

Written by John Crumlish
Tuesday, 24 July 2018 09:13



Although veteran Croatian gymnast **Tijana Tkalcec** will skip next month's European championships and this fall's world championships, she told IG she is pleased with her current international Challenge Cup ranking after a year-long absence due to health issues.

"So far I am very satisfied, since I just came back," said the 29-year-old Tkalcec. "It was a long and hard journey to come back, but it was worth it. At the end of this part of the season, I'm first in the world ranking list on vault, and my goal for this year is to stay in the top three."

Tkalcec said she will not attend Europeans in Glasgow and worlds in Doha, but has additional Challenge Cup meets on her agenda later in 2018. Thus far this year she placed fifth on vault at the Challenge Cups of Osijek, Koper and Guimaraes.

"It's still too soon for me, and my vaults are not as good as they should be, so I will sit these ones out," she said of Europeans and worlds. "I will go to Challenge Cups in Hungary and France in September, and then try to improve my vaults for next year."

Tkalcec, a vault finalist at the 2013 Europeans in Moscow, trains under coaches **Igor Krijajmskii**

(all apparatuses) and

Tatjana Goverdovskaja

(balance beam and floor exercise choreographer) at the Marijan Zadavec Macan club in her hometown of Cakovec. Away from competition from 2015 until May 2017, she competed at the 2017 Challenge Cups of Koper and Osijek before pausing again to tend to her ongoing kidney problems.

"When that hits, my blood results are bad, and my whole body is sore from the toxins that my

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kidneys don't refine as well as any healthy kidney would," she said. "I just need to have a break so everything comes back to normal again."

Despite her medical setbacks and her 30th birthday looming in nine months, Tkalcec said she is ultimately motivated by her ageless passion for gymnastics, the camaraderie that she enjoys with her international rivals and steady encouragement from loved ones.

"It's kind of hard to answer that question the right way," she said of why she continues. "But I guess that love for the sport and the feeling you get when you come to the competition and perform, and see all your good friends, is what keeps me going. I have all the support at home from my family and my fiancé, so that makes everything easier."

Tkalcec's longevity has also yielded longterm friendships among her fellow gymnasts, including two-time Czech Olympian **Kristyna Palesova**.

"We were very good friends when she was competing and we were big supporters of each other at every competition," Tkalcec said. "We had great times, and were there for each other through good and bad times. I guess that is what has kept our friendship going even now. We speak to each other almost every day, and also visit one another as often as we can."

Although Palesova has retired, her influence on Tkalcec is still apparent since Tkalcec now wears leotards that Palesova designs.

"I chose to wear Kristyna's designs because I saw how well she makes them, and since she was a gymnast she knows exactly how to make perfect leos for us," Tkalcec said. "She even has her own line—her first collection came out in May—and I hope I will be able to represent her leos many times more."

Tkalcec's summer activities included cheering for the Croatian soccer team as it advanced through this summer's World Cup in Russia. She watched the final match against France with friends in Novi Sad, where she was vacationing at the time.

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“There was an organized FIFA corner next to the river, and around 300 people watched the game there and everyone cheered for Croatia,” Tkalcec said. “That was a special feeling, knowing that in sport there are no religious, skin-color or ethnic differences.”

Despite Croatia’s loss to France in the final, Tkalcec said she was thrilled to be part of the national excitement and sense of honor.

“I think that, since I'm an athlete, I wasn't as nervous as other people watching the game,” she told IG. “We are kind of used to all that. But at the penalty shots it was nerve-racking every time. I can say that I am proud to be a part of such a small and very successful country.”

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