

PERFECT FORM:
CHANGING THE IDEAL
GYMNAST

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Statement of Purpose

The media have presented a stereotype of the ideal gymnast. With the “perfect 10 complex” set forth in the 1970s by Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci, a push for perfection is embodied in women’s gymnastics. This stereotype can cause gymnasts to believe they need to be younger and smaller in order to be successful. This documentary explores this stereotype, how it is perpetuated in the media, and how it is changing. By looking at the comebacks of the 20-something-year-old gymnasts, this documentary challenges the stereotype and explains why older, more mature gymnasts can also be competitive in elite gymnastics. Thus, by examining past and present gymnasts, the documentary establishes what is to be the future of women’s gymnastics.

This paper will explore the different topics covered in the documentary and will explain some of the decisions and problems I encountered creating it. First, this paper will rationalize why the topic is important to study. Then, it will justify the need to present the topic in the form of a documentary, discuss previous literature on the topic, and explain the documentary’s focus and organization. Last, the paper will list the interviewees and discuss the many things I learned while creating the documentary.

Rationale

Nearly sixty-three thousand gymnasts in the United States participate in competitive women’s gymnasts (“USA”). Over 70 million people tuned in to at least one USA gymnastics telecast in the 2000 season (Braden). In 1996 gymnastics coverage comprised nearly two-thirds of the time allotted to women’s sports and a quarter of all Olympic prime time coverage (Chisholm “Acrobats” 415). Olympic anchor Bob Costas noted that the Olympics may not change the world, but they have “helped change attitudes about women in sports” (Tuggle and Owen 180). Therefore, because of the abundant number of people involved in the sport and exposed to it, it is important to analyze and recognize the sport and the attitudes and stereotypes it presents about women.

While the little girl image is gradually changing for participants in the sport, the image maintains its strength in the media. This stereotype and its standard of perfection are seen in the history and the

future of the sport as women are forced to live up to the Nadia image, which is often blamed for causing eating disorders. These problematic stereotypes are not limited to the confines of gymnastics, though, and can have serious implications for women inside and outside of sports. By conditioning audiences to male domination and patriarchal ideals, the media perpetuate women's subjugation to men and fit them into their "natural" feminine roles. In addition, by portraying female gymnasts as the Other and justifying their athleticism with sexuality, the media take away women's power rather than giving them control over their destinies.

Justification

Next, it is important to understand the two reasons why this topic was best delivered in documentary form. First, gymnastics is a visual, artistic sport that is not easy to be described accurately or appropriately. Because of the visual nature of the sport, it seems only appropriate to perform a study of it in a visual manner. In addition, when talking about differences in age and body type, it is helpful to visually reinforce the points with footage and images. Thus, the documentary's visual elements further support the message.

Second, a documentary can reach a wider audience than an essay. People are more inclined to watch a documentary than they are to sit down with a written essay. Thus, because the documentary is intended to inform people involved in the sport and who just watch and are interested in the sport, this audience needs to be required to give a minimal amount of effort in order to encourage them to attend to the message.

Scope

It is also necessary to establish the documentary's scope. In order to do this, it is important to understand the documentary's purpose and audience. First, the documentary was produced with the intention of it being aired on PBS. Thus, it follows PBS format, which states that documentaries should be 26-minutes-and-forty-seconds in length. The documentary caters to PBS's general audience, who has a basic understanding of gymnastics but is not necessarily knowledgeable of the intricacies of the sport.

Therefore, it was important to clarify aspects of the sport necessary for understanding of the issues. However, the documentary does not provide the basics of gymnastics¹ that are not necessary for comprehension. Gymnastics is one of the most popular sports in the Olympics and receives large viewership. For example, over 40 million households watched at least one gymnastics competition on NBC Sports in 2000 (Braden). Thus, the general audience is already somewhat familiar with the sport. In addition, there are over 3 million U.S. families involved in the sport; these people will also be interested in the documentary (Braden).

In addition, the documentary does not focus on men's gymnastics. While there may be some examples of men staying in the sport longer, the documentary's purpose is to investigate the stereotype in women's gymnastics.

Literature Review

While other authors have investigated female media representation, much of this research focuses on the amount of coverage and the representation of female athletes in general, not specifically on gymnastics. C.A. Tuggle and Anne Owen studied NBC's 1996 Olympic media to determine how much coverage was devoted to women's sports. They determined that women and men received equal coverage, but most of the women's coverage was placed on individual sports, such as swimming and gymnastics, because of their "social acceptance" (178). In addition, Marie Hardin et al. performed a content analysis of four Florida newspapers' coverage of women's sports in the 2000 Olympic Games; they focused specifically on photographs and images of these women compared to men. In their analysis, they determined that portrayals of female athletes are moving away from historical stereotypes and sexualization.

Shari L. Dworkin and Michael A. Messner investigate female representation in sports media by describing how women are framed and described. They note that men often represent the standard in sports, and women represent "the Other" (180). They discuss male dominance in coverage of women,

¹ "Basics of gymnastics" may include introductory elements of the sports, such as describing the four competitive events.

noting a “symbolic annihilation” of women’s sports coverage and citing a newspaper study that shows men sports stories outnumbered women’s stories 23 to 1 (172).

