

Thinness to Success

Eating Disorders

BY SABRINA MILLAR

In 1976 the average female Olympic gymnast was 17 years old, stood 5' 3" and weighed 106 pounds. By 1992 the average female gymnast was 16 years old, 4' 9" and weighed 83 pounds.

Les désordres alimentaires chez les athlètes d'élite sont devenus de plus en plus apparents chez les femmes sportives. L'auteure veut éduquer et alerter les jeunes gymnastes qui devront faire face à certains problèmes dans le monde des sports compétitifs.

Every four years the world stops and devotes their attention to their television sets to marvel at the tiny wonders that grace the gymnasium with their skill, strength, and charm. However, no matter how amazing these *young* athletes are, there is something that is often overlooked—their low weight. The sport of gymnastics is no longer a “women’s” sport but what some may call a “child’s” sport. The tiny immature bodies found in the gymnastics arena nowadays are more closely related to children than women. There is a rise in the occurrence of prepubescent bodies of today’s elite female gymnasts, which in turn raises issues concerning eating disorders. There is no doubt that

eating disorders have found their way into the world of elite female gymnasts. So what are causes for the growing rise of eating disorders in gymnasts? I, as an athlete and a woman myself, want to know when, why and how this trend occurred? Why are gymnasts, compared to other women athletes, so prone to eating disorders? To find this answer, I have to wade deeper into the history and development of women’s gymnastics as a competitive sport. I aim to uncover when the prevalence in eating disorders in female gymnasts rose, and weight and ages dropped. Among the factors that have led to the emergence of eating disorders in elite ranked female gymnasts, are the changes women and sport have both gone through in the past four decades. There is a history in the pressures to achieve the “ideal” body shape for young women in sport and society.

Since the first women’s event in gymnastics was witnessed at the 1928 Olympic Games, the popularity of the sport began to rise. With the introduction of women in the sport came many significant changes both in elements of the sport and the physical requirements of the athletes. However, we do not see the disturbing changes in the physical aspects of the female gymnasts for many decades. In 1976 the average female U.S. Olympic gymnast was an average of seventeen and a half years old, stood 5' 3" and weighed 106 pounds. Shockingly, by 1992 the average female U.S. Olympic gymnast was 16 years old, 4' 9" and weighed 83 pounds (Ryan 120). This trend in reduced age and size of female gymnasts has become a con-

siderable reason for prevailing eating disorders. In fact 65% of elite female gymnasts admit to currently having some sort of eating disorder.

Before we venture further into the realm of eating disorders in women’s gymnastics, it is essential that we understand the level at which the majority of such eating disorders become evident. There are many levels to women’s gymnastics, ten levels in fact. At level ten the gymnast becomes an *elite* gymnast. Elite gymnasts are those who compete in international competitions, such as, the World Championships and Olympic Games. The number of elite female gymnasts around the world makes only a small portion of the sport. Therefore the high numbers in eating disorders that occur in the elite level does not relate to the entire sport. Although eating disorders do not apply to *all* gymnasts, there has to be something about the sport that predisposes these girls to eating disorders, especially compared to other women’s sports (Bauer 3).

According to several studies concerning female athletes and eating disorders there are many factors and influences that create disordered eating patterns in athletes. Modern athletics has made the pressures to perform even greater. Athletes appear to be willing and eager to go to any measure to achieve an advantage. So what are these factors that contribute to the reoccurrence of eating disorders in female gymnasts? Well let’s not forget the nature of the sport and the way in which it is judged and scored. Gymnastics is an aesthetically judged sport. In the past few decades the ideal image of an elite female gymnast has “shrunk form

in Elite Female Gymnasts

sturdy muscularity to razor-thin prebuesence” (Bauer 4).

Larissa Latynina was one of the most successful women gymnasts in the 1950’s—and woman she was! Latynina competed up to the age of 32. The mature physique and grace Latynina presented portrayed the way women’s elite gymnastics used to look like. Those days are long gone (Bauer 4). The mature body type was normal in women’s gymnastics until the 1972 Olympic Games when tiny 17-year-old Olga Korbut showed the world what amazing things her petite young body could do and became the “Olympic Darling.” Then emerged another young athlete named Nadia Commaneci in the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal; she claimed the first Olympic perfect ten. At the age of 14 Nadia reached the status of all-around Olympic title of elite women’s gymnastics (Ryan 200). Nadia was the new sparkling sweetheart to prance gold in the gymnasium.

The “Nadia Syndrome” that still affects women’s gymnastics today includes both extreme leanness and youth. Youth. Ah ... wonderful youth. One more dynamic that contributes to eating disorders in the elite lives of these girls; “An elite female gymnast’s career is a race against time and nature. The window of opportunity is so narrow: from about thirteen to the onset of puberty. Then the window slams shut” (Ryan 66). The demand the sport puts on the body inevitably delays menstruation for several years, often this *is* the wish of these young girls, which is to prolong puberty. Because of the aesthetic nature of women’s gymnastics, the world is

left in awe as these tiny and strong bodies with their childlike charm, successfully complete all events at or above the level of the women. The turning point was here and the rise in eating disorders also devastates itself from this Nadia syndrome.

