

Florida State University Flying High Circus

There has been an FSU Flying High Circus for almost as long as there has been a Florida State University. When the Florida State College for Women went coeducational in 1947, one of the new faculty members was Jack Haskin. As a high school coach in Pontiac, Illinois, Haskin had staged student gymnastic exhibitions. He wanted to start an activity at the new university which would allow men and women to participate together. His idea was the circus.

The Flying High Circus is a self-supporting activity. No student activity fees, tuition payments, university or state funds go towards circus activities. Unlike many other athletic endeavors, the students receive no tuition waivers or university scholarships for their long hours of practice for the nationally famous shows that bring credit to FSU.

The acts in the Flying High Circus have evolved from "circus activity" to "circus professionalism." Performances are often of such high caliber that professional contracts are sometimes offered to student performers, especially on the flying trapeze. In the circus, you will see tricks attempted and completed that are more difficult than many you would see in other American or European circuses. Examples include the triple somersault on the flying trapeze (accomplished by two performers at FSU), the seven man pyramid on the high wire (which has only been performed by two other groups), double back somersaults on the skypole and many more. Some acts are unique to the FSU Circus or are rarely done elsewhere such as triple aerial high casting and three-lane breakaway. Other acts are traditional circus classics. There are no animal acts in the Circus.

Few of the student performers had any previous circus training before coming to Florida State, although some have had related training such as springboard diving or gymnastics. Many receive their first introduction to the circus through the one-hour course on circus activities offered for credit by the university, but more enter the circus as a result of personal contact with other circus members. Training for the various acts is provided by one full-time coach, a member of the FSU Circus as a student, and a staff of paid and volunteer student assistants. Different acts are added to the show or removed from the show as performers with particular strengths and talents join the circus, learn new acts and different tricks, and then graduate. No two shows are alike.

A significant difference from professional circuses is the use of safety nets and safety lines. These will not help a performer complete a trick, but they do provide an extra margin of security for the student performers. The FSU Circus emphasizes the performances, not the risks. An additional measure of safety is provided by having the students do all the rigging. Since the performers rig their own acts in practice, they become more aware of the importance of correct rigging since they will be working on equipment that they have set up. Because of these safety features, the use of progressive learning techniques, and the high caliber of the students involved, the Flying High Circus maintains a high reputation for safety.

And, yes, they really do it "just for fun." Only one semester hour of credit for the circus activities course can be earned by an undergraduate on a one-time basis and many performers have never taken the course. The participants work on their own time practicing at the circus lot after classes or working on conditioning or juggling skills at home in the evenings and on the weekends. In addition, they must maintain a "C" average to appear in the home shows on campus and "C+" average to travel on the road shows, far above that required for other athletic endeavors. Yes, grades are not a problem; their collective average has always been one of the highest for students in any extracurricular activity in the University, even though many of the students are in demanding fields such as pre-medicine, nursing, computer science, and accounting.

Source: 43rd Home Show Program