

Northeastern's dance team sets the bar high for national stage

Sofia Garrett, deputy sports editor

The Northeastern University Dance Team is a spectacle at every sports event it attends, most commonly basketball games — but in Daytona, Florida, the group hopes to prove itself as more than a halftime enjoyment.

The Huskies are set to compete in the Team Performance and Hip-Hop divisions at the Daytona National Cheerleaders Association and National Dance Alliance Collegiate National Championship competition April 11 to 13. Last year, Northeastern earned third in the nation for Team Performance — a new program best — and placed in the top 10 for Hip-Hop, and the Huskies hope to keep riding that wave.

Head coach Nicole Vicino described last year's Team Performance routine as innovative, showcasing one of the group's greatest strengths: entertainment. Going into this season, the dancers looked to build on their success, along with hammering down on weaknesses.

"We got some great feedback from the judges last year about focusing on technique and pushing ourselves," Vicino said. "We're really diving into that this year and building upon what we did last year."

Vicino is well-equipped to prepare her dancers for the nationals stage, as she was a member of Northeastern's dance team from 2011 to 2016 and part of the first group of Huskies to compete at nationals. After graduating, she joined the Celtics dance team for two years before returning to Northeastern to coach. Alongside assistant coach Kelsey Dillon, Vicino ensures the team is ready when it hits the stage in Daytona.

"It's been 10 years that I've been a part of the team. And over the 10 years, it's been such a transformative time for the Northeastern dance team," Vicino said. "So many teams have been around for 30 to 40 years. And we're really still in the beginning phases of our team."

Now in her fifth season as head coach, Vicino is excited to see the program take it to the next level — and there is no time like the present.

Northeastern will compete its Team Performance and Hip-Hop routines in the preliminary rounds April 11 and 12, with the hopes of qualifying to recompete in the finals April 12 and 13. The Hip-Hop finals take place on Daytona's infamous bandshell, an outdoor stage familiar to fans of the hit Netflix docuseries "Cheer."

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Ali Caudle

The dance team presents its Team Performance routine at Northeastern's annual NDA/NCA National Send-Off April 5. Last year, the Huskies finished third at nationals for their Team Performance routine.

“We’ve got a group of really driven, competitive dancers,” Vicino said. “I think that their mindset is more cohesive than I’ve experienced in the past few years. They’re all really focused on this one goal: bandshell for Hip-Hop and making it to the top three again for Team Performance.”

The Huskies have worked relentlessly the last six months in preparation for nationals, from team workouts every Tuesday morning to daily practices in the evening. In the time ticking down to nationals, the team is only pushing itself harder.

“These final weeks are really where we get down to the nitty-gritty details ... like making sure everyone’s hands are angled the same way,” fourth-year captain Kelsey Hagen said. “These are really big differences that can affect how well you score on the score sheet. We’re doing a lot of things over and over again so that when we go on stage, we can just feel confident about our performance and really focus on just giving it our all.”

For Hagen, this nationals marks the end of her collegiate dance career, as she’ll stand on a much different stage in May for graduation.

“It’s definitely very bittersweet,” Hagen said. “While there are dance alternatives, this is really my last opportunity to dance on this competitive team environment. But this team this year and our routines are definitely very special and unlike anything we’ve done ever before. So I think that it’s going to be a very special nationals for me.”

Vicino highlighted the huge value of all the graduates, emphasizing how greatly they will be missed by the team.

“They’ve just been really pivotal in driving the growth of this program,” Vicino said. “They’ve been extremely consistent. They cared a lot. They’ve created new team traditions. They have just been an absolute dream to coach over the past four years.”

While the departure of beloved graduates is heartbreaking for the program, Northeastern’s dance team isn’t structured around grade or seniority. Vicino explained how the dancers have established a coequal, safe space for all.

“I think everybody on the team, and even the freshmen who are in their first season, have stepped up,” Vicino said. “There’s big pockets of greatness from everybody in terms of showing leadership and creating a cohesive team bond.”

The team culture is best summarized by not a word, but rather an item — a traveling journal, to be specific, Vicino said.

Each dancer gets an opportunity to document their feelings in the group’s shared notebook before passing it on to a teammate who’s making a noticeable effort in practice that week. Then, the cycle continues.

As a newcomer, first-year Alexi Deninno expressed her gratitude for the team’s welcoming atmosphere.

“I feel like there’s no separation between grades. [Upperclassmen] never really say the word ‘rookie,’” Deninno said. “We all have the same passion, the same goals and everyone is so including. [The seniors] bring the best energy, and they’re like second parents. It’s amazing.”



Northeastern's dance and cheer teams pose for a group photo at their nationals send-off. Both groups debuted the nationals routines they plan to compete with in Daytona, Florida from April 11 to 13. (Ali Caudle)

The Huskies showcased their team chemistry and cohesive bond April 5 at Northeastern's annual NDA/NCA National Send-Off, where the team debuted their nationals routines for the first time.

"The stakes feel a little bit higher because you're performing for people that you really care about, and you want to do your best and show them what we've been working for," Vicino said. "This is a great confidence boost for the team, getting to perform for their peers and show the school, staff and faculty who we really are."

Different from the entertaining routines the Huskies perform at sports games, their nationals routines are packed with explosive tricks, costume manipulations and an obvious "wow" factor — a side of the dance team people might not expect.

"I think that there's a lot of education that needs to be done about how special dance is," Vicino said. "It truly is a sport, and there's so much that goes into it, so much time and practice, and we need more support. I think it's one of the most demanding activities on the human body."

That is what Northeastern's dance team looks to prove when it steps on stage in Daytona — and the team wasn't shy about sharing its goals for the trip.

"My biggest hope is winning first in our Team Performance," Deninno said. "We deserve it, and we're going to give it our all."

Vicino emphasized her confidence in her dancers and the results they will receive.

"I know that they're going to score much higher than they've ever scored before," Vicino said. "I think we're going to hit records for placement and for scores. My hope is that they come out of it feeling extremely proud about the routines that they put out and that they show the country who Northeastern is, and that they've got a really solid dance program on top of academics. And I know that's going to happen."