

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Fourteen-year-old refuses to be deterred from Olympic dream

BY MITCH ABRAMSON

THE RIDE to the Aviator Events Center in Brooklyn is an exercise in frustration for Alexis Page. From her home in Harlem, Page, a 14-year-old Olympic hopeful in rhythmic gymnastics, treks nearly three hours on the subway and bus with her mother, a ride that is complicated by the others aboard.

"There's the one-eyed man who I see a lot," Alexis says as she peels back an orange in her kitchen early Saturday morning.

The difficulty in reaching Aviator, which sponsors Page in her Olympian quest, allowing her to train for free, may be the least of her problems.

There are the more serious obstacles, like dealing with physical and financial constraints that could keep her from reaching her dream of making the 2012 Olympic Games.

Two years ago, her mother Pamela, who doesn't own a car, lost her job as a legal secretary, forcing her and Alexis to move into a smaller apartment with Alexis' grandmother a block away.

Around that time, Alexis, one of the few African-Americans in the sport, was diagnosed with scoliosis, an abnormal curvature of the spine that causes her muscles to stiffen.

In a sport that requires maximum flexibility and balance, it's a potentially devastating ailment. The pain can get so bad from practicing, her mother says, that Alexis sometimes breaks down and cries on the train ride home.

"Some days I go to the gym and I can't even arch my back or jump," Alexis says glumly. "It makes it hard to practice."

Herbert Berger, a therapist who works with Alexis to correct her condition, says that as her level of competition increases, her practices will increase in difficulty, placing even more strain on her spine.

Her mother sometimes asks if she wants to quit gymnastics. Alexis always says no.

"I love this sport too much," Alexis says.

There is also a feeling of obligation to keep going: Because of her great talent — and what she represents as an African-American competing in a predominantly Eastern European sport — many people are invested in Alexis' success.

"It's important that we try to fulfill her dream,"

said Wendy Hilliard, the first African-American to make the U.S. rhythmic gymnastics senior national team and a mentor to Alexis. "We want to show that if we give a kid an opportunity, they can succeed, and Alexis is a great role model for other kids."

Alexis, a freshman at St. Jean Baptiste School in Manhattan, placed fifth in the National Junior Championships in Dallas on Aug. 14, putting her on the junior national team.

She also took fourth place at the Junior Pan-American Championships on Nov. 13 in Havana, Cuba, a qualifying tournament for the 2010 Youth Olympics in Singapore.

While the U.S. team earned a slot in the Olympics with a gold-medal finish, the individual competitors still have to qualify. Alexis receives some funding from USA Gymnastics, the national governing body, but it doesn't cover everything.

To help meet the rest of the costs, which include nearly \$800 for costumes, Hilliard set up a "Team Alexis" fund through her foundation to help inner-city girls.

One of the biggest contributors to the fund is Aliane Baquerot, a former student of Hilliard's and a 1996 Olympian.

Baquerot and her mom, Vivian deMilley, contributed approximately \$4,000 to help allay the roughly \$25,000 in annual costs that the Pages must raise for equipment, transportation and the coaches and help staff on her team.

"We just figure out how to pay for it," Pamela says. "Sometimes we get help from family members. Sometimes from the foundation. How do you take something away from a child that loves the sport so much? I'll do anything to keep her in the sport."

They are not as fortunate as Rebecca Sereda, a 13-year-old from Staten Island who is the top-ranked rhythmic gymnast on the junior national team.

Sereda's father drives her to practices at the Isadora Club in Staten Island and Brooklyn. The Seredas are originally from Ukraine, where rhythmic gymnastics is a cherished sport. Sereda relies on her father to cover her expenses with help from USA Gymnastics, which shells out \$300 a month from August to January to the top three juniors.

'Some days I go to the gym and I can't even arch my back.'



Alexis Page hones skills as rhythmic gymnast despite scoliosis. Photos by Debbie Egan-Chin

"It definitely makes things easier," said Sereda, who attends Totten Intermediate School 34. "My dad is a big help."

Berger, who has worked with the Knicks, Giants and Jets, treats Alexis twice a week, his costs covered by Hilliard. The fact that her body is still maturing, Berger said, makes it easier to make skeletal adjustments to her spine.

"She still has a huge mountain to climb," Berger said. "But I think I can help her. It's not going to be easy."

It rarely is for Alexis, who loves to read and says she'd like to be a writer. Still, you won't hear her complain about the travel to Aviator or her physical setbacks.

"I love the sport," Alexis says. "I like the competition, being in front of a crowd. The crowd gives you adrenaline, and you give them what you've been working on. It makes it all worth it."

Page and others will display their talent in this weekend's Aviator Rhythmic Gymnastics Invitational. Visit www.aviatorsports.com for more information.

COMING UP THIS WEEK

GIRLS BASKETBALL

Lafayette vs. Goldstein Today, 4:30 p.m.

Lafayette and Goldstein have both dominated the PSAL's Brooklyn 'B' South division over the past few years. Last season, both teams tied for the division lead with 15-1 records; this year, they've both started 7-0. A win in this game would help one team gain a leg up in the tight division race. Lafayette will lean heavily on high-scoring Alaka Albert (25.7 points per game), but she'll be hard-pressed to find openings against Goldstein, which has held five of its opponents to less than 40 points.

INDOOR TRACK

PSAL Millrose Trials Tomorrow, 4 p.m.

Boys & Girls coach James Jackson likely still remembers last year's struggles at the Millrose Games. The Kangaroos qualified teams for the boys and girls 4x400-meter relays, but neither squad managed to win on the track at Madison Square Garden. Both teams will begin their quests for redemption tomorrow, at the Millrose Trials at the Armory in Manhattan. They'll be aiming to qualify for this year's Millrose Games, which take place at the Garden on Jan. 29. The girls team could be a strong contender behind Kerri Thompson and Tineika Toussaint.

WOMEN'S BOWLING

New Year Knockdown Saturday, noon and Sunday, 12:30 p.m.

St. Francis College will host its 2nd annual New Year Knockdown tournament this weekend at Rab Country Lanes on Staten Island.

The tournament features eight teams, six of which are nationally ranked, including Pennsylvania school Kutztown and Adelphi University, according to Terriers coach Dawn Gugliaro. Led by former Lincoln HS standout Alexandra Stein, St. Francis is currently ranked 10th by the National 10-Pin Coaches Association, and the team hopes to improve on that standing with a strong showing in the Knockdown tourney.

"Everyone's pressing for the NCAA championships (in April)," Gugliaro said. "Every tournament from now on is going to be crucial for us to move up in the rankings."