Researchers have also investigated stereotypes in gymnastics but have not focused on perpetuation of these stereotypes in the media or the separation between the media’s depiction and reality. Ann Chisholm, in her article “Acrobats, Contortionists, and Cute Children: The Promise and Perversity of U.S. Women’s Gymnastics,” discusses perversity in gymnastics and the portrayal of gymnasts as cute little girls. Chisholm addresses this issue by comparing gymnasts to minstrelsy and the circus and contortionists and acrobats. She concludes that gymnasts are forced to embody qualities of liberal feminism and liberal citizenship in order to be accepted into U.S. culture. Chisholm, in her article “Defending the Nation: National Bodies, U.S. Borders, and the 1996 U.S. Olympic Women’s Gymnastics Team,” focuses on the representation of gymnasts’ bodies in the 1996 Olympics. She determines that gymnasts are represented as beautiful and elegant and become acceptable to the mainstream because of the media’s portrayal of these gymnasts as national icons and “The Face of America” (Chisholm “Defending” 138). She also compares the media’s portrayal of U.S. gymnasts to international gymnasts in order to support the U.S. media’s effort to form a national identity.

Melissa A. Brown, in “Media Impact on Elite Gymnastics,” continues to analyze this media representation of gymnast, specifically acknowledging the media’s attention to body type and commentators’ constant focus on gymnasts’ bodies sends the message “that one needs to be thin to win is ever-present” (1). Furthermore, she interviewed twenty elite gymnasts about how they felt the media covered them. She determined that the media tend to choose “darlings” based on “personality, not results” (5). Gymnasts who were not “darlings” had mixed emotions about the media’s favoritism, commenting that “the media places too much emphasis on one individual and disregards the rest” (5). Gymnasts also commented on the dramatization and the exploitation of personal issues to sell a story. However, Brown ultimately concludes that the media can be both positive and negative for the sport; just as it can portray the athletes incorrectly, it can also get attention and publicity necessary for the sport to grow.

Also, Joan Ryan, in *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, focuses on injuries, eating disorders, images, pressure, parents, and politics in gymnastics. She highlights coaches' physical and mental abuse and the dangers of elite gymnastics, putting most of the blame on coaches and parents and neglects the media's role.

Despite the research that has been performed related to stereotype and media representation, no research has focused on alternative body types and the role of older gymnasts competing in the sport. Thus, no author has been able to offer insight to this new trend and evaluate the effects older gymnasts will have and have had on the sport. My interviews with scholars, athletes, and experts reveal the stereotype of the ideal gymnast and provide valuable insight to the trend of comebacks. The interviewees also provide information about changes in the sport in general. For example, Ziert discusses the impact of new, improved equipment and the changing Code of Points. Bhardwaj, Hatch, Miller-Phillips, Zmeskal-Burdette, Moceanu, and Phillips-Bannister all discuss first-hand, personal experiences of comebacks and old versus young comparisons.

Focus of Film

The documentary studies the gymnastics stereotype by primarily focusing on how the stereotype was formed, how it is perpetuated, and how it is inaccurate. In order to do this, the documentary is broken into three major categories: background of gymnastics, the stereotype of the ideal gymnast, and the trend of older gymnasts in the sport. These topics will be discussed through voice-over narration and interviews. For a complete script of the documentary, see Appendix A.

Background of Gymnastics

This section discusses the history of gymnastics, focusing primarily on the impact of Nadia Comaneci and Olga Korbut, since they began the trend of younger gymnasts. The changes in gymnasts' ages and body images in the mid-twentieth century in comparison to gymnasts now show a trend in older and younger gymnasts remaining competitive in the sport. In order to understand the impact of this change and the problematic stereotype that has been formed, it is important to understand the history of

the sport and the changes it has undergone. To do this, the documentary uses some photographs and video footage of historical and current gymnasts, allowing viewers to visually see the differences and similarities in the athletes.

Historically, gymnasts' body images have changed from womanly to child-like. Gymnastics was first encouraged in the United States as a means to increase women's health through exercise and to give them an outlet for grace and femininity (Chisholm "Defending" 129). The sport was not included in the Olympics until 1928 when gymnasts performed a team rhythmic dance. It was not until 1952 that women gymnasts competed as individuals (Hultman). This Olympics exemplifies the womanliness of gymnastics in this era with its 32-year-old champion, Soviet Union gymnast Maria Gorokhovskaya ("Results Finland"). The 1956 and 1960 Olympics continued this trend with a slightly younger, yet still mature, winner Larissa Latynina; she was 22-years-old in 1956 and 26-years-old in 1960 and competed while three months pregnant ("Results Australia"). Similarly, the 1964 and 1968 Olympic Champion Vera Caslavskaya was 22-years-old and 26-years-old when she won, still sporting the mature, developed, womanly body type ("Results Japan"). In the 1964 Games, the average age for gymnasts was 22.7 years old (Montpetit 183).

The 1972 Olympics produced a younger champion, 20-year-old Ludmilla Tourischeva, who could be considered the last mature Olympic Champion for 28-years. However, it was her teammate, 17-year-old Olga Korbut, who gained publicity for her smile, pigtails, and girlish emotions, thus, initiating a "little girl" trend. People fell in love with her personality, appearance, and daring skills—setting the standard of both beauty and gymnastics ability. According to Salmela, Korbut's "youthful image" and "emotional contact" launched "a trend towards the 'child-champion'" ("Competitive" 123).

