



OU Athletics

The Unsinkable Maggie Nichols

*After rising above overwhelming challenges,
OU's record-setting gymnast looks to the future
with the strength and grace of a true champion.*

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Little did Maggie Nichols know that when she walked off the Lloyd Noble Center floor after the University of Oklahoma's impressive dual victory over Michigan last March that her college gymnastics career was over.

Everything that Nichols had worked for as a senior—most notably the chance to write the final chapter of her collegiate career—was unceremoniously taken away by the COVID-19 pandemic when the NCAA signaled the end of spring sports.

Yet, the Minnesota native is not leaving empty-handed. She is one of only two gymnasts to ever complete the Gym Slam—scoring a perfect 10 in each event—and the first to do it twice (in 2018 and 2019). She is a 17-time All-Big 12 selection and two-time Big 12 Gymnast of the Year. She is also the 2019 winner of the Honda Sport Award, given annually to the student-athlete who is considered the best in collegiate athletics. And she earned six NCAA individual championships and All-America honors 30 times.

Along the way, Nichols helped lead the Sooners to a 111-2 overall record and three undefeated seasons that included winning three Big 12 titles and a pair of NCAA national championships in 2018 and '19.

"The record books are filled with Maggie's accomplishments and her national championships," says OU head coach K.J. Kindler. "But her impact has been felt worldwide through her bravery and her courage, as well as her accomplishments within the sport."

Nichols' gymnastics career has been marked by injury and tragedy, but even more so by her resilience, courage, and both mental and physical toughness.

In the Netflix documentary "Athlete A," released this past summer, it was revealed that Nichols was the first gymnast to come forward with allegations of sexual abuse against former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar.

While Nassar was eventually found guilty and sentenced to life in prison, USA Gymnastics was initially slow to investigate Nichols' claims, and there is still speculation that speaking out cost Nichols a spot on the 2016 U.S. Olympic team.

Shortly after, Nichols signed with OU and spent the next four years putting old memories in her rearview mirror while creating a résumé that is nothing short of amazing.

Nichols recently earned her OU bachelor's degree in communications with a minor in business. She is now working on her master's in adult and higher education with a concentration in intercollegiate athletics administration.

Sooner Magazine talked to Nichols recently to get some insight into her time at OU, her life in gymnastics, her amazing strength in the face of adversity and what the future may hold.

Sooner Magazine: Have you made peace with the way your career ended at OU, not getting the chance to pen the final chapter you had hoped for when the pandemic put an abrupt end to your senior season?

Maggie Nichols: I believe so. Initially, it was kind of hard to accept and move forward because of all the work we did

to put ourselves in a position to possibly win another national championship. But when you look at the circumstances and why they felt they had to cancel the rest of season, you know it was the right decision. The important thing was to keep everyone involved as safe as possible and not jeopardize any lives or anyone's health. It was disappointing from the standpoint that the seniors didn't get to finish off our goals and create some more memories together like we had planned. Still, we started the season at No. 1 in the country and we finished at No. 1, so we took advantage of the time we did

get to compete together as a team.

SM: How important is the documentary 'Athlete A' to you and to the sport of women's gymnastics?

Nichols: I believe it is incredibly important because of the way it has helped change some things that were happening in the sport. There were very few people who knew the extent of how horrible things were behind the scenes and how many gymnasts were affected over so many years. 'Athlete A' also helped people see how USA Gymnastics was hiding so much of what was going on, things that even my closest friends had



Josh Gateley

OU women's gymnastics coach K.J. Kindler had a big smile for Nichols during the 2019 UCLA meet where OU prevailed at Lloyd Noble. Kindler says Nichols' impact has been felt worldwide through her courage as Athlete A, as well as her accomplishments within the sport.

no idea were happening. I also believe it has helped give courage to other gymnasts and athletes around the world, maybe allowing them to come forward and share their stories of sexual abuse or other types of abuse in their respective sports. That aspect alone means so much to me because I feel it is so important to bring these issues out in the open.

SM: Having experienced that adversity during your time with USA Gymnastics, was there ever a point when you considered walking away from competitive gymnastics?

Nichols: Despite all the hurdles and challenges at different times, I have always been that gymnast who really loved everything about the sport, even knowing just how hard it is to train and practice to make an elite team. For sure, there were days that were very difficult and days that I didn't want to be anywhere near the gym—but quitting the sport never really entered my

thinking. My goal of being the absolute best gymnast that I could be always kept me moving forward.

SM: After being left off of the 2016 Olympic team, you decided to go a different direction in the sport and become a collegiate gymnast. What made you believe the University of Oklahoma was the right place for that next chapter?

Nichols: I visited a few schools during that whole process, but ultimately, the closer I got to taking that next step, everything kept pointing me toward OU. I came to a gymnastics camp at OU when I was 10 years old and, even then, I felt there was something special about this place. It felt like I belonged. So, when I was trying to decide where I was going to go, all of that factored in. Plus, I knew OU was going to offer a great balance of athletics and academics and give me a real opportunity to be successful in both. And then finally, Coach Kindler and the whole coaching

staff here—they are the absolute best in the country.

SM: How would you describe Coach Kindler and the role she played in helping you reach so many of your goals?

Nichols: K.J. has meant the world to me. She's helped make my college experience absolutely amazing. You hear about coaches who care about their athletes not only while they are in the gym but with everything they do outside the gym. That's who K.J. is. Of course, she is always there to make you a better gymnast and bring out the best in you—but that consideration goes far beyond those things. You might have some sort of issue you are dealing with in class or in life, and she's more than willing to help you any way she can. She's like a mother figure to everyone in the program and incredibly supportive and unselfish in everything she does. She wants the absolute best for all her student-athletes in every aspect of our lives. I can't thank



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A 17-time All-Big 12 selection and two-time Big 12 Gymnast of the Year, Nichols also was the 2019 winner of the Honda Sport Award, given annually to the student-athlete who is considered the best in collegiate athletics.

her enough for what she's done and continues to do for me.

SM: Of all your collegiate gymnastics accomplishments, including NCAA titles, All-America honors, perfect scores, etc., what are you most proud of during your time at OU?

Nichols: That's a hard question to answer. I think when I look back at the national titles and medals and those things, I enjoyed every single moment of those accomplishments. But when I reflect on everything that I've been through from the elite world—especially the injuries and coming out publicly as 'Athlete A'—being able to come to OU and focus on my goals here, face those pressures and achieve so much is probably what I am most proud of, mainly because of the mental strength I feel it took to make all of that happen.

SM: Would you call your time at OU therapeutic?

Nichols: Yes, I would say it was therapeutic—especially coming in after

elite gymnastics, which is known for tearing you down in a lot of ways. Add in everything else that happened with USA Gymnastics, and I believe coming here and being part of this program helped me rediscover my love for gymnastics. OU allowed me to enjoy the sport again—enjoy it when I was training and enjoy it when I was competing. To receive the amazing support from the coaches, your teammates and the entire OU Athletics Department made it fun again and took me back to what I find beautiful about gymnastics. It was such a great experience for me.

SM: What makes you tick?

Nichols: I believe that I am very driven. If I have a goal, I'm going to do everything within my power to achieve it—no matter what obstacles get in the way.

SM: There is obviously a team aspect of international gymnastics, but it is also a very individual-driven version of the sport. How was collegiate

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gymnastics different?

Nichols: Our coaches talk about it all the time—having a strong bond with your teammates and creating a strong team chemistry is so important to putting your program in a position to compete for national championships. It is an amazing feeling to go into battle with some of your best friends in the world competing alongside you and for you. Coach Kindler and her staff are so good at creating an environment that brings everyone together and ultimately accounts for that championship team chemistry.

SM: What do you do in your spare time away from gymnastics and school to relax?

Nichols: My favorite thing to do is to hang out with my friends because we are always laughing and having fun. That always relaxes me and gets my mind off other things. I also enjoy reading and, if it's been a really hard day, I'll take a long walk or spend time alone

Right - In her new role as a volunteer student-coach for her former team, Nichols high-fives freshman Audrey Davis for her performance during the OU-Arizona State meet at the Lloyd Noble Center on Jan. 10.

Below - The sensational Maggie Nichols has landed on her feet again as an OU graduate student in higher education-intercollegiate athletic administration after COVID-19 put an abrupt end to her senior year of competition with the OU Sooners women's gymnastics team.



Josh Gateley



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Above - Nichols relaxes with fellow gymnasts. She says it's important to bond with team members. "It's an amazing feeling to go into battle with some of your best friends in the world competing alongside you."

Left - Nichols won her second individual All-Around title at the 2019 NCAA Championship in Fort Worth. The Sooners went undefeated that season, winning their third national title in four years.

in my room to clear my mind.

SM: With the pandemic disrupting so many aspects of normal life, how have things been at OU doing virtual classes?

Nichols: It's very strange, and just something everyone has had to adjust to. I miss being on campus and going to classes, and the all the things that make your college experience special. While I have enjoyed the challenge of doing school online and interacting on Zoom, I would honestly rather be on campus and in class with my professors and classmates. But what can you do? I believe this is helping keep people safe, so it's something we've got to continue to do until it is safe to go back.

SM: Since you are getting ready to start work on your master's degree, have you given much thought to what you would like to do with the next chapter of your life?

Nichols: Because I am working on

my master's, I feel like I have more time to figure out exactly what I want to do in the future. I know I want to be involved in sports and help people any way I can. I know it's something I've got to keep an open mind about and see what opportunities are out there. At one point, I thought I might go into sports broadcasting—and I think I would like to be a commentator for various events—but not on a full-time basis. I started working as the student-volunteer coach for Coach Kindler and the women's gymnastics team this past semester and I'll continue that during the upcoming season. So coaching is definitely a possibility. And I have also been working with the OU football program helping with recruiting. It's been very exciting for me to learn from both of those experiences.

SM: You gave the OU program so much of yourself over the past four years. What did your experience

here give back to you?

Nichols: It has been the best four years of my life. I could talk about it over and over, and never really say enough good things about my time here at OU. I learned so many incredible lessons inside the gym and outside the gym. I've said it before, but everyone here is like one big family and there is an unbelievable level of support and encouragement you get at OU. My time here has given me so many incredible moments and memories that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. There were definitely some hard times, but being able to compete alongside my teammates and with my coaches, and to have the opportunity to wear OU on your chest—it really doesn't get any better than that.



Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman.