

TOKYO OLYMPICS

SUNI LEE

‘As cool as it gets’

Graphic by MARK BOSWELL, C.J. SINNER and RACHEL BLOUNT • Star Tribune staff

America has a new gymnastics phenom, and she's from St. Paul. Suni Lee, 18, who trains in Little Canada, is known for having one of the hardest uneven bars routines in the world. But her execution of a rare skill — the Nabieva — and the sequence of skills that follow could be the difference in whether she walks away from Tokyo with a gold medal.

A RARE SKILL

Suni Lee executes the Nabieva right at the start of her routine. Although it has become a trendy skill to attempt, Twin City Twisters bars coach Seth Helland said, very few gymnasts have success with it in competition. “It is as cool as it gets on bars,” he said. “I believe it is the most aesthetically pleasing skill you will see performed at the Olympics, regardless of apparatus.”

The moment of decision: Lee has two routines she uses in competition, and usually decides in the moment which one she will do based on how the Nabieva feels. “I hope to do the [more difficult] 6.8 bar routine every single time, and that's the one I plan on doing,” Lee has said. “But if the swing is off, then I'm not able to do it.”

Where it comes from: This “same-bar” release move, meaning it starts and ends on the same bar, was invented by Russian Tatiana Nabieva. It is the only skill in the Tkatchev family of release moves — where a gymnast swings around the bottom of the high bar, flies over the top and catches the same bar again — done in a layout, with a straight body position and legs together.

The challenge: Connecting it to other skills is rarely done. Nabieva herself reportedly found connections out of it to be challenging. Lee connects hers to a release move to the low bar, a soaring flip with a full twist called a Bhardwaj. “A Bhardwaj out of a Nabieva ... is potentially the coolest connection we have ever seen on bars,” Helland said. “It showcases our sport at its absolute best.”

SEQUENCING SKILLS

Higher difficulty: If Lee feels solid in going for the higher difficulty, she will connect her next two skills — a Maloney and a Gienger — to her first two skills, the Nabieva and Bhardwaj. In the Maloney, she will shoot backward up to the high bar in a similar fashion to the Nabieva, and the Gienger is another same-bar release move with one flip and a half-rotation to face the opposite direction. She does three more release moves before dismounting. Seamlessly connecting all of her release moves is the key to the extremely high difficulty score or “start value” of her routine — making it one of the hardest in the world.

Probable difficulty score: 6.8

Slightly less difficult: If Lee feels like her swing out of the Nabieva and Bhardwaj aren't quite right, she'll do the rest of the skills in a slightly different order, mostly by moving the Maloney and Gienger to the end of her routine, right before her dismount. Because she loses credit for some connections, her start value is diminished by three-tenths of a point — still extremely high, but it could be the difference between gold and silver. She performed this version on the second day of the U.S. Olympic Team Trials.