This trend towards younger champions continued four years later with the domination of 14-year-old Nadia Comaneci, who became a role model, standard, and stereotype for gymnastics. By receiving the first perfect 10 in Olympic history, Comaneci established that perfection was obtainable and launched the "perfect 10 complex" that future gymnasts would be judged by; this standard demanded perfection not only in gymnastics ability and performance but also in age, weight, and beauty. Ann Chisholm addresses

this standard of perfection, noting that judges and television commentators hold gymnasts up to this Nadia image in their “gracefulness and elegance, and concurrently perfect performances,” and in their “overall physical appearance (e.g., toe point, body position, extension, beautiful lines, etc.)” (“Defending” 133). Similarly, Salmela attributes Comaneci for the evolution of the sport by “combining the playful, but perfectly executed childlike poses of Olga,” ultimately leading to a trend of being competitive at a young age (“Competitive” 123).

After the institution of the “perfect 10 complex,” top gymnasts for the next 24 years were below 20-years-old (1980- Elena Davydova, 19; 1984- Mary Lou Retton, 16; 1988-Elena Shushunova,19). This image reached its extreme in the 1992 Olympics when the top three finishers (Tatiana Gutsu, Shannon Miller, Lavinia Milosovici) were 15-year-olds. During both the 1992 and 1996 Olympics, the broadcast media portrayed these gymnasts as little girls rather than women and even posted their ages, heights, and weights on the screen before each routine. The 1996 Olympics continued this “perfect 10 complex,” and the top gymnasts were between the ages of 17 and 19 (Lilia Podkopayeva, 18; Gina Gogean, 18; Simona Amanar, 17; Lavinia Milosovici, 19). In addition, gymnasts were still forced to live up to the media’s standards of perfection.

After the 1996 Olympics, the International Gymnastics Federation established a new, more difficult code of points and an age minimum requirement of 16 for world senior elite competitions. Thus, these changes added what critics called contradictions to the sport by requiring “slightly older teenage gymnasts who are capable of performing still more spectacular feats with bodies that are even smaller for their ages than those of their predecessors” (Chisholm “Defending” 127). However, the 2000 Olympic Champion, 21-year-old Simona Amanar, did not reflect this contradiction but led a field featuring an older, experienced, and more mature group of competitors. In addition, 24-year-old Svetlana Khorkina won her third world all-around title at the 2003 World Championships, while a 28-year-old wife and mother Oksana Chusovitna won the vault title; thus, these results prove that there is room for women in artistic gymnastics. The 2004 Olympics exemplified a trend of older and younger gymnasts competing

competitively against one another; the Olympic champion, Carly Patterson, was 16-years-old, while the silver medalist was 24-year-old Khorkina.

Stereotype of the Ideal Gymnast

Next, the documentary determines if there is a stereotype in gymnastics for gymnasts to be little girls. In doing so, the documentary explores two ways in which such a stereotype might be formed: the media and the United States Gymnastics Federation (USAG)². First, in an effort to reduce the threat of women in sports and justify their participation, the media portray gymnasts as cute little girls. Patricia R.W. Clasen discusses how the label “female athlete” creates an image that is “a paradox grounded in traditional dualisms of Western culture”—masculinity/femininity (36). She explains that society creates an “unrealistic expectation that females will always be feminine while males will always be masculine”; thus, female athletes are expected to fulfill the impossibility of “exist[ing] in multiple poles” (Clasen). Therefore, women challenge hegemonic masculinity by entering sports where men traditionally “reinforce an ideology of superiority” through the execution of five masculine attributes: “physical force and control, occupational development, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality” (Trujilla qtd. in Clasen). Thus, in Clasen’s definition of hegemonic masculinity, it is impossible for women and sports to exist in the Western dualism “without having an impact on the definitions of what is masculine, and, therefore, feminine” (Clasen).

Consequently, the media must emphasize femininity, which is done in their coverage of gymnastics. According to Clasen, women’s gymnastics “epitomizes the paradoxes of women’s sports” as gymnasts are described as girls and are portrayed as cute, dependent, and delicate in an effort to “promote their femininity through fragility and dependence” (Clasen). In addition, by the media portraying gymnasts as powerless and dependent, females are “socialized in ‘feminine appropriate’ ways that steer them away from power-laden sporting roles,” taking the threat away from masculine hegemony (Hardin, et al. 64).

² USAG is the governing body of gymnastics in the United States. It sets the rules and policies for the sport (“Inside”).

The documentary looks at Olympic coverage to determine if the media are portraying the gymnasts as cute little girls. For example, in the 1992 Olympics, NBC used the following introduction to the women's gymnastics competition:

It is nothing more than a stamped medal disc suspended from a brightly colored ribbon. But separate journeys toward it tugged on the lives of little girls with oceans between them. Little girls who had traded their childhoods for a chance to dance in the Olympic Games ("1992 Olympics").

According to Ann Chisholm, this focus on cuteness "offsets masculinity while it constitutes a modernist image of women's liberation that is dependent on tiny bodies, lilliputian features, ponytails, ribbons, and so forth" ("Acrobats" 429). Thus, despite the fact that women gymnasts are becoming older, the media feel the need to rationalize their presence in sports and continue to perpetuate the Nadia/Olga image of gymnastics.

Along the same lines, the documentary also looks at whether the stereotype is inherent in the sport in the way the athletes represent themselves. For example, Paul Ziert, publisher of *International Gymnast* magazine, argues that the public thinks gymnasts are "very young," "are young girls who primarily do what they are told to do," who "don't have any personalities," "all they do is go to the gym," and "they only eat salads." He blames this inaccurate image not on the media, but on the coaches and the gymnastics federation who tell the girls how to act and talk, and they, consequently, develop an artificial presentation of the sport. Therefore, he argues for gymnasts to be allowed to express who they really are rather than conforming to the desires of the gymnastics federation or their coaches:

We need personalities. A sport can't grow without personalities. Right now we are so bland...it's a rice-only diet, I think. There's no taste at all here. And we've got to add some spices to our sport. By doing that, we just have to open the kids up and let them be who they are. Let them be proud of who they are.

