

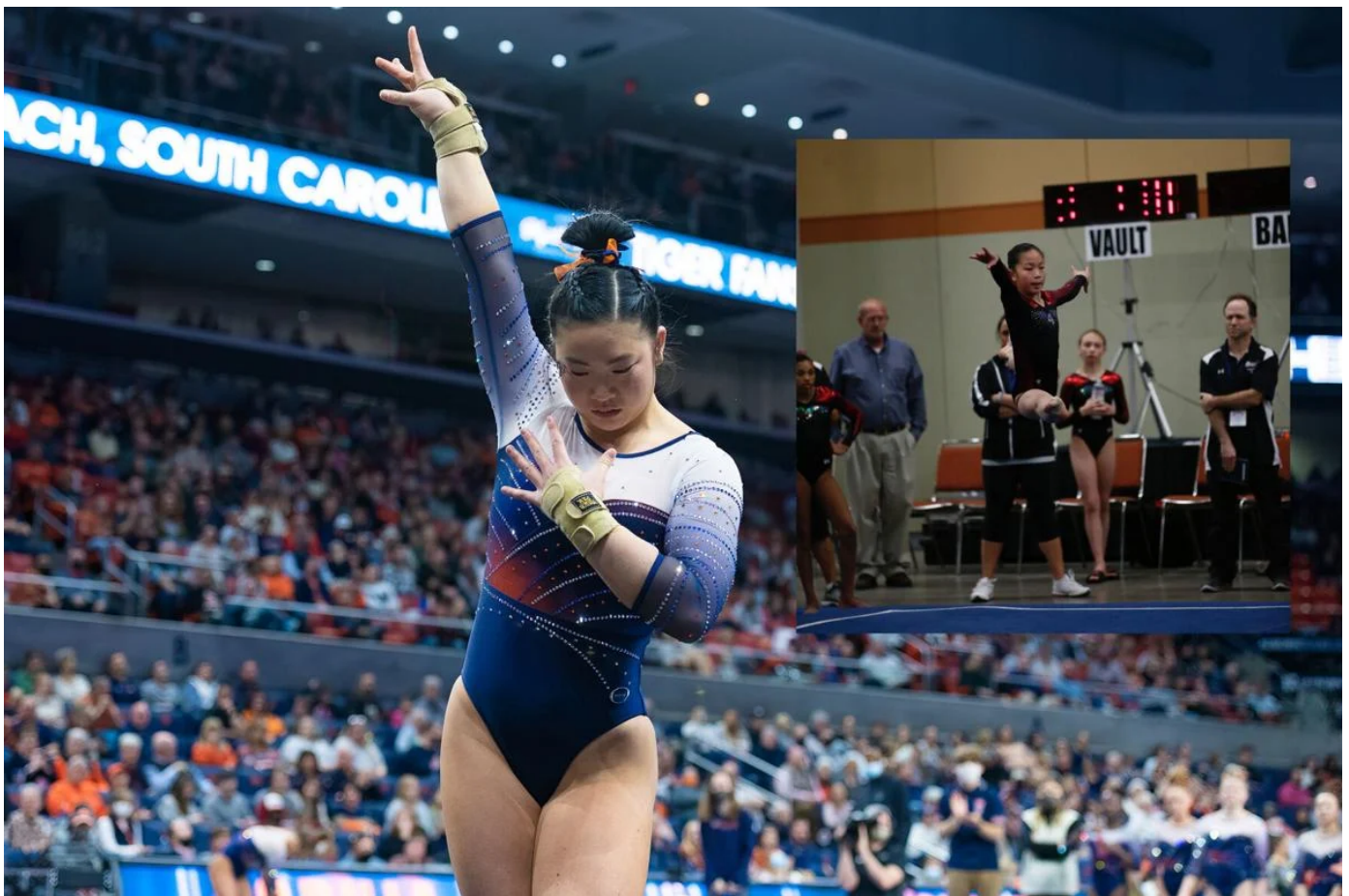
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FEATURED

AU GYMNASTICS

'Home is Auburn': From China to Iowa to the Plains, Sophia Groth finds family

Justin Lee1
Feb 28, 2022



Auburn's Sophia Groth on the floor. Auburn vs Missouri on Friday, Feb. 11 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News

Justin Lee1

Sophia Groth just can't hold it back.

When she hears her teammates cheering her on, her face lights up, even in the middle of a routine.

So cool, so calm, so composed, this is the only time the steady freshman breaks. You'll never find fear, or worry, or signs of nervousness on her face during an Auburn gymnastics meet, but when she sticks a skill, and she hears those teammates cheering her on, she just can't contain it.

Last Friday on beam, she rolled a graceful switch split leap into a spinning one, soaring like a trapeze artist up almost to where the basketball rims would be in Auburn Arena, then landing like a ballerina on a surface thinner than an iPhone.

Then she heard their voices. She heard Drew. She heard Derrian. She heard Cassie and Aria and Suni. All her teammates, from her whole Auburn Tiger family, were cheering her on from below. She grinned from ear to ear.

"I'm just so happy!" she would say. "It just comes out of me."

That's according to her mom, Karen Groth, who's seen plenty of surprises out of her daughter since she moved to her new home away from home at Auburn. Sophia has been a steady standout for the Tigers, though that much was to be expected: Sophia was an elite recruit and she had scholarship offers from top programs all across the country.

"In my life, I've never seen her do that," Karen says, though, when she mentions her daughter smiling wide even in the middle of her routine, when she's meant to be concentrating. "She would tell you that that would be arrogant. If she had seen someone do that in high school she'd have been like, 'That would be arrogant' — because she's a very humble person.

"So I asked her once: 'So, you used to think that kind of peacocking was arrogant.' She goes, 'Mom, I can't help it! It just comes out!'"

No worries. It just feels different for her when she's doing it for the team. Mom is all for it. "I ask her questions not to change her behavior — because I think it's fabulous — but more because I just want to understand who this person is now," Karen said.

Sophia has had the chance to blossom at Auburn, she has said in her own words, and her mom is happy to see her thrive at her new home away from home — with her new family away from family.

"She's coming home for a couple of days in May and then going back to summer school, because I don't think she can stand to be away from Auburn," Karen said.

"It's definitely her happy place."



Auburn's Sophia Groth performs on the floor during the team's meet against Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News

It was raining the day they found her, abandoned on the street in the Hunan province of China. It was cold, too. Karen looked up that day's weather later. Sophia was found at around 5:30 in the morning when she was four days old, and officials took her to the orphanage.

Sophia is adopted. Her adoptive mother Karen is a white woman from Iowa — an All-American swimmer at Iowa State, and then an officer in the Air Force, who had never been married but who wanted a child when she adopted Sophia's sister Natalie and brought her back from Kazakhstan in 2001.

Sophia was born April 5, 2003. Karen met her April 5, 2004.

Her flight had been delayed as she traveled in to the hotel in Hunan where she'd meet her. She finally made it well past nightfall, at about 9:30 at night. So Sophia was up late after her bedtime, she said, and Sophia was cranky.

"She threw a bottle of formula across the hotel," Karen laughs, telling the story. "She had finished most of the bottle and she was saying 'Mama, mama' — and I was like, 'I just met you two hours ago.' They must have called the nannies at the orphanage 'mama.'

"I turned around to look at her and she pitched this baby bottle all the way across the hotel room, and it hit me in the head. Formula went down the side of my head, and I went, 'Oh man, we're in trouble with this one!'" she laughed.

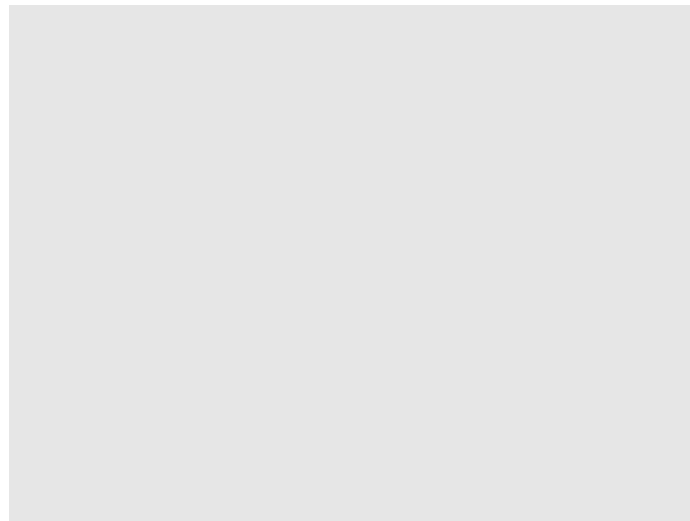
Karen laughs now, too, when she's watching Auburn gymnastics on TV, and the commentators calling Sophia's routine talk about her. Well-intentioned but maybe a bit presumptive, they'll say something like: 'Her mom swam at Iowa State, so we know where she gets her athleticism from.' Not exactly.

Some things were different for Sophia growing up from what they'd assume. No one knows anything about Sophia's biological parents or why she was abandoned: It's possible it had to do with China's one-child policy. Karen says she saw signs of trauma

out of Sophia when she was a baby on cold, rainy days, like that day. For the first couple of years, Karen said, food was the key to Sophia's heart, because they'd been starving at the orphanage.

"The one thing I can say is, like when I was growing up, people would say, 'Oh, you're good at math like your dad,' or, 'you're good at something like your mom.' When your kids are adopted, that rhetoric that plays in your head, you have to throw it all away," Karen said.

"I don't know why she's good at gymnastics, or why she works so hard, or why she's so loyal, and where she gets all that from — but I can tell you she's the same kid she was the day I met her. She's very driven. She couldn't sit up on her own the day I met her and six weeks later she's running down the driveway."



Sophia Groth performs on floor at the Junior Olympic level as Jess Graba, the twin brother of Auburn head coach Jeff Graba, looks on at right.

Contributed

Sophia rocketed up through the ranks in gymnastics and Jeff Graba took notice.

At 12 years old, she won beam at the Junior Olympics national championship meet in 2015.

“What we saw when we recruited her is exactly what everybody’s seeing right now,” said Graba, Auburn’s head coach.

“She has a little bit of everything. She’s got power. She’s got execution. She can dance. She’s a competitor. She’s tough. She’s strong. So, she has the whole package.”

There was just one problem: “It wasn’t a secret,” Graba laughed. “Everybody could see she had the whole package.”

Five-star Suni Lee was the only top signee in Auburn’s freshman class. Sophia was a four-star.

Sophia got interest letters from everyone in college gymnastics. She got scholarship offers from four-time national champion Oklahoma, 10-time national champion Georgia, plus Denver and Iowa and Iowa State, with strong interest from LSU and Florida. Graba is convinced pretty much anyone in the country would’ve offered her once she showed mutual interest. Instead, Karen and Sophia decided to narrow down who they’d talk with, and Karen ultimately let her visit five schools and Sophia picked Oklahoma, Georgia, LSU, Denver and Auburn.

“I knew I wanted her to be a college athlete ... because there’s so many safety nets underneath you,” Karen said, from her own experience as a swimmer at Iowa State. “You have the advisors, and you have the coaches, and the director of operations, and the trainer, and the nutritionist.”

Whereas big sister Natalie sunk into the books, and eventually earned a full-ride academic scholarship to a big university, Sophia showed more prowess with her athletic ability.

“Gymnastics would’ve never been my choice,” Karen admits, though. “Swimming? You touch the wall, that’s your time. Gymnastics? I don’t even know — ‘Is that a good score?’ It’s different judges, it’s different people. ... I don’t understand the scoring, I don’t understand any of it. I would have preferred her to do an objective sport, where you run and you get a time.

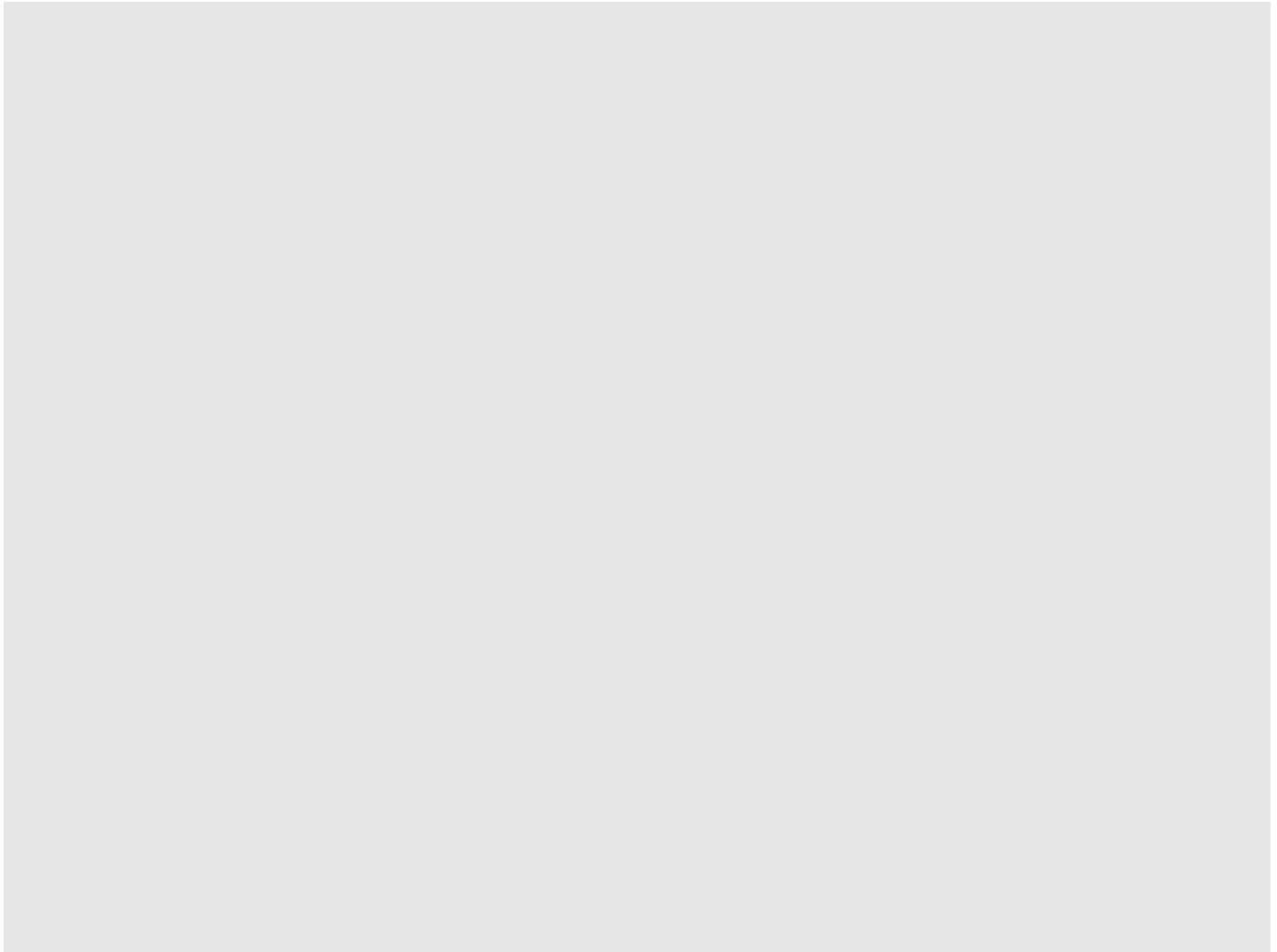
“But no, she chose gymnastics, so there we are.”

And she stuck with it. Through injuries and setbacks, Sophia powered through. She suffered a spinal cord injury and Karen said she offered to buy her a horse and get her out of the game. She offered to take her ice skating, whatever — because in the lightning fast world of gymnastics, she never thought Sophia would be able to catch up after missing time to recover from her injury.

She didn’t want a horse. She insisted she wanted to go back to gymnastics. She got back out on the floor and caught up right away.

She was only nine years old when she suffered that spinal cord injury. She came back 10 weeks later. She went on to go to the Junior Olympics national championship six times, and go to the Nastia Liukin Cup and the Hopes Championship.

And one day when she was still a young child, still naïve, but flying high in gymnastics, she looked up at her mother and asked: “If I go to the Olympics, do you think China will wish they kept me?”



Sophia Groth, center, poses for a photo with Auburn head coach Jeff Graba, left, and assistant coach Kurt Hettinger, right, after committing to Auburn after the eighth grade.

Contributed

“She got offers from all those schools,” Karen remembers, thinking to Sophia’s teenage years, “and when she got the offer from Jeff, it’s the only time she cried. It’s the only time she broke down.

“I said, ‘Why are we crying? What happened?’

“And she goes, ‘He made me an offer!’

“And I go, ‘Why are we crying?’

“She goes, ‘Because I love it.’”

Sophia committed to Auburn after eighth grade and never wavered. Her mom said it's where she wanted to go from the minute she first stepped on campus.

"She had offers from the top five programs and she chose Auburn, and at the time she chose Auburn, they were 16th or 17th, right?" Karen said. "And I'm so competitive, I was like, 'Auburn?' Like, it was my favorite campus, it was my favorite program — but, 'Are you sure you don't want to go to OU?' who had won national championships, right?"

"And she was like, 'Well I'm going to go to Auburn and we're going to do that.'"

She's grown as a gymnast: Sophia has the nation's sixth-best scoring average on beam. And she's grown outside of the gym, too. In recent years she has shown interest in supporting charities benefiting orphans.

She enjoys Auburn's campus, she's enjoyed football games, and wouldn't you know it: That big school that Natalie got a full ride to was Alabama.

The sisters watched the 2019 Iron Bowl together in the athlete's recruiting section in Jordan-Hare. Sophia enjoyed that one. Every year now, they have a bet together where the sister whose team loses the Iron Bowl has to wear the opposing team's shirt the Sunday after.

They were back at home together for Thanksgiving this past year, and Karen figures Sophia threw the Alabama shirt on and threw it back off. 'Ugh!'

"Most freshmen come home for Christmas and they're like, 'I don't want to go back. I love being home,'" Karen said. "She couldn't wait to get back on that plane to go home — and home is Auburn, not Iowa."

There's one place Natalie will willingly wear orange and blue, though, and she doesn't even have to lose a bet to do it: That's at Auburn gymnastics meets, where she's her sister's biggest fan.

Mom comes down for meets, too.

“Her support’s been everything to me,” Sophia said. “Her and my sister have just supported me throughout this whole journey. And gymnastics is not an easy sport, and you go through a lot of ups and downs, and so just having her there as my rock has been very special and something I’ll always hold very close to my heart.”

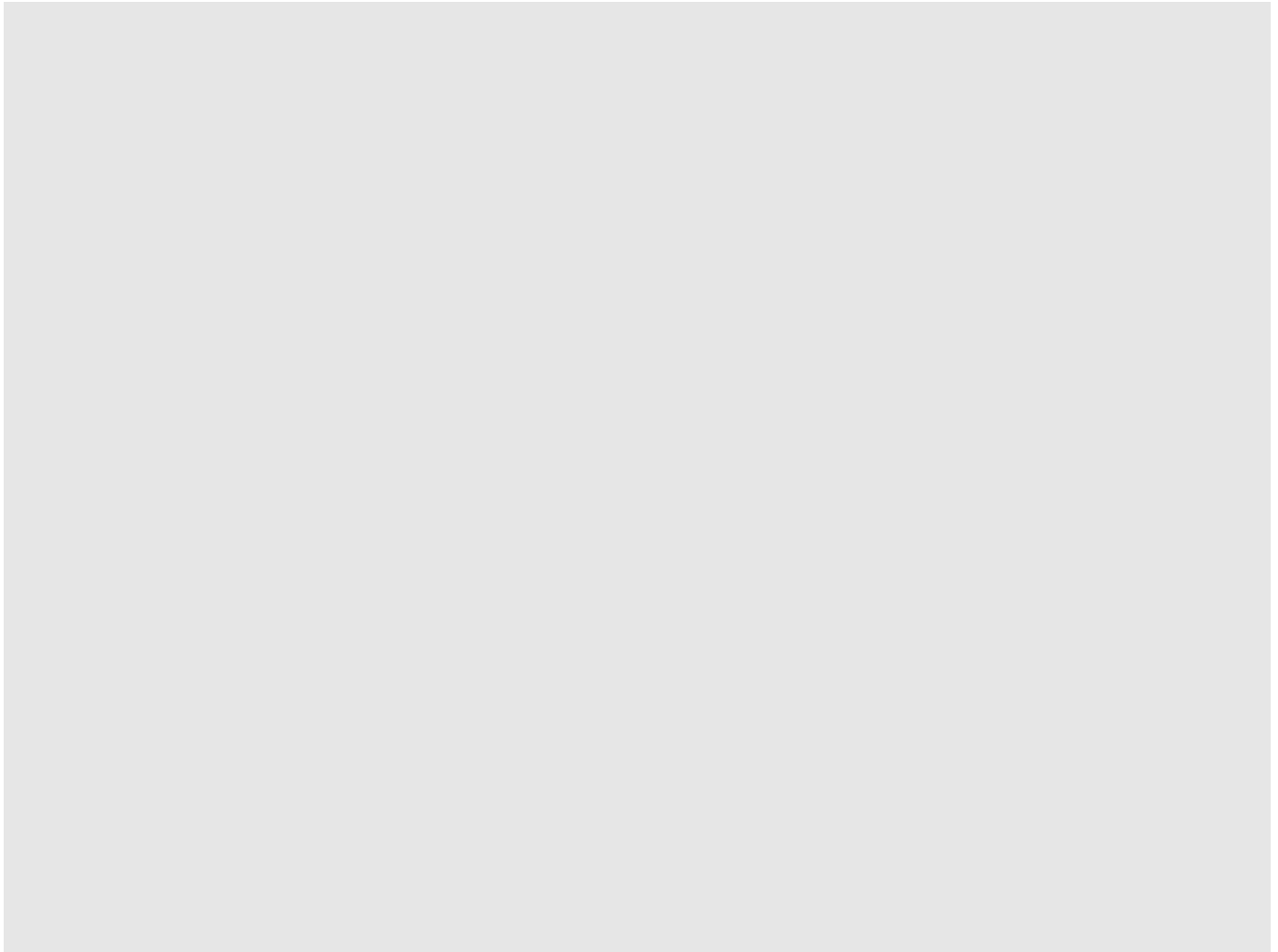
No. 6 Auburn faces No. 3 Florida on Friday night for an epic meet in Auburn Arena, with a claim to the SEC’s regular-season championship on the line.

Karen will be there. Natalie will be there. Maybe Sophia will hear their voices too, cheering her on.

She’ll leap and spin and stick and dazzle.

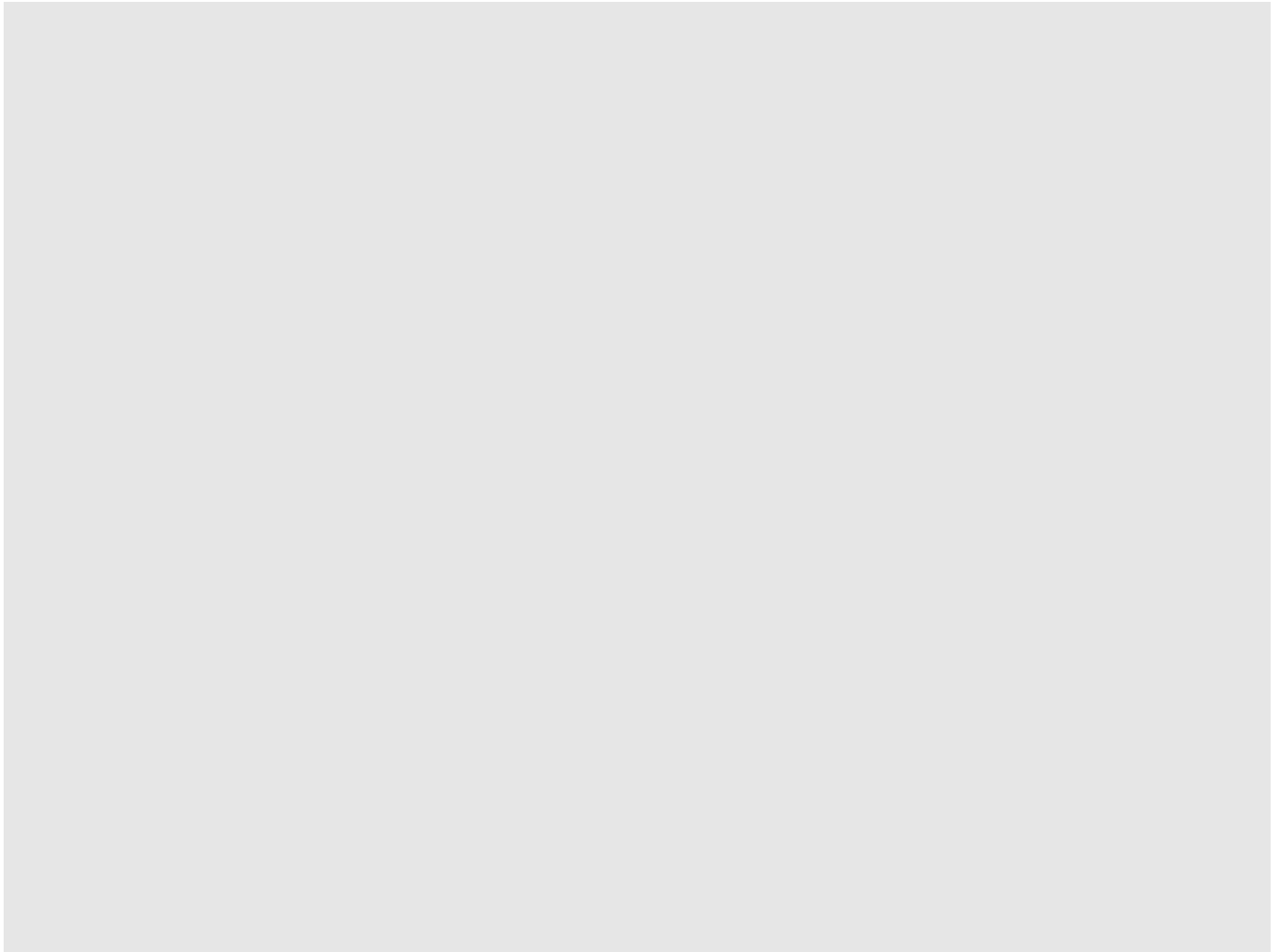
Then she’ll smile.

PHOTOS: Auburn gymnastics soars to program-record score against Kentucky



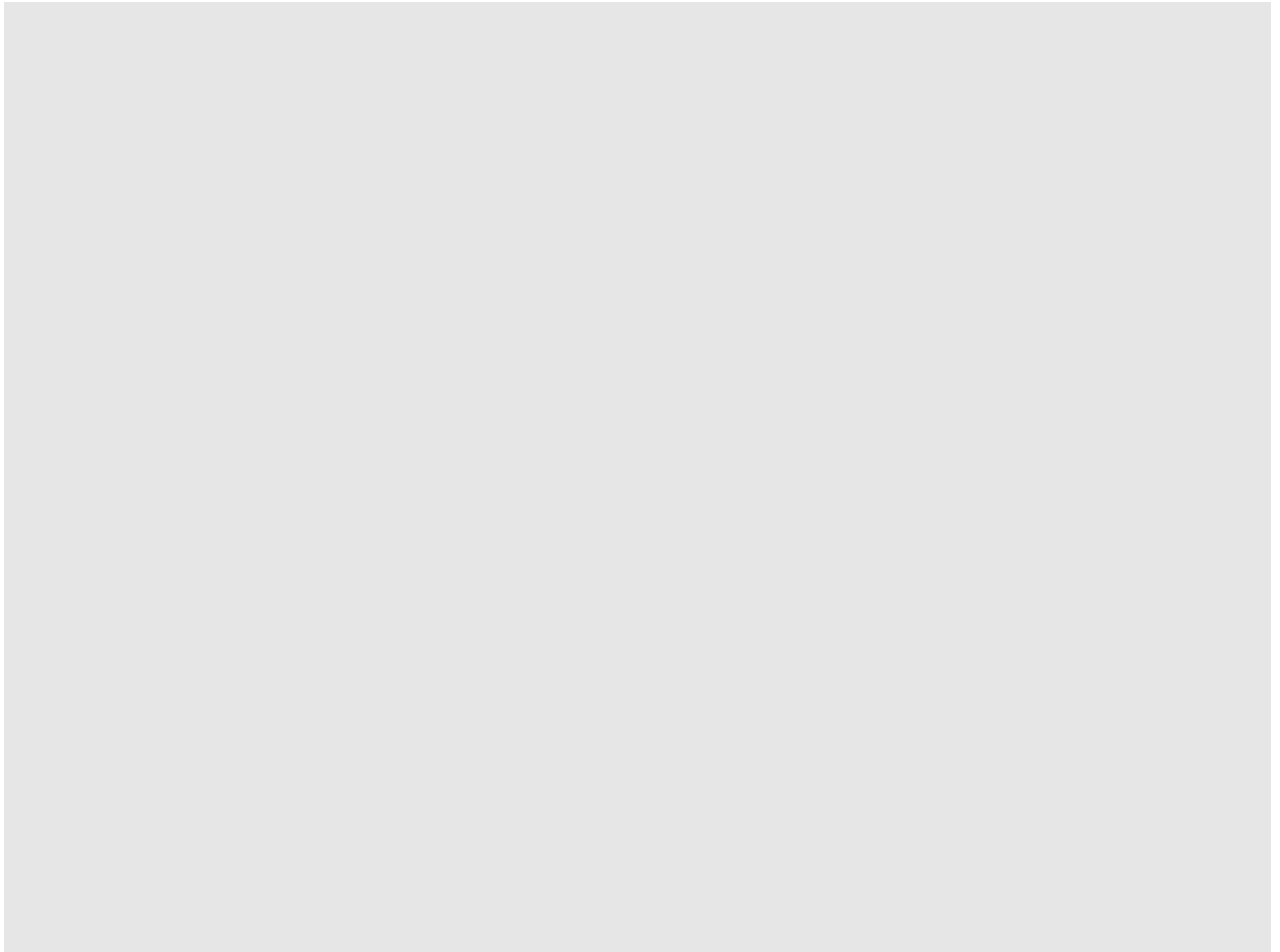
Auburn's Suni Lee and teammates celebrate after Lee's perfect 10 score on the beam during Friday's home match against Kentucky.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



