

# Young gymnast's tumbling is technically perfect

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Go ahead and shine the spotlight on Samantha Policicchio. She welcomes the attention.

She looks forward to being the last gymnast in line at a big meet. She has loved showing off her tumbling skills since she was a 7-year-old doing flips in front of the Downers Grove Heritage Festival parade.

"Everybody's watching, your music's on and their eyes are on you," the 13-year-old of Woodridge said, describing what it is like to be the center of attention. "In tumbling, you have all these people watching, the pressure's on — you just go."

Samantha certainly shone brightest in her biggest meet of the year. She won the Intermediate girls tumbling division at the United States Trampoline and Tumbling National Championships, held June 21-25 in Louisville. It was the biggest meet in the history of the event.

"Knowing that there are so many people competing, it makes you try so much harder and do so much better. I feel like I want to show off," she said. "I want to do my best, and that was the place to do it."

Samantha was one of 12 kids from Elite Sports Complex in Downers Grove to compete at nationals.

"Samantha's been doing very well all year. She's a very talented kid," said Jean Hailman, director of the Tumbling and Trampoline program at Elite Sports Complex. "She had a great state meet, and was obviously great at nationals."

What a year it has been for Samantha. After competing in artistic gymnastics for seven years with her little sister, Alysha, Samantha turned her focus to tumbling with several of her teammates this season.

In her first tumbling meet in February in Joliet, Samantha took first place.

"It really boosted my confidence. To get first in my first meet, I was excited," she said.

"That's where she got the bug," said her mom, Jennifer, also one of Samantha's coaches.

Tumbling is a component of gymnastics, but only a small part of the floor routine. In tumbling meets, judges look for complete technical perfection.

Is the athlete straight? Are they down the middle of the mat? Did they deviate from the routine at all? Did they stick their landing? All of these technical skills are examined closely.

"It's not like a floor exercise in gymnastics where you have the choreography and the tumbling," Hailman said. "It's all strictly execution."

Jennifer Policicchio thinks of her daughter as a "natural" for the sport.

"She just has amazing tumbling form. I don't think it's something that can be taught, she just

has it," mom said. "She has the strength, the flexibility — it's just one of those natural talents that somebody has."

Samantha said that natural ability helps her add more difficult elements to her program, which, in turn, translates to higher marks from judges.

"I don't have to think about what I'm doing too much. I just do it," she said.

Samantha's tumbling skills have also been a benefit away from the gym. She played soccer and volleyball and was also a cheerleader as a seventh-grader at Jefferson Junior High School last year. She plans to do the same this school year.

It doesn't hurt that tumbling practice is only two nights a week. She was at the gym four nights a week in artistic gymnastics.

"Tumbling is fun, and it's only a couple nights a week so I can still have a life outside of the gym," Samantha said.

"And it has helped in other sports. In cheerleading I can tumble, in volleyball I can jump high and in soccer I can run. I don't know if I could do all of those as well if it wasn't for tumbling."

Mom is happy with the decision to stay with tumbling.

"We want her to still be involved in school," Jennifer Samantha said. "Saying good-bye to artistic gymnastics was her decision, but I think it was a good one."