By letting the gymnasts be open about themselves and their lifestyles to the media, the image of gymnastics and gymnasts would become more accurate and honest.

Trend of Older Gymnasts

Next, this section discusses the trend of older gymnasts competing in elite women's gymnastics. In order to do this, the documentary looks at why gymnasts can stay in the sport in their twenties, discusses body type/age as a factor in longevity in the sport, and explores the recent comeback trend and trend to stay in the sport longer.

First, in her book *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, Joan Ryan claims that the world's best gymnasts are children and that there is no room for women in elite gymnastics (67). This documentary examines the truth of this statement. It does so by looking at past and recent trends in the sport and by interviewing gymnasts who have competed as "women." For example, Shannon Miller-Phillips, an Olympic gold medalist who competed as a "woman" in 2000 at 23 years-old, agrees that gymnasts can stay in the sport longer:

A lot of gymnasts nowadays are finding that they can stay in gymnastics longer because of the mental aspects of gymnastics, and staying in there mentally is more important than staying in there physically [...] [older gymnasts] have those years of experience through competition and repetition of your routines you don't have to do as many routines physically (Miller-Phillips).

Thus, Miller-Phillips argues that not only can women compete in the sport, but they can also have a mental advantage. 1996 Olympic gold medalist Dominique Moceanu agrees with Miller-Phillips, stating that her age contributed to her comebacks in 1998 and 2000 because it helped her understand the sport better and gave her valuable experience.

However, many scholars agree with Ryan and argue that smaller, younger bodies are ideal for gymnasts. For example, in their article "Growth in Body Size Affects Rotational Performance in Women's Gymnastics," Timothy Ackland, et. al. discuss their research on the importance of small body size for women gymnasts. They note that biomechanics call for gymnasts to be smaller with "high strength to mass ratios" in order to maintain elite level skills:

In a sport that requires the mass of the body to be propelled against gravity with multiple twists and somersaults, this bigger physique is considered less efficient from a biomechanics perspective. The dominance of younger gymnasts can, to a large extent, be explained by the small stature and mass that characterizes youth (165).

Thus, as gymnasts age, biomechanically they are no longer ideal for the sport.

While it is important to look at obvious physical factors involved in shaping gymnasts, other factors, such as mental aspects and understanding of the sport, are also important. John H. Salmela, in “Psychomotor Task Demands of Gymnastics,” argues that biomechanical principles are not the only agents working for gymnasts. While science typically describes the appropriate body types, techniques, and angles needed for efficient, successful gymnastics, Salmela alludes to the notion that such details are worthless if a gymnast is unable to process and execute the coaches’ instructions:

We assume that because a technician who is versed in biomechanical principles, which allows him to describe gymnastics in degrees, feet per second or foot-pounds, can also have the gymnast immediately execute this same verbal instruction in terms of a movement sequence. Unfortunately, unlike a computer, gymnasts cannot be fed verbal instructions in biomechanical programming and react by transforming this into the described movements (7).

Thus, Salmela gives credit to mental strength. He also recognizes experience’s role in reducing anxiety, which ultimately leads to better performance (127).

After exploring the stereotype and determining if there is room for women in the sport, the documentary investigates whether there has been a trend of older gymnasts competing or more comebacks in the sport and what factors contributed to such a trend. For example, in 1964 gymnastics reached a turning point when it was included in the first ever United States Olympic broadcast (Daumas 38). According to Taylor Downing, television coverage of gymnastics allowed the media to show the world what gymnastics was:

Ever since the 1970s when the Soviet Union almost managed to ‘miniaturize’ women’s gymnastics by training a series of brilliant young girls to perform extraordinary feats, television has been able to offer stunning scenes of physical achievement. Moves and exercises that are remarkable enough when seen in real time take on an almost magical, ballet-like appearance in slow motion. Television can savor these moments over and over again and a new generation of teenage superstars was born at each Olympic Games (29).

As a result of the sport’s presence in the media, people began to see the new “teenage superstars” such as Nadia Comaneci and Olga Korbut, and they became “household names across the world in a sport that thirty years ago was very much a minority interest” (29). Thus, because the general public’s first real look

at gymnastics occurred when younger gymnasts were beginning to dominate, the rich older-gymnast history was lost, and the image of the little girl gymnast was disseminated.

Coinciding with this introduction of gymnastics to television was the change in gymnastics philosophy. Arno Lascari, in his article “Aesthetics and Mechanics in Artistic Gymnastics and Sport,” discusses the conflict between traditional gymnastics philosophy of artistry and aesthetics and the new trend of “circus philosophy” (52). Traditional philosophy, he argues, is based on the sport’s origins of beauty in body movement and gymnastics as art. However, he points out that several trends diverted this philosophy, changing it to this new circus mentality where form is not important and big skills are paramount. According to Lascari, several factors, including television, contributed to this change in philosophy:

With the advent of television, the mass audience has been courted more and more. International gymnastics is now more big business (show business?) with monetary rewards high for gymnastics events that can please large audiences. Television announcers have often played up what the audience likes; namely the spectacular, the bizarre, the circus (52).