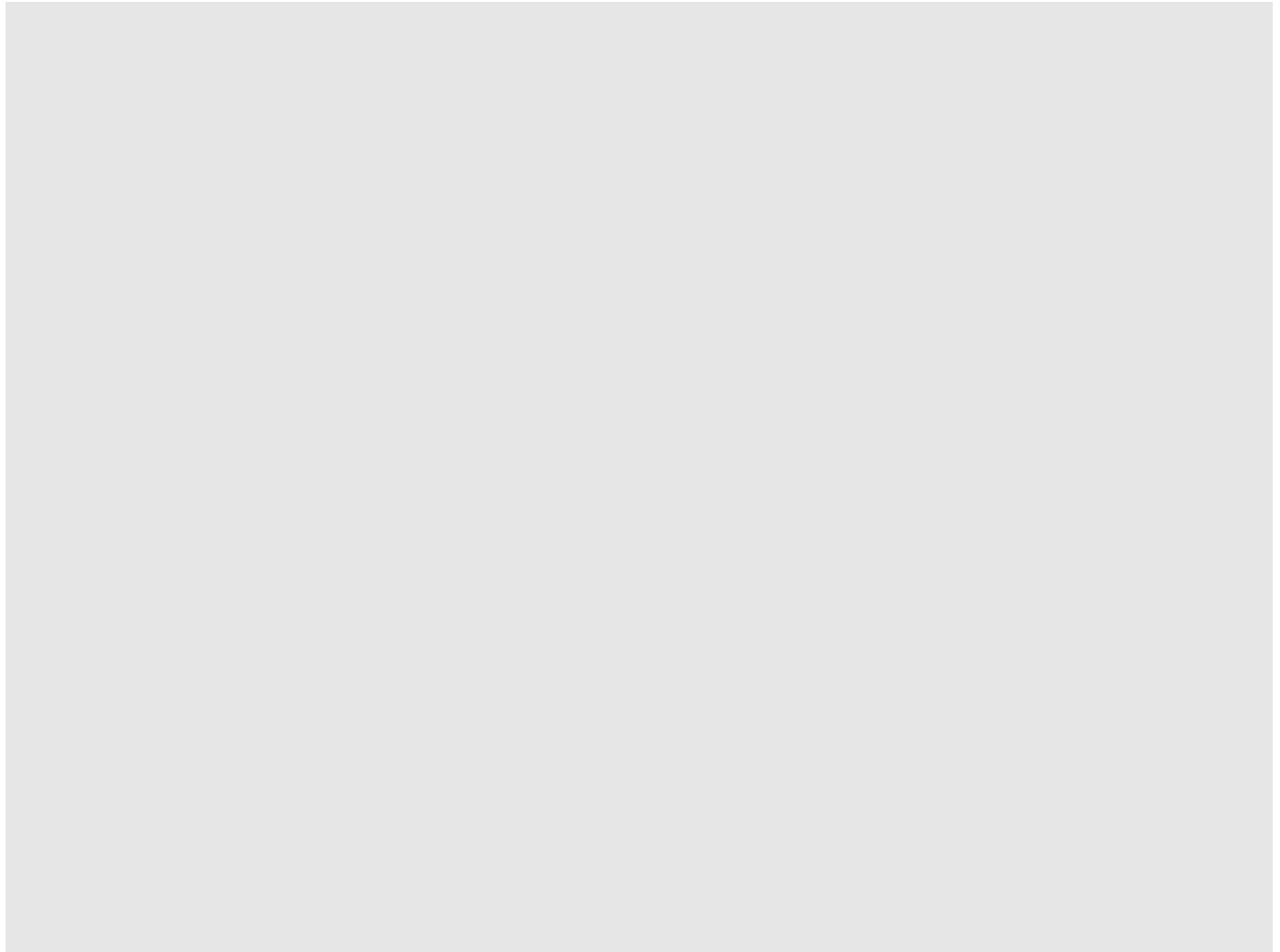
Auburn's Derrian Gobourne is introduced to the Arena. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



