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Bound by beams, backflips ... and blood

For Seattle Pacific coach Laurel Tindall and daughter Kai, 22 years in the gym has had its share of ups and downs – with plenty of memorable moments, too



Photo by Andrew Towell

Kai and Laurel Tindall celebrate after Kai's 9.75 beam routine on Senior Night.

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SEATTLE – She went from a one-arm front handspring into a back handspring. Then did a scissor half-split jump, followed by a one-footed front tuck.

Move after move, [Kai Tindall](#) was sticking her balance beam routine on a frosty February Friday.

Finally, she executed a practically perfect punch front full dismount, gave the customary salute to the judges, and ran into her coach's arms.

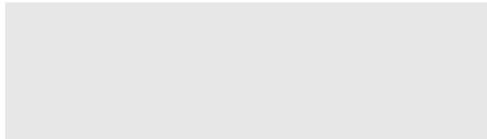
In that heartfelt snapshot in time, as cheers cascaded from the Brougham Pavilion stands, this was more than just a coach-athlete moment.

This was a mother-daughter moment.

The daughter is Kai. The mother is [Laurel Tindall](#), longtime mentor of Seattle Pacific's nationally prominent women's gymnastics program. And on this night, as mom watched, pen and clipboard in hand as always, daughter had just pulled off one of the best beam routines of her entire life, with a 9.75 score to prove it.

So ask Kai about the best day or night or event of her career – essentially every minute of which has been spent in Laurel's gym, whether in diapers or a leotard – and she doesn't hesitate with her reply.

"Hitting one of my best routines ever on Senior Night," Kai said. "The team got



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UPCOMING EVENTS

MAR	APRIL 2014					MAY
SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

Thu, Apr. 10, 2014

There are no events scheduled.



some really good pictures and (Laurel) came over and gave me a kiss on the cheek."



In a sports world where some parent-coaching-their-offspring relationships work very well, and others not so well, the dynamic between Kai and [Laurel Tindall](#) has, for the most part, been one of the good ones.

It's not a perfect 10 – no parent-child relationship ever is.

But a sense of perspective, a focus on the big picture, and a desire to do things right have made this a mostly enjoyable experience in a sport where joy often gets trampled by frustration.

"It's never easy coaching your own kid, and obviously, I've coached her for a long time," Laurel said. "It probably has been harder these past four years. But we also have three good coaches here (Tindall, assistant [Sarah Jean Marshall](#), and assistant [Carly Dockendorf](#)). With the staff we've had, it has made it so much easier for her and for me in getting her where she needs to go."



Dave, Kai, and Laurel Tindall march onto the floor in Brougham Pavilion on SPU's Senior Night.

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POLL



Laurel Tindall has SPU at nationals for the 32nd time in 33 years.

FROM PUGET SOUND TO PROVIDENCE

Where both Tindalls and the rest of the Falcons are going now is Rhode Island for this weekend's USA Gymnastics Collegiate Championships. Seattle Pacific will march into Providence's Pizzitola Sports Center on Friday at 4:00 p.m. PDT for the team preliminaries.

Team finals are Saturday at 4 p.m. Pacific, and individual finals -- with Kai having an excellent chance of making it in at least the floor exercise -- are Sunday morning at 10 PDT.

Certainly, SPU will have ample motivation after missing out on last April's team finals despite a then school-record score of 193.900 in the

preliminaries.

Kai comes in with ample motivation, too. This will be her final weekend as a competitor. Ironically, while most college senior gymnasts are ready to put the physically and mentally demanding sport behind them, she is wishing that more was still to come.

"I don't feel like I'm ready to be done. I'm definitely going to miss it," Kai said. "I feel like I can go two or three more years. It feels like I've figured it out and have gotten it all together."

NO SURE THING

Growing up as she did in Laurel's gym, it would be easy to assume that Kai and college gymnastics would be a natural fit.

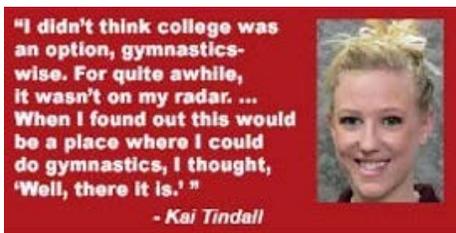
But it wasn't that straight-forward.