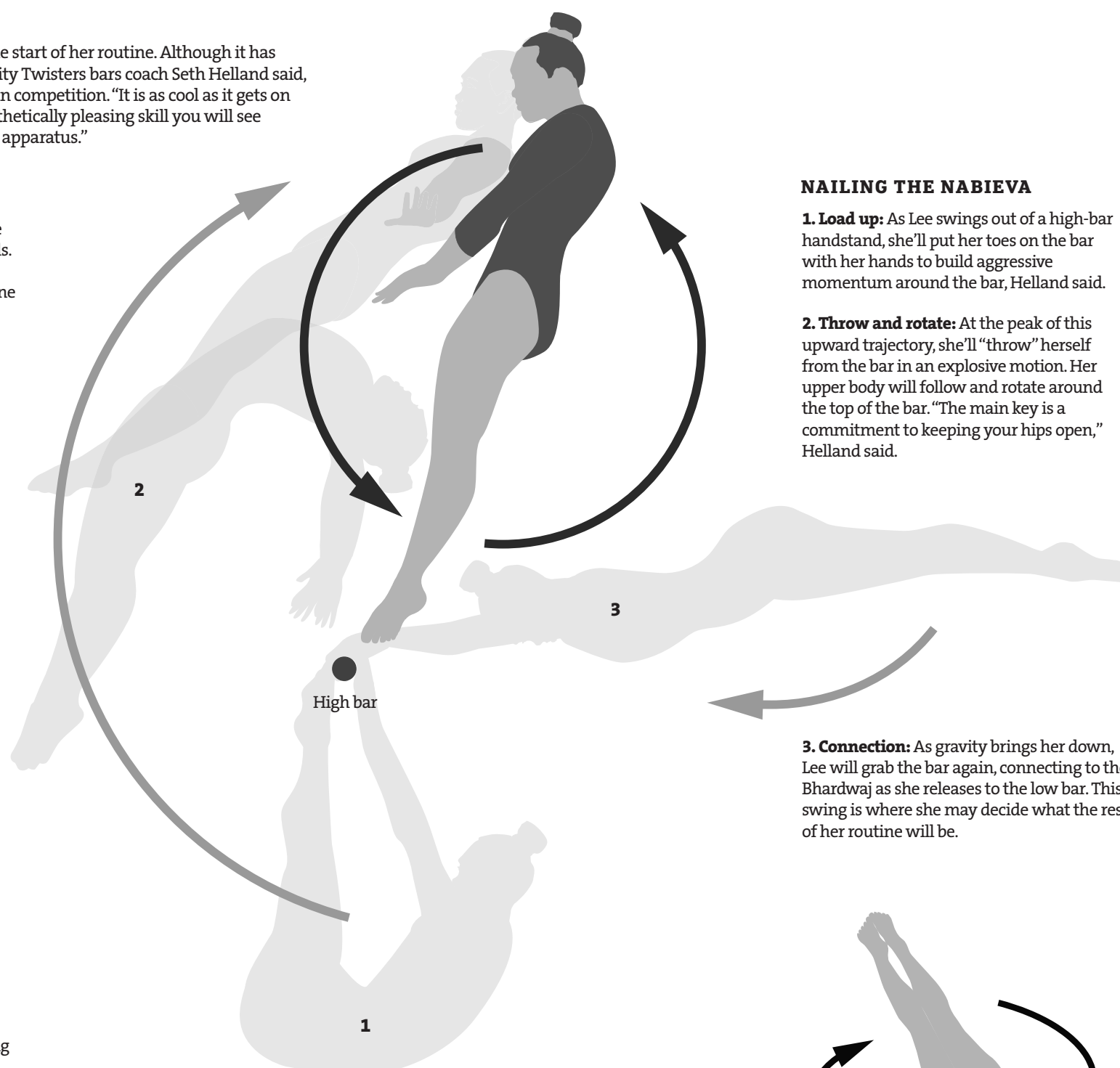
Probable difficulty score: 6.5

TECHNICALS OF THE UNEVEN BARS

Pursuit of a seamless routine: The entire routine should flow from one movement to the next without pauses, extra swings or additional supports. The most daring parts of the routine are often in the high-flying release moves and dismounts. Perfect form, straight body lines in the vertical position and a stuck landing are essential to performing well.

Specs

Low bar height: Approx. 5.5 ft.
High bar height: Approx. 8 ft.
Space between bars: Approx. 6 ft.

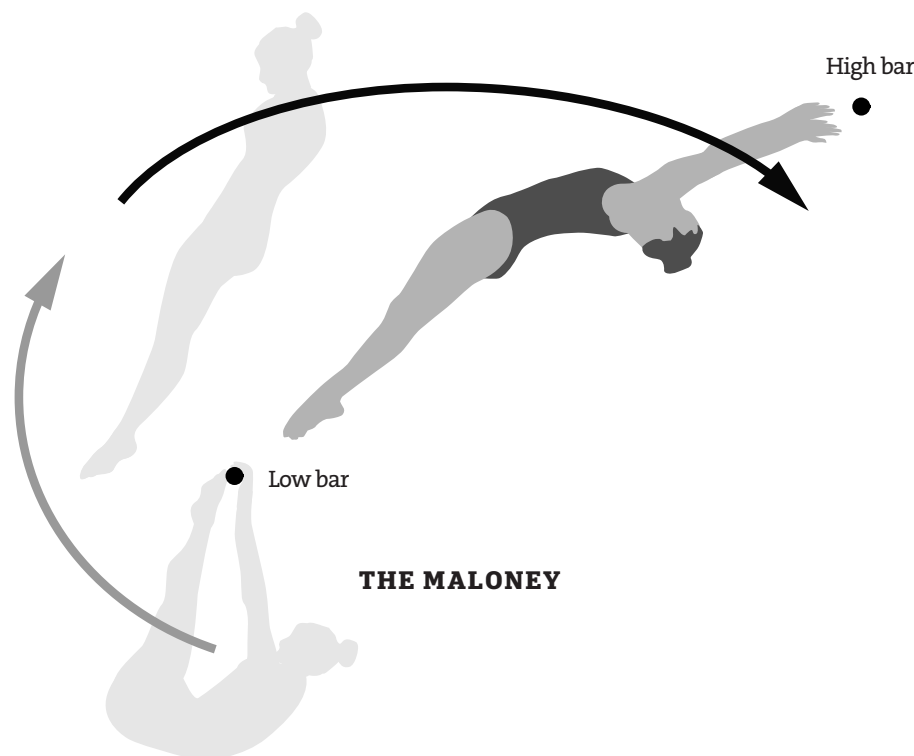


NAILING THE NABIEVA

1. Load up: As Lee swings out of a high-bar handstand, she'll put her toes on the bar with her hands to build aggressive momentum around the bar, Helland said.

2. Throw and rotate: At the peak of this upward trajectory, she'll “throw” herself from the bar in an explosive motion. Her upper body will follow and rotate around the top of the bar. “The main key is a commitment to keeping your hips open,” Helland said.

3. Connection: As gravity brings her down, Lee will grab the bar again, connecting to the Bhardwaj as she releases to the low bar. This swing is where she may decide what the rest of her routine will be.



THE MALONEY



THE GIENGER

EXECUTION SCORE

Judges will look for flaws big and small, deducting fractions of points each time they spot a form break:

- Leg separation
- Unpointed toes
- Bent arms
- Angle of handstand
- Hops or steps on landing

DISMOUNT

Lee will leave the bar in a high-flying full-twisting double backflip — that's two rotations backward with one rotation twist.