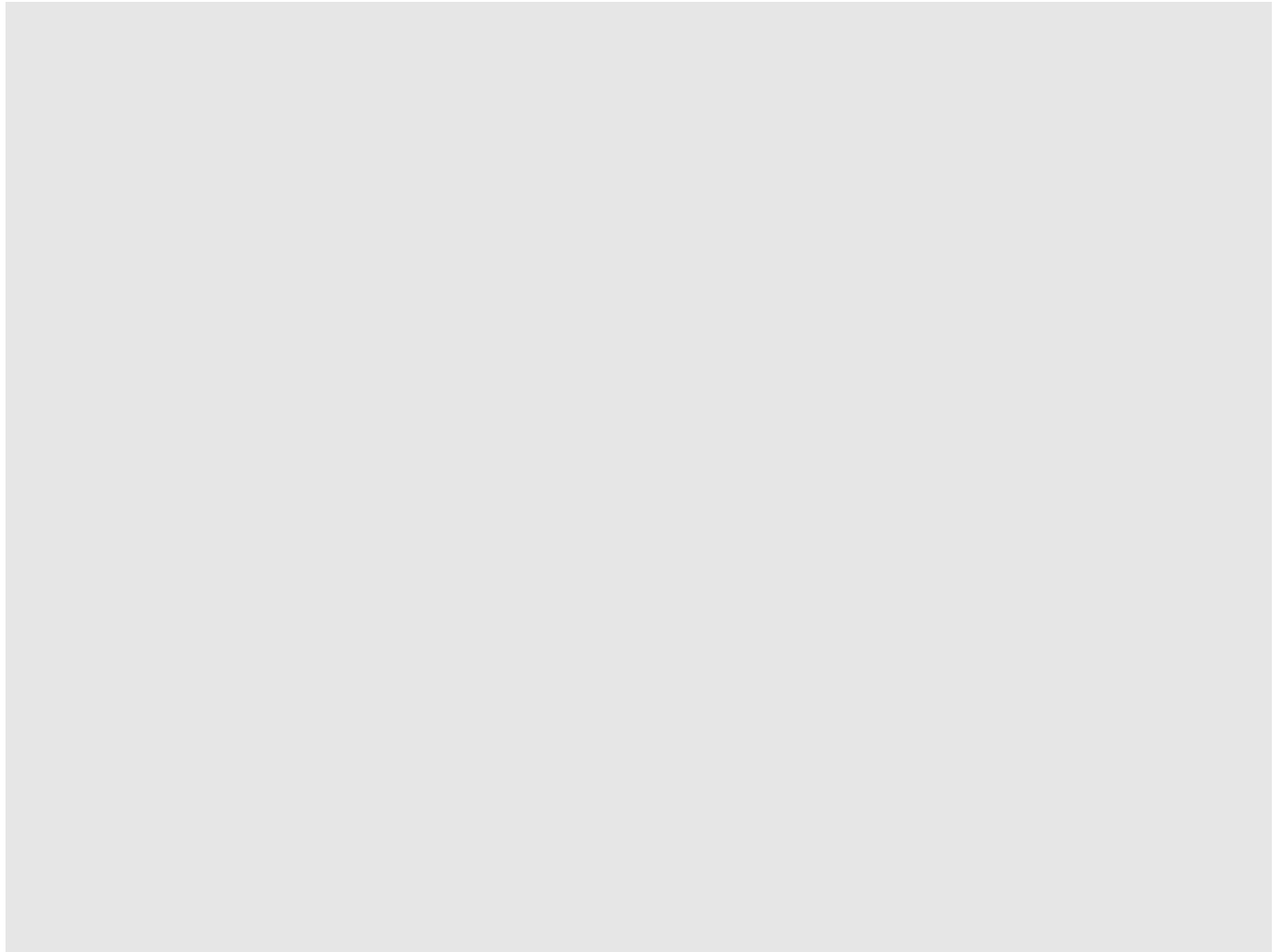
Auburn's Sophia Groth on vault. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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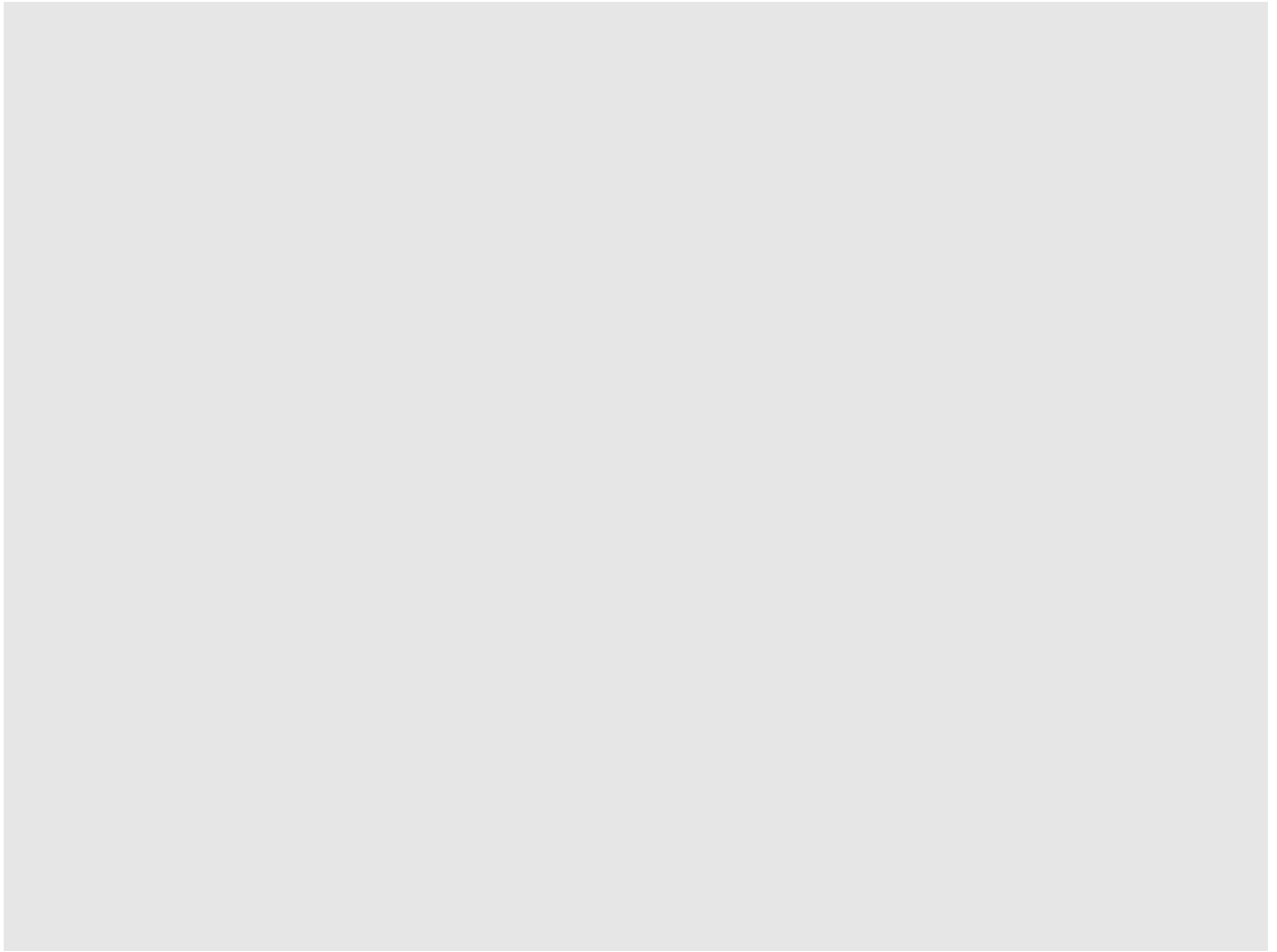
Auburn's Sara Hubbard on vault. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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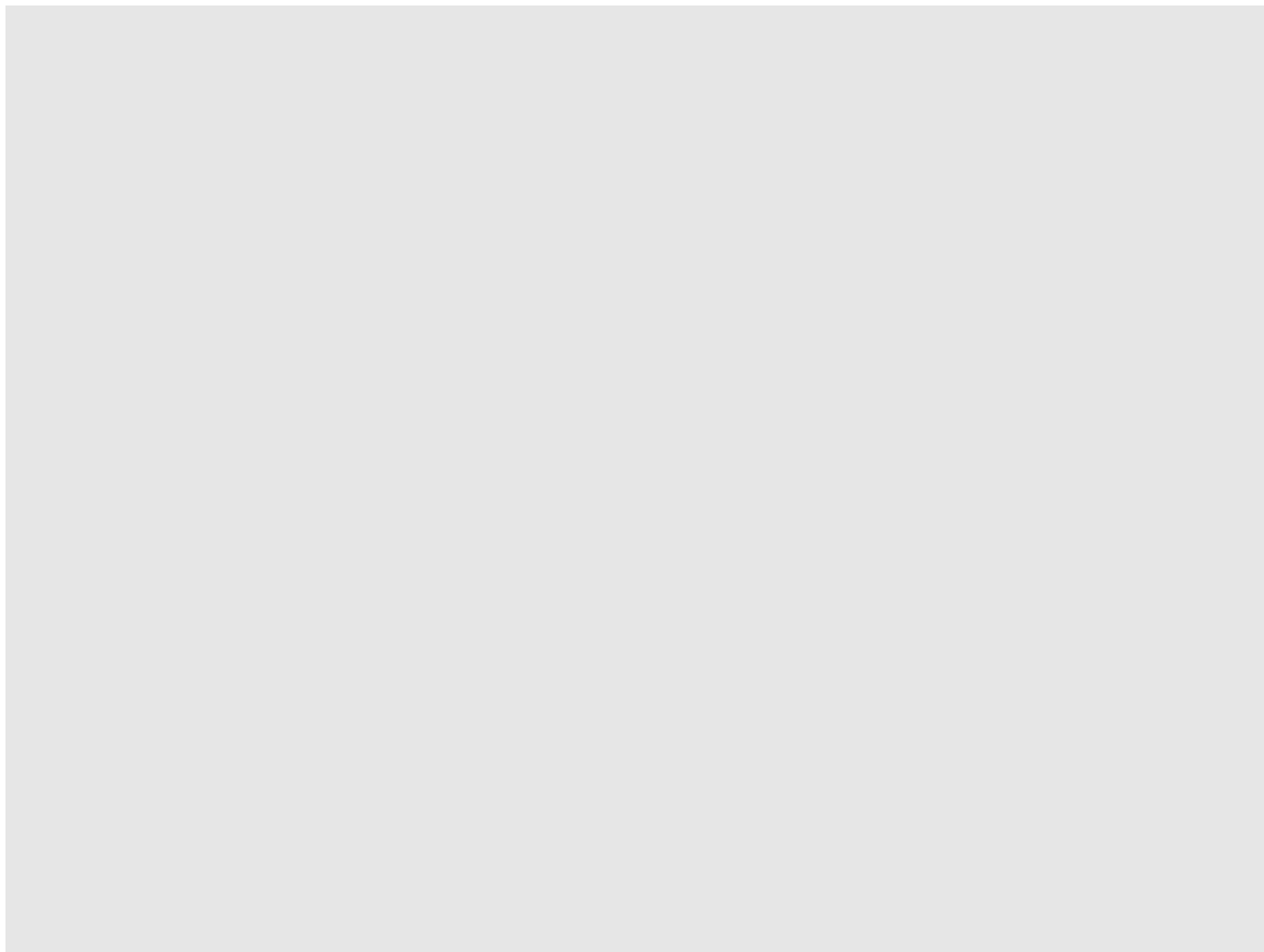
Auburn's Drew Watson on vault. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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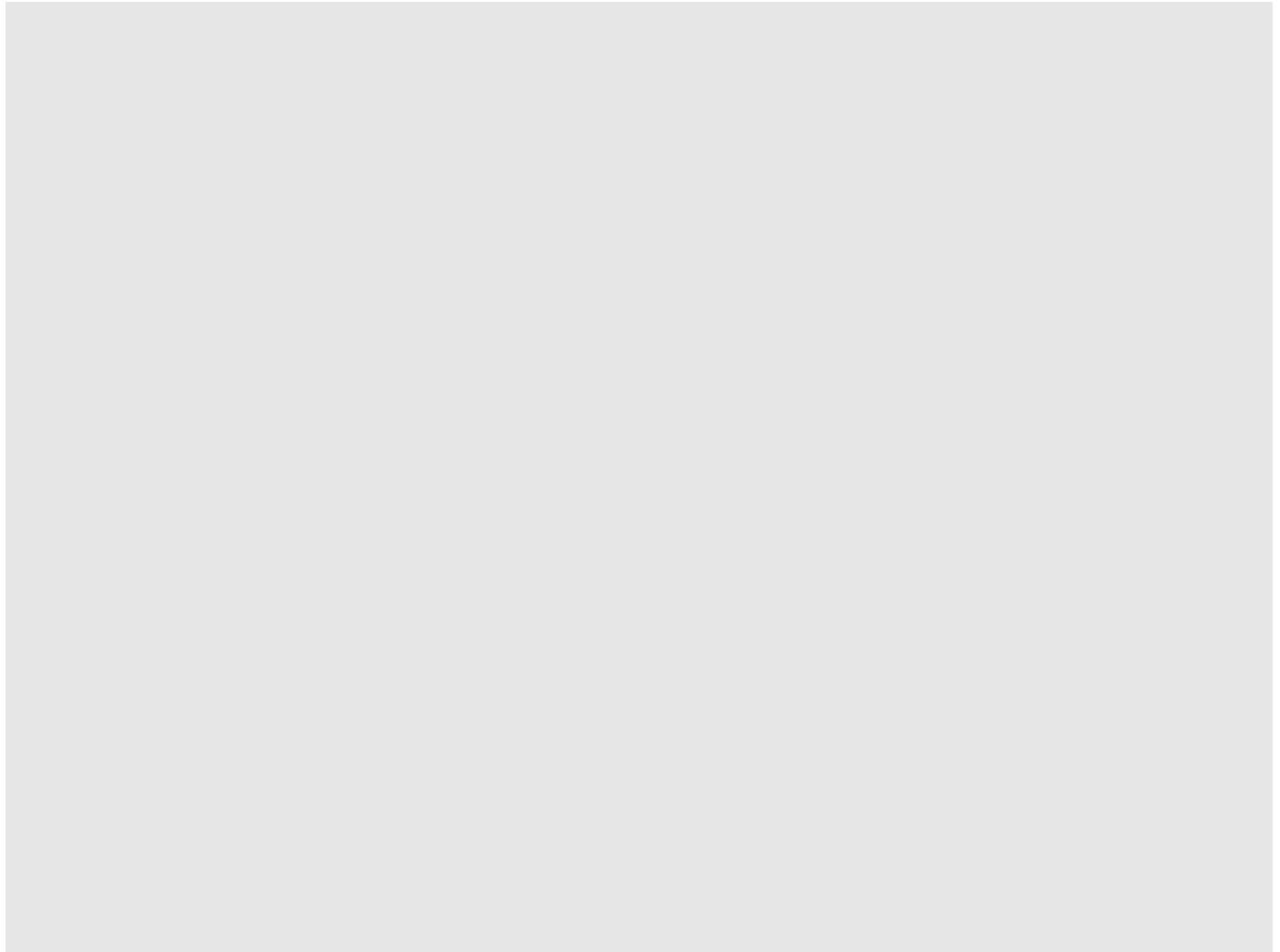
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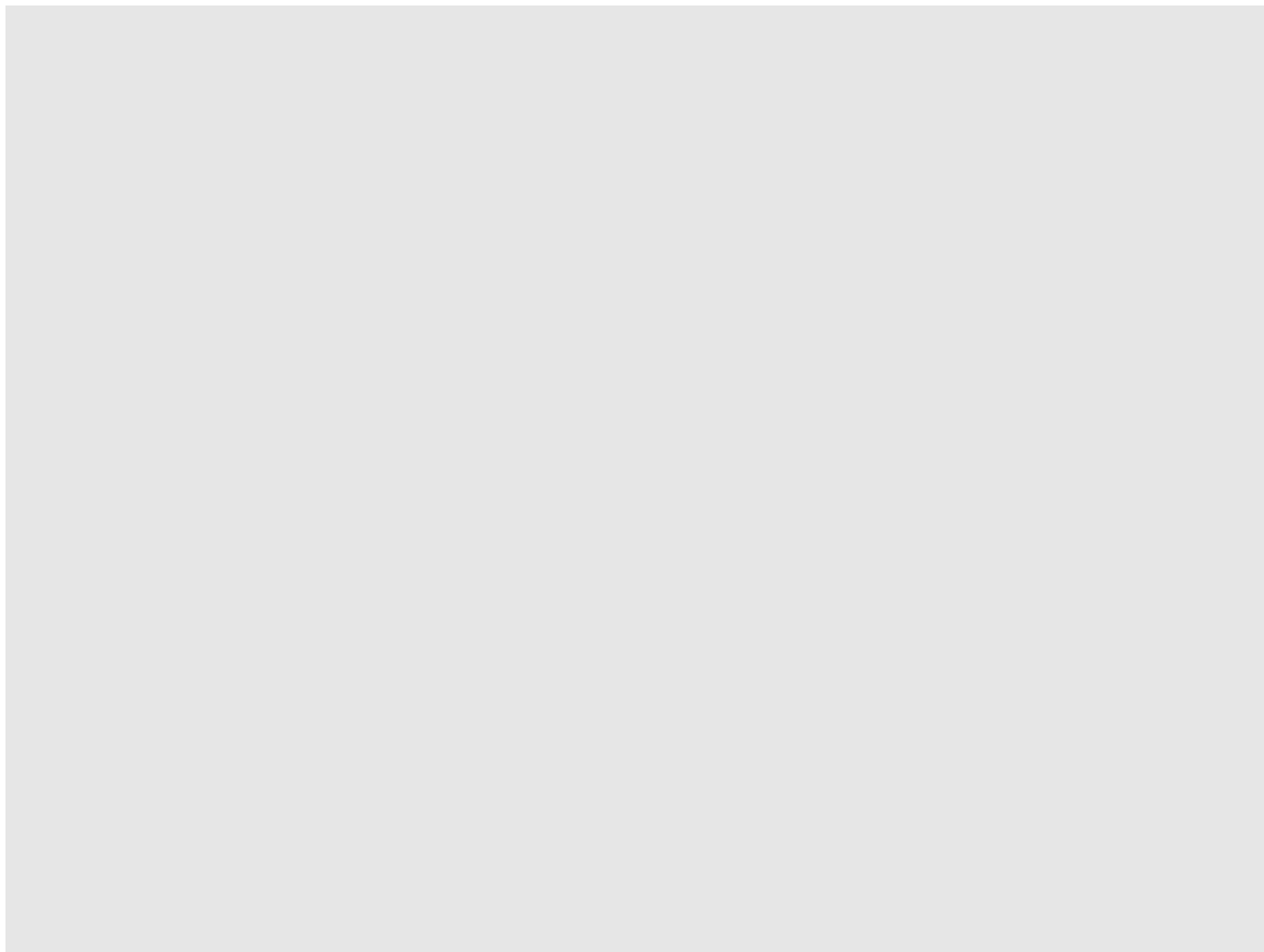
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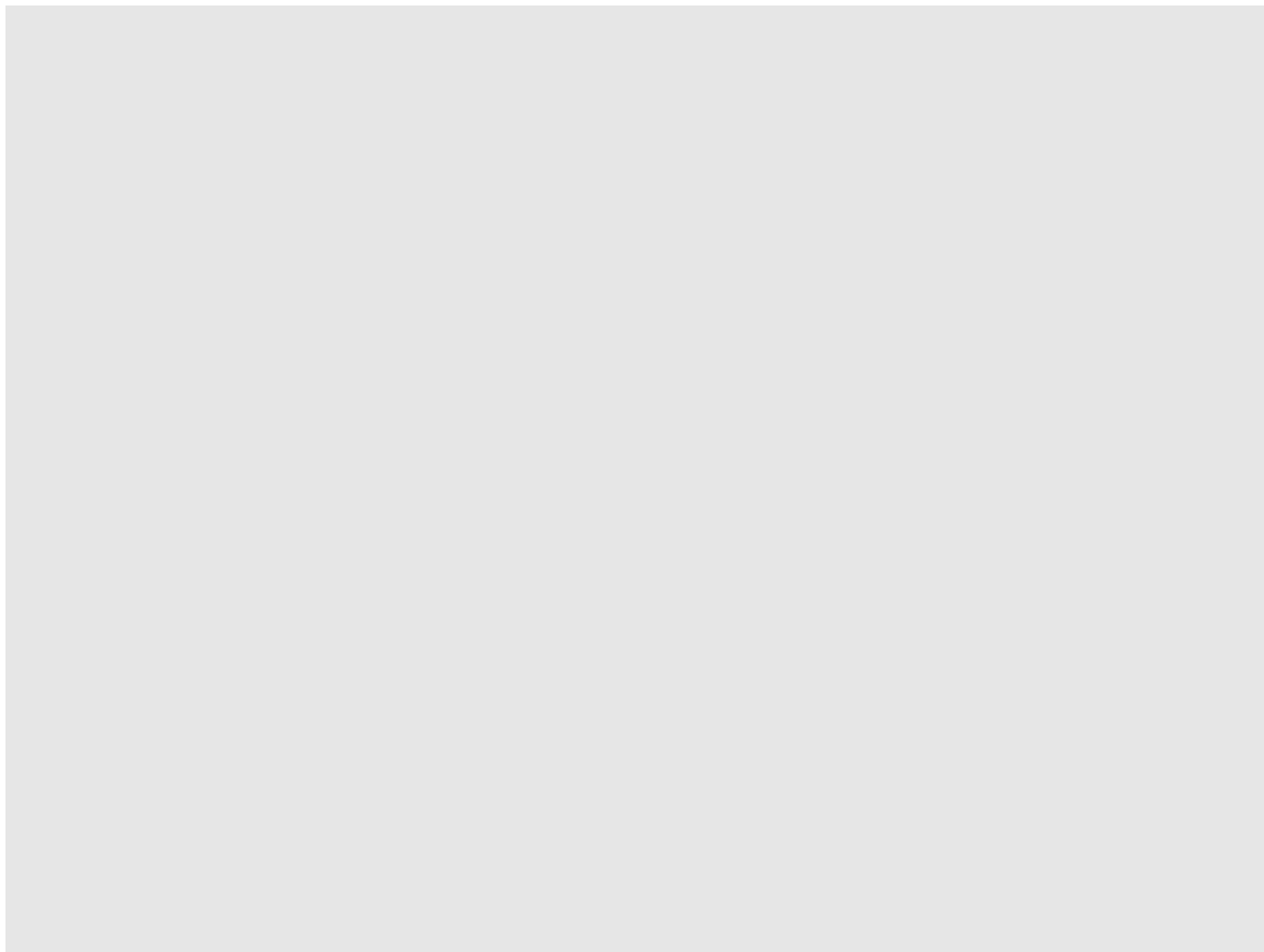
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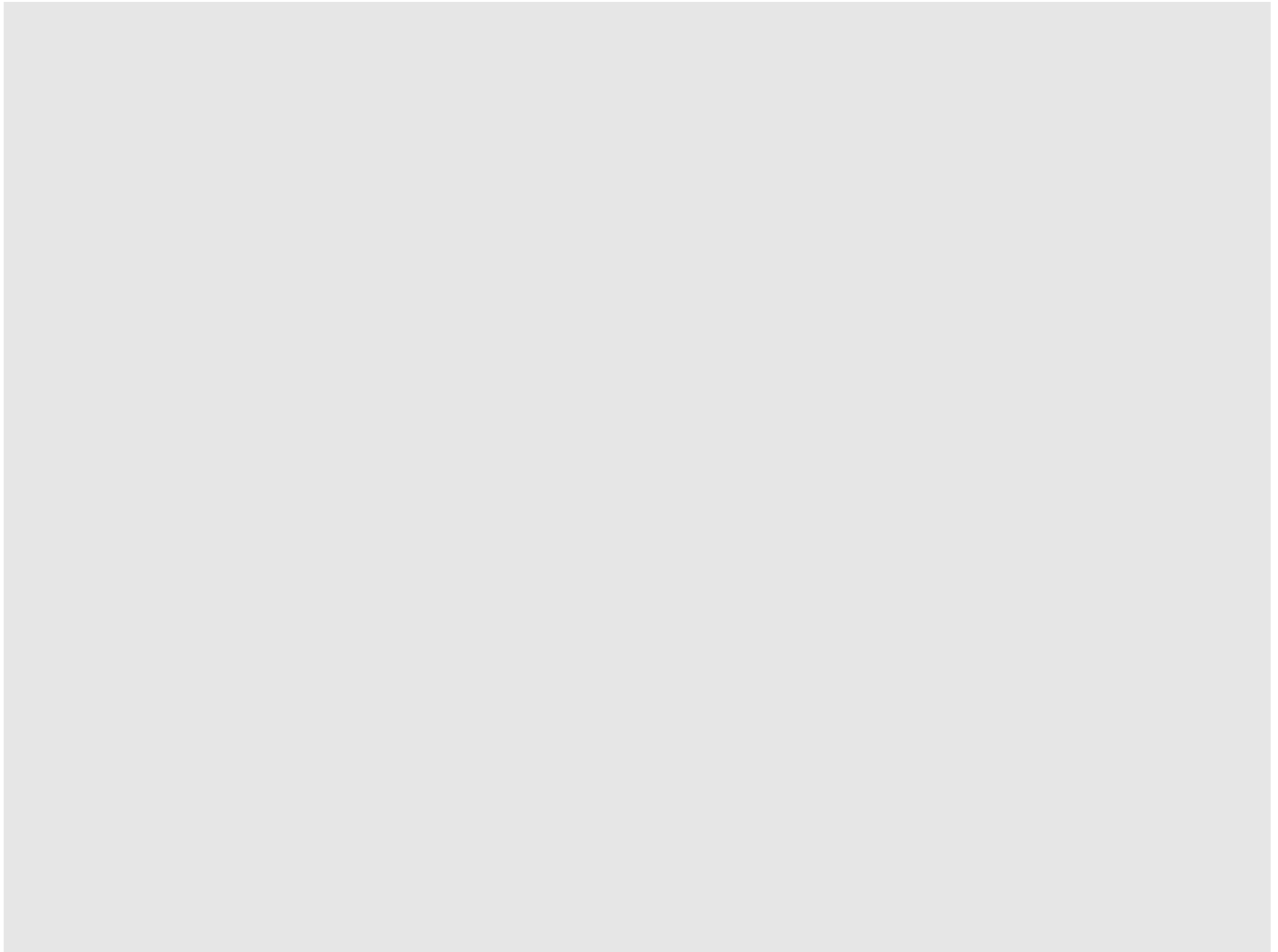
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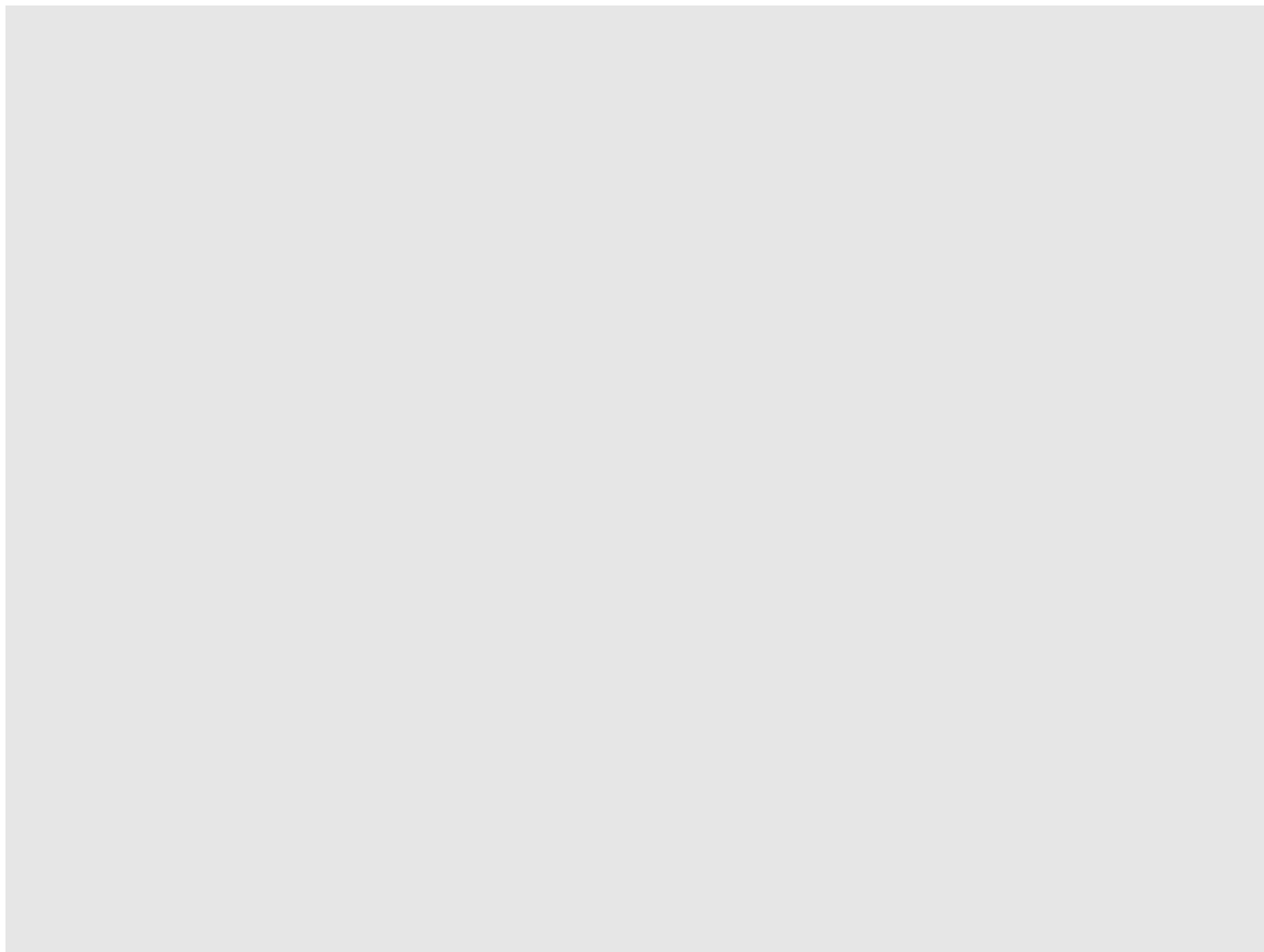
Auburn's Gabby McLaughlin on vault. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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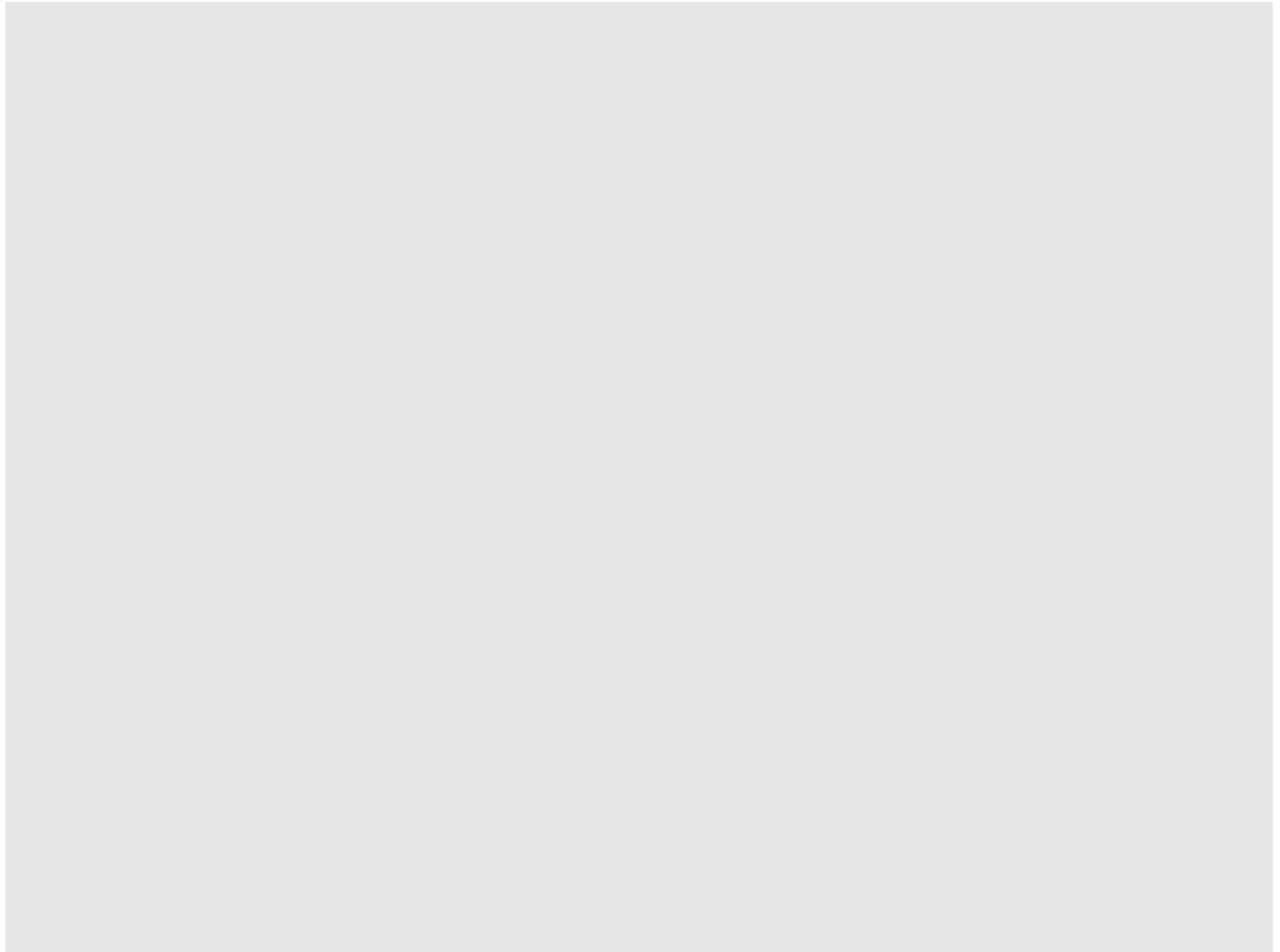
Auburn's Sophia Groth on bars. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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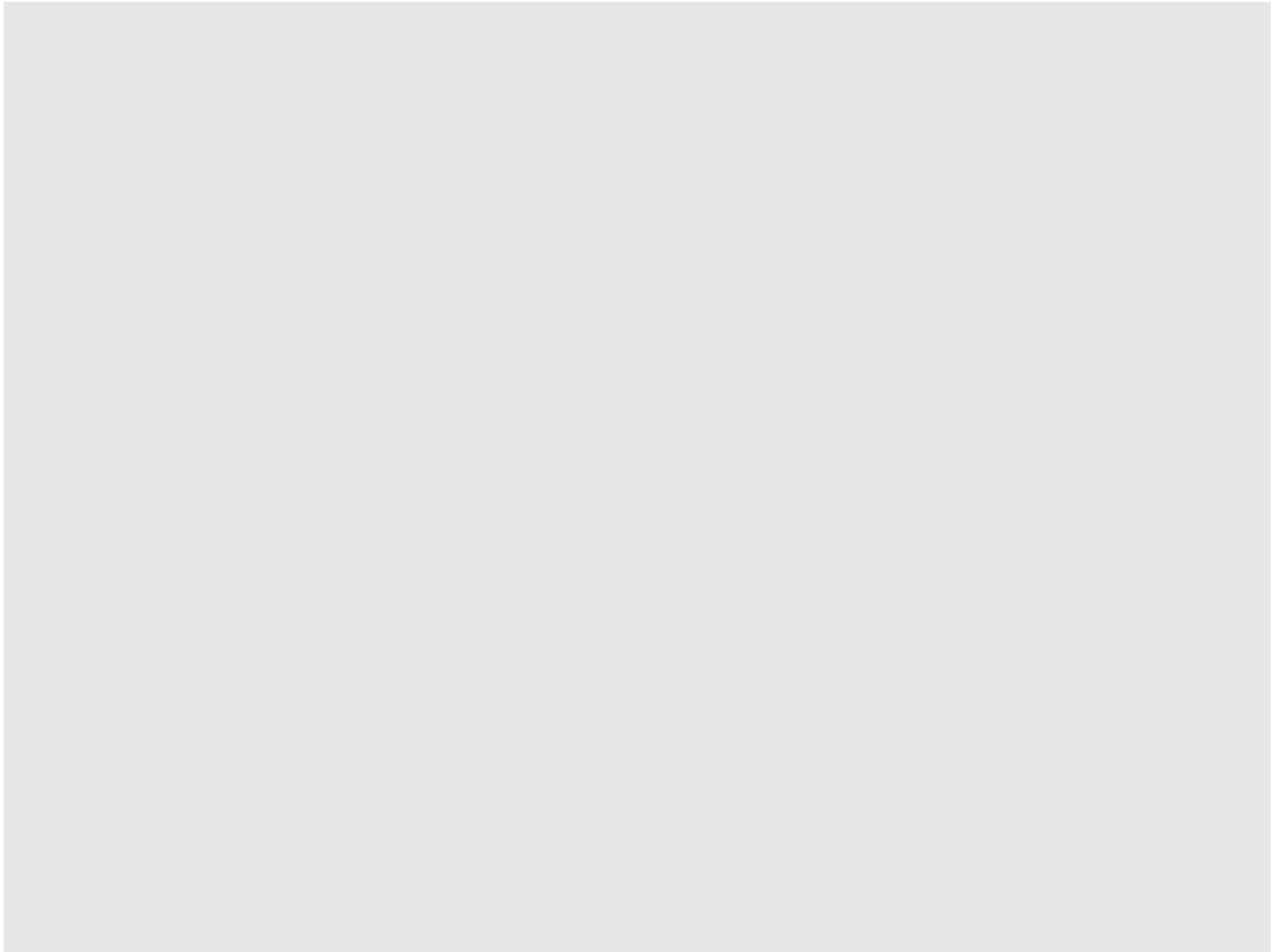
Auburn's Adeline Sabados on bars. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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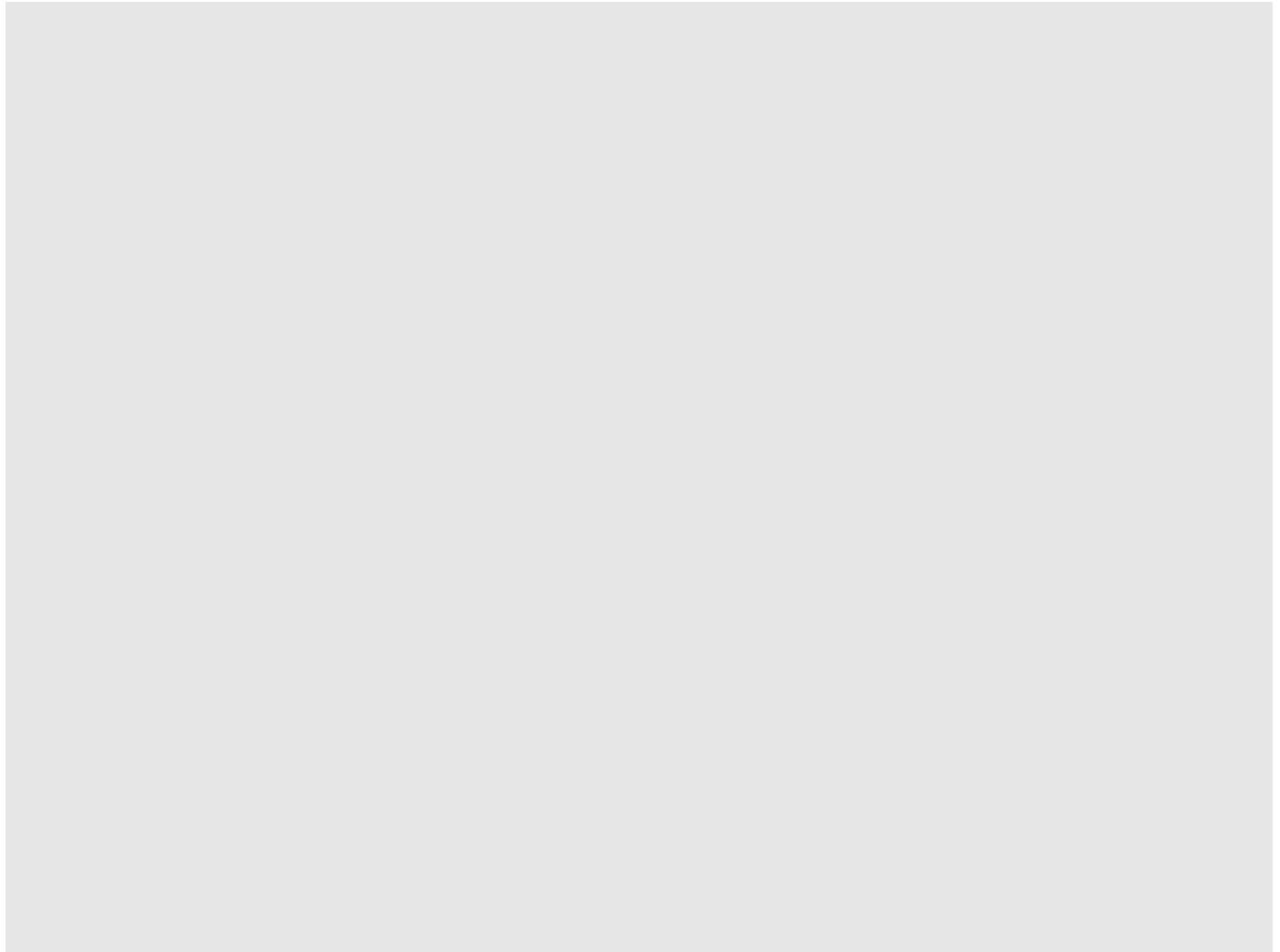
Auburn's Cassie Stevens on bars. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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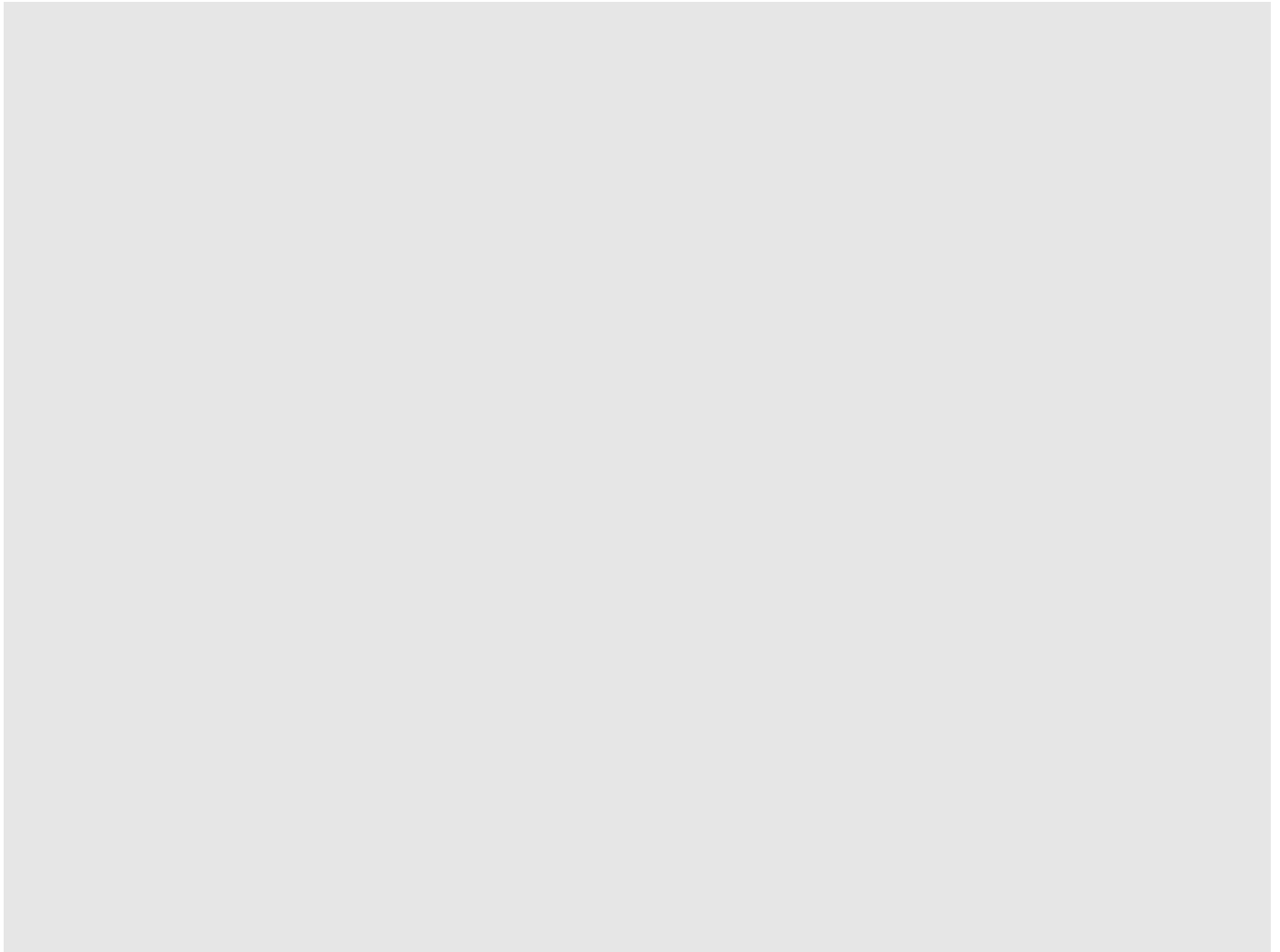
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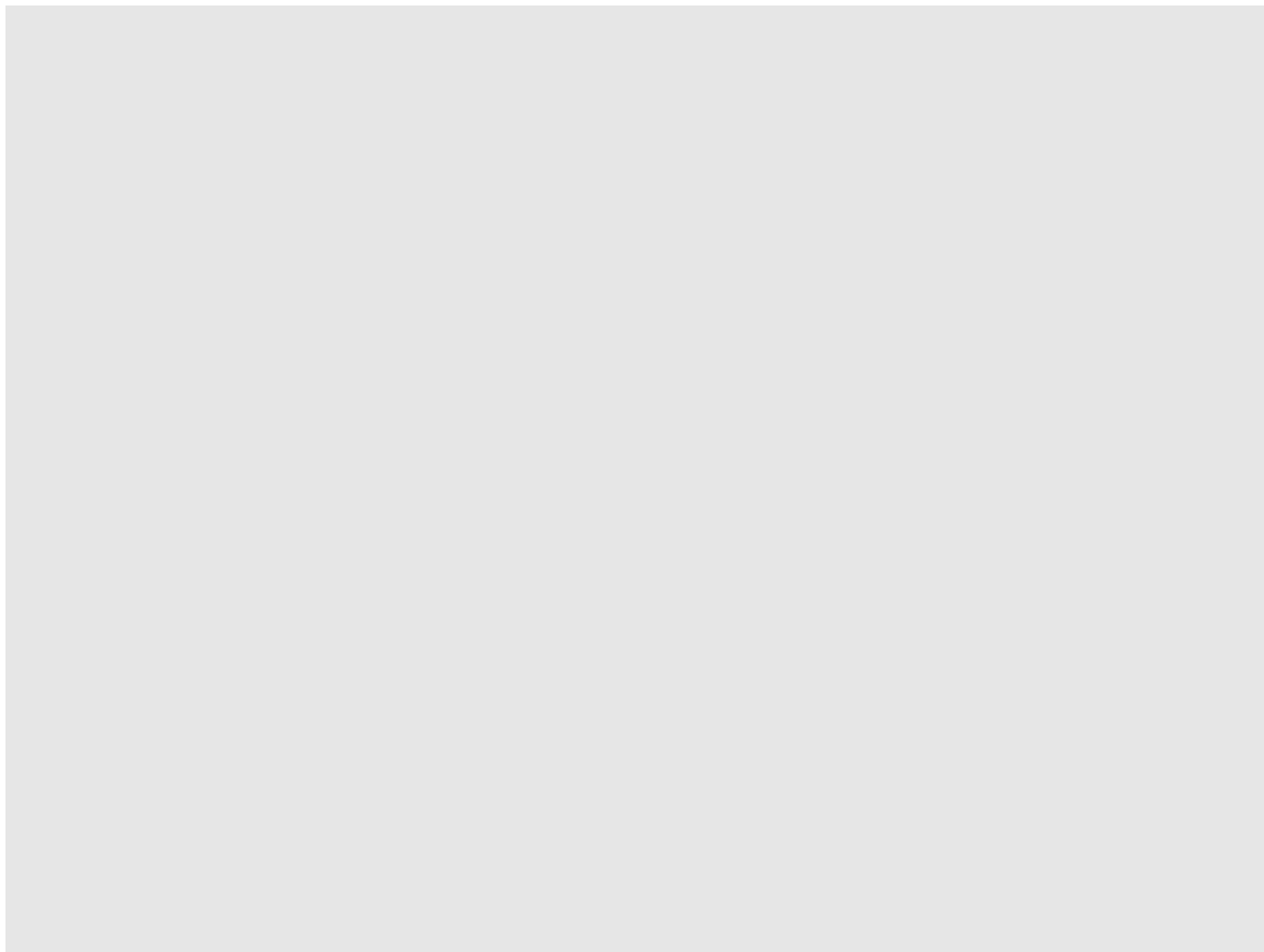
Auburn's Aria Brusch on bars. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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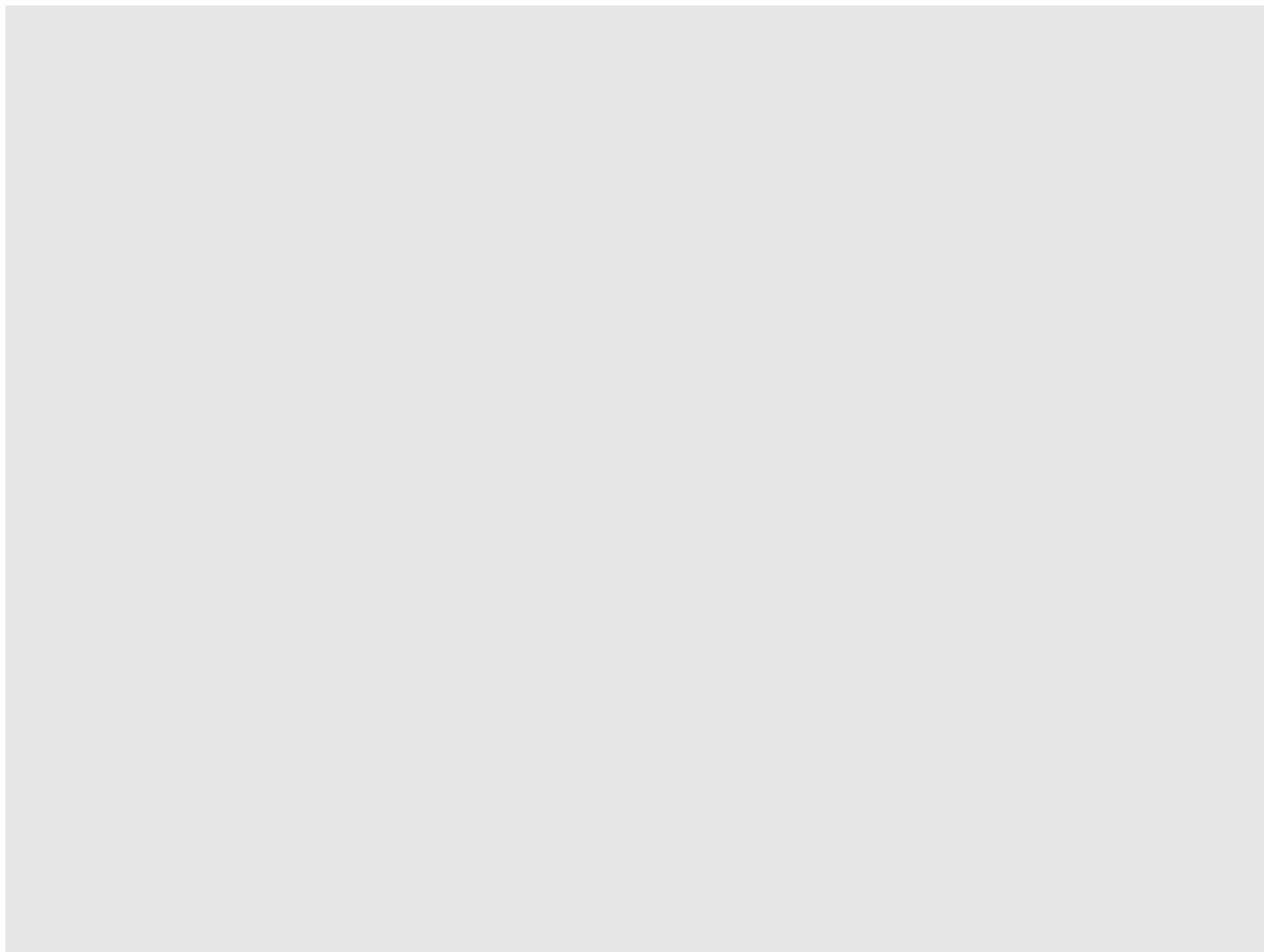
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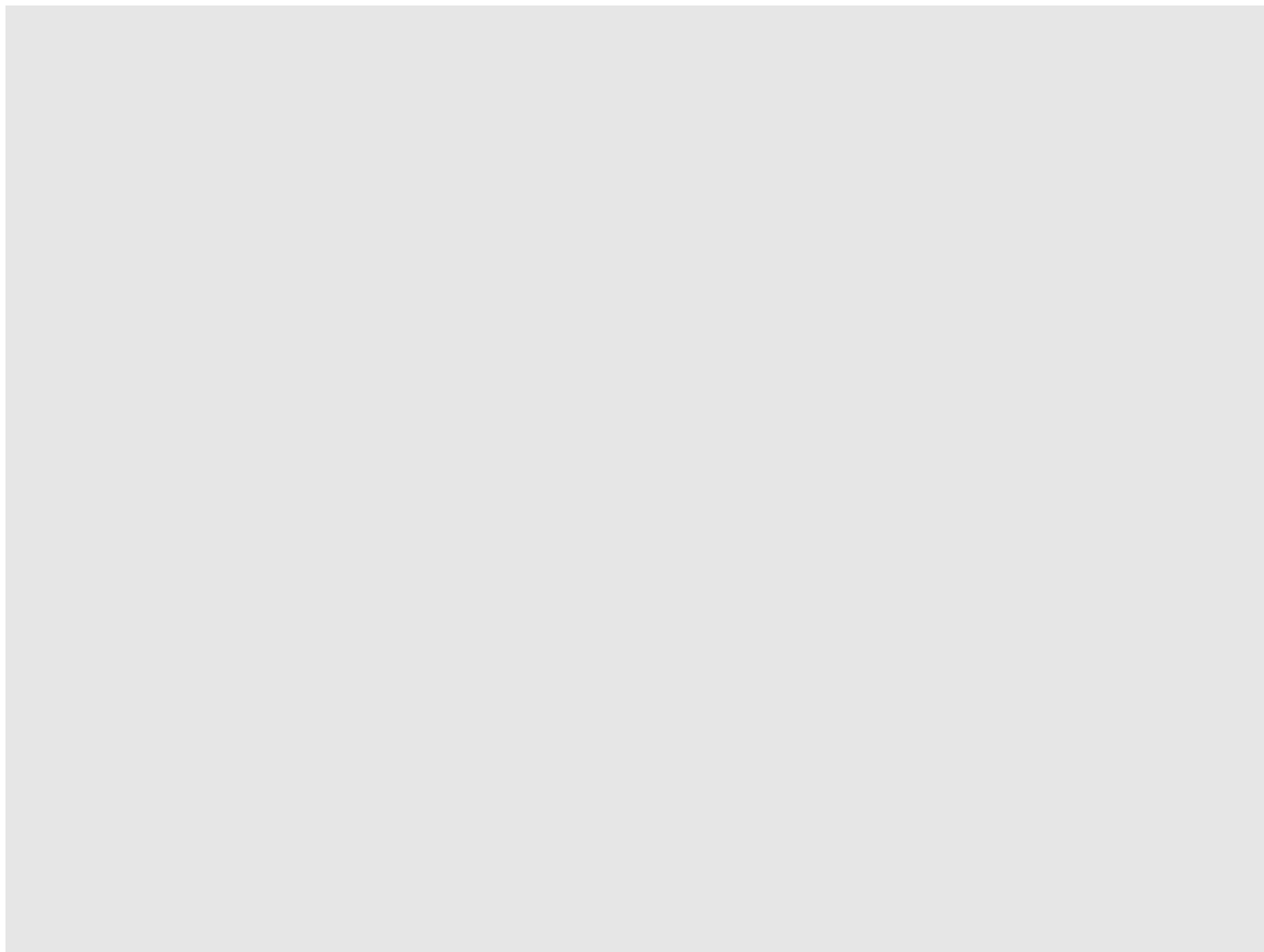
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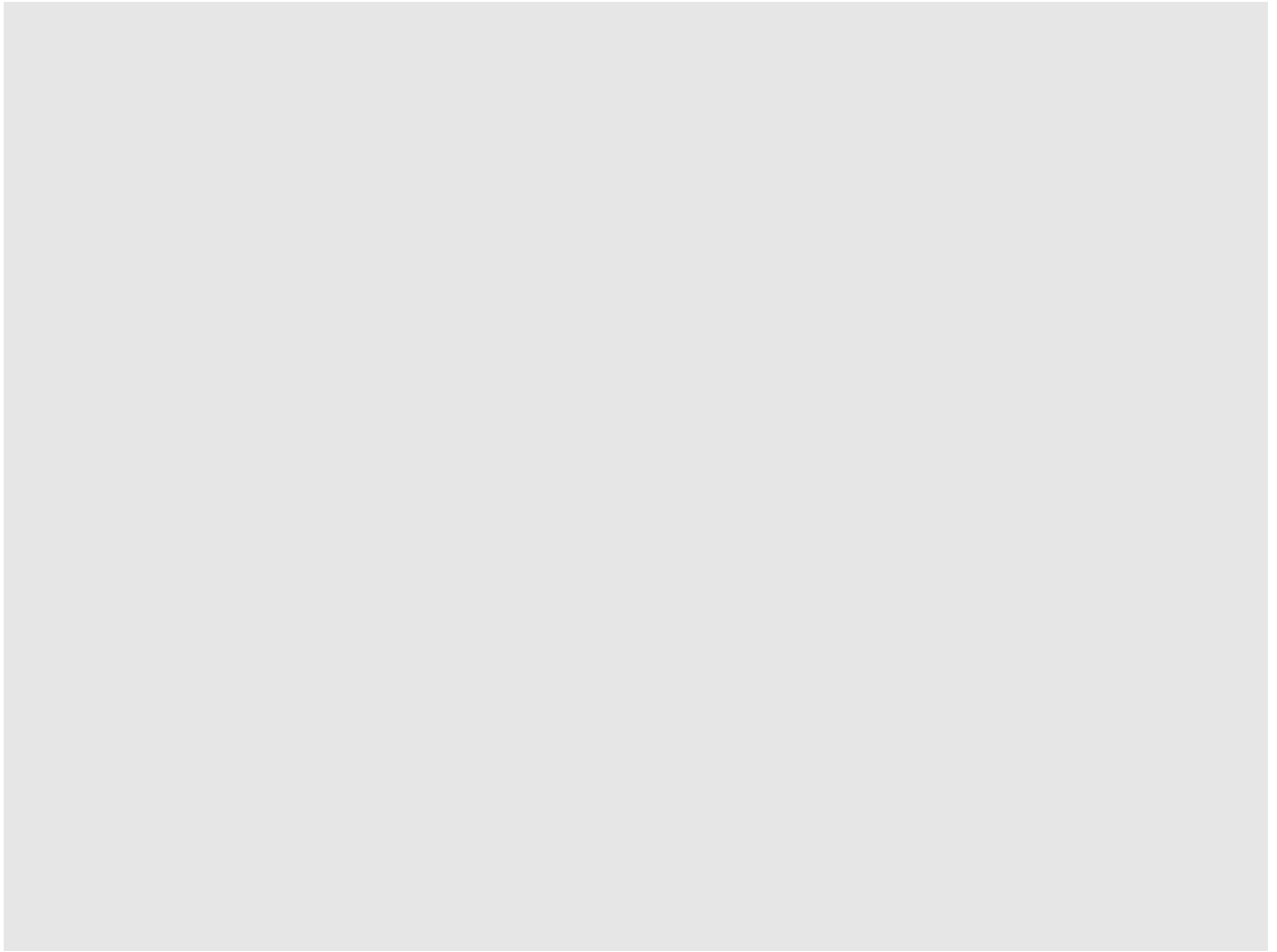
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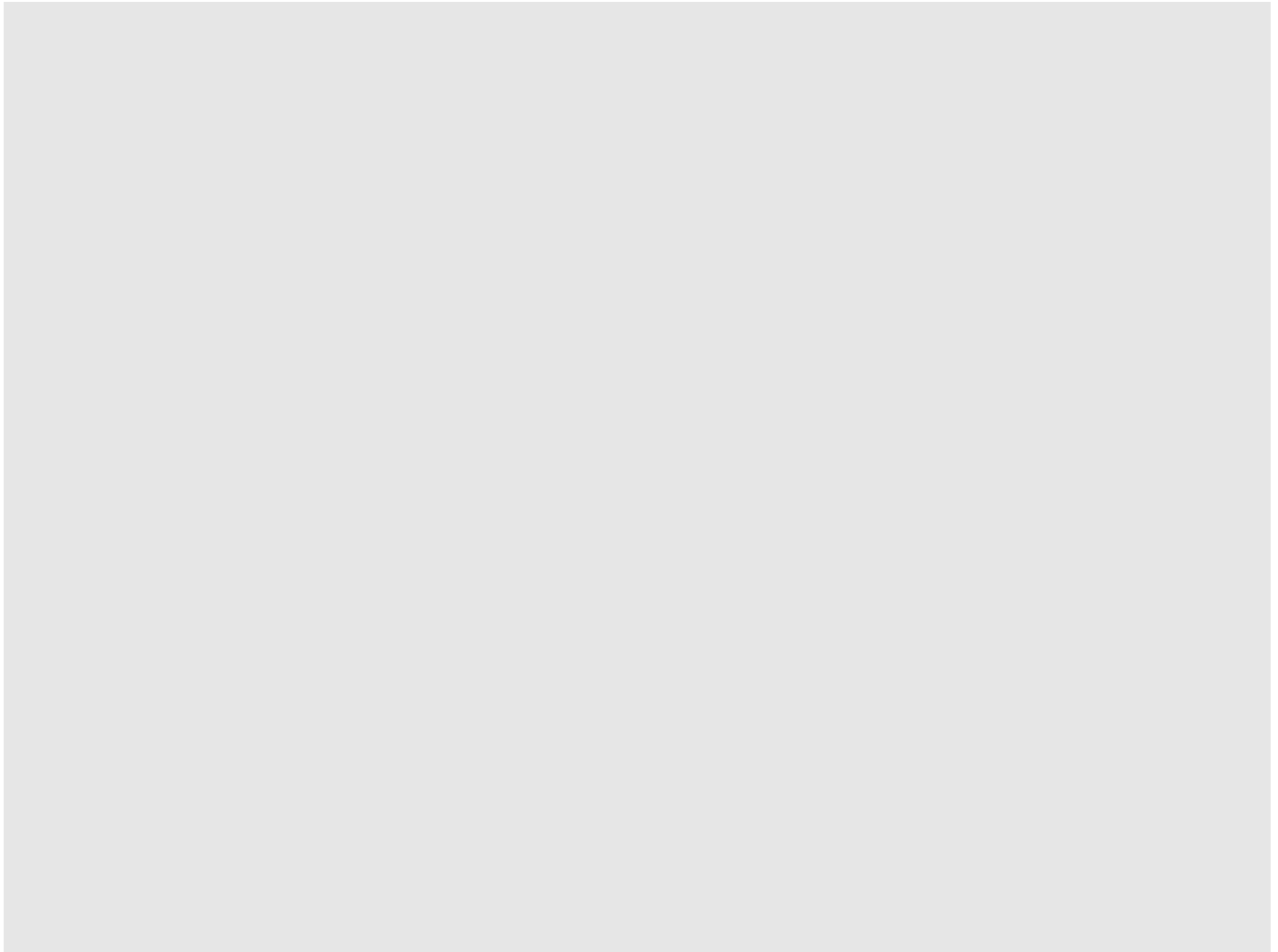
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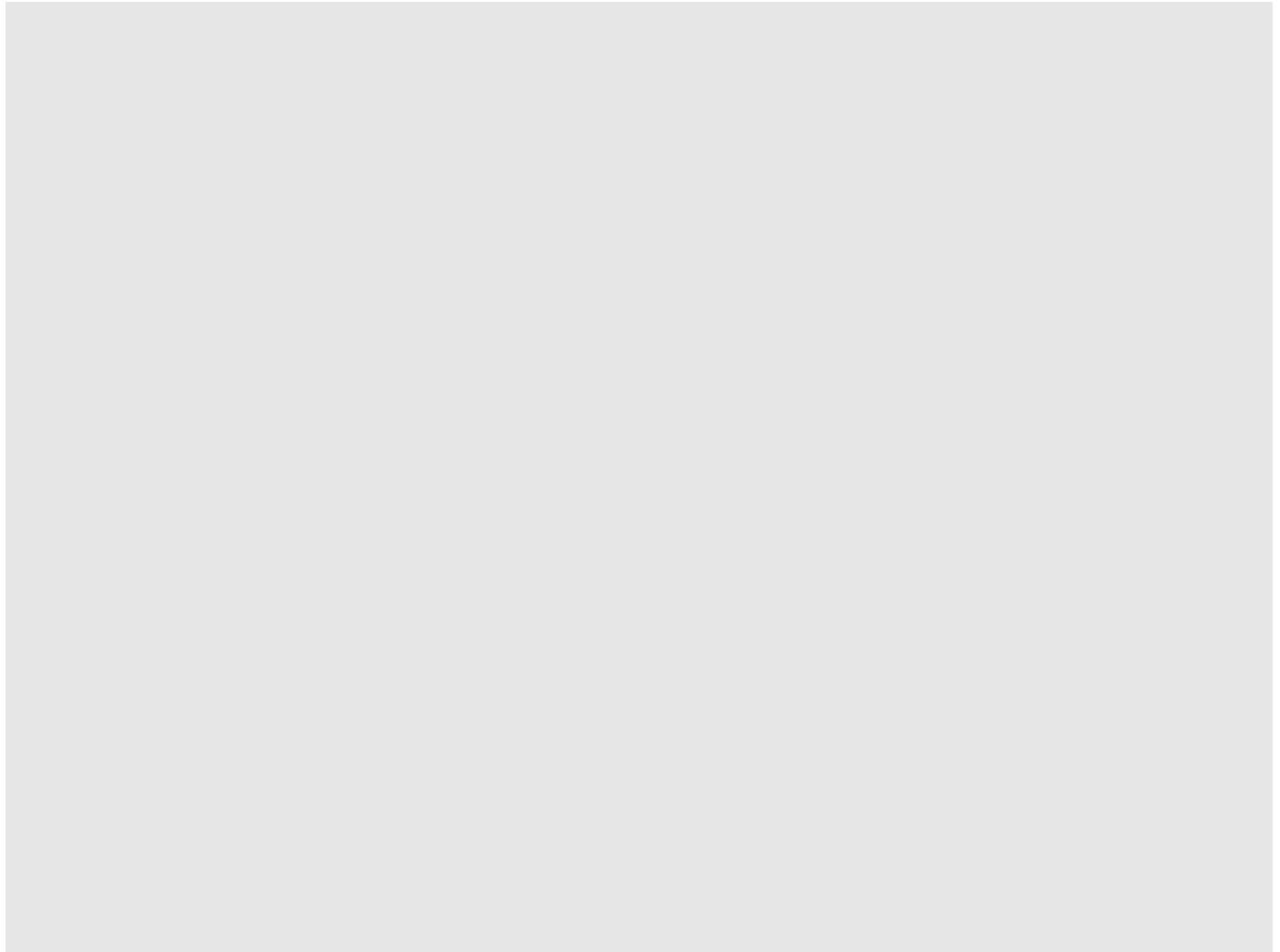
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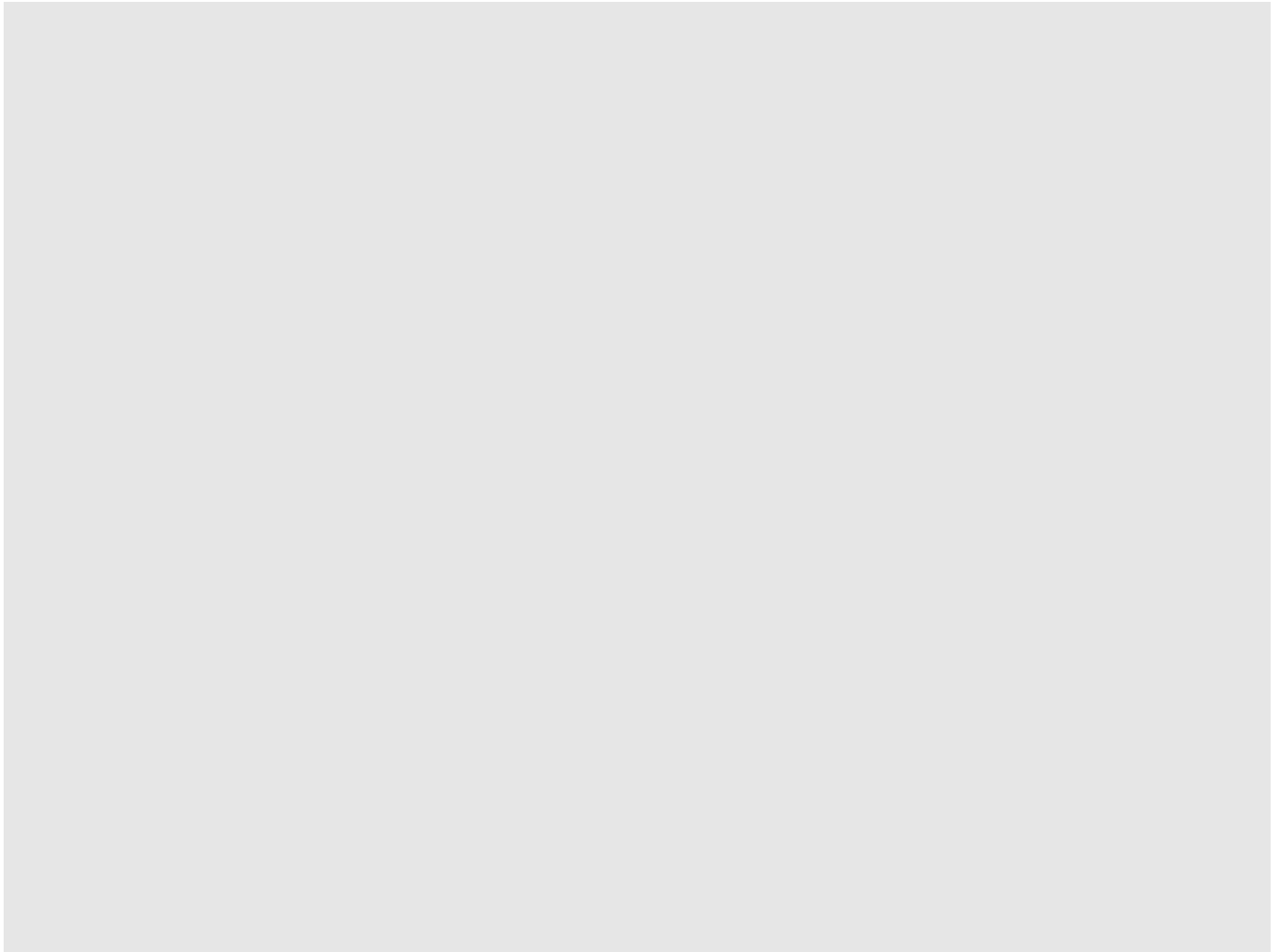
Auburn's Suni Lee waves to some fans between rotations. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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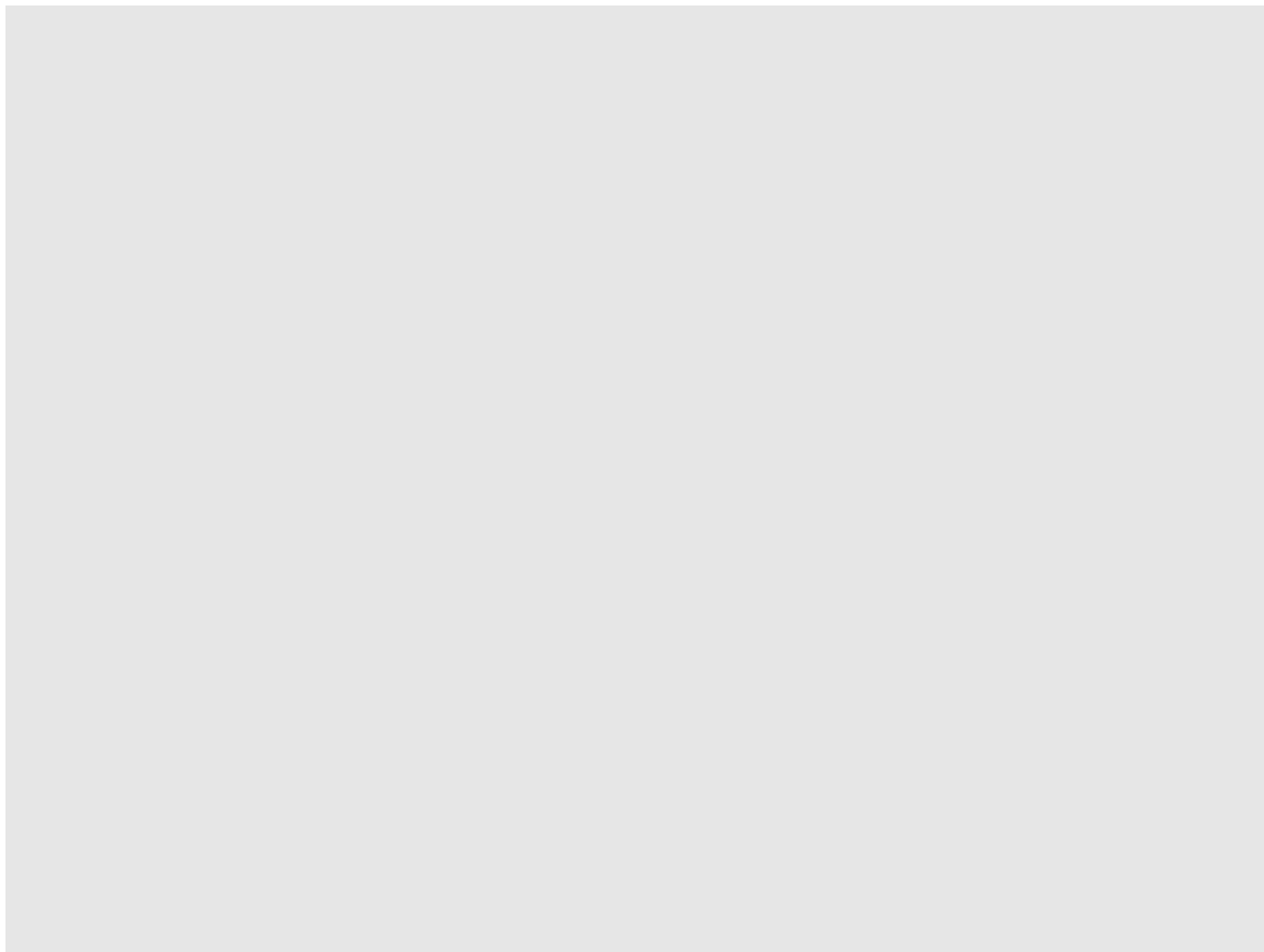
Auburn's Olivia Hollingsworth on beam. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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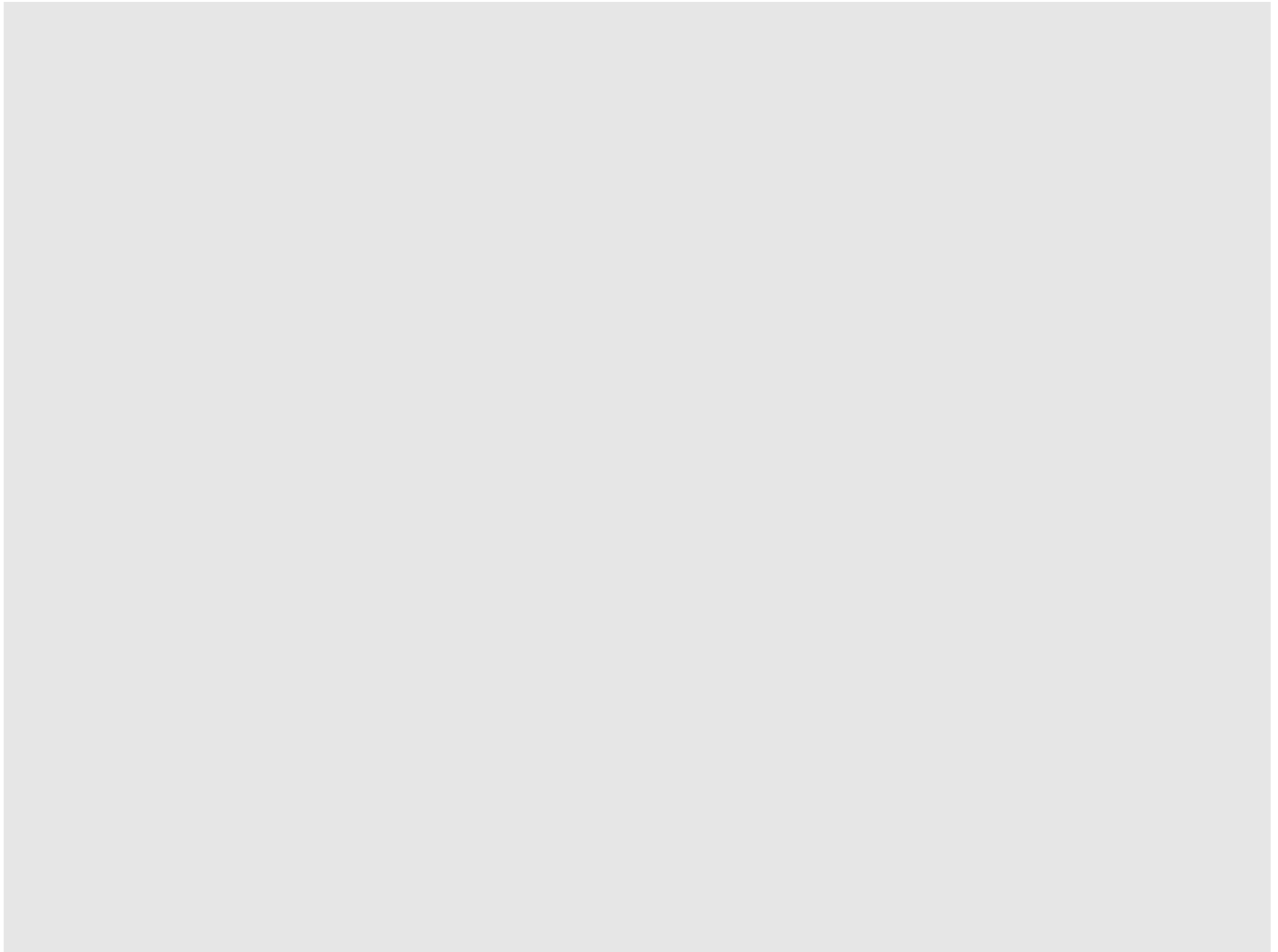
Auburn's Piper Smith on beam. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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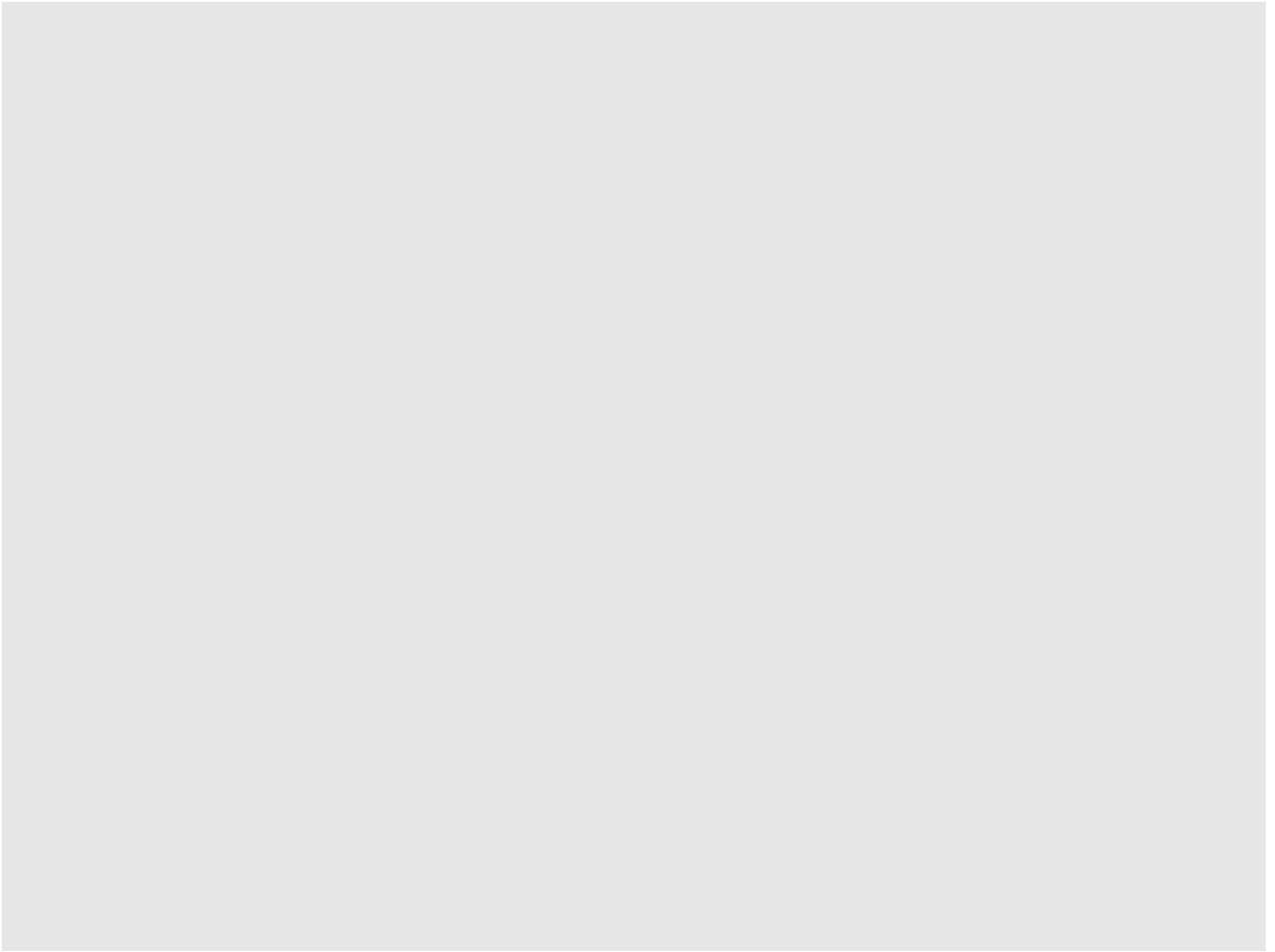
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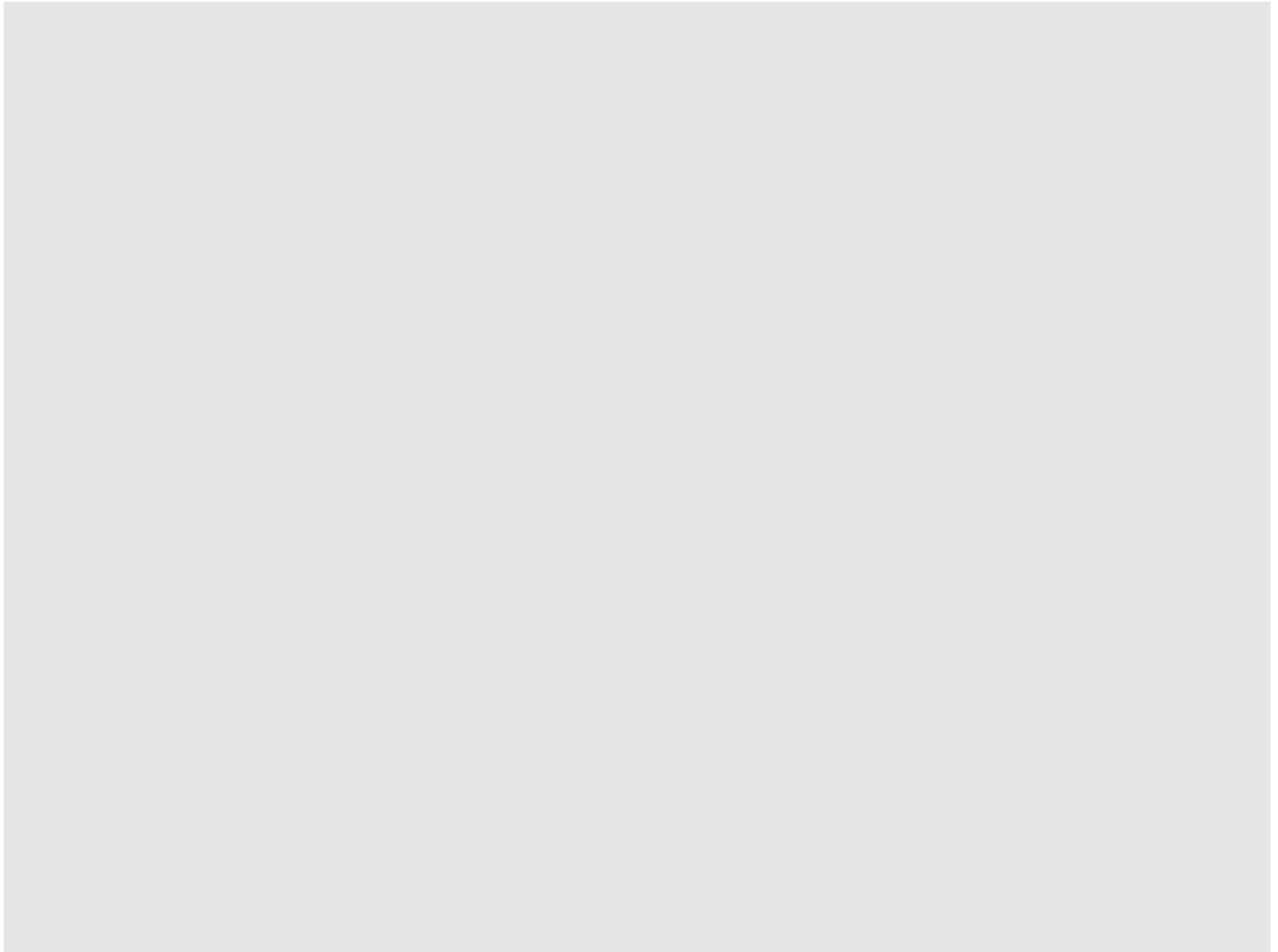
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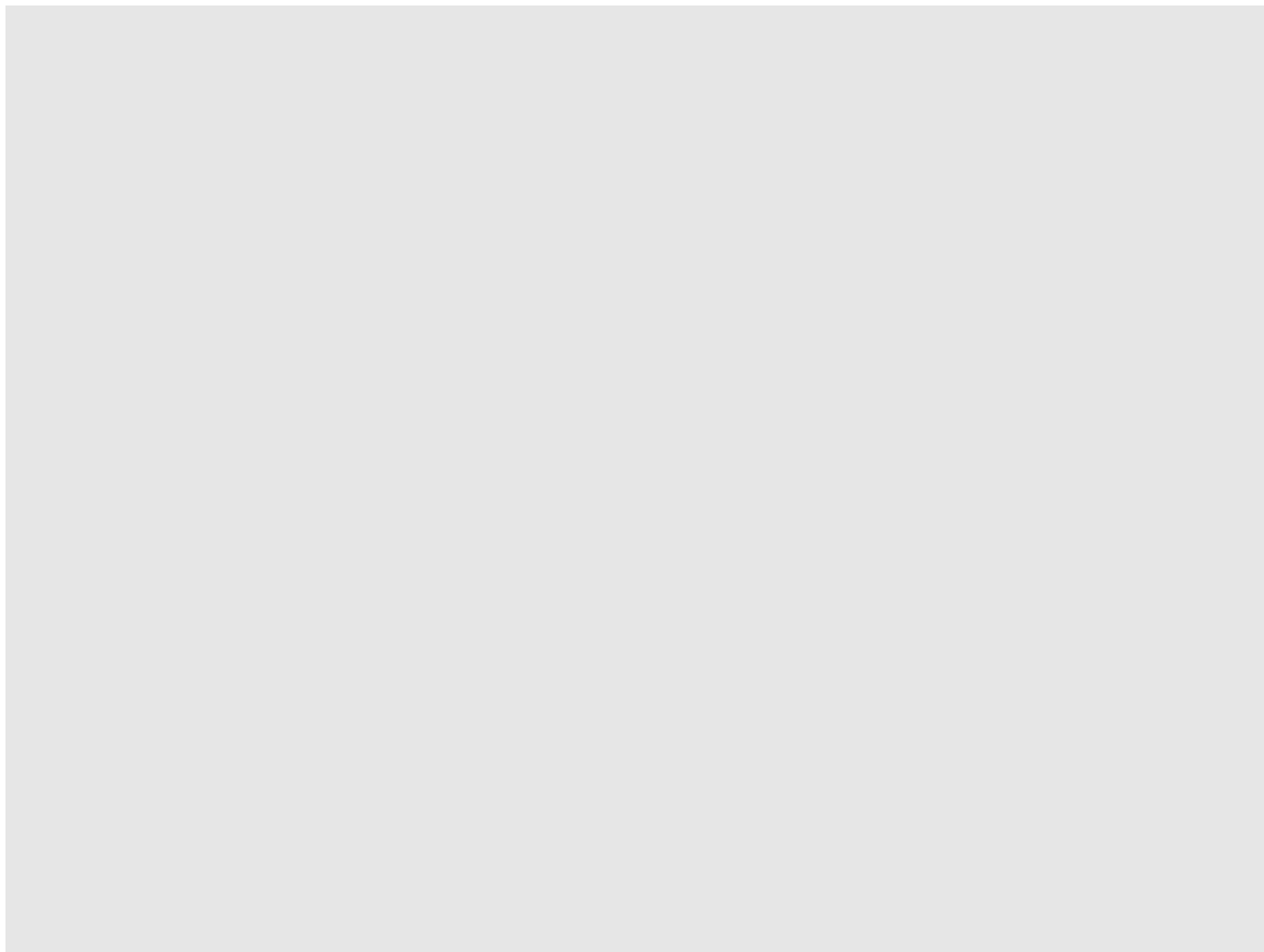
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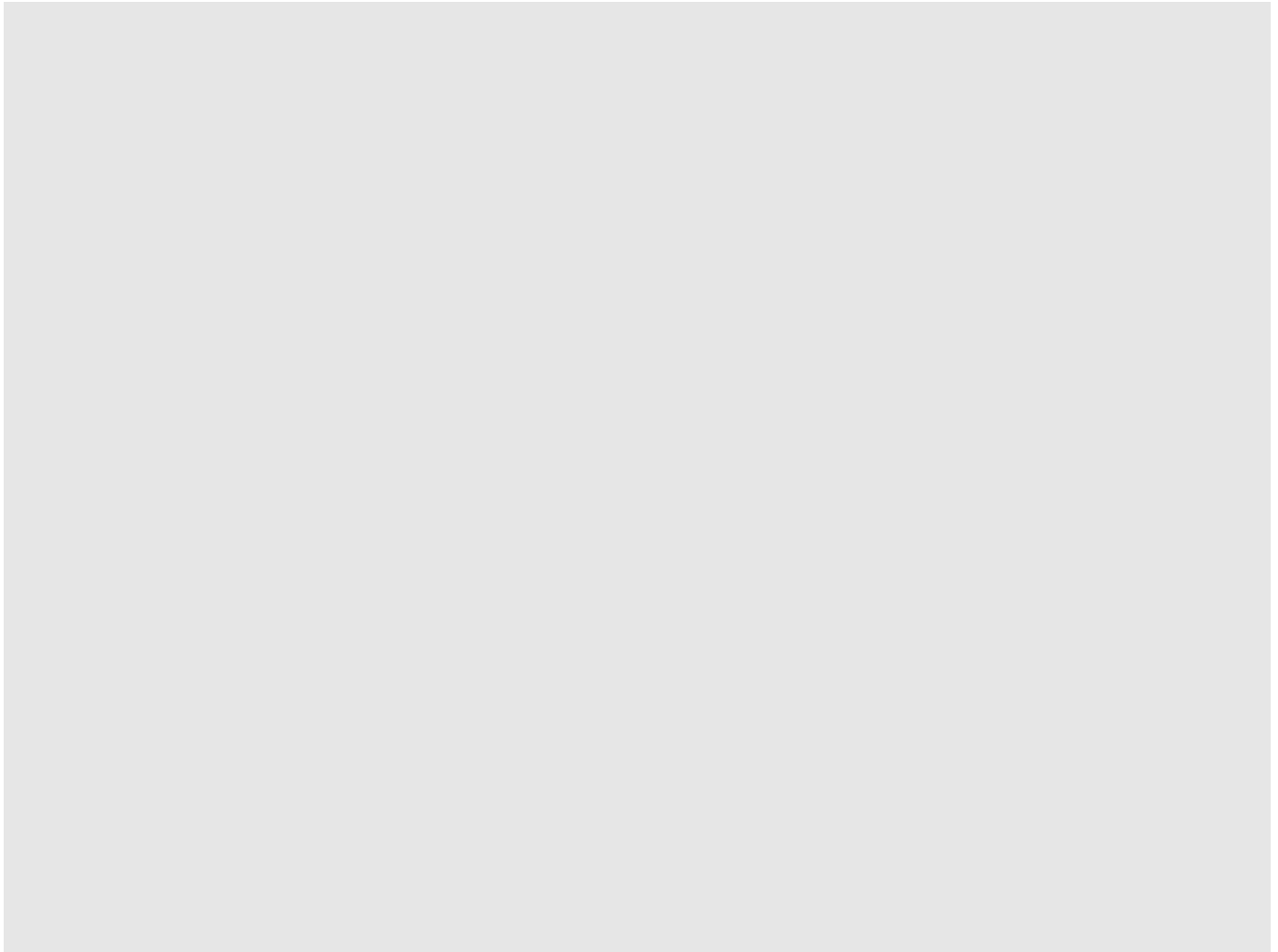
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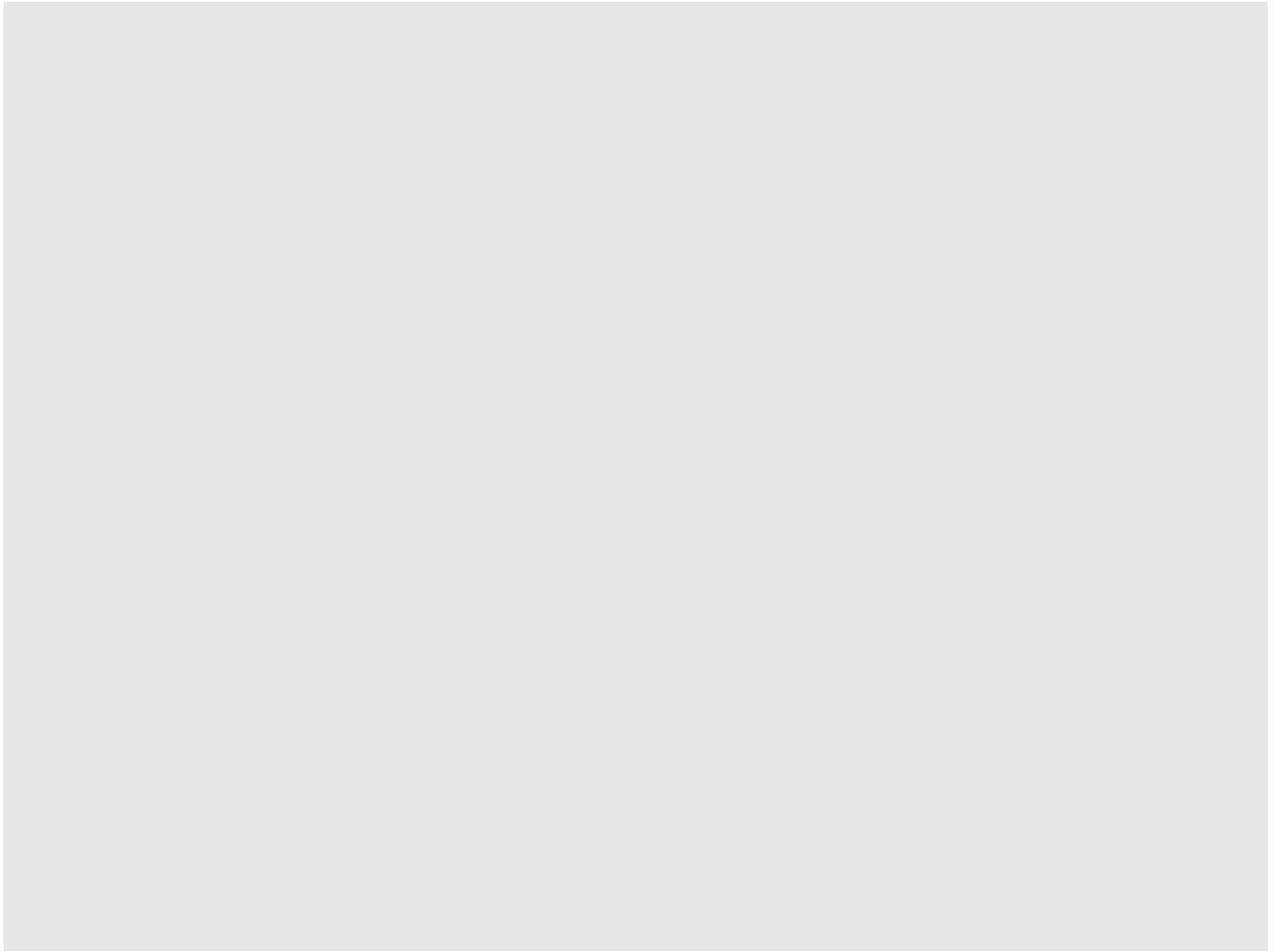
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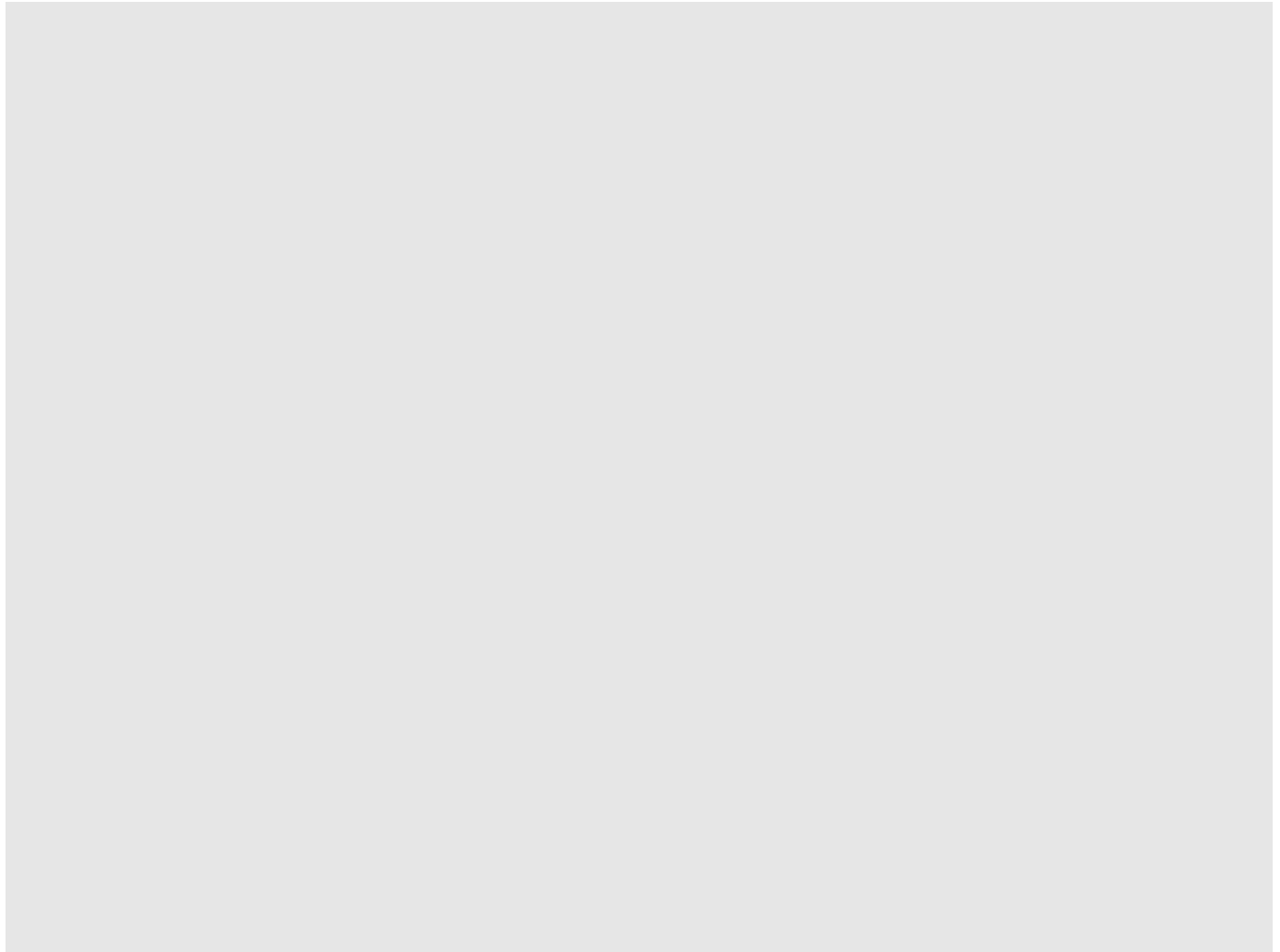
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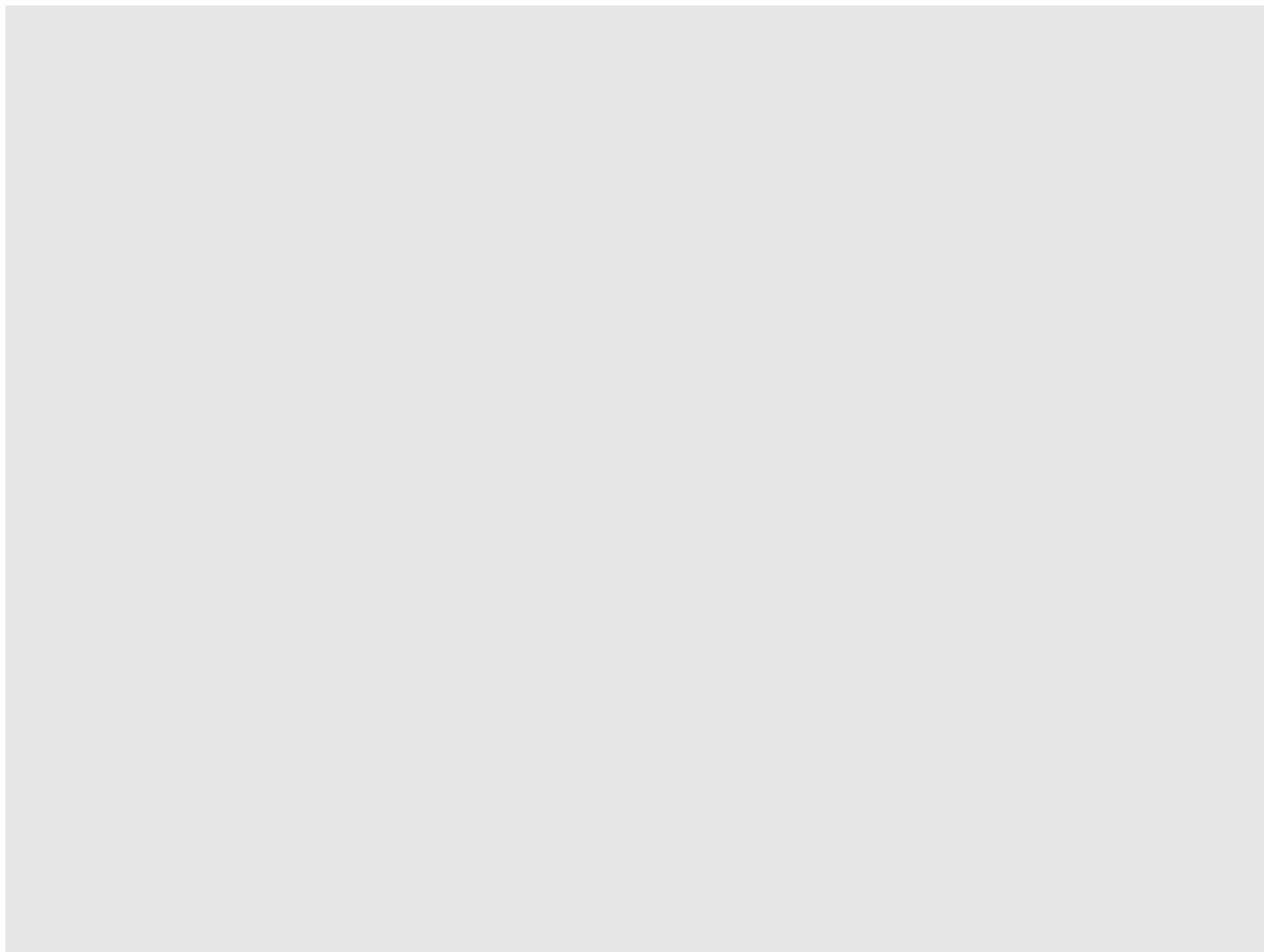
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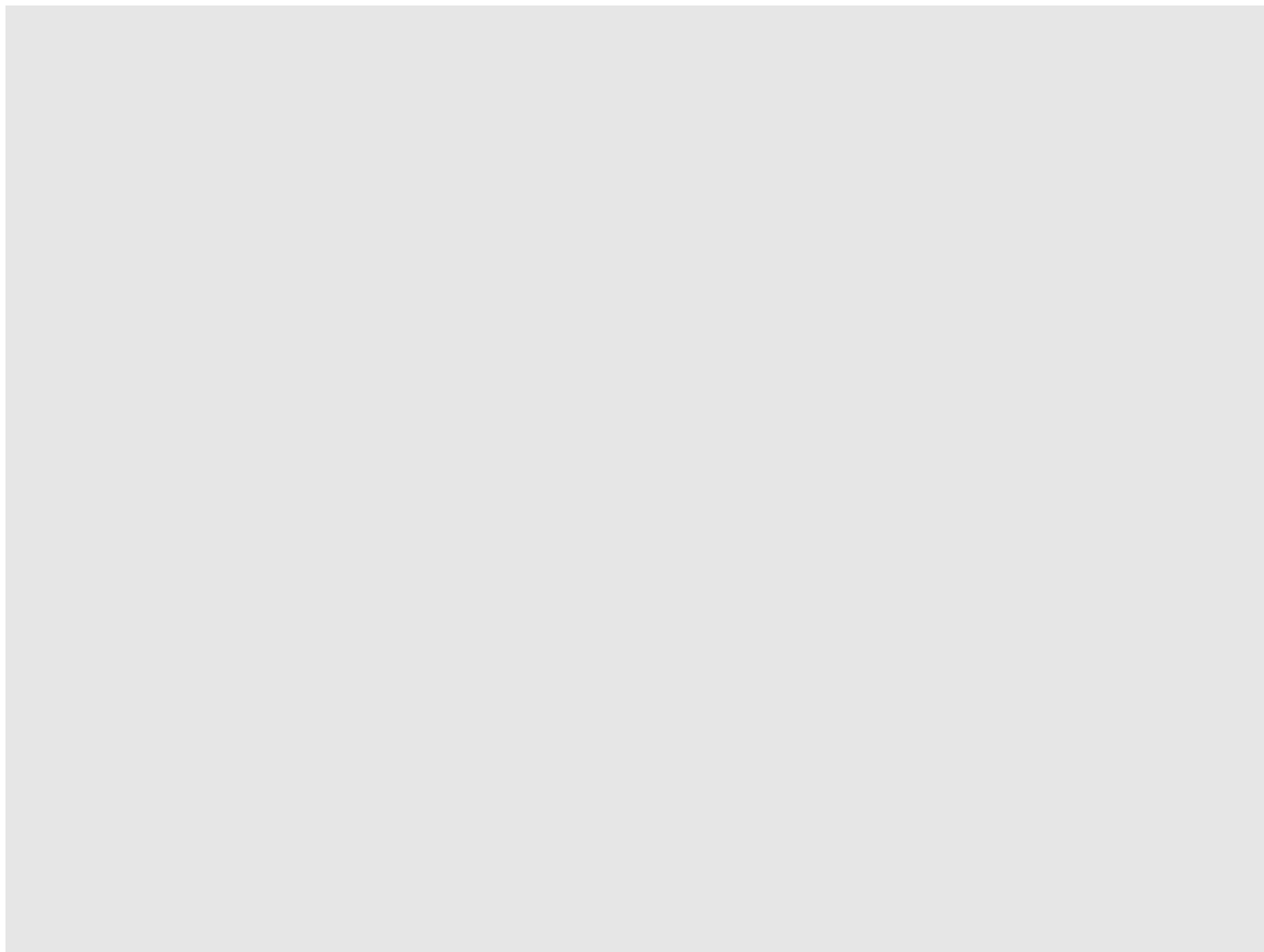
Aubie makes an appearance inside the Arena. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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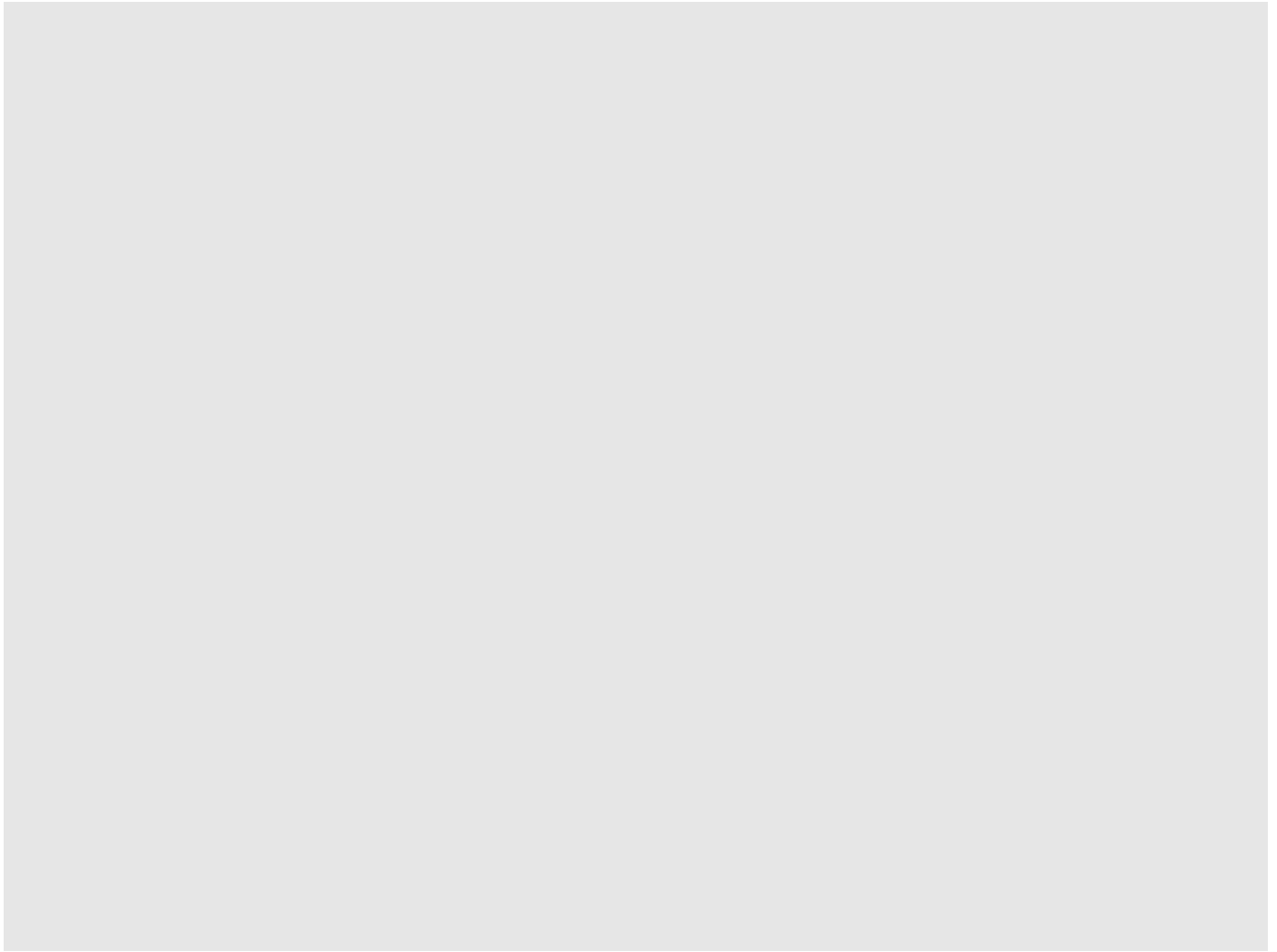
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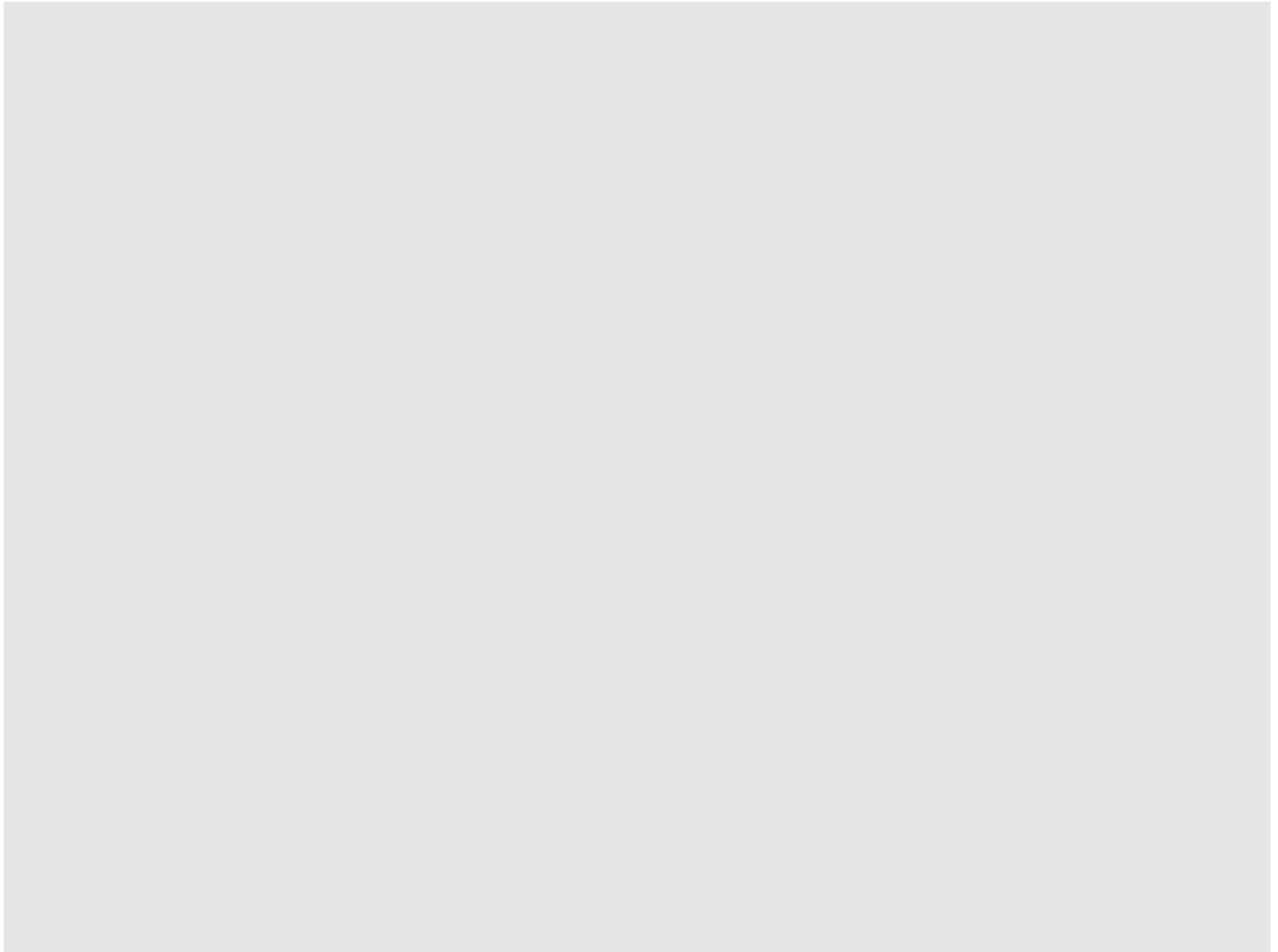
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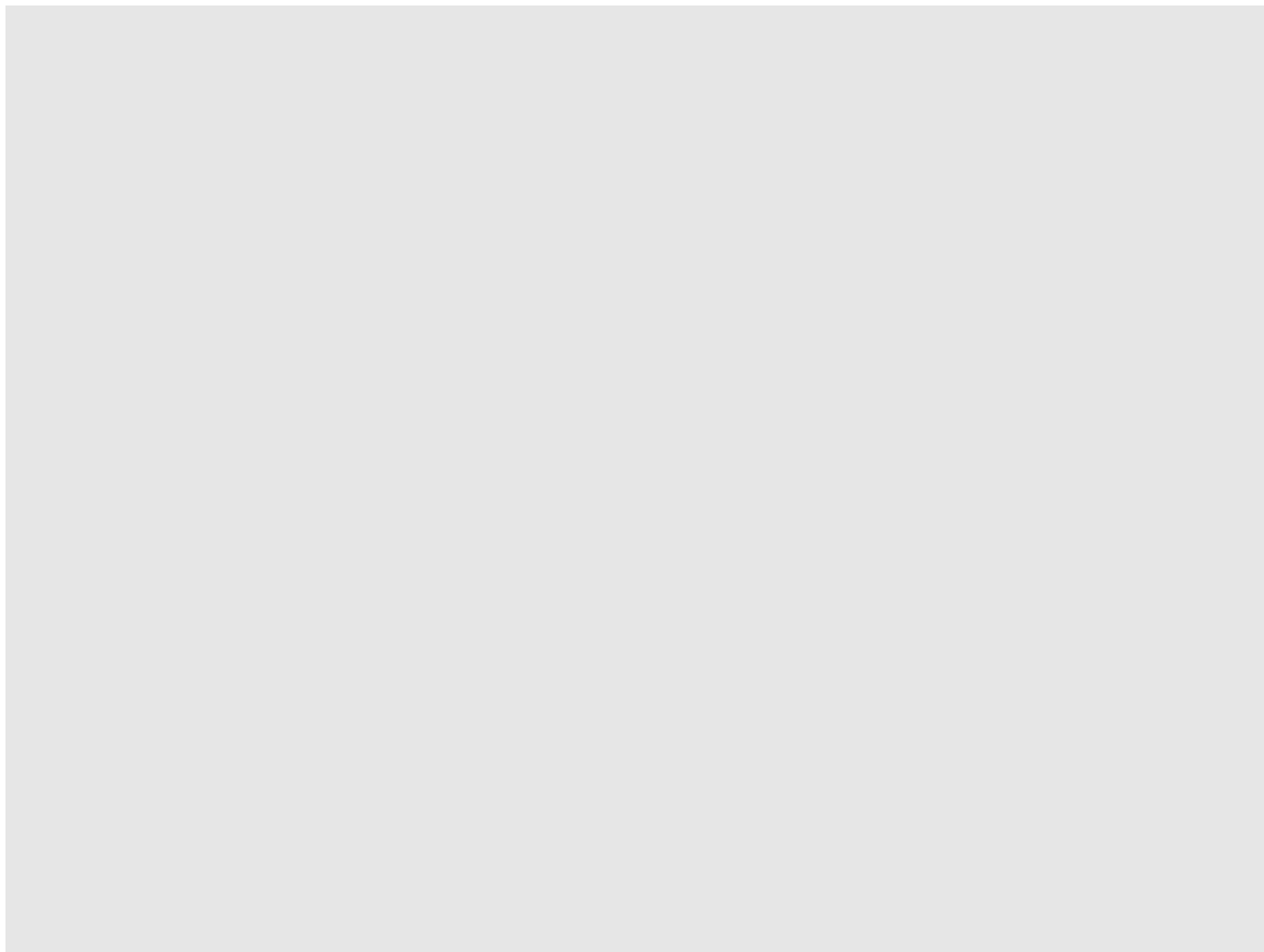
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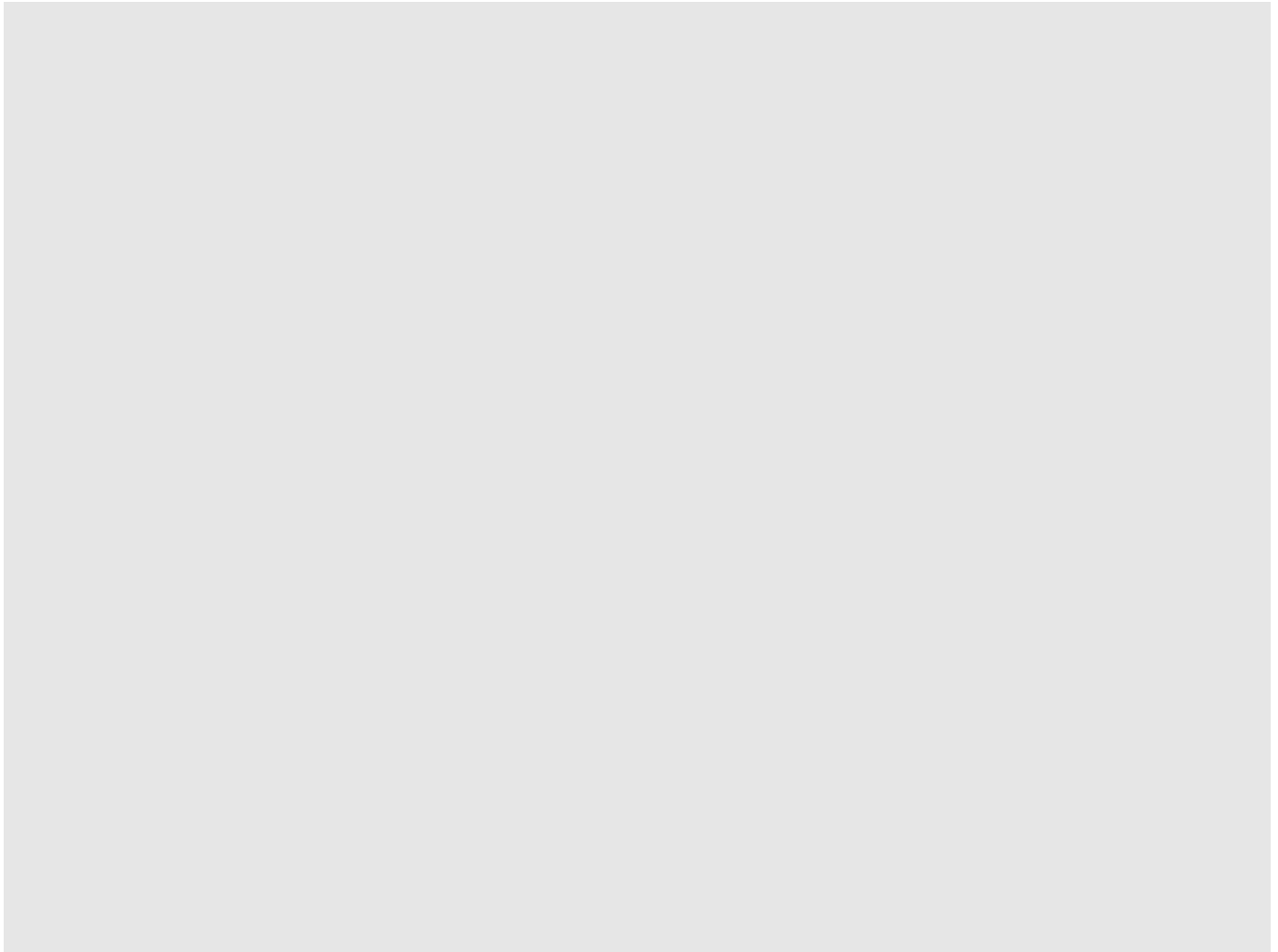
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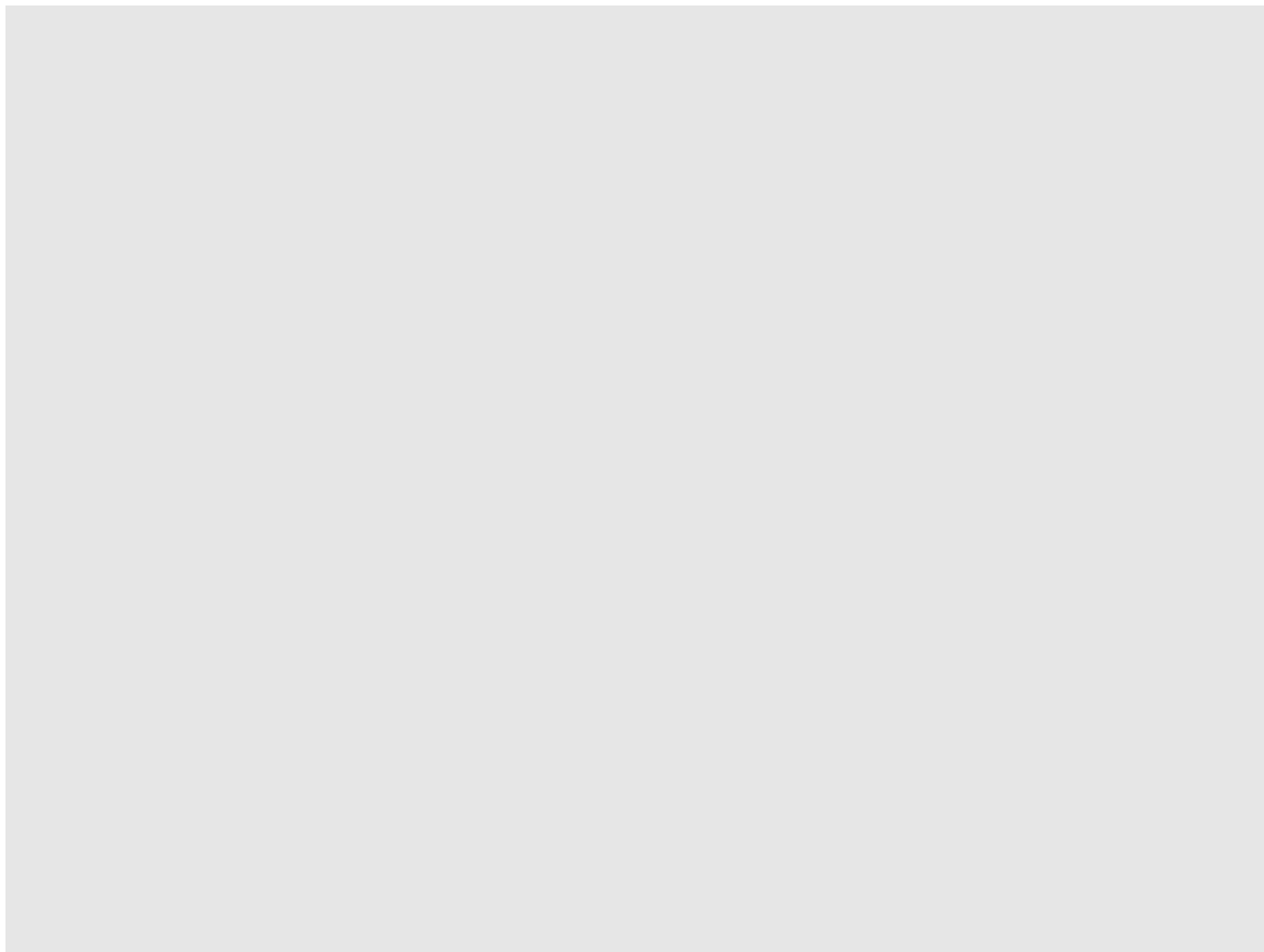
Auburn's Sophia Groth performs on the floor during the team's meet against Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

