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As debut nears, Clemson gymnastics is ready

By Ian Taylor
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Clemson's Rebecca Wells works out during practice on Tuesday morning at Littlejohn Coliseum in Clemson.

Photo by Caleb Gilbert

CLEMSON — In June 2021, then-Clemson athletic director Dan Radakovich announced women's lacrosse and gymnastics teams would be added as varsity sports.

The lacrosse team had its inaugural season during the 2022-23 school year, and now the gymnastics team is ready to take the spotlight ahead of its first campaign this year.

Nearly two and a half years after Radakovich's announcement, a ton of progress has been made for the Tigers' gymnastics program, from the hiring of head coach Amy Smith to the groundbreaking of a \$37 million facility and the formation of what is preparing to be "Team 1."

After practice Tuesday in the team's soon-to-be-home of Littlejohn Coliseum, Smith said the past year and a half has felt like the Tigers were "building the plane as we're flying it."

"It's been an incredible, incredible experience. It's the most overwhelming year of my life, but the most amazing one as well," she said. "It's really incredible to be able to give this experience to these 17 young women."

Among that group is redshirt senior Rebecca Wells, who came from Utah State alongside Smith and is the veteran presence on a figuratively and literally young team.

"It's amazing, being able to start this program with this team and just building the culture already," Wells said. "We've already had so many good meetings and conversations about who we want this team to be in a few years and starting this year."

After spending all of last year practicing and competing against each other, the Tigers have added more new pieces and are looking to make a splash in their first year. The hope was that any growing pains and fumbles that a young program can make have already been worked out, Smith said.

"We continue to prepare, and I don't anticipate any challenges," Smith said. "It's just, we've got to get in competition mode and get ready, and we're doing that."

She and the rest of the Tigers have a focus on the intangibles. In particular, the attitude.

"We are attitude and energy, we control the controllables and they know that," Smith said. "You get to choose — it can be positive or negative or neutral, so let's choose to be positive and get after it. We know at some point we're going to get hit with adversity, so what we're going to do with adversity is we are going to adapt, we are going to be resilient and push through and really feel like the teams that can do that."

"That's going to put us at a championship level."

Wells said the team wants its defining characteristics to be about having the attitude that Smith described and bringing both a positive one to practice and life, as well as a competitive one once the season starts.

"Just attacking it, going as far as we can," she said. "We really want to make it to nationals this year and be at least a top-15 or top-10 team this year. So, it's just giving it our all and being prepared for that."

The Tigers' addition of gymnastics also hailed the beginning of the ACC's entry to the sport now that it has the minimum of four member teams to hold a conference championship. Alongside North Carolina, N.C. State and Pittsburgh — who have been competing in the East Atlantic Gymnastics League — the Tigers will be competing in the ACC's first gymnastics season since 1984.

Conference competition will begin in January, but first, the Tigers will have their first of five home events this season at Littlejohn Coliseum on Jan. 12, when William and Mary comes to Clemson. Prior to that, Clemson will host its free "Gymnastics 101" event on Dec. 8.

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