

Written by Dwight Normile
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As the U.S. men's team prepares for the world championships in Tokyo, I started thinking about its new national champion, **Danell Leyva**. I have watched him compete in the senior division of the U.S. championships since 2006, when he placed 17th as a 14-year-old. I remember thinking, *Why is this kid trying compete with seniors?*

The following year I started to figure it out, because he placed ninth. From 2008 to 2011 he finished 11th, fifth, second and, just over a month ago, first. No. 1. The champ. Not a bad run for someone who doesn't turn 20 until Oct. 30 (the same day **Nastia Liukin** turns 22, by the way, but I digress).

The longer I've watched this unique gymnast, the more I've come to appreciate what he's done and, more importantly, what he represents. So, following are nine things I like about Danell Leyva, because I've left No. 10 for you.

1) **His work ethic:** I used to think he would never be more than a two- or three-event guy. He was pretty good on floor, parallel bars and high bar, and very average on the other three. Now he's pretty good on pommels, rings and vault, deceptively talented on floor, and absolutely amazing on parallel bars and high bar. Through hard work, he has turned himself into a legitimate contender for an all-around medal in Tokyo.

2) **His attitude:** He is humble yet confident. When he says he wants to win, he doesn't sound cocky. He respects two-time world champion **Kohei Uchimira** (who is only 22), but he's not intimidated by him. Instead, he wants to put a little scare in him. It may be the world championships, but for Leyva it's still all part of the fun.

3) **His parallel bars:** He is fantastic on this event, and I like that he doesn't do any somersaults

on the apparatus. His peaches, giants and Diamidovs are so good, he doesn't need to.

4) **His gym:** He seems to be in the perfect place for his gymnastics career. He decided to go pro, so the NCAA is out. But his steady progress over the years proves that everything is clicking for him at Universal Gymnastics in Miami.

5) **His coach:** When I see coaches chewing out their gymnasts after a bad routine, I appreciate that **Yin Alvarez** is always there with a hug. He realizes that his gymnasts don't mess up on purpose. "I have my moments like everybody else, but I never go to the gymnasts when I'm mad," Alvarez once told me. "Gymnasts want to do nothing wrong; they want to do good all the time."

6) **He's old school:** There are certain details that reveal a gymnast's training and tradition. On floor, for example, Leyva understands that good form applies to the entire body. When he runs into his tumbling, he keeps perfect form with his arms and hands (arms straight, fingers together). And here is a subtle detail that you just don't see very often (anymore): After his Manna, press to handstand, he pikes down and silently *places* his toes on the mat first, then his heels. That's control. When he stands up from this position, he lifts his arms overhead simultaneously. Very classy. (A lazy gymnast would bend his knees a little during the pike down, slam his feet onto the mat, and then leave the arms hanging down when he stands up.)

7) **His trademark:** Every star needs a signature skill, and his jam-dislocate-hop to undergrips on high bar works wonders on a crowd. It's also unexpected because it's at the end of a very difficult routine. Now that he follows this skill with an immediate Endo-full pirouette, it's even better. Leyva says he added the Endo combination by accident. "I was training one day and was a little tired," he said. "And when I did the hop I caught the bar directly in a handstand with my legs open already. And ever since I was little I've always mashed my skills together."

8) **His post-routine routine:** Leyva never celebrates harder than he just worked on the apparatus itself. After all, he's got a coach to do that for him.

9) **His team spirit:** Even though he has specific individual goals, he's the ideal team player. And his overall improvement in the past year could be the biggest factor in determining the U.S.

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team's fate in Tokyo. The irony here is that he's a native of Cuba. "I can't wait to show a better job of what we did [at Visa Championships] in Tokyo," he said. Note that he said "we."

10) **What do *you* like about Danell Leyva?**