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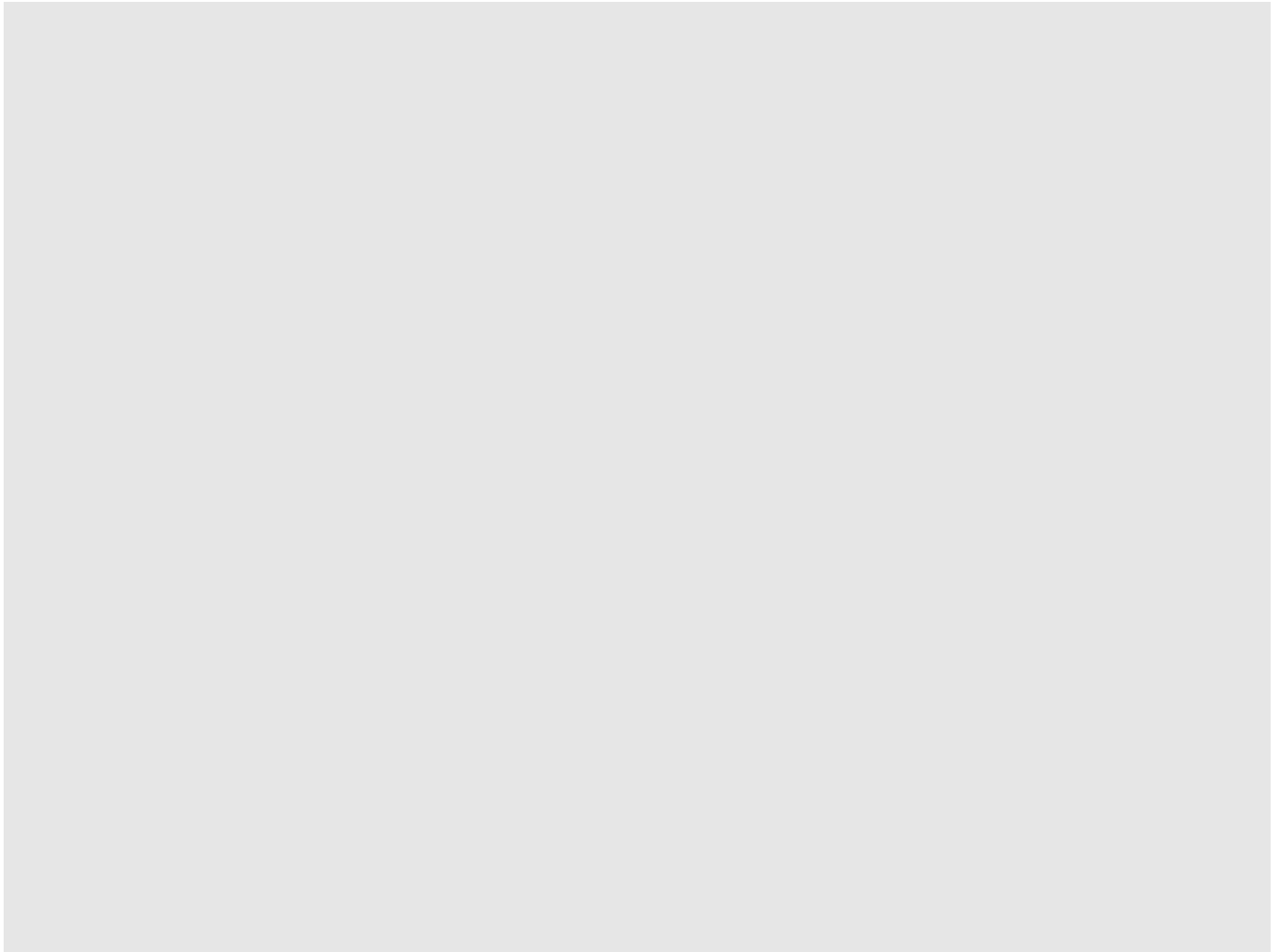
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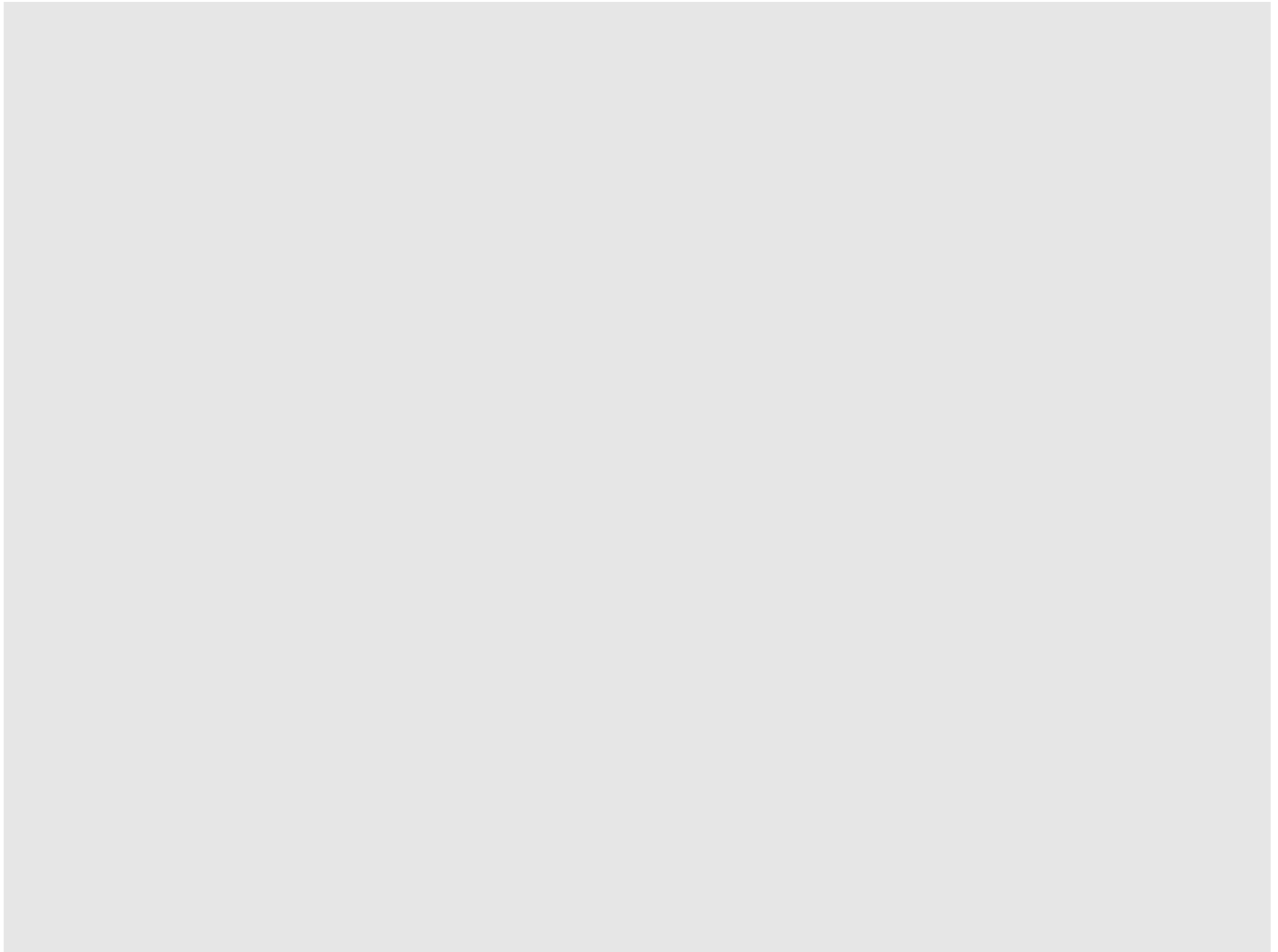
Auburn's Suni Lee on the floor. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