The china doll look of these young gymnasts has captured the essence of female gymnastics over the years. But at what price do their bodies and psyches pay to be the “Darlings” of the summer games? Gymnastics being an artistic sport requires a certain image, particularly the image of the female body. “It is frequently said that sports a microcosm of its surrounding culture. A favorite notion in our society is *Thin is In*” (Overdorf 62). To be thin is one of the distinctive requirements for presentation in gymnastics. No one honestly can imagine a chubby gymnast, even if extremely skilled. Female gymnasts adhere to the demands of image in both sport and society. With pink ribbons in their hair, make-up plastered faces, and petite frames, the desired little princess look is achieved. The girls have to always perform, act, and look a certain way. Sadly, what once were women athletes are now pretty little girls doing flips and spins.

The point in which the appearance and beginnings of deterioration of female gymnastics changed also came with the famous Romanian—born gymnastics coach Bela Karolyi. Karolyi produced seven Olympic gold medals; fifteen World Championship medals and after his move to the U.S, seven U.S national champions in ten years. Karolyi insisted on young girls for their resilience and for their little-doll look that he believed enchanted the spectators and

swayed the judges (Ryan 199). Many coaches followed the trend of Karolyi and recruited small young girls for their teams. For most athletes reaching the demand their coaches put on them to be in their best shape is not usually a problem. However, for female gymnasts who are already predisposed to eating disorders, the pressures from coaches could precipitate a life threatening disease and essentially end their short-lived athletic careers.

Coaches are some of the most influential people in the athletic careers of elite gymnasts. The lives of most of these young girls are in the hands of the coaches; they often spend more time with their coaches than with their families and friends. Karolyi is one of the most famous coaches in gymnastics history producing a long line of champions. However, many of his former gymnasts remember his harsh training methods. Erica Stokes was destined to be one of Karolyi’s gymnastic

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champions after claiming a junior national title. Erica remembers Karolyi calling her a “pregnant goat” and similar names to all the girls in the gym. Eventually Erica developed bulimia nervosa and quit gymnastics at age sixteen, nine months shy of the Olympics (Bauer 7). Karolyi has been a great factor in not only producing outstanding gymnasts but to the increasing rise of eating disorders in elite female gymnasts. Karolyi pushed young girls to gold medals, world championships, and also anorexia, bulimia, and lifetime injuries.

Unfortunately, many young gymnasts are not as privileged as Erica Stokes, who managed to escape the pressures of the world of elite gymnastics before it took over her life. Athletes such as Christy Henrich brought to attention the problem in the sport, when both gymnastics and an eating disorder did overtake her career and life. At age twelve Christy made the national team and by thirteen was training more than nine hours a day. By the time she was fifteen, weighing only 90 pounds at 4' 11", she was becoming an Olympic hopeful. However, an incident occurred that would change Christy's life and the reputation of female gymnastics to this day. In 1988 a judge at the Budapest Gymnastics meet told Christy she'd never make the Olympic team if she didn't lose weight. Christy resorted to anorexia and bulimia as a way to control her weight. At one point Christy's weight was only 47 pounds. Christy's body became too weak and she had to quit gymnastics just before the 1992 Barcelona Olympic games. In 1994, at the age of 22, Christy Henrich died of multiple organ failure (Bauer 9).

Gymnasts withstand pressures that many people and other Olympic athletes are unaware of. Throughout their entire childhood they train to perform one perfect performance on the largest stage in the world. They must be perfect. Their bodies must be perfectly lean, their behavior perfectly polite, and their movements perfectly precise (Ryan 139). The

quest for perfection drives many of these young gymnasts to obsessive personalities that can easily generate eating disorders. In gymnastics the results depend on the perception of a performance as much as the performance itself. Every four years the requirements increase in difficulty. Therefore there is a greater advantage and pressure in maintaining a smaller physique to perform the difficult elements.

With the apparent factors that have contributed to the problem of eating disorders in women's gymnastics over the past several decades, the question remains “How do we fix the problem”? In fact, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) has begun to make changes to bring back the grace and maturity of gymnastics. After the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, Olympic gymnasts will be required to be at least sixteen years old. However, the aesthetic nature and judging of the sport and the perfect body image remains. So eating disorders in female gymnasts are not going to become a thing of the past any time soon.

Athletes or not, women are prone to eating disorders due to the “thin is in” mentality. Coaches will still strive for perfection of their athletes, and if it involves their weight they will control it, and gymnastics as a rhythmic sport will be hard to change without losing its popularity. The face of gymnastics needs to change for the health of these athletes. The “Kiddie Korps era of gymnastics” is at a dangerous level (Ryan 241). Nonetheless, most people enjoy watching the new young super-stars of gymnastics become our world champions. There's an unspoken prerequisite to the elite gymnastic world, keep them young, small and more dazzling. I couldn't have said it better than Joan Ryan did in her book, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*:

Deep down, we know that our consumption and disposal of these athletes are tantamount to child exploitation and, in too

many cases, child abuse...we don't want to see them parade past us with their broken bodies and mangled spirits, because then we would have to change forever the way we look at our Olympic darlings. They are the pink ballerinas inside a child's jewelry box, always perfectly positioned, perfectly coiffed. They spin on demand without complaint. (Ryan 243)

The world has witnessed elite female gymnasts get increasingly smaller with every Olympic Game. While enchanting the world, in the background is a devastation of disease and pain as these young girls starve themselves. So the FIG, parents, coaches, and these girls need to ask themselves: is the *thinness to success* worth it?

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