TOP TEENS

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Taking Off

When acrobatic gymnast Nicole Powell needed a new partner, her brother, Shawn, reluctantly stepped up. Now the Bethesda siblings have their sights set on the 2020 world championships.

BY DINA ELBOGHADAY | PHOTOS BY SKIP BROWN
NICOLE POWELL REMEMBERS THE
crowd cheering as she confidently stood
on her partner's shoulders, ready to be
thrust into the air. She would flip back­
ward twice, her body curled into a tight
ball, before landing on her feet. She'd
nailed the move, a double tuck, many
times before. But this time, at an acrobatic
gymnastics competition in Milwaukee in
2017, she landed on her rear end. The
13-year-old quickly regained her foot­
ing and pushed through the rest of the
performance, knowing that she and her
partner had lost their chance of advanc­
ing to more competitions anytime soon,
if ever.

"I kept thinking: Why did this happen?"
says Nicole, now 14. "I just couldn't
believe it."

"Acro" gymnasts like Nicole fuse acro­
batics with music and dance, Cirque du
Soleil style. Unlike artistic gymnasts,
they do not perform on the vault, uneven
bars or balance beam. They work only
on the floor, with at least one partner.
Nicole, who entered the sport at age
10, excelled at women’s pairs. She and
her partner of three years had earned
a gold medal for their age group at an
international competition in Poland
in 2016. They'd been building on that
momentum by the time they arrived in
Milwaukee the following summer, but
the fall crushed them. The mistake cost
them a spot on the U.S. acrobatic gym­
nastics team, which meant they would
not be invited to compete in any inter­
national events in 2018—including the
world championships, widely considered
the Olympics of acrobatic gymnastics, a
non-Olympic sport.

The botched performance also under­
scored a truth they'd been trying to
ignore for some time: Nicole had physi­
ically outgrown her partner, who could
Clockwise from top left: Nicole and Shawn with one of their coaches, Brandon Cephas, at Xtreme Acro & Cheer in Rockville; Shawn, pictured with Cephas, had never done gymnastics before he started training with his sister; Nicole stretches at the gym.
no longer support Nicole's height or weight, as often happens in the sport. Nina Kimmel, Nicole's 34-year-old half sister and de facto manager, knew it was time for a change. She began an online search for other sports that might appeal to her sister, perhaps competitive cheerleading. She was still on her phone looking for options on day two of the Milwaukee competition as she watched a boy-girl duo (called a "mixed pair") perform. That's when the idea came to her. Seated next to Kimmel was her younger half brother, Shawn, who was 14 at the time. She looked at him and thought, "He'll do."

NICOLE AND SHAWN NOTICED the sideward glances from other gymnasts the first time they practiced together at their gym in August 2017, not long after the Milwaukee competition. "Everyone was looking at me like I was crazy," says Nicole, now a freshman at Holton-Arms School in Bethesda. Her teammates at Xtreme Aero & Cheer in Rockville recognized Shawn. He was Nicole's brother, the guy who came to all of her competitions and chatted with them at her birthday parties. Funny and likable. But also short and scrawny, especially for a "base," the gymnast tasked with lifting, supporting and tossing the "top" gymnast, in this case, Nicole.

"They looked at my size and they didn't think I'd make it," says Shawn, now 16. "Nobody thought it would last."

Nicole's coach, Juli Eicher, had serious doubts. "Frankly, I was in shock when [the family] came up with this crazy idea," says Eicher, the acro program director and head coach at Xtreme Acro. She also had seen Shawn a few times before. He was almost the same size as Nicole. He couldn't do a cartwheel, let alone reliably lift his sister over his head for a sustained period. But as Kimmel tells it, Shawn was Nicole's best bet.

"I knew we could motivate him, watch his diet, bulk him up," she says. "That was within my zone of influence because he's family—and he's a sweetheart. Going outside the family for a partner would have been harder. Plus, he happened to be sitting next to me when I was super desperate to find a boy."

At first, Shawn resisted. The thought of wearing a leotard intimidated him ("too tight," he says), as did the challenge of mastering a sport in which he had no experience, especially since he wasn't much of an athlete. He enjoyed playing soccer, but wasn't a star player. Nicole and Nina, however, proved persuasive. They helped him fully grasp what he describes as the "physical and social benefits" of acrobatic gymnastics. Nicole puts it more bluntly. "He means muscles and girls," she explains. "Lots of acro girls." Shawn, a sophomore at Landon, an all-boys school in Bethesda, looks sheepish. He insists that he also wanted to help Nicole. "I've been around her all her life," he says, "I knew I could do a good job working with her. He figured he'd give it a try, and bow out if he didn't like it.

Early on, Shawn struggled to keep up with his teammates during conditioning. At practice, he could only do three or four push-ups at a time. "I'd always be the last one to finish anything," he says. "It was difficult and upsetting, and sometimes I wanted to quit."

Brandon Cephas, the gym's assistant coach and tumbling coach, kept him going. They tackled basic tumbling skills six to seven days a week, most notably the handstand, and worked on Shawn's strength, stability and stamina. A few months into the training, Shawn noticed improvements. "I could hold Nicole up for a bit longer," he says. "We kept working and working, and next thing I knew, I could lift her up with one arm, and all of a sudden we were flipping all over the place." Shawn is now 35 pounds heavier than he was when he started, and at least an inch taller, at 5 feet 8½ inches. He's developed six-pack abs and impressive upper body strength.

Still, the hard work wasn't enough to make up for the vast difference in their skill levels, at least initially. With her previous partner, Nicole had competed...
in the 12-18 age group, an elite level that involves challenging skills and routines. When she and Shawn teamed up, they intended to compete one level lower, in the 11-16 group. But a few months into the partnership, as they approached a major competition in Las Vegas, their coach nudged them to drop one rung lower to Level 8, which is not defined by age but requires less demanding skills.

“I was kind of relieved, because I knew we weren’t ready,” Nicole says, echoing Shawn’s thinking. When they got to the Vegas Acro Cup in February 2018, they blew away the competition, Eicher says. “That’s when we knew we were back on track.”

In July 2018, Nicole and Shawn won gold at the USA Gymnastics Championships in North Carolina for mixed pairs at the 11-16 age level. Soon after, they were selected for the U.S. team that will compete at international events in 2019.

“It’s pretty unusual for someone who has no background, not even a gymnastics or dancing background, to progress to that level so quickly,” Eicher says. The Bethesda siblings have set their sights even higher for 2020, when they hope to be chosen for the team that will compete at the world championships in Geneva.

At a family gathering in Kimmel’s Bethesda home one recent afternoon, Shawn and Nicole showed off their new leotards and ticked off the previous year’s successes. “We proved everybody wrong,” Shawn says with a smile.

COACHES AND TRAINERS WHO’VE worked with Nicole and Shawn say one key to their success is their connection on the floor, which helps sell the storytelling aspect of their performances to judges. Arthur Davis, the siblings’ Los Angeles-based choreographer, says acro gymnastics is a physical manifestation of an intense relationship that requires immense trust—a confidence that your partner will catch and support you, even if you’ve had a nasty spat. He sees that kind of connection and understanding between Shawn and Nicole.

Their mother, Maryam Seifi, says the siblings have always had each other’s backs. When family friends threw a party and relegated the children to the basement to watch television, 6-year-old Shawn insisted that the other kids make room for his little sister in the front row so she could see the screen. In third grade, Nicole confronted an older boy whom she believed was bullying her brother and told him to knock it off. That instinct to protect one another is a general ease between them.”

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has grown stronger since they teamed up for gymnastics, Seifi says. Nicole acts as a caregiver of sorts when she practices with her brother, who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 12 and wears a glucose monitor that sets off an alarm on his phone when his sugar level is off. Early on in their partnership, she roomed with him when they were on the road so she could make sure he woke up to the alarm if necessary. Shawn acts as Nicole's number one defender, recently pleading for leniency on his sister's behalf when she set up a sleepover at their house without her mother's permission.

"I was going to take her phone away, but he talked me out of it," says Seifi, a dentist who owns StarBrite Dental in Rockville and District Smiles in D.C.

Like all siblings, they bicker occasionally. One point of friction is rooted in their personality differences, Shawn says. At practice, they tend to quarrel about things like whether she's tucking her knees close enough to her chest during a flip or whether he threw her too low, both of which can lead to a fall. The falls happen often during practice, but rarely in competition. "If we fall on one of our skills, my thinking is we shouldn't keep getting upset about it, but Nicole keeps getting upset, and that can lead to an argument," Shawn says. "I'm a bit more laid-back than she is, even when it comes to school or doing chores. I don't get stressed very easily."

Nicole says the disagreements tend to ramp up when they're not nailing their moves in the weeks leading up to a major competition. "I get frustrated, and he gets mad at me for being frustrated, and then I get mad at him for getting mad at me," she says. "Sometimes we'll just finish the practice without talking to each other. It can be five to 10 minutes, or maybe longer."

NICOLE'S FASCINATION WITH THE SPORT

The sport started in the summer before fifth grade, when she and Shawn spent the weekdays at their sister Nina's house. Kimmel was busy tending to her newborn baby, their parents were working, and Shawn seemed content to eat cereal in front of the TV all day. Nicole was bored, so Kimmel enrolled her in acro gymnastics classes, which eventually led her to join the Xtreme Aero team that September and commit to the sport year-round. "I loved it because it made me feel like I could fly," Nicole says.

A year later, Nicole was rushed to the emergency room after falling on her neck and spraining it during practice. The attending doctor declared an end to her gymnastics career, placed a brace around her neck and said she had to keep it on for six months. "There she was, an 11-year-old in a neck brace crying her eyes out because the doctor said she was done with gymnastics," Seifi says. "She looked at me and she said, 'Mom, that cannot happen. It absolutely cannot.'"

Kimmel, who manages her mother's Rockville dental office, says Nicole saw a few doctors that week for other opinions. One suggested taking off the brace. He said keeping it on would weaken her neck muscles and slow her recuperation, so off it went. A mere 12 days after the scare, Nicole eased her way back to practice, and Kimmel became her manager by default, in part because she had a flexible boss.

Today, the family's life revolves around gymnastics. Kimmel coordinates Nicole and Shawn's practice schedules, books their travel and helps select their leotards, which are custom-made in Spain. The siblings practice six days a week for a total of roughly 20 hours. A nanny takes them to weekday practices, and their father, William Powell, usually picks them up. "I'm basically a chauffeur, videographer, fan and check writer," says Powell, who runs his wife's D.C. office. Last year, Seifi arranged to have her annual staff getaway in Milwaukee so she could drive straight to Chicago afterward for one of Nicole and Shawn's competitions. The siblings skipped a Thanksgiving vacation in Florida in November to squeeze in more training leading up to an event. The family didn't even plan its usual Christmas getaway for the past two years because the kids had to practice. On the plus side, scheduling logistics are less complicated now than they were with Nicole's previous partner: "At least we're dealing with the vacation plans of one family instead of two," Kimmel says.

The demands of the sport leave little time for socializing. Shawn was transitioning into his freshman year at Landon from Cabin John Middle School when he
took up gymnastics, which left him with little time to bond with new classmates after school, he says. In the gym, he's one of only two male athletes, so most of his social interactions are limited to the girls around him. "Everyone at the gym understands the time constraints," says Shawn, whose former girlfriend was also a gymnast.

A typical weekday for him and Nicole consists of school, practice, then two to three hours of homework before bed. So far, their school work hasn't suffered, even though they've had to miss two weeks of class this year for competitions and a visit with their choreographer in California, their mother says. They're mindful that their grades are important to colleges, that would make it easier to get into the schools they need to keep their grades up: Nicole wants to be a dentist one day, and Shawn hopes to be a mechanical engineer with his own company. (If aero makes them more attractive to colleges, that would be a plus, their mom adds.)

"A lot of my friends at school are athletes, too, so they get it," Nicole says. "They know that when I can do something with them, I do. But it's easier to spend time with her across friends, whose schedules easily sync with hers, and five of them hang out together away from the gym in the limited free time they have. She and Shawn don't complain much about the toll the sport has taken on their social lives, though sometimes Nicole wonders what it would have been like if she'd chosen a different sport, like skating or dance, which attracts more boys. "I go to an all-girls school and I'm in pretty much an all-girls sport," she says.

At their gym, a nondescript cinder block warehouse with an open floor, mats strewn all around it and practice belts and ropes hanging from the ceiling, Nicole and Shawn are a fixture. She remains the fierce competitor who, with one of only two male athletes, so most recently the Washington Post.