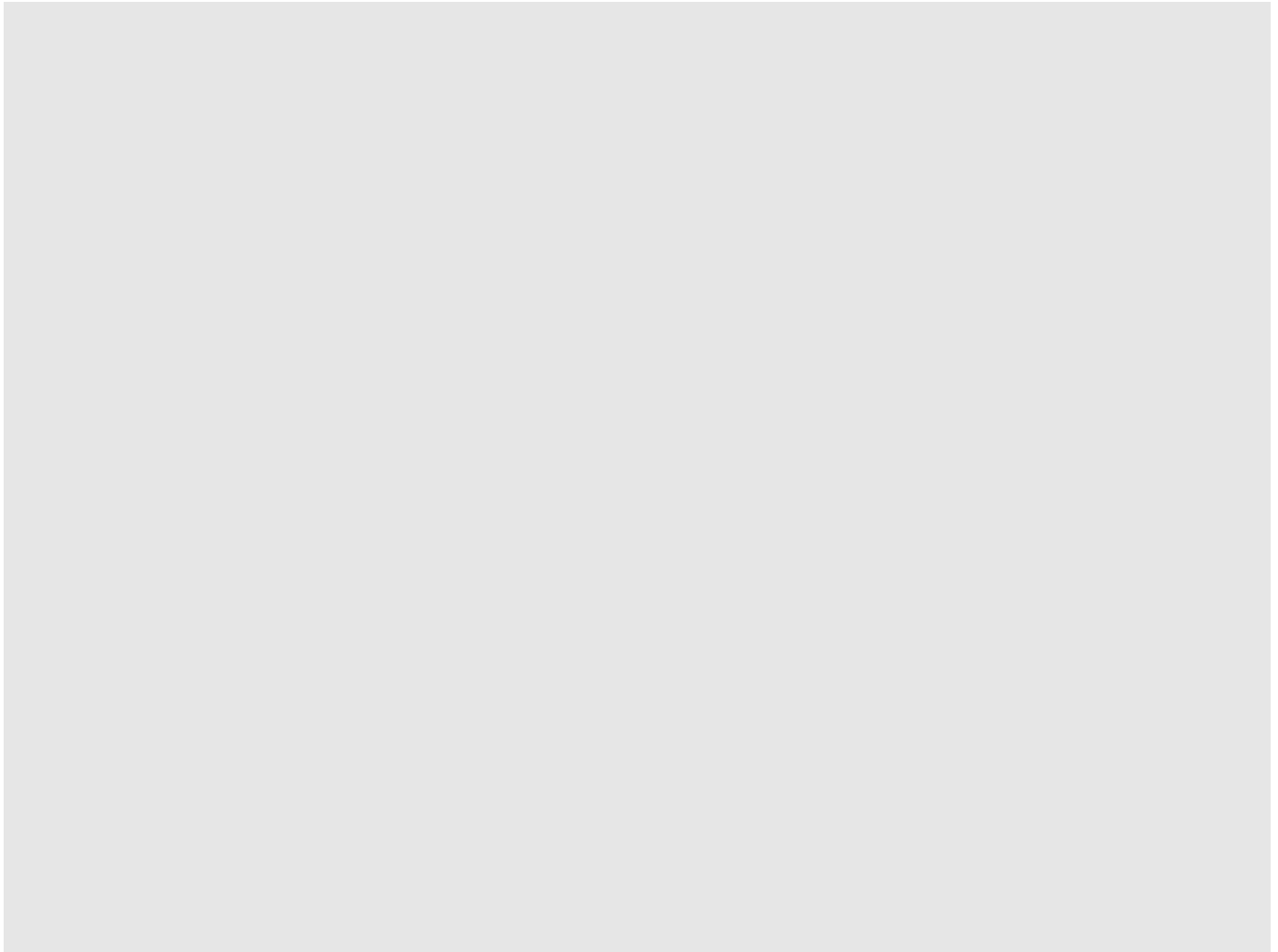
Auburn's Drew Watson and Suni Lee after Lee's floor routine. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



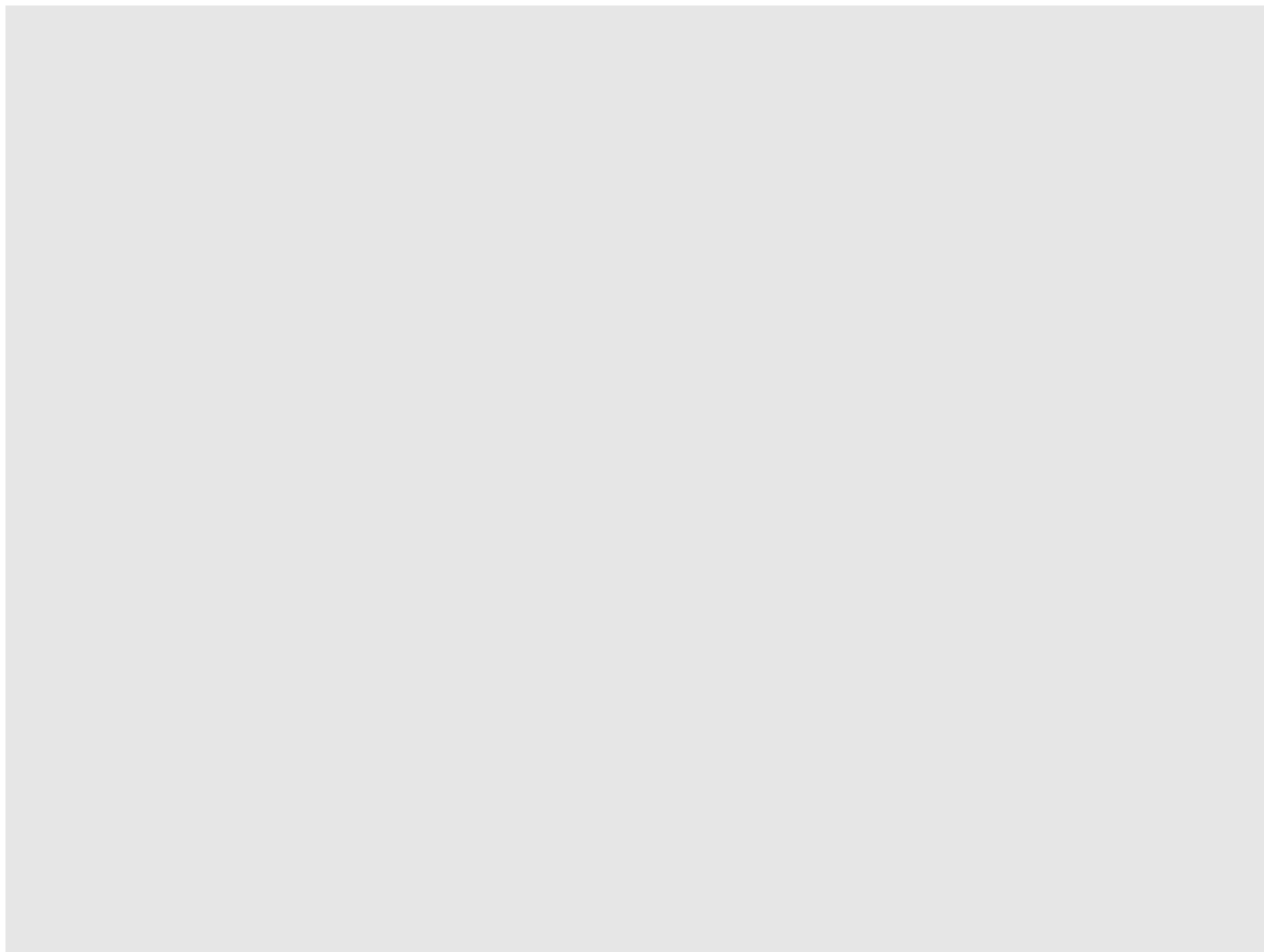
Auburn's Suni Lee reacts to her 9.975 score on the floor. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



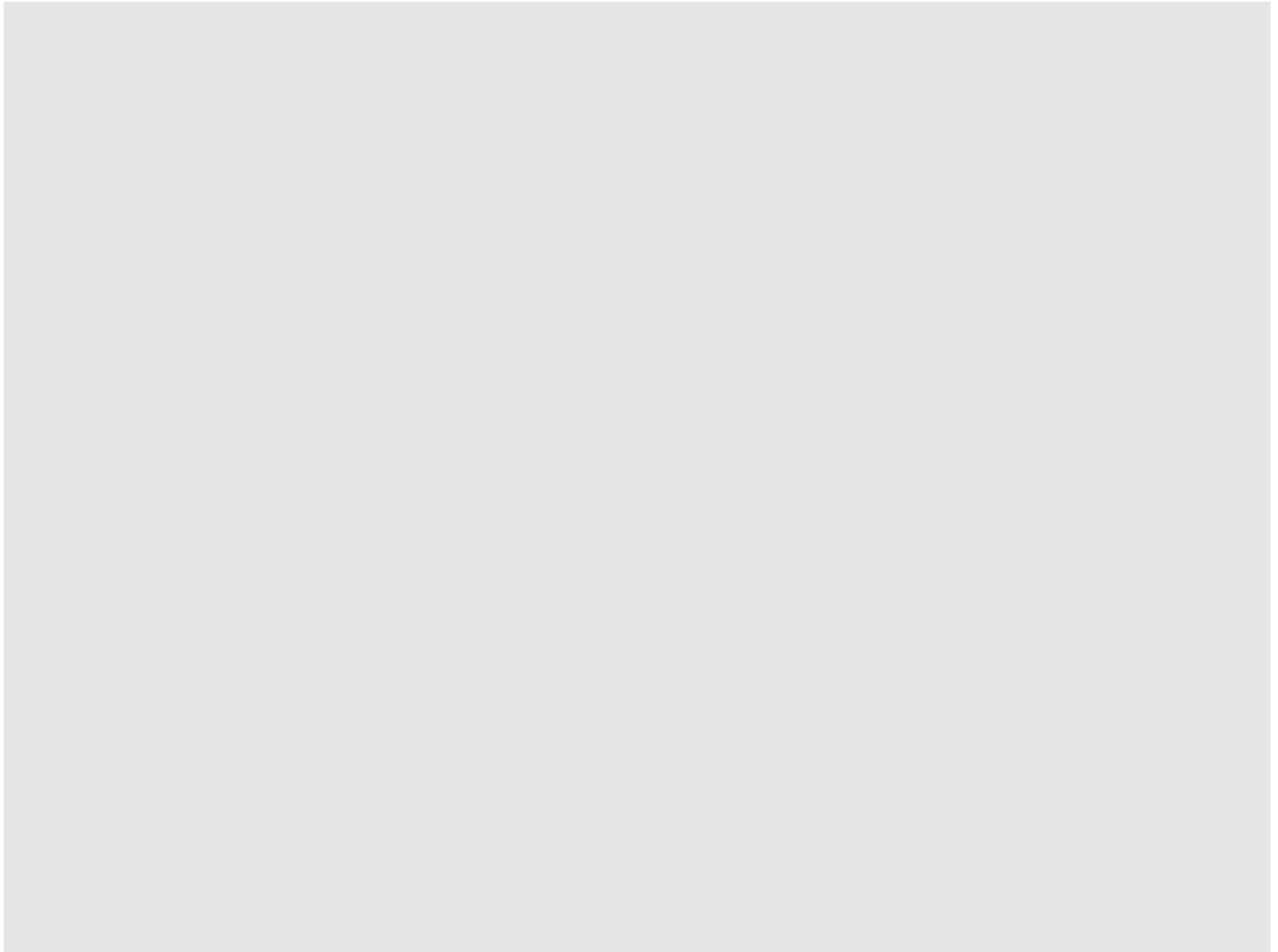
Auburn's Derrian Gobourne on the floor. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



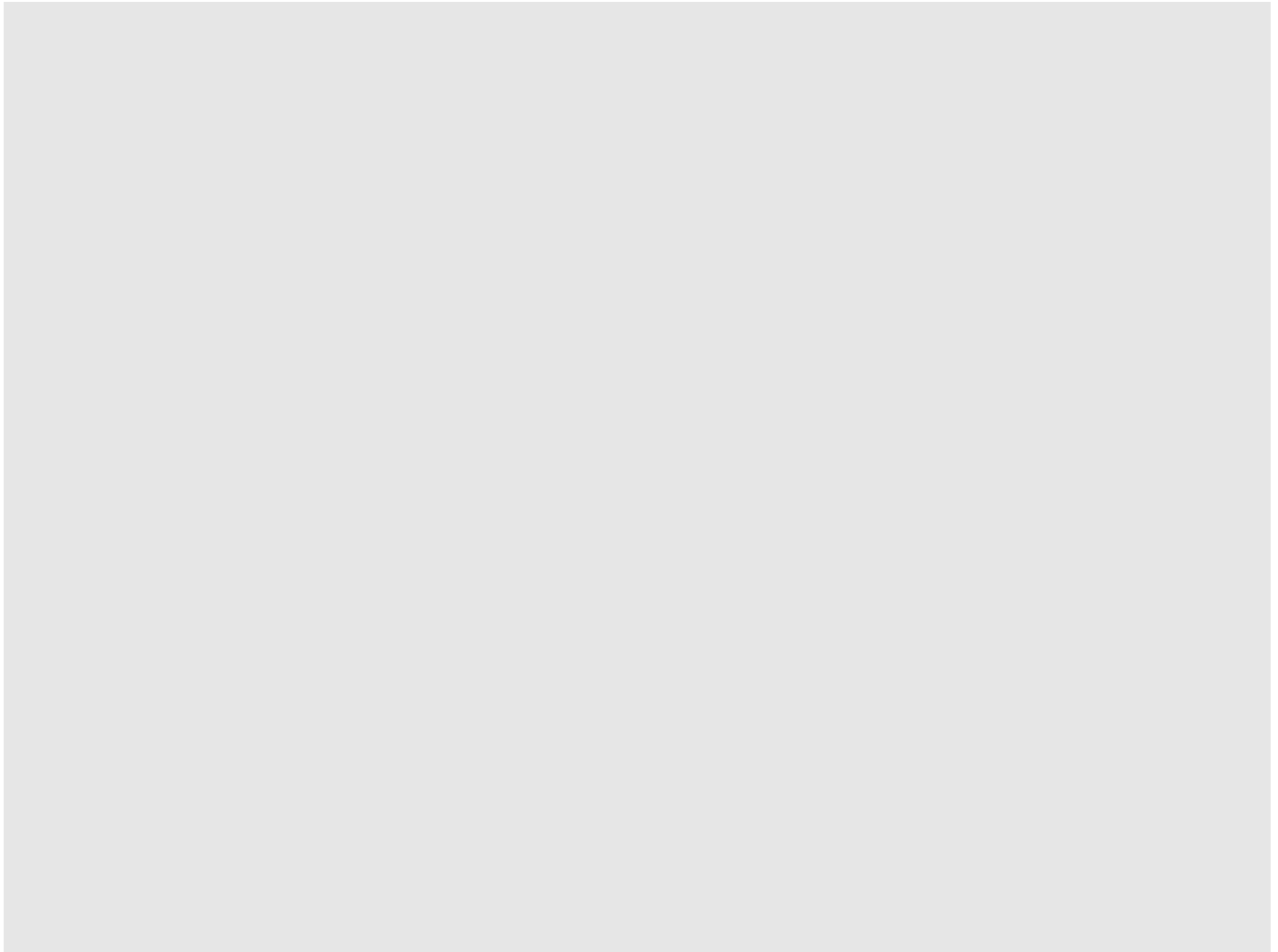
Auburn's Derrian Gobourne on the floor. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

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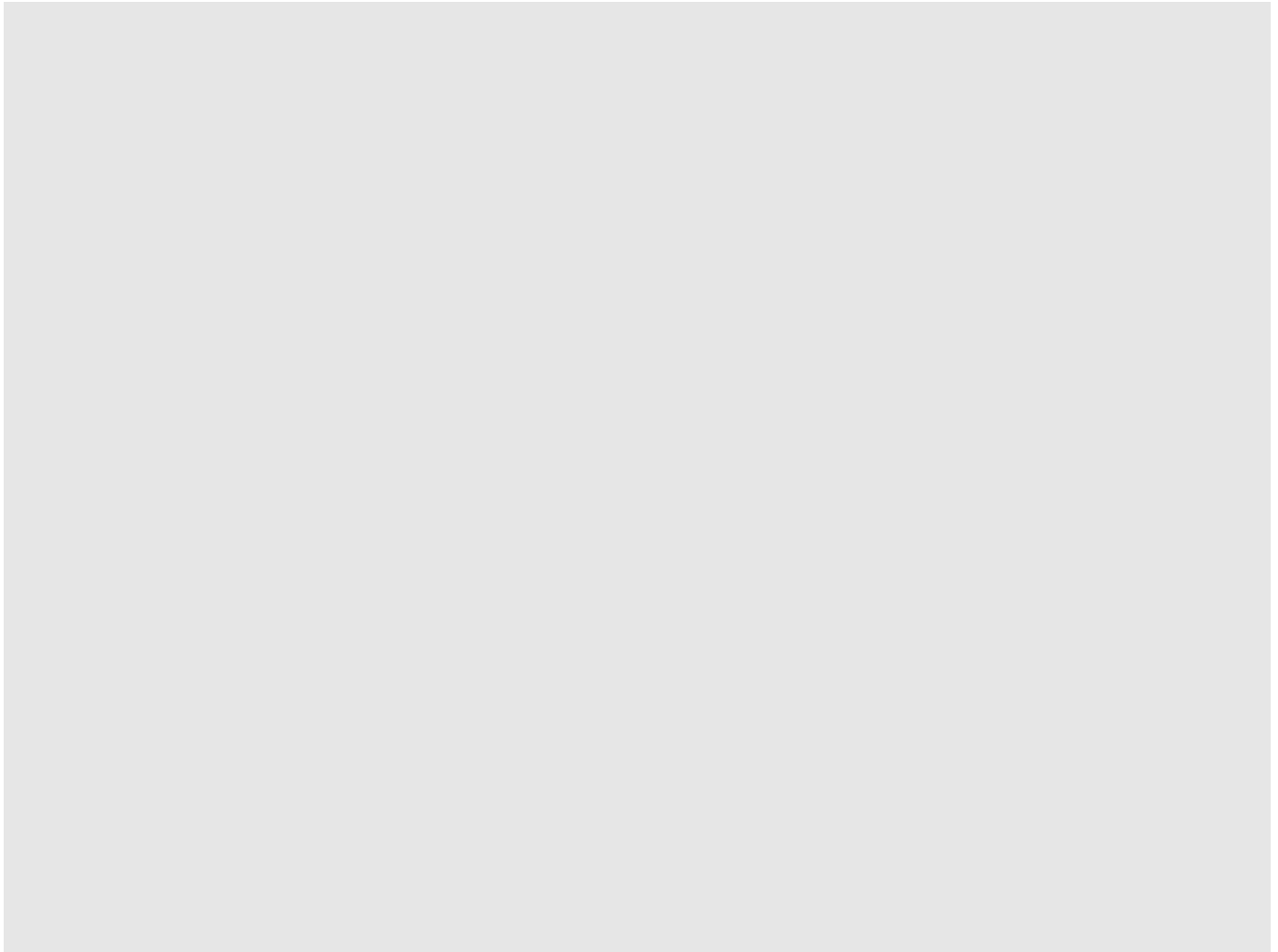
Auburn's Derrian Gobourne celebrates after her floor routine. Auburn vs Kentucky on Friday, Feb. 25 in Auburn, Ala.

Adam Sparks / for the Opelika-Auburn News



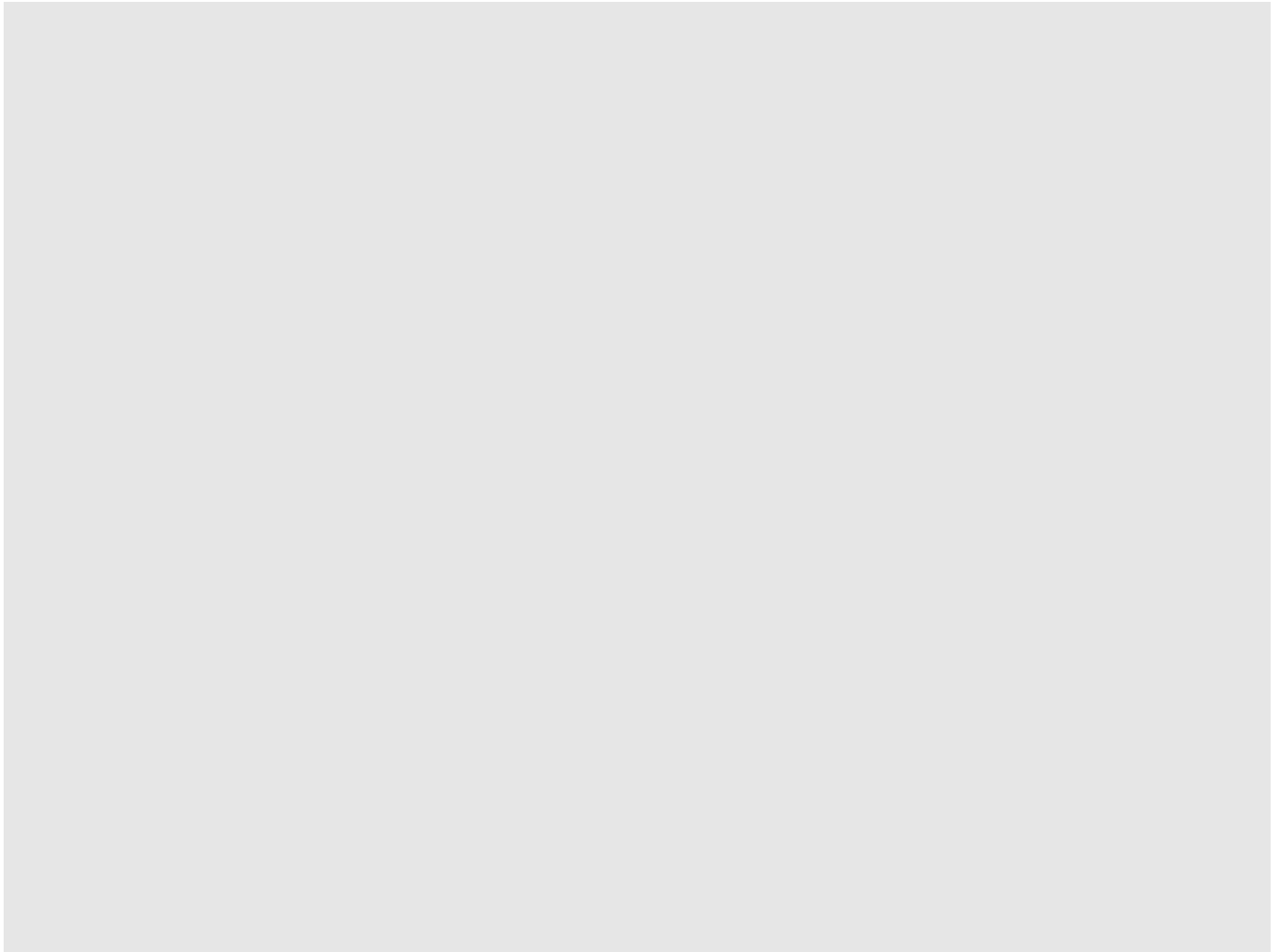
Suni Lee prepares to get on the bars during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



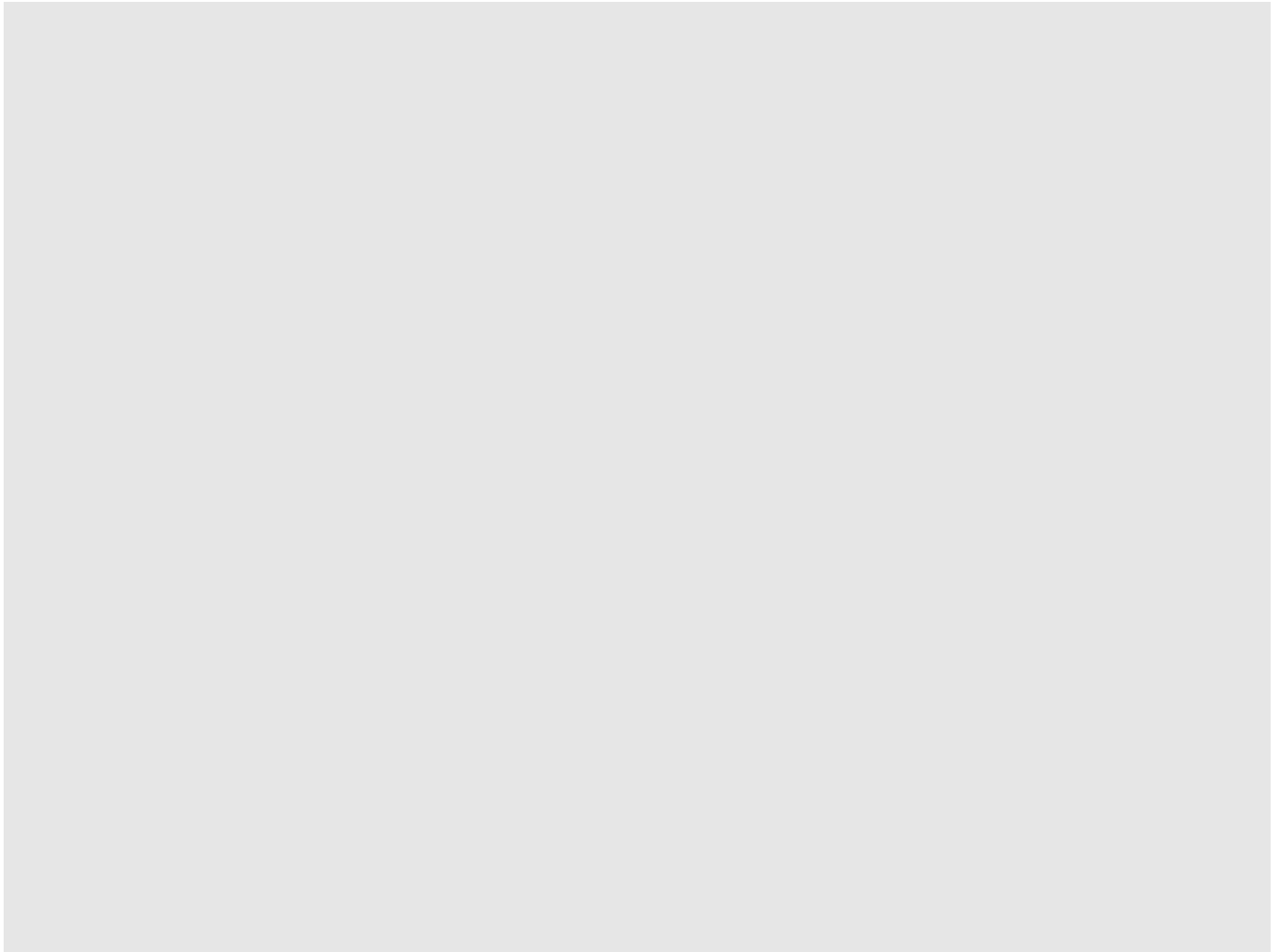
Derrian Gobourne encourages teammate Gabby McLaughlin as she works out on beam during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



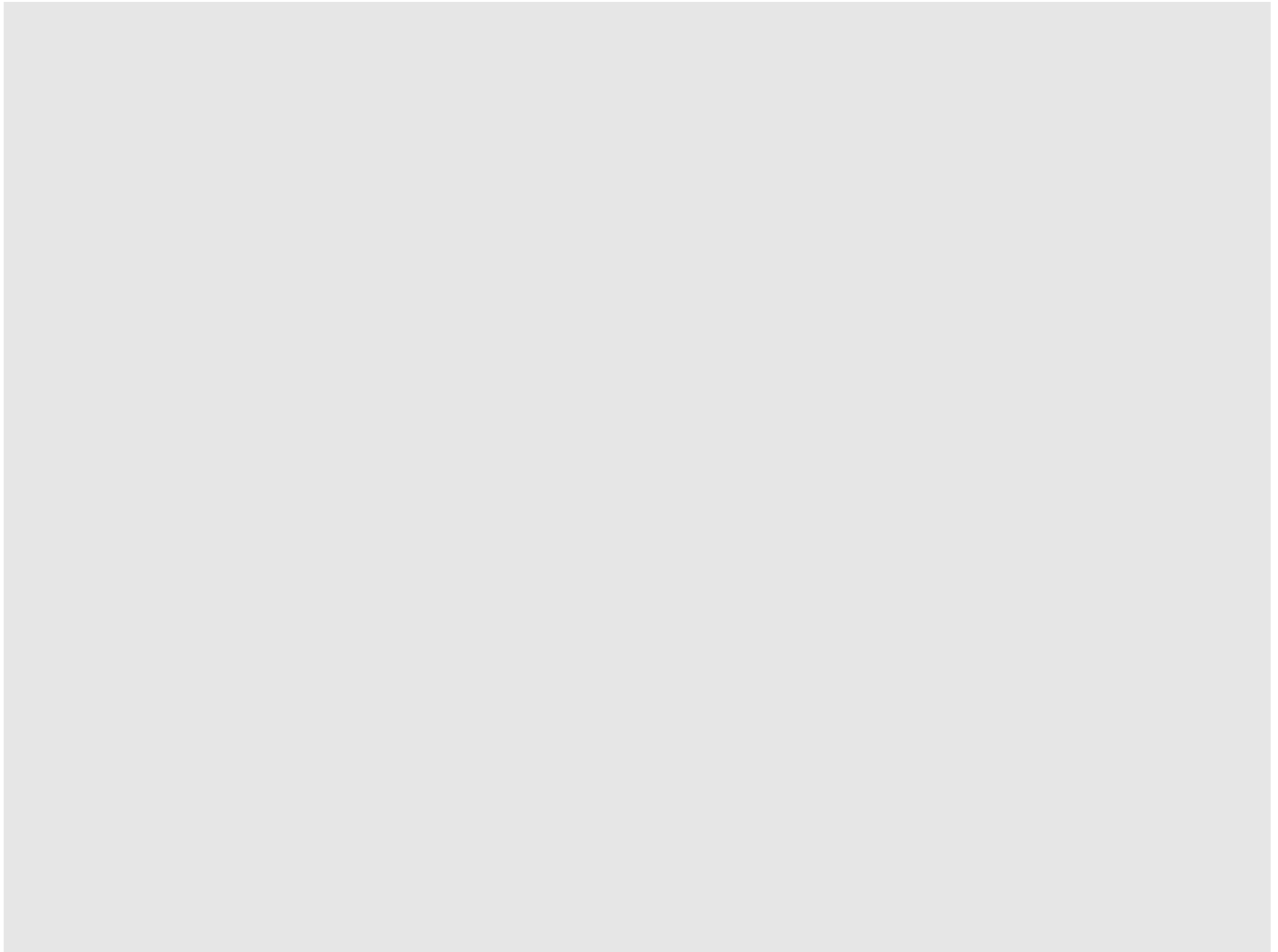
Suni Lee works out on beam during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



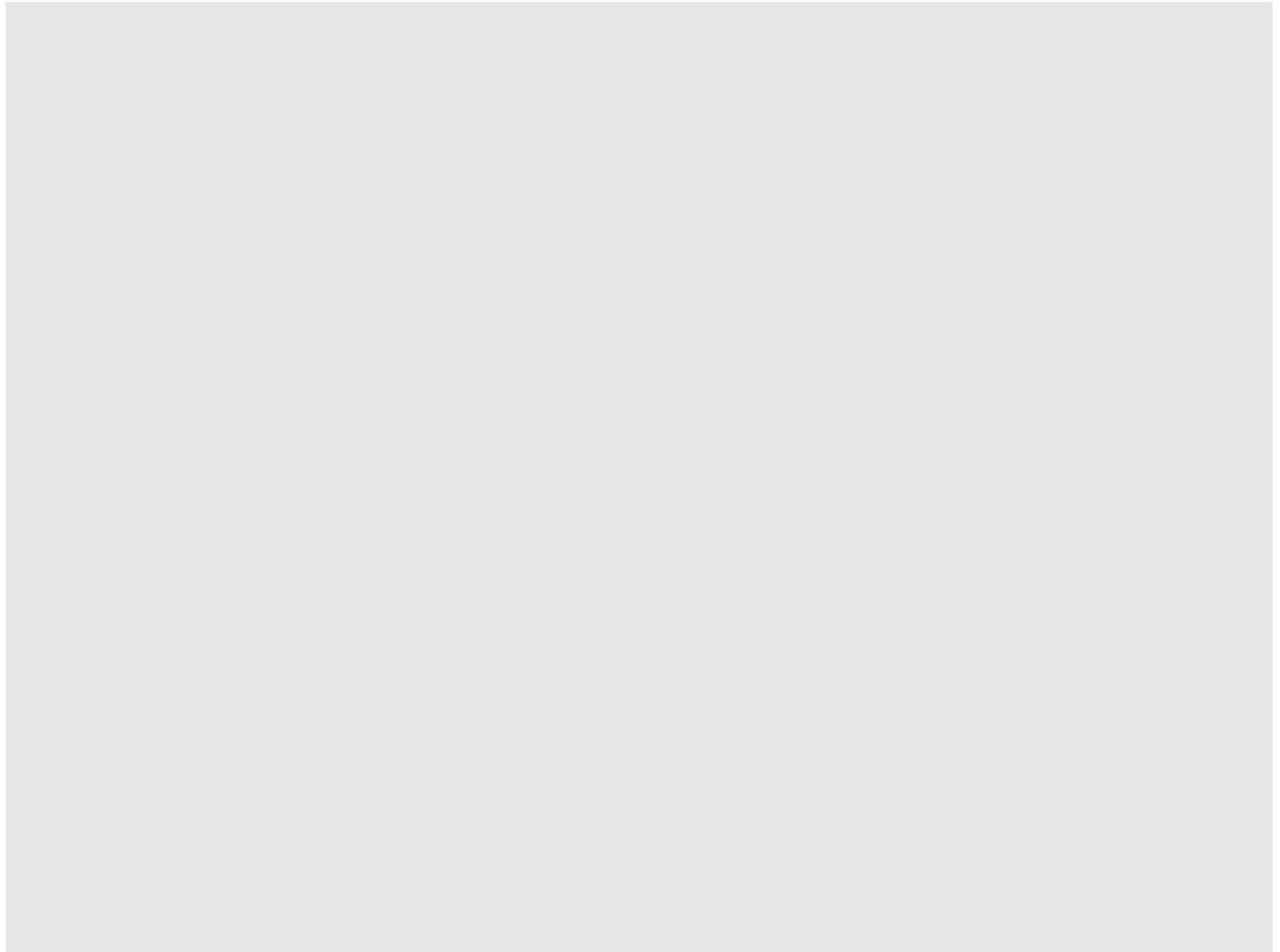
Suni Lee works out on beam during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



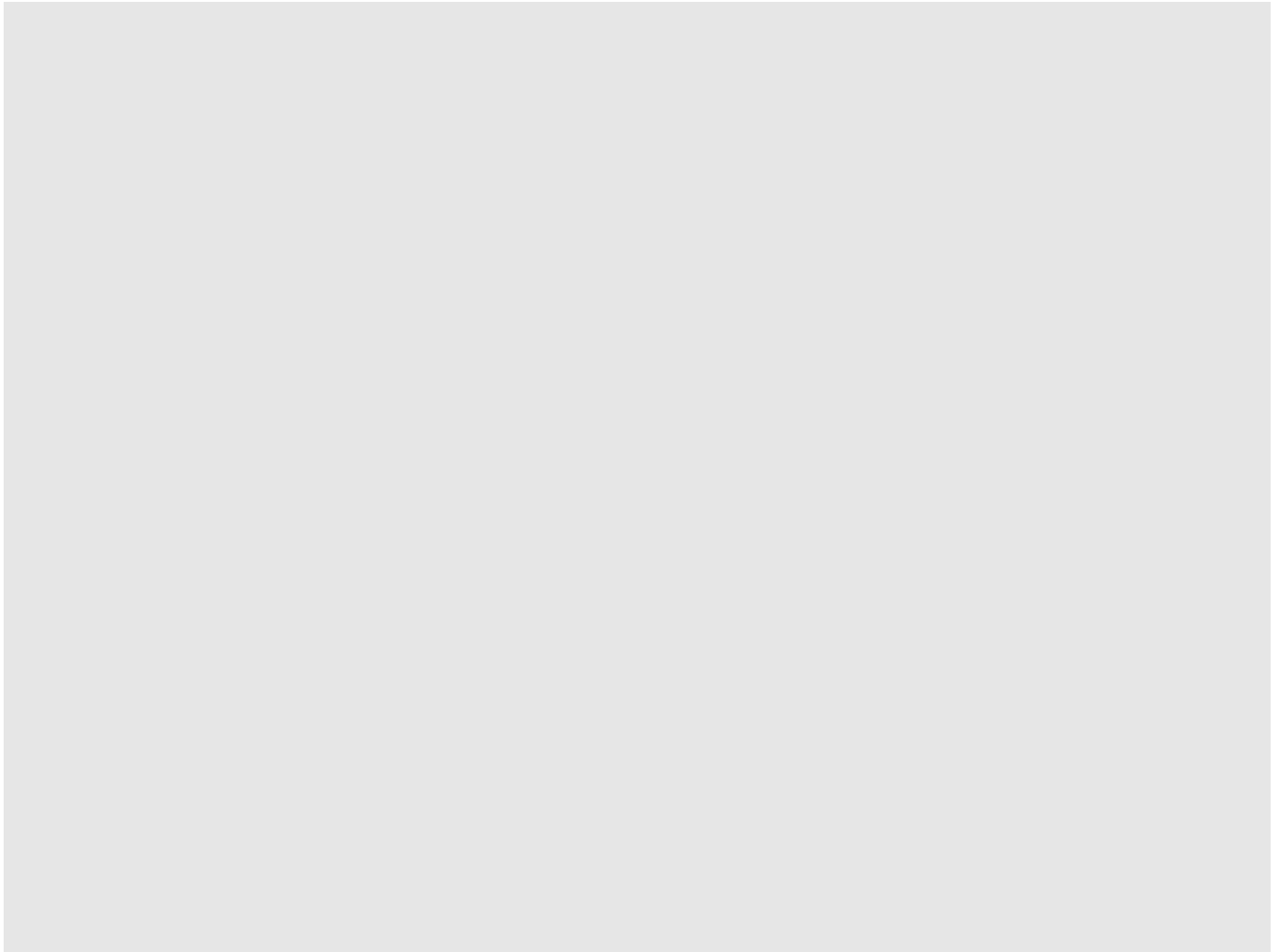
Cassie Stevens works out on beam during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



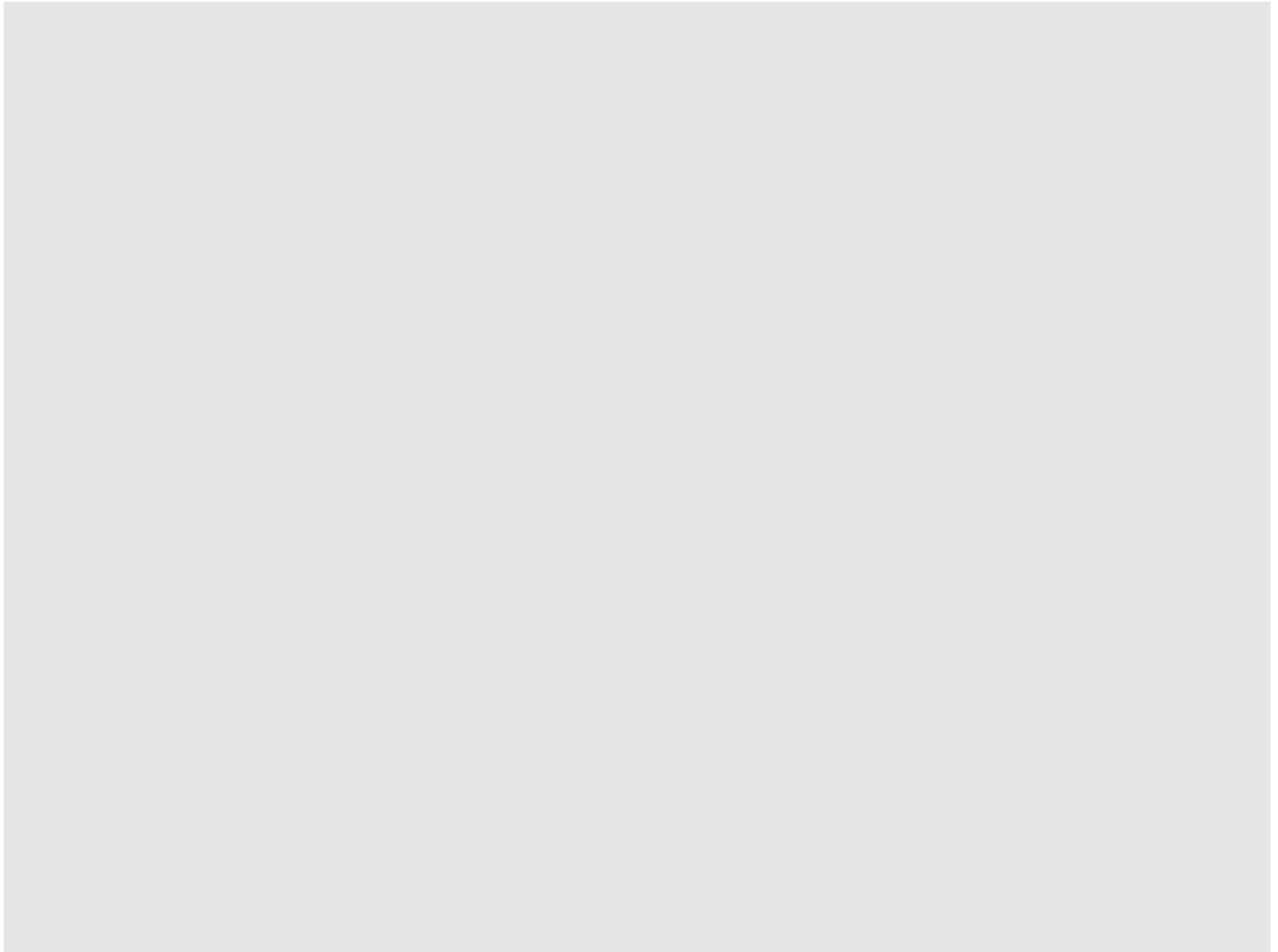
Auburn head coach Jeff Graba talks with Gabby McLaughlin during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



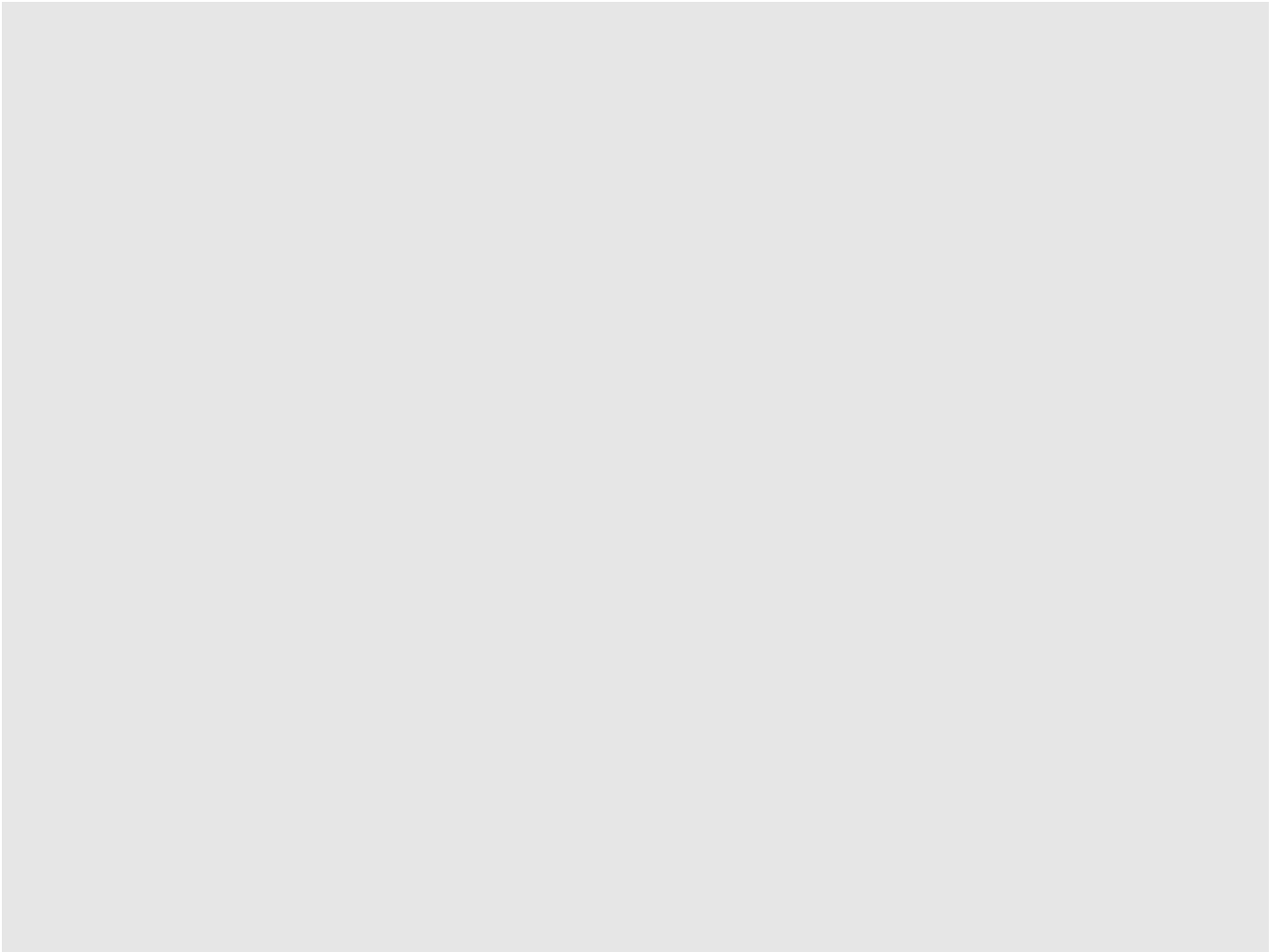
Suni Lee and Sophia Groth step onto the floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



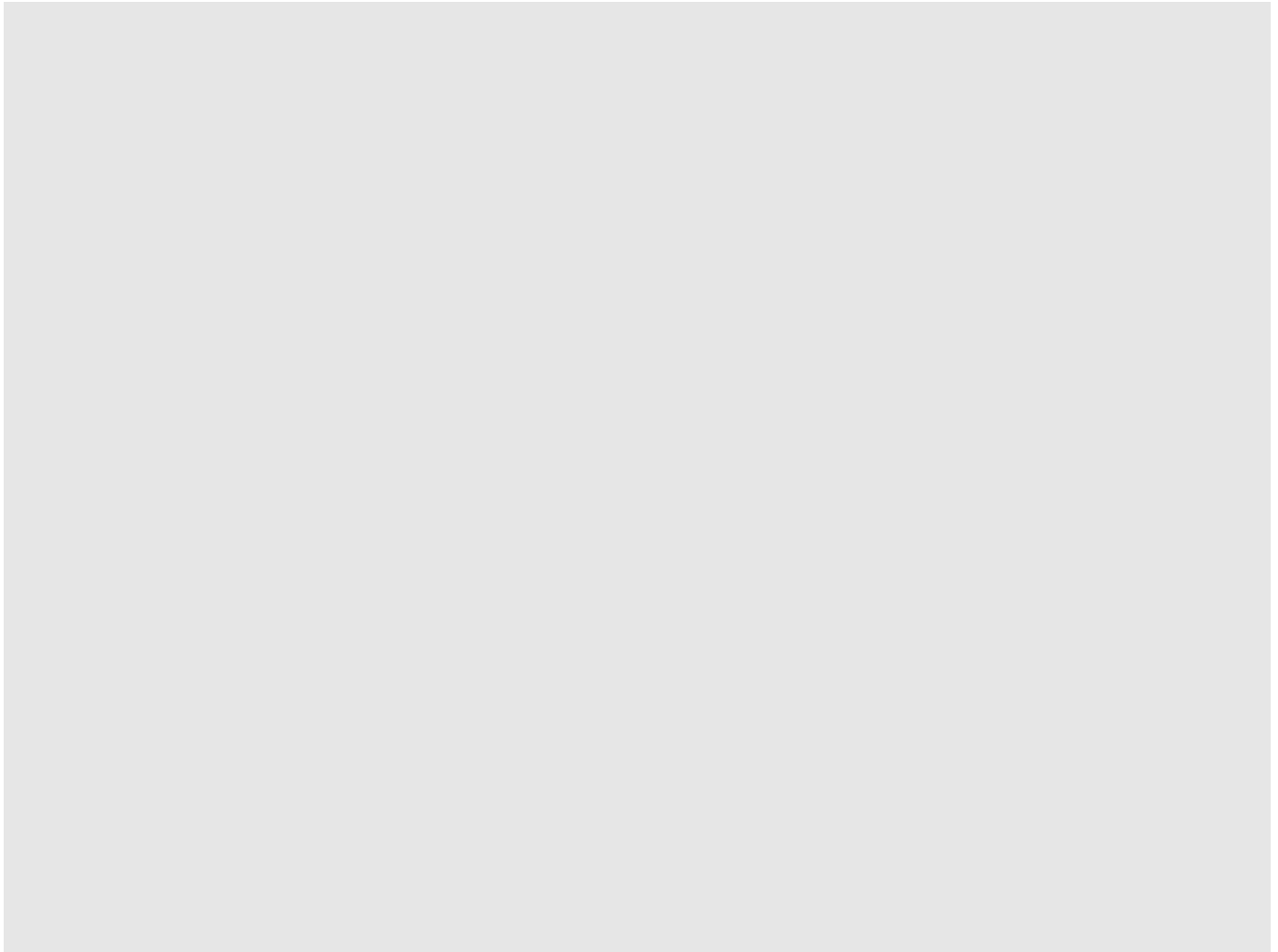
Sophia Groth works out on floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



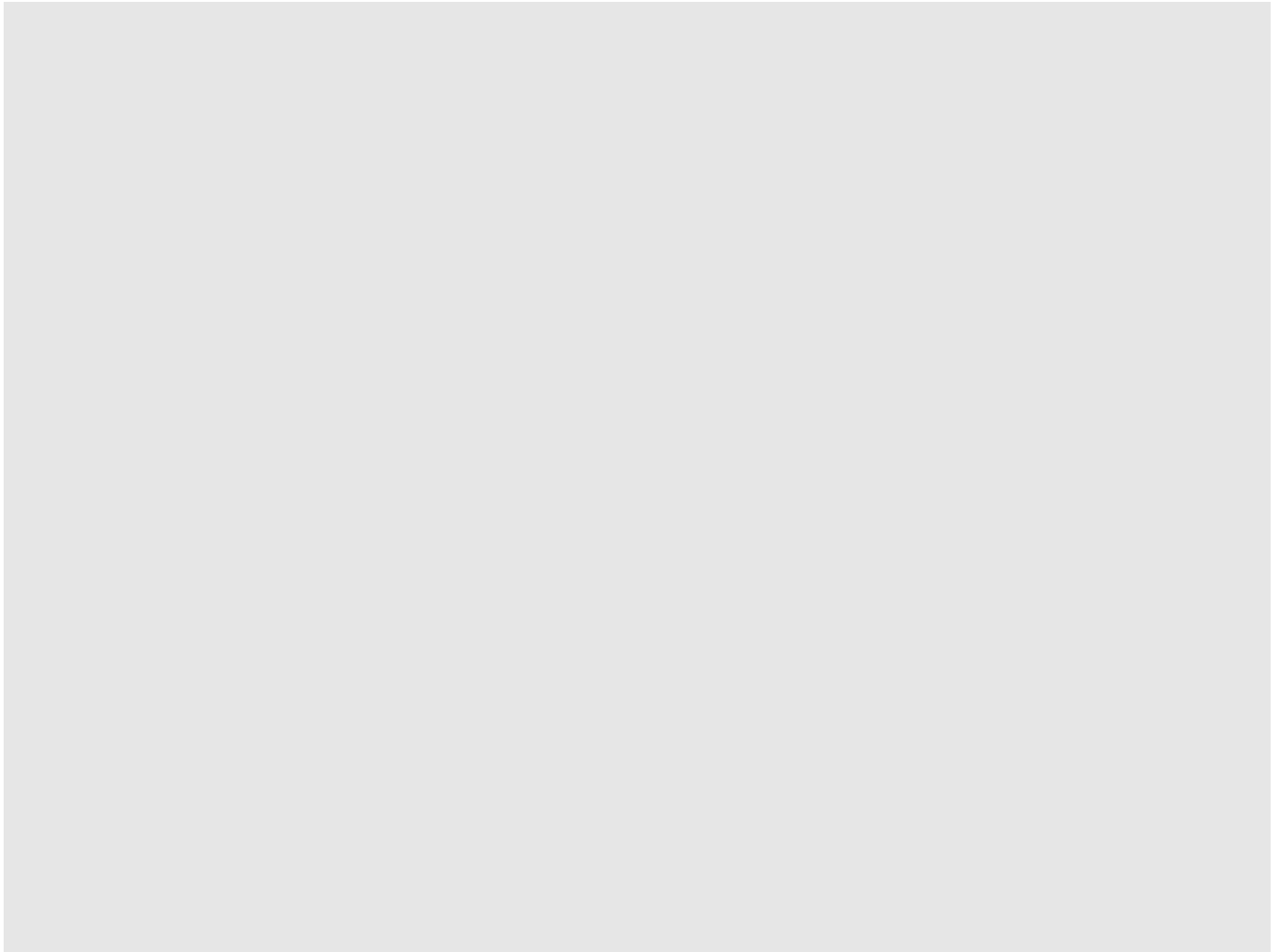
Sophia Groth works out on floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