He notes that Olga Korbut exemplifies the “changing mood of gymnastics,” often sacrificing rhythm and form to use risky, “eye-catching” skills (53).

Ziert recognizes the change in philosophies, citing the 1960s when gymnasts such as Larissa Latynina and Vera Caslavka displayed traditional philosophy of beauty and artistry and wore “beehives” and “French twists” and looked like they were “going to prom.” They emphasized the beauty and artistry of gymnastics, performing simpler, yet well-executed moves and paying attention to dance and interpretation. However, he argues that now people demand more athleticism, which has caused the switch to Lascari’s circus philosophy. Ziert blames the Code of Points³ for reinforcing the circus philosophy, requiring more difficulty and more skills:

Most of the problems were driven by changes in the Code of Points [because the FIG⁴] wanted everything to be absolutely empirical. What you do is eliminate the flow of the artistry [. . .] You see very jerky routines where everything is like your sitting there as a

³ The Code of Points is the set of gymnastics rules that place value and emphasis on skills that gymnasts perform. The Code changes every four years after the Olympics.

⁴ Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique- The international governing body of gymnastics.

judge or a spectator and you're imagining yourself with a checklist [. . .] I would like to see gymnastics represent art much more than it is, and dance and ballet and a sense of a performance.

Thus, because of the transformation of evaluation from artistry-centered to athleticism-centered, the sport favored younger gymnasts.

Similarly, John H. Salmela, in his book *Competitive Behaviors of Olympic Gymnasts*, recognizes the early trend of younger gymnasts competing in gymnastics, blaming “the increasing demands placed upon gymnasts to perform even more outstanding athletic feats” on the “overall lowering of the average size and age of the gymnasts” (30). He claims that Korbut served as a role model for younger gymnasts, giving them “an international sport celebrity after whom they could model their own behaviors” (122).

While the current Code of Points maintains this emphasis on big skills⁵, better equipment has allowed older gymnasts to preserve their bodies and has given them more airtime to complete their skills, despite their more mature bodies. For example, the floor exercise mat and balance beam now have more springs, and the bars are wider. In addition, the vaulting horse has become a longer, wider vaulting table, allowing gymnasts to get more power and be safer. Miller-Phillips attributes this improved equipment for gymnasts' increased longevity in the sport, noting that the “overall equipment changes” and the decreased amount of pounding on a gymnast's body are factors that allow a variety of ages to excel.

Other changes in the sport have also contributed to the recent trend of older gymnasts. For example, after the 1996 Olympics the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) established an age limit requiring gymnasts to be at least 16 years-old in order to compete at World Championships or Olympic competition. As a result, gymnasts are forced to be a little older.

⁵ By “big skills” I am referring to harder, more acrobatic, and dangerous gymnastics elements with more flips and twists.

Interviews

In order to address the topics of stereotypes, comebacks, and older gymnasts, the documentary uses interviews⁶ from experts in the sport, including the following individuals:

- ◆ **Shannon Miller-Phillips-** Olympic gold medalist gymnast. Miller-Phillips, a two time Olympian and a seven-time Olympic medalist, made a brief comeback before the 2000 Olympics. At the 2000 U.S. National Championships she placed 2nd on bars but had to withdraw from the competition because of a knee injury. She petitioned into the Olympic Trials, where she further injured her knee, eliminating her chances of making the Olympic team. Because Miller-Phillips attempted a comeback with relative success, she comments on the differences between competing as a 15-year-old in 1992 and competing as a 23-year-old in 2000. Miller was also plagued with injuries before the 1992 Olympics (dislocated elbow) and the 1996 Olympics (tendonitis). Thus, Miller-Phillips comments on the differences in competing in a younger versus older body. In addition, she discusses the current challenge of the gymnast stereotype and provides insight as to why older gymnasts are able to be competitive.
- ◆ **Kristie Phillips-Bannister-** Gymnast. Phillips is a former gymnast and made a comeback into elite gymnastics at 27 years old. She comments on her comeback and why she decided to pursue gymnastics into her late 20s. During her comeback, she received some criticism and was even dubbed the “geriatric gymnast” by one newspaper. She comments on this media and public response and discusses the positives and negatives of her experience in the sport at both a younger and older age and her role in changing the image of the stereotypical gymnast. She also discusses reasons why it is possible for older gymnasts to make comebacks, such as better equipment and better health
- ◆ **Kim Zmeskal-Burdette-** Former gymnast. Former World Champion Zmeskal-Burdette competed in the 1992 Olympics at 16-years-old. In 1998 she attempted a comeback but injured herself before the 2000 Olympics. As a coach and former gymnast, Zmeskal comments on the difference between

⁶ Most of these interviews were performed at the 2004 USA Gymnastics Championships in Nashville, TN, on June 2-5.

competing as a 16-year-old and a 22-year-old. She also comments on the future of the sport and how the change in the gymnast image affects the way she coaches.

- ◆ **Mohini Bhardwaj-** Gymnast. At 25-years old, Bhardwaj was one of the oldest members of the 2004 Olympic team. In 1996 she barely missed making the Olympic team, turned to a very successful college gymnastics career, then decided to make one last shot at her Olympic dream. Bhardwaj comments on the obstacles she has gone through to pursue her comeback, including financial difficulties and injuries. She also explains her motivations of making a comeback, how her age and experience help her be a better gymnast, and why women can be successful in the sport.
- ◆ **Annia Hatch-** Gymnast. Hatch is an eleven-time Cuban national champion who moved to the United States in 1998. In 2001 Hatch made a comeback to the sport, competing for her new country. As a 26 year-old, Hatch became a member of the 2004 Olympic team and won the silver medal on vault. Thus, as an accomplished gymnast, Hatch is very qualified to discuss the role of older gymnasts in gymnastics. In addition, she compares doing gymnastics when she was younger and older.
- ◆ **Mary Lee Tracy-** Coach. Tracy, a former Olympic coach, has participated in the comebacks of two gymnasts—Dominique Moceanu and Kim Zmeskal. While neither gymnast was successful in making a second Olympic team, Tracy provides observations how these gymnasts differed from her younger, more stereotypical gymnasts. In addition, because she is an authority in the sport and is currently coaching six elite gymnasts, Tracy can speculate why gymnasts are attempting to make comebacks and comment on what she thinks the impact of such comebacks will have on the sport.
- ◆ **Bob Colorossi-** President of USA Gymnastics until 2005. As the head of the country's governing body of gymnastics, Colorassi had enormous impact on the sport. Thus, Colorassi gives insight as to what USAG's role is in the sport. Also, Colorassi explains his opinion on gymnasts competing when they are older and what it means for the country's program.
- ◆ **Elfie Schlegel-** Gymnastics commentator for NBC. Schlegel, a former Canadian gymnast, provides observations about the change in the gymnasts' image. She also gives insight and opinion on how the

media cover gymnastics. Because she is involved in the production process, she discusses what the network requires her to talk about and defends the language and images included in the broadcast. Since Schlegal has been providing Olympic commentary since 1988, she also comments on the change in gymnastics.

- ◆ **Paul Ziert-** Publisher of *International Gymnast* magazine. Ziert has been involved in the sport as a gymnast, coach, or publisher since the 1960s. As an expert in the sport, he provides backgrounds and history of the sport in general and insight to how the sport has changed through the years. In addition, because he observes the sport on a regular basis, he explains the impact—both positive and negative—of gymnasts competing at older ages. As a member of a gymnastics-related media, he comments on how his magazine differs from the popular media. Also, he discusses his magazine’s goals and how it portrays the sport.
- ◆ **Dave Black-** Photographer. Black is a regular gymnastics photographer who has had his photos published in a variety of forums: *Sports Illustrated*, *International Gymnast*, *Newsweek*, CBS Sports, etc. As a photographer since the early 80s and a member of the media, Black has had access to gymnastics meets, training camps, and practices. Thus, he gives insight to how he chooses to portray the sport, and he gives stories and explanations as to how the sport has changed since he has been a photographer.
- ◆ **Sian Beilock-** Psychology professor at Miami University. Beilock has done much research on topics such as stereotype threat and expertise. Beilock comments on how older gymnasts’ experience may give them a mental advantage over younger gymnasts because of the confidence and experience that allows them to concentrate more on the performance and less on the technical elements, allowing them to provide more artistic and mature qualities to the sport.
- ◆ **Patricia Clasen-** Communication professor at the University of Wisconsin-Rock County. Clasen’s work, as discussed earlier, focuses on the problems of being a woman and being an athlete in a society that associates athleticism with being male. Thus, she is able to comment on why the media

might focus on gymnasts as being young and dependent in order to justify their presence in this male arena. In addition, Clasen comments on how the media emphasize female gymnasts' femininity to make it easier to accept their presence in sports.

Learning Outcomes

This documentary's formation came after two years of careful planning and research. During this time, I faced many challenges, education opportunities, and successes; thus, creating this documentary was a learning experience on multiple levels. I gained valuable production and post-production experience and learned how to overcome problems and ensure success.

Production and Post-Production Experience

According to Bill Nichols, documentaries are supposed to "move us towards a predisposition or point of view regarding some aspect of the world" through "credible, convincing, and compelling representations" (165). Therefore, when I was creating my documentary, my goal was to be a credible, persuasive, and thorough as possible. In order to achieve this goal, I knew that I had to have quality footage, interviews, and editing that would help get my point across in the least distracting and most compelling way possible.

First, I paid careful attention to developing my production skills and choosing appropriate and quality equipment. In order to shoot the documentary, I purchased a Canon GL-2 camera, which I used for all of my shoots. I had little experience handling this type of camera (I had previously used low-end consumer cameras and high-end news cameras, but had never used anything in between). Therefore, I had to quickly learn how to use the camera's features and determine the settings that would give me the best quality and aesthetically pleasing final product. I took my camera on several practice shoots in order to become comfortable with it before my trip to Nashville. In the end, both my videographer and I were very confident in our abilities to use the camera and select the best possible settings; this allowed us to get quality footage.

I also had to become proficient with the other necessary production equipment—lights and microphones—in order to ensure that none of my interviewees were too dark or had sound problems. Therefore, like with the camera, I practiced setting up for an interview and worked with my videographer to be sure that she knew exactly what I wanted my framing and composition to look like. Unfortunately, at the National Championships there were not many aesthetically pleasing backgrounds; I had to compensate by using a black curtain behind the interviewees, which made some of the interview settings flat and undynamic (especially when the interviewees were wearing black). However, I am still pleased with the outcome of the interviews, and I did not encounter any real audio problems. During the Mary Lee Tracy interview at Cincinnati Gymnastics Academy, I was able to have more freedom of location and background; I framed her with balance beams and the gymnastics banners in the background. This framing was nice because it gave depth and personality to the interview.