"I didn't think college was an option, gymnastics-wise. For quite awhile, it wasn't on my radar," Kai said. "At first, I wanted to go to a school far away. I grew up at SPU and in Seattle, and I wanted a new experience."

She looked at other options. But the summer before her senior year at Mountlake Terrace High School north of the city, Kai suffered a shoulder injury that required surgery.

"At that point, I didn't know if I would do gymnastics again," she said.

Taking a step away from everything, Kai considered Seattle Pacific more seriously. Because both parents work at the school (mom Laurel as a coach, dad Dave as a computer and information systems specialist), she was eligible for a tuition discount. Also, by her own acknowledgement, "I absolutely love the city."



And, there was one more thing.

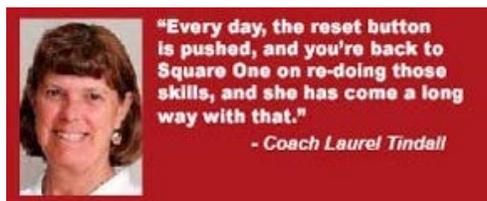
"When I found out this would be a place where I could do gymnastics, I thought, 'Well, there it is,'" Kai said.

Like her daughter, Laurel didn't know as the years went by just how far Kai and gymnastics would go – and if that path eventually would take her to the shores of the Ship Canal.

"She got better, but we weren't looking that far ahead," she said. "When we started out, it wasn't like 'She's going to be on my team in 2010.'

Then Laurel, now in her 39th year of leading the Falcons, added with a slight laugh, "I wasn't even looking at it as if I was going to be coaching in 2010."

From the get-go, Kai was simply another Falcon trying to earn a spot in the rotation. As a freshman, she did earn one on the beam, competing in every meet, including nationals.



But her sophomore winter in 2012 was a struggle. It also became a major motivator for her, especially after getting to nationals again – but this time as an alternate who

ultimately spent all three days in Bridgeport, Conn., only watching as the Falcons claimed the fourth-place trophy.

"I was just doing beam, and I kind of messed up my chances because I was missing routines," Kai recalled. "Knowing that I didn't want to sit and watch and knowing that I wanted to have a hand in that success was extremely motivating. I said, 'I need to do everything in my power and not let that happen.'"

This season, Kai has been part of Laurel's lineup on beam and floor exercise in every meet, and has become a regular on the vault, as well. She was the team's top floor performer in nine of the 11 meets this season, and has SPU's best score of 9.825 in that event. She is ranked No. 4 nationally on the floor heading to Providence.

"I'm not ready just to be done," Kai said. I want to be done at my best."

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

While her competition days are winding down, Kai's gymnastics days aren't. About to turn 22, she has been cutting her coaching teeth since age 10.

"She would be helping the kids on doing a handstand," Laurel said. "She didn't have much of a choice: It was either sit in the office and watch a movie, or help coach."

Kai, an aspiring grade school teacher, knew early on coaching was as good a fit for her as it is for her mom.

Still is.

"It has turned into a passion," she said. "I love being a coach and working with kids and being able to have that impact on them," she added. "Then when I got to college, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. All of my experience here has solidified that goal."



Kai Tindall is No. 4 nationally on the floor.

There's plenty to think about with nationals looming, so neither Kai nor Laurel has tried to think too much about this intertwined chapter of their lives coming to a close.

But as it does close, one very grateful daughter and one very proud mom are ready to share it with each other.

"In all of her career, she has had to work through all of the injuries, and also a lot of mental things. A lot of people have those mental things to work through," Laurel said. "Every day, the reset button is pushed, and you're back to Square One on re-doing those skills, and she has come a long way with that."

"The ones who have worked through it enough to be here now, it will make them stronger in the future," she added. "When you run into something, you can't just run away. That's one of the huge things gymnastics teaches you."

It's one of the huge things [Laurel Tindall](#) taught Kai.

It's one of the huge things [Kai Tindall](#) learned from Laurel.

Call it a coach-athlete moment. Or better yet ...

...call it a mother-daughter moment.

