



The Dominique Dawes Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program

The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.

Needing to be a part of positive change, Dominique Dawes has shifted her priority from making the Olympic medal stand to creating happy childhoods. “Unlike an Olympic gold that will fade in time, a happy childhood will last forever,” says Dawes, who tonight becomes the first gymnast in the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame.

It took a long, often painful journey for Dawes, now 46, to reach this point. Growing up in Silver Spring, Md., gymnastics became her life after her mom signed her up for a class across from Wheaton Plaza Mall when Dominique was 6. It was love at first sight.

“There were a lot of little people, like me, with squeaky voices like me,” Dawes recalls. “And the skills they were doing was like the circus, flip after flip after flip. I really wanted to learn what those big girls were doing, and so I got hooked.”

Soon it became all-consuming. Training two hours before school and five hours after it. “I slept in a leotard so I could get a little extra sleep.” Dawes won her first competition at age 9. By 11 she was on the international stage, competing in Brisbane, Australia. In 1992 at age 15, she helped the U.S. win a team bronze in the Barcelona Olympics.

Unlike today, where women of color are “dominant, just dominant” in the gymnastics world, Dawes was breaking new ground. She was the first African American gymnast:

- to make the U.S. national team;
- to qualify and compete in an Olympics;
- to win an individual Olympic medal;
- to win an Olympic gold medal.

She also is one of three U.S. female gymnasts to compete in three Olympics.

Dawes’ role as a pioneer means more to her now than it did then. “I didn’t understand the impact that I was making because I was still a child,” Dawes says. “When Gabby Douglas’ mom told me how excited Gabby was to meet me because I was one of the first it didn’t really resonate. Now it does.”

In the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, “Awesome Dawesome” was part of the “Magnificent Seven” team that was America’s first to win a gold medal in women’s gymnastics. Even that wasn’t totally fulfilling.

“I remember when I was on the medal stand with nearly 50,000 people in the Georgia Dome, my hand over my heart singing the national anthem, reflecting on that 13-year journey it took to get there, I remember not feeling satisfied and complete. The level of sacrifice required was not worth it to me.”

Dawes, who between 1991 and 1996 won 15 U.S. Championships, winning the all-around title in 1994, appreciates that gymnasts today have a fuller life than she did. “Gymnastics was all we did. That’s why I love seeing this generation of athletes today, like a Simone Biles or a Jordan Chiles, they seem to be living more of a full life. Getting married, going to college. Being normal.”

So after an endorsement tour with the “Magnificent Seven,” Dawes sought out some normality. She lived in Manhattan for a while and was in a Broadway musical of “Grease,” singing, acting, dancing. She earned her degree at the University of Maryland, College Park. But she felt she owed something to the thousands of fans who still wrote her letters. So she began training six months before and “somehow” made the U.S. team for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, helping the U.S. to a bronze medal.

Then she really hung up her leotard and focused on how to help the next generation of young women. She teamed with Michelle Obama on Let’s Move, an exercise program to fight childhood obesity, after she and former Saints quarterback Drew Brees co-led the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition. She also has made documentaries with the likes of LeBron James and Steph Curry.

Today she spreads her message of healthy activity through speeches and the Dominique Dawes Gymnastics & Ninja Academy that she and her husband, Jeff, opened in July 2020.

Now with locations in Clarksburg and Rockville, the academy creates a much different environment than what Dawes experienced growing up. “When I go to our facility, and it’s not often, the thousands of kids are smiling, they’re laughing. They have a healthy socialization with their coaches and with their peers there, and that’s nothing that I had in my childhood. I would often arrive in tears and leave in tears. No child should be subjected to the pressure, the physical abuse, the mental abuse I went through. And so, it’s pretty special to see what we have created.”

Among the facility members are Dawes’ four children, three girls and a boy including 5½-year-old twins. She isn’t worried about molding the next gold medalist at her academy. Her focus is happy, healthy kids.

“We care about a young person’s self-esteem. We care about developing friendships. We care about developing them as whole children.”

And if her daughter says I want to take piano lessons? “OK, sure, why not?” Dawes says. “Now, we live in Montgomery County, Md., so people like to spread their kids thin, there’s so many activities. Three of my kids dive. Two play soccer. My son is taking up baseball, but also loves playing golf with my husband. I want them to be exposed to different activities.”

That’s why in Dawes’ home you won’t see her Olympic medals or Wheaties boxes with her likeness. “They’re tucked away,” she says. “It’s part of my life, but it doesn’t define me.” Instead family photos adorn the walls and “things that really make me happy.”

Which is what will make her Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame induction tonight so special. “I’m so looking forward to sharing this honor with my husband, as well as my four kids. It makes it so much sweeter when you have a full life and you can celebrate these exciting feats with others.”