In addition, I also focused on learning how to create a coherent documentary. In order to get the message across, it is important to choose an appropriate documentary mode and use post-production and editing to enhance the product. Through implementing documentary modes, I not only learned about the characteristics of the modes themselves, but I also learned about the importance of carefully constructing a message and selecting images and dialogue.

First, I decided to use a poetic introduction in order to attract the audience's attention. I left the images in black and white in order to reinforce that there is a stereotype; instead of giving the gymnasts color and personality, their images are homogenous and boring. I also used close-up shots that did not really show the gymnasts in their entirety—further keeping their identities, ages, and distinguishing characteristics relatively unidentifiable. This introduction contrasts the documentary's conclusion when the gymnasts are given full color; thus, they are permitted to have their own identities because the stereotype has been stripped away and the audience has been enlightened. While the shots are still relatively close-up, the gymnasts are identifiable and are allowed to be their own person rather than a black and white clone gymnast.

In contrast to this poetic mode, the rest of the documentary is created in expository mode with the narrator acting as a voice of God. I decided to use this mode because it is good at conveying information and easily gets points across. In addition, expository modes allow audiences to gain obvious answers and see noticeable cause-effect associations (Bernstein 401). While I appreciate the ambiguity of poetic modes and the statements reflexive modes make, I preferred to relay my message directly in order to reduce confusion. Therefore, I implemented the expository mode into my editing, as I used visuals to reinforce a verbal argument and evidentiary editing to form my argument. For example, I logically outlined my argument in the three sections (background, stereotype, and comebacks) and then used the interviews as evidence to support the claims. I also used the visual images to reinforce the interviewees and the narrator's claims; the visuals did not carry the argument by themselves.

Problems and Successes

Along with learning from my experiences with production and post-production, I also learned from the many problems and successes that I had during the documentary-creating process. By encountering problems and deciding how to overcome them, I have learned what tactics and decisions should and should not be made in the future. While creating *Perfect Form*, I had my most significant problems with footage and music. My major successes were obtaining interviews with top level gymnasts and officials.

First, I had some problems obtaining footage for parts of my documentary. While I got most of my B-roll of gymnasts performing during the 2004 National Championships, I did not have historical footage for the background section or footage of some of the older gymnasts making their comebacks. I tried to get this footage from several places. First, I contacted the International Olympic Committee to get historical Olympic footage. They directed me to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). The USOC informed me that the footage compilation costs would be \$250 per hour, and the license fee for the use of the footage in a film festival was \$2500 per minute for two years use. In addition, the license fee for use of their footage on PBS was an additional \$750 per minute. I decided that the footage was too expensive and the use was too restrictive, and I explored other avenues, such as using photographs rather

than video footage. This tactic proved to be worthwhile. I posted requests for photos on the Internet and received several replies. These photographers were willing to let me use their photographs with no cost or stipulations. For footage of the older gymnasts' comebacks, I immediately contacted USA Gymnastics' (USAG) video librarian, Kent Koven. Koven agreed to get me footage at no cost. However, because he is new at his job and the USAG library is unlogged and unorganized, this process took a very long time.

Next, it was difficult to obtain music for my documentary. I immediately found a song that I really liked—The *Ever After* main theme song. I decided to see how much it would cost to use the music in my documentary by contacting Fox Music, Inc. to ask for permission. Ted Spellman, the director of licensing, replied, telling me that the minimum fee would be \$250 for one year's use. Again, while I was willing to pay the money to use the song, I did not want to be restricted to how long and where I could show the documentary based on my contract with Fox Music. Therefore, I used the song as temporary filler and a model for what I wanted my song to essentially sound like. Eventually, A.J. Rickert-Epstien, a Miami student, offered me some music he and his friend Jason McKay created; this music was ultimately used in the final draft of the documentary.

Along with these problems, I also had many successes with this documentary, which have also contributed to my learning process. First, I learned that I must be assertive and willing to risk rejection in order to get what I need for my documentary. For example, during the National Championships in Nashville, I was given press credentials to gain access to the gymnasts and officials. However, it was still up to me to ask for interviews. While it was intimidating to ask Olympic Champions and TV personalities to let me interview them for a student documentary, I was surprised how the interviewees were so willing to help. Therefore, I had very few problems getting interviewees to agree to be interviewed; only one person declined my request (Marta Karolyi, the National Team Coordinator). From this experience I learned that taking risks and being forceful is necessary and beneficial, as I ended up getting a great deal of expert interviews by doing so.

Conclusion

In 1980, when the trend for younger gymnasts was not more than a decade old, Salmela predicted a conflict between the physical necessities of young, small, and agile gymnasts and the mental toughness and experience of older, more mature gymnasts:

Are we not soon approaching the margins that limit human capacity to perform? The elite gymnasts are becoming younger and younger, so young that the women's best performances are occurring during the prepubescent years. Will there be a cutoff point where advantages gained by lithe, light body structure will be traded off against the inability of the young mind to absorb the psychological stress? Or is the psyche at that age more resilient to such forces than was ever believed? ("Competitive" 129).

While gymnastics has changed tremendously since the 80s—better equipment, a new Code of Points, and a minimum age requirement—the contradiction between mental and physical toughness continues to be evident in the sport as older and younger gymnasts compete for top spots. However, despite the popular notion that younger is better and the stereotype that there is no room in elite gymnastics for women, the recent trend of women making comebacks and staying in the sport is revolutionizing the sport. Thus, it is important for the public and the media to acknowledge this change in order to disseminate a positive image of female sport and to reduce restrictive stereotypes and gender roles.

Appendix A

INTRODUCTION	
Video	Audio
Video: Black with images of gymnast	McCool: Very confident, very strong—physically and mentally strong.
	Patterson: Good body, like strong...good mentally.
	Fan 1 Daughter: A person that can do a lot. A person that has fun competing, and just a good all around person.
	Miller: Oh gosh. It's so hard to describe the ideal gymnast.
	Armine: The ideal gymnast obviously is talented.
	Fan 1: The ideal gymnast is...
	Vise: The ideal gymnast is...
	Miller: The ideal gymnast is...
	Betty's Friend: One that's determined
	Fan 1: Someone who has a sense of competition and a sense of all around good and character.
	Miller: Someone who has some talent but also is willing to work hard.
	Vise: Really strong, flexible...
	McCool: Aggressive.
	Vise: Have a good mind set.
	Armine: Hard worker. Dedication.
	McCool: Top level.
	Armine: Patience. Courage. Confidence.
Magazine/newspaper headlines (little girls), <i>Little Girls in Pretty Boxes</i> , etc.	Narrator: If there are so many ways to describe the ideal gymnast, why do we automatically think of little girls, tiny bodies, and childishness when we think of gymnastics?
NBC announce Olympic team	Narrator: On July 19, 2004 USA Gymnastics sent a message that gymnastics was not just for little girls when it named two gymnasts over 25-years-old to the U.S. Olympic Team.

	Narrator: Which leads to the question: What is the Ideal Gymnast?
Title: Perfect Form	
HISTORY	
Text: “At the start of my career, nothing was proven and gymnastics was simply a pastime, nothing more. I never set out to be ‘Nadia—the first gymnast to receive a perfect 10 in competition, with a new power and body-type that would change the face of gymnastics forever.’” - Nadia “Letters to a Young Gymnast”	
Video: Olga Korbut- 1972 Olympics	Narrator: In the 1970s two girls revolutionized gymnastics. In 1972, a Soviet gymnast named Olga Korbut, with her big smile, pigtails, and girlish emotions captured the media’s attention as people fell in love with her personality, appearance, and daring skills.
Text: Elfie Schlegal: Former Gymnast/ NBC Gymnastics Commentator Video: Elfie Schlegal interview Olga Korbut Ludmilla Tourischeva Elvira Saadi	Elfie: I think Olga Korbut had a lot to do with the body type changing in women’s gymnastics to the smaller athlete. Even though she was 17 years old in 72, she looked younger compared to her teammates. She was playful and I think that people remember from Olga in 72.
Video: Elfie Schlegal interview Nadia Comaneci	Elfie: But I think it was probably 76 with Nadia Comaneci. She was long and had elegant gymnastics. But she was 14 years old and she was probably instrumental in making a major change in women’s gymnastics.
Video: Nadia Comaneci on <i>Time</i> magazine cover	Narrator: By receiving the first perfect ten in Olympic history, Nadia Comaneci proved that perfection was obtainable and became a role model, standard, and stereotype for gymnastics.
	Clasen- We have a prototype because they were the first true stars of the sport. And maybe based on that we can’t leave that prototype out of our mind when we watch. And we expect all gymnasts to conform to that. They still really were fascinating to watch.
Video/Photo: CU of gymnast’s hands on bars	Narrator: It was the 18 and 19 year olds...and the 20 and 30 year olds...that dominated the sport for the first 20 years of the sport’s Olympic history.

Video/Photo: 1952 Olympics Maria Gorkhovskaya	Narrator: In 1952, it was a 32-year-old woman who dominated.
Video/Photo: 1956/60 Olympics Larissa Latynina	Narrator: The next two Olympics continued this trend with a slightly younger, yet still mature winner Larissa Latynina.
Text: Paul Ziert: Publisher <i>International Gymnast</i> Magazine Video/Photo: Larissa Latynina Vera Chavloskova	Ziert: Latynina who has won more Olympic medals than any athlete in any sport. She told us one time, I believe, that she was in the first part of her pregnancy at the Olympic Games. Vera Chavloskova, you saw her...she had a beehive and a French twist. They look like they could have gone to the prom just put on a dress and away they go. That was a beautiful time. I think people probably now demand a little more athleticism.
Graphic/Video/Photos: Timeline or montage of gymnasts, years, ages.	Narrator: With the trend of more athleticism set forth by Olga and Nadia, the top gymnasts for the next 24 years were below 20-years-old.
Video/Photo: <i>International Gymnast</i> cover featuring Simona Amanar	Narrator: However, the 2000 Olympic Champion, 21-year-old Romanian Simona Amanar, did not reflect this contradiction but led a field featuring an older, experienced, and more mature group of competitors.
Video/Photo: 2003 World Championships Svetlana Khorkina Oksana Chusovitna	Narrator: At the 2003 World Championships, 24-year-old Svetlana Khorkina won her third world all-around title, while a 28-year-old wife and mother, Oksana Chusovitna, won the vault title.
Video/Photo: Carly Patterson Svetlana Khorkina	Narrator: The 2004 Olympics exemplified a trend of older and younger gymnasts competing competitively against one another—the Olympic champion, Carly Patterson, was 16-years-old, while the silver medalist was 24-year-old Khorkina.
STEREOTYPE	
Text: “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.” - Joan Ryan “Little Girls in Pretty Boxes”	
Photo: Cover of <i>Little Girls in Pretty Boxes</i> Highlighