

## Remembering Ricky

by Gordy Bylin, Husky gymnast 1977-1980

I was in the group of lucky guys to get a chance to train and compete with Ricky Mah as Husky gymnasts from 1977 until the end of the varsity, University-sponsored team in 1980. We lost Ricky last summer after a battle with cancer he could not beat. The memories I have, and have collected from others, tell a story of a great, fun, loving, kind, and truly inspirational man.

Ricky walked on to the team with a front handspring vault and a round-off back handspring on the floor. Two years later, he was at Nationals on vault and ranked high on the floor exercise. Ricky was a very powerful athlete. He was Pac10 vault champion the first year he made Nationals. He made Nationals again the following year; although he had a hamstring pull the week before the meet, he still ended up in the top 15. Coach Foxal tells me Ricky's Cuervo vault was the first to be competed by a college athlete in the US. A Cuervo is a handspring with a half twist and then a back flip out. We used to say he had legs like tree trunks. When I was a



Ricky on one of his many fishing trips

freshman I was the skinny, weak guy who could swing like a monkey but could not do one handstand push-up. Ricky, by the last year we trained together, could clap his hands when he pushed up! Ricky was one of those guys that would never attack me with negative energy, he would lift me up and push me harder with positive words to get that strength training done right. When he was first learning tumbling skills, he had some back handsprings that would kind of move sideways in his series. Coach Foxal had a challenge, but they got them straight and Ricky's tumbling became excellent. He performed a back  $1\frac{1}{4}$  rollout with the half twist on the second back flip (back in, Arabian dive out). That was a big trick for the times, definitely dangerous. We had a meet against the Oregon Ducks, I believe, and Ricky was on the floor. He was a bit sluggish that day. His first pass was the  $1\frac{1}{4}$  roll out skill. Keep in mind we tumbled on wrestling mats with a carpet over it in those days! Ricky looked to be in slow motion as he turned to the dive roll, but was short. I don't even think his hands got to the floor before his head. I really thought it was all over for him. He tried to get up and fell to his knees. I thought he was broken for sure and would be paralyzed, so we asked Howard, the trainer to get him off the floor. Ricky was trying to finish the routine. That was the most I have ever feared for a teammate in a crash situation. Howard got him off the floor and the next day Ricky says he thinks he pulled a muscle in his back or neck. That fall would have been the end of me, but he had

such an intense muscle structure in his neck, such great strength that it saved his life.

We lived very different lives in college. Ricky was helping with the family restaurant when needed and playing basketball on the weekends, while I was pursuing the party life at the "Mars Hotel" the gymnast house. My brother, Bert and I were reminiscing about the great team banquets at his family's restaurant and how great the food was. I remember Ricky could eat like nobody's business. Coach Foxal tells me Ricky tried out for the Husky football team after our sport was dropped, made the scout team, and trained with them the rest of that year. I spoke with Gary Kath, another teammate, and he remembers going on some houseboat trips with Ricky. Gary says Ricky was awesome at the high dive off the top of the boat but would come up with a doggie paddle. He was not a very strong swimmer. Ricky was an airline attendant for Alaska Airlines and really loved to

fish.

I got the call in May 2014 that there was celebration of Ricky's life, as his family was informed that he would not win his fight with cancer. The Bylin brothers picked up Dr. Hughes and made it to the event in Renton. We did not know what to expect when we arrived. It was amazing to see how his core group of co-workers from Alaska Airlines and family had put together such a special event. Those of us that did not have contact with Ricky for many years were a bit taken aback by the scope of Ricky's friends and loved ones. The love for that man in that room was pure and intense. His family was there and met with all of us before Ricky arrived. When he got there you knew he was in a lot of pain. The disease and the treatment had begun to take their toll. We waited for a chance to meet him and say our good-byes. There were a bunch of us from the old team and we got a team picture with Coach Hughes, Coach Foxal, and Ricky. When I got to see Ricky he kissed my face and gave me a hug and I could see and feel the love and memories flooding his brain. He was doing the hardest thing ever in life, learning to let go. I feel very lucky to have that moment with him as our eyes connected and we said goodbye. Ricky led a great and fulfilled life, and the amount of people that showed up that day are a testament to that. Thanks for the stories and the times we all trained together. Ricky's life seems to leave us all with the same thing, a huge smile when we picture his face.