCool's family consists of parents Mike and Linda and an older brother Michael, 19, and younger sister Morgan, 13, who is a dancer. She said her family is very supportive of her gymnastics endeavors. When asked what her parents say to her before meets Courtney said, "We always pray – we're big Christians. My dad tells me to give all my glory for God. He tells me that I have a lot of talent. My mom can't really watch me during meets because she gets so nervous but she's always behind me. My mom said I have a great attitude and I need to just work hard and keep it up."

In her spare time Courtney likes to go to the movies or shopping with friends. Her favorite stores are Abercrombie and Weather Vane and she likes to shop for jeans and T-shirts. She also likes to visit her grandma and play cards. Courtney has a passion for animals and has a rabbit, named BG, a hamster named Buddie, and a dog named Hamlet! "I'd like to be a vet in the future because I love animals," said Courtney.

Courtney summed it all up by saying, "It's just amazing to have this talent and be able to have a shot at making the Olympic Team. It's a dream come true. This is what I've been working towards for a long time and I really want to make this year a good one!"



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Courtney McCool

Hometown: Kansas City, Missouri

Birthday: April 1, 1988

Club: Great American Gymnastics Express

Coaches: Al Fong and Armine Barutyan Fong

School: Lee's Summit North High School 10th Grade

Began Gymnastics: 1995

Favorite Events: Bars and Beam

Gymnastics Highlights:

2004 Olympic Test Event, Greece; 1st-AA, 2nd-VT, 3rd-UB

2004 Visa American Cup, New York; 2nd-AA, 2nd-VT, 2nd-FX

2003 Masillia Gym Cup, France; 3rd-AA, 1st-BB, 4th-VT

2003 Pan American Games, Dominican Republic; 1st-Team, 2nd-VT

2003 U.S. Championships, Wis.; 2nd-AA, 2nd-VT, 2nd-BB, 4th-UB (jr. division)