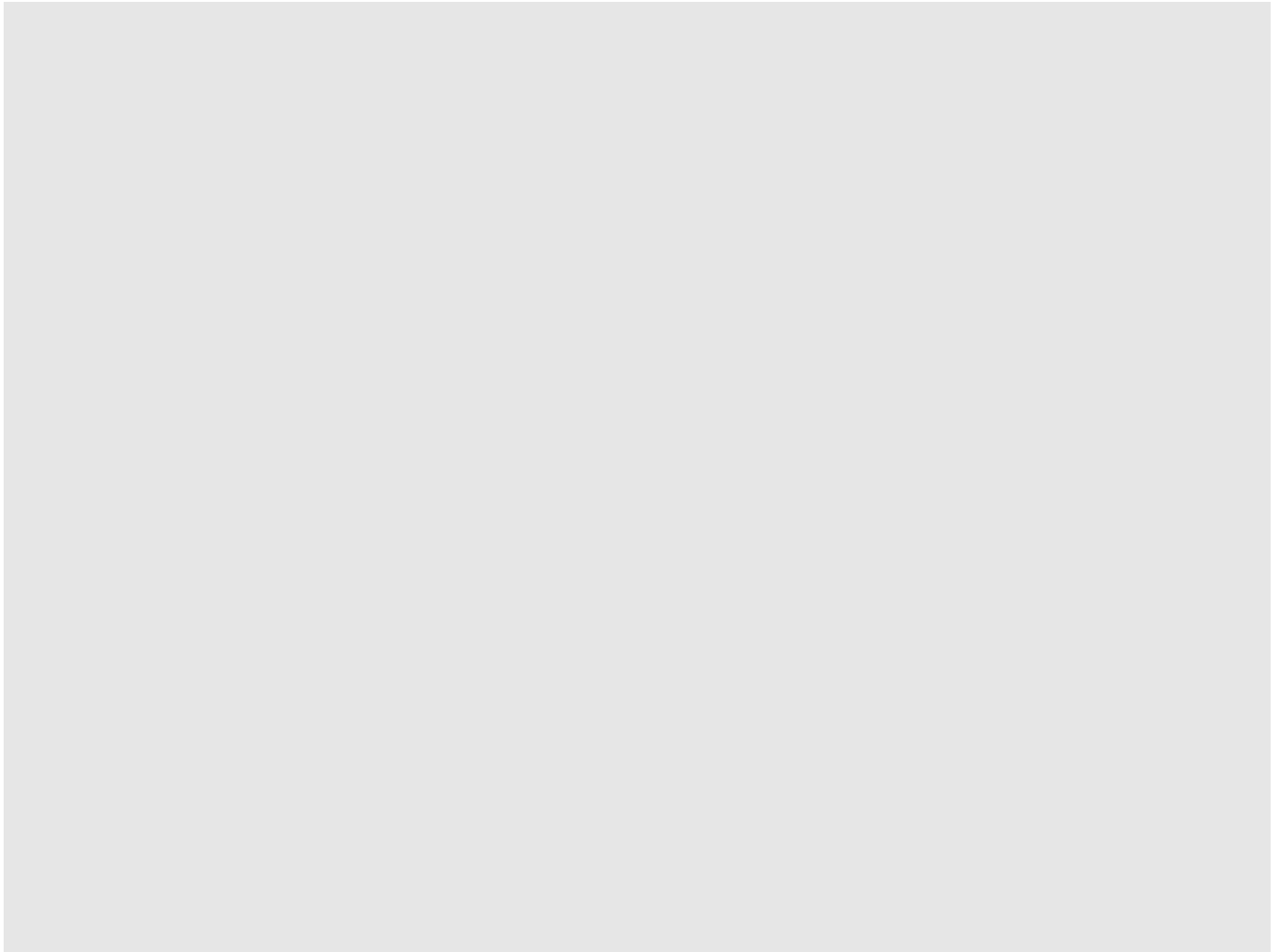
Sophia Groth works out on floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



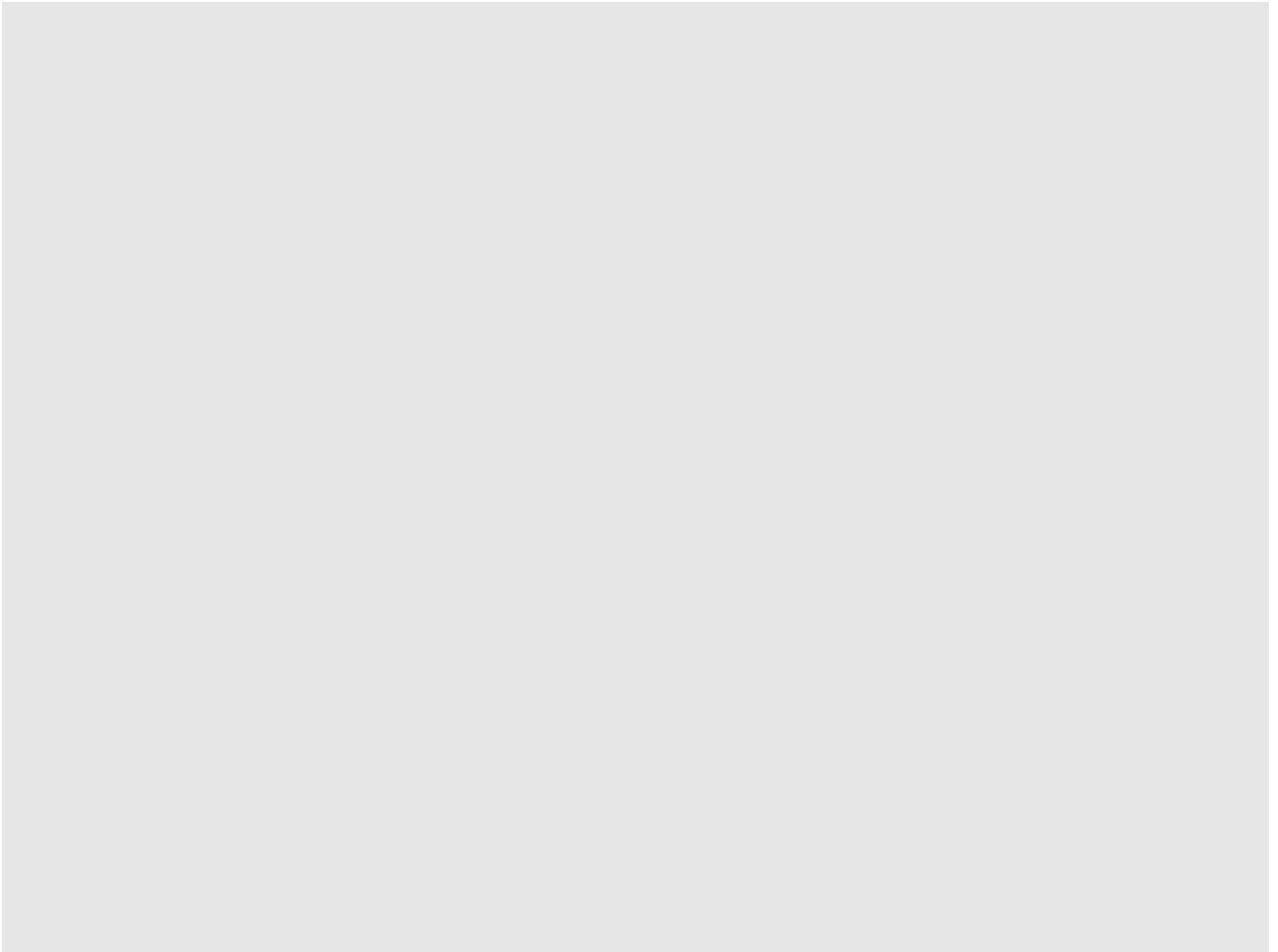
Sophia Groth works out on floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



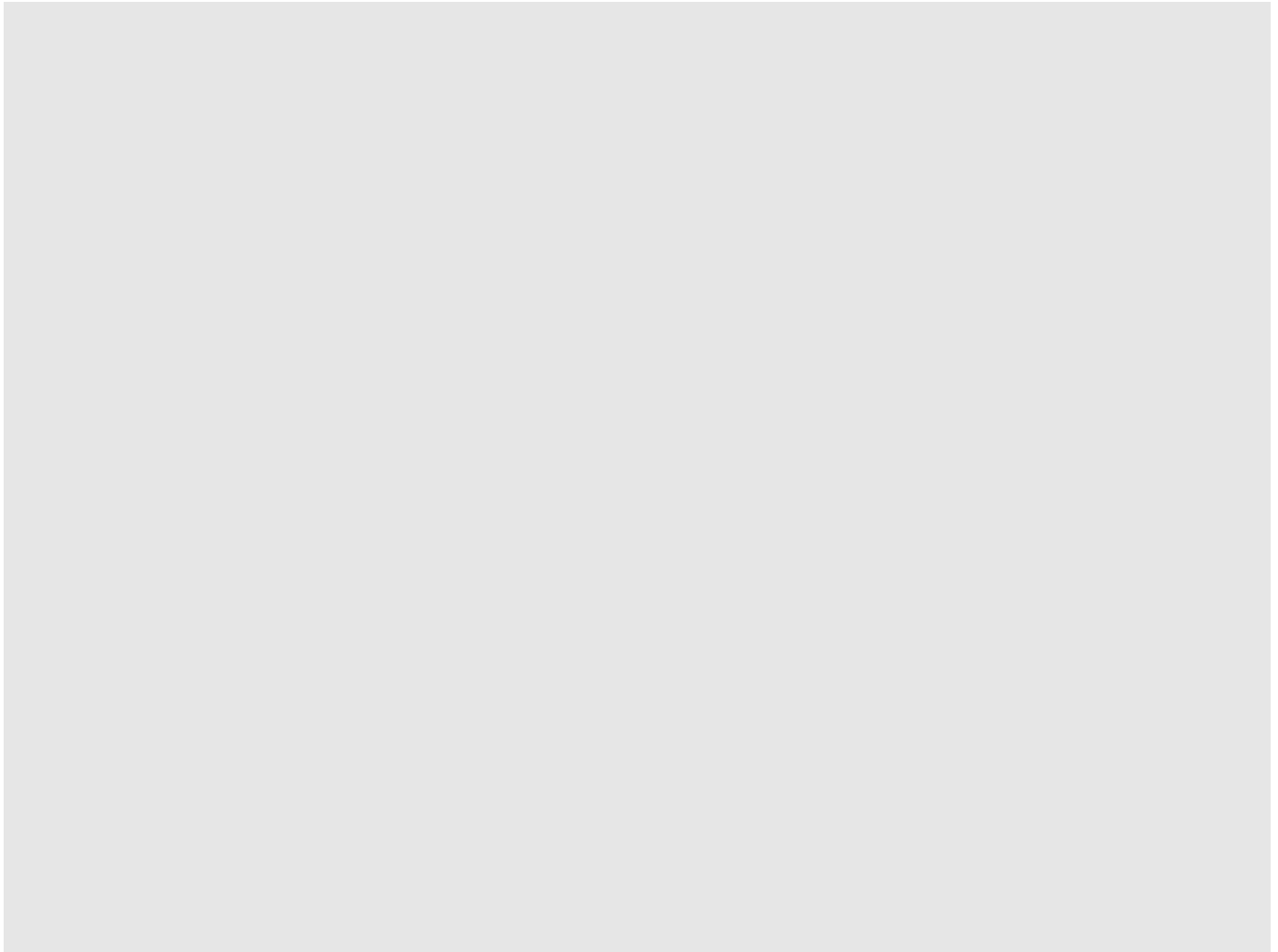
Auburn's Morgan Leigh Oldham shares a laugh with Derrian Gobourne during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



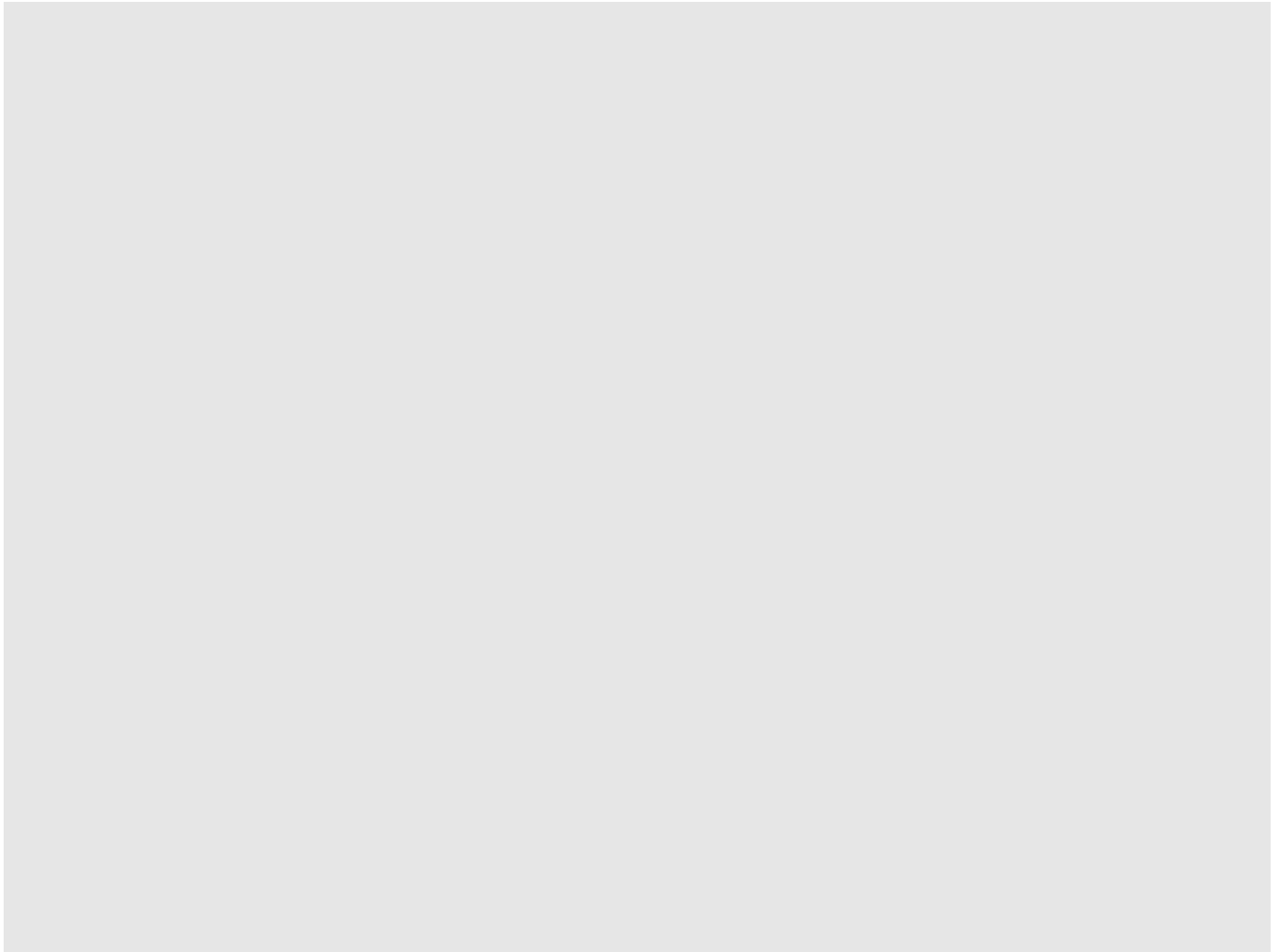
Sophia Groth works out on floor during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



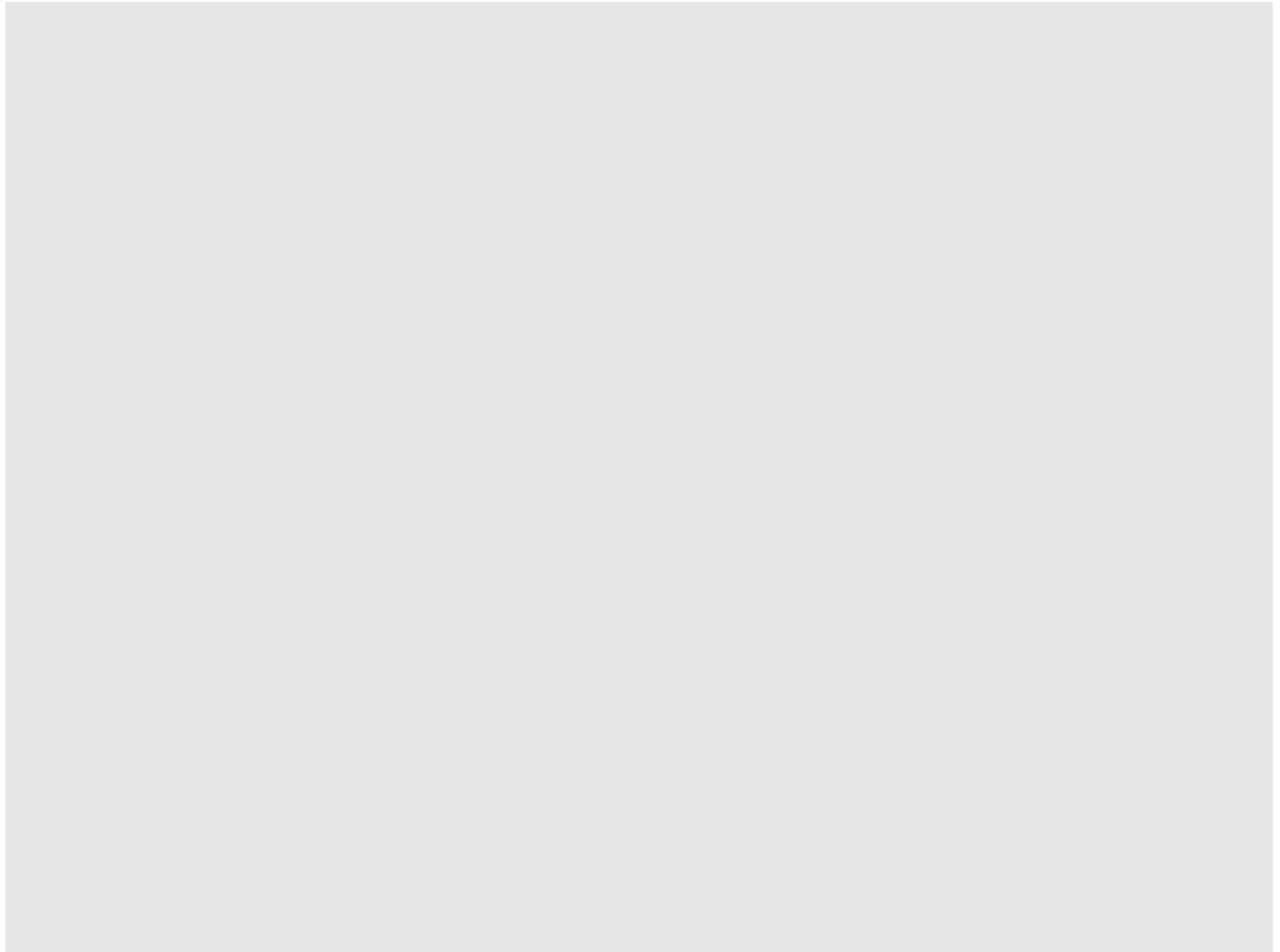
Morgan Leigh Oldham greets a fan during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



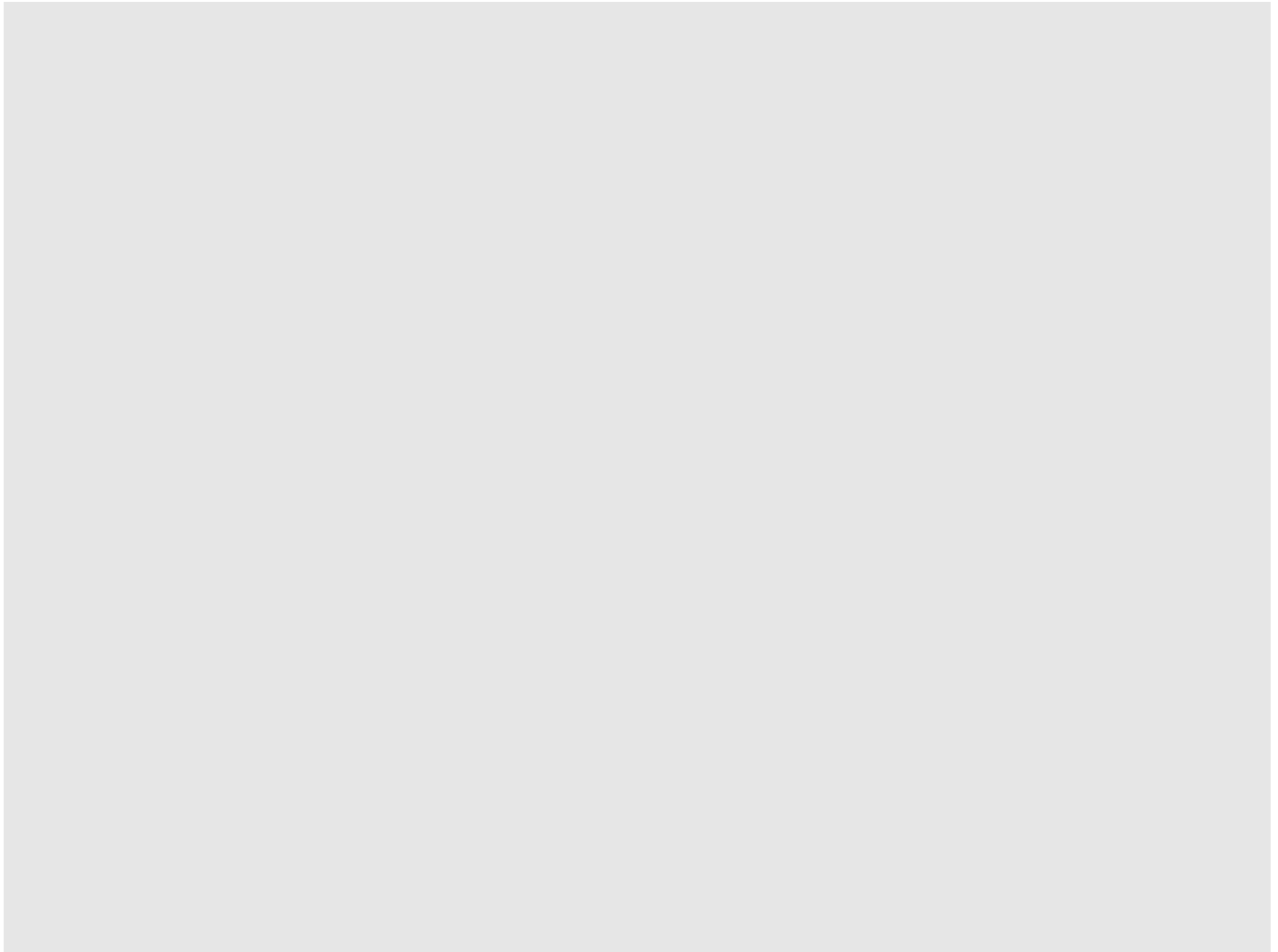
Suni Lee, Sara Hubbard and Olivia Hollingsworth share a laugh during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



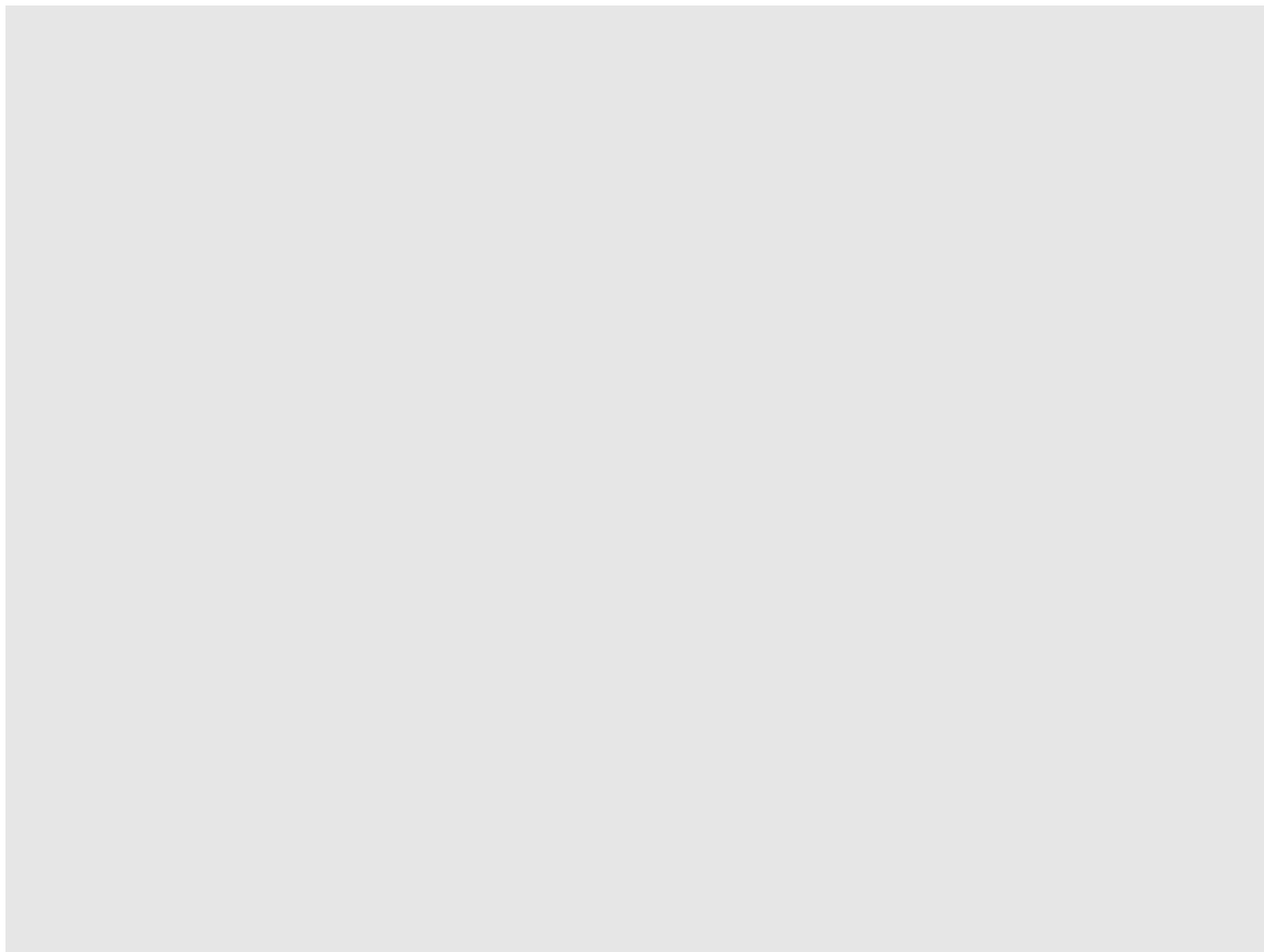
Suni Lee is introduced before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



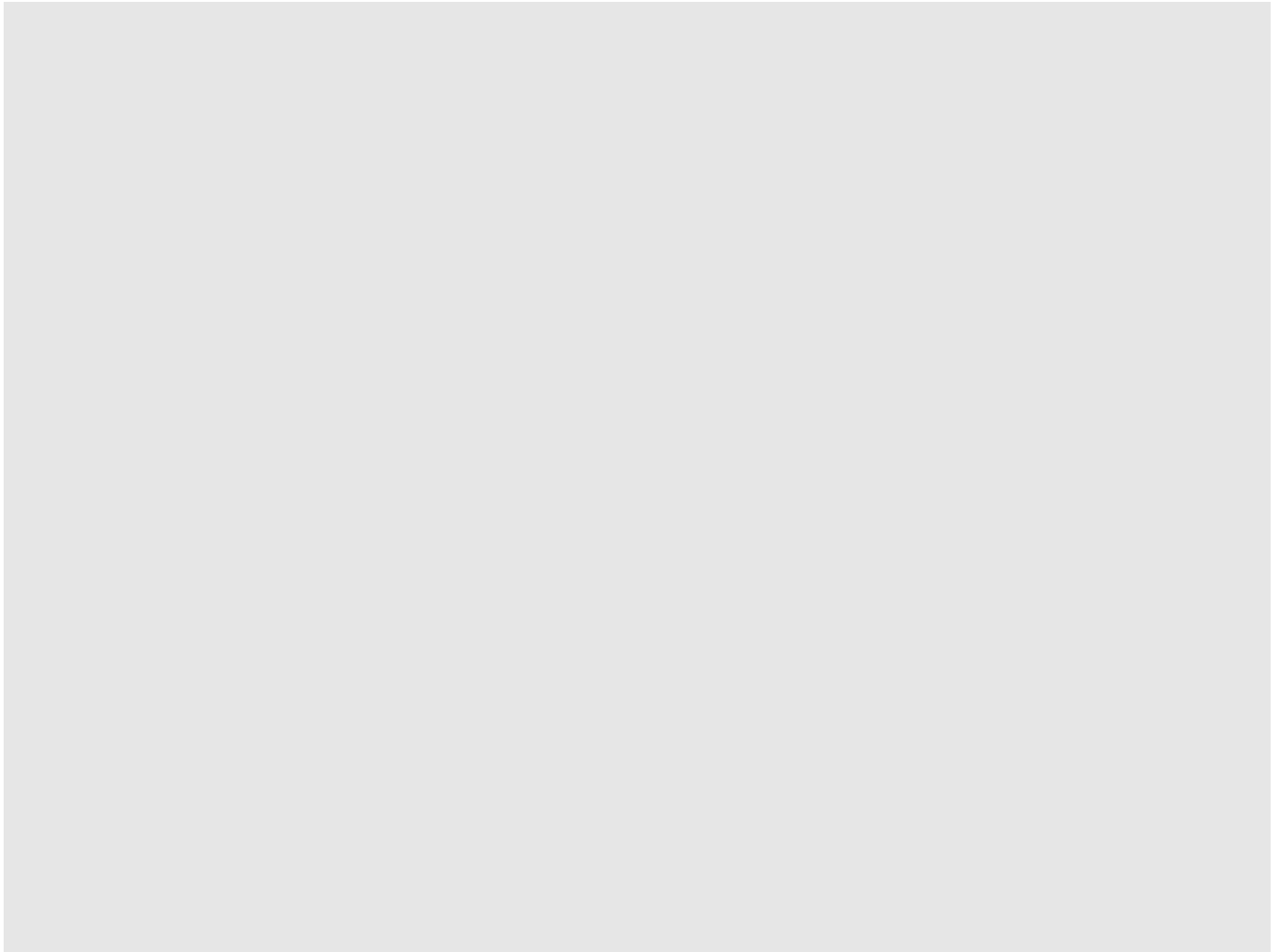
The Auburn cheerleaders cheer as Suni Lee gets set to perform on bars during warmups before the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



Suni Lee performs on beam during the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/



Suni Lee, center, celebrates with Cassie Stevens, Piper Smith and Sophia Groth after her 10 on beam during the Auburn gymnastics meet with Kentucky on Feb. 25 in Auburn.

Justin Lee/

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