UNI Dance Team wins National Championship

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The University of Northern Iowa Dance Team returned from the 2010 National Dance Team Championship with two trophies in their paws, including a title as National Pom Champions.

The National Championship was hosted by the Universal Dance Association at Disneyland in Orlando, with the semi-finals Jan. 16 and finals competition the following day.

The Dance Team is comprised of 14 members ranging from freshmen to experienced seniors. This win marks UNI’s first national championship. The squad also placed eighth in the Jazz category. UNI has a history of making Jazz finals, they have attended the past five years.

Amanda Miller, textiles and apparel major, is one of the team’s four co-captains. This marks her fourth year with the team and 17 years of dancing. As she was deciding whether to be involved with dance at the college level, her high school instructor encouraged her to join the rapidly growing program.

The team’s other three captains are seniors Lindsey Bishop, Holli Rutherford and junior Emily Hauser.

The team’s other members include: Laura Dahm, Kristin Foxhoven, Leanne Hotek, MacKenzie Johnson, Emily Marx, Jessie Marx, Cassidy O’Brien, Taylor O’Tool, Hayley Rinehart and Amy Wickett.

According to Miller, the team practices three times a week, with workouts two times a week.

To prepare for Nationals, they ramped up their practice time. Except for four days out of the winter break, the team practiced every day for at least six hours in the McLeod Center.

“We start out Thursday,” Miller said. “Friday morning, we’ll have a practice on the actual floor, so we can get accustomed to it. Saturday is semi-finals. Basically, our goal is to make it to the next day. Finals are on Sunday.”
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Dance teams from across the country compete at the National Championship. The University of Iowa and Grandview College also represented Iowa at the competition. Other notable competitors included Idaho State University, California State University-Long Beach and the University of Delaware.

“It’s an awesome feeling to be around other dancers who have the same passion as us,” Bishop said.

In the past, UNI has taken only Jazz routines. That changed this year when the UDA opened up the Pom category. Seeing themselves as a strong pom squad, the team pounced on the opportunity. Their confidence was only boosted by this year’s results.

“Dance is very subjective,” Bishop said. “It all depends on what the judges want to see. It’s not like basketball, where you win or you lose. You and your whole team can perform at their best, but if the judges aren’t feeling it, they aren’t going to rank you well.”

Regardless, UNI outscored their competition enormously. There was a 60-point gap between their score and second place.

“We didn't just win, we rocked it,” Miller said. “Especially not knowing what to expect going into it.”

To make the victory even sweeter, the squad didn’t pay to have their winning routine choreographed. They created it themselves.

The team receives little funding from the athletic department. The team has an advisor, Jessica Fuller, but can’t afford a coach and pays out-of-pocket when fundraising can’t cover their costs.

“The Athletic department asks us to do a lot that they wouldn’t ask the scholarship students to do, because they know we could use the money,” Rutherford said.

One of these tasks was to clean the gum off of the McLeod Center’s floors and seats.

“We go… with our garbage bags and little scrapers (and) just get in there,” Bishop said.

The team earned $750 for their efforts. The hard labor had an important purpose though.

At that point in the season, we hadn’t received a full-paid bid, and we were told we wouldn’t be going to Nationals if we couldn't pay for it,” Miller said.

The squad has previously received partially-UDA-paid trips to Nationals, but this was the first year they secured a full-ride to the competition by placing second at the national camp. Total costs per season exceed $20,000, so money is always tight. The team is constantly fundraising.
"Send us your kids, we'll babysit them!" Miller said.

The team is also looking toward next year, with auditions already planned to be held from April 15-19. The squad will be losing five seniors, more than one-third of the team.

Confidence in the future is still apparent in spite of this.

“(Winning) was a great way to end our career and great motivation for the future members of UNI Dance Team to step it up in the following years,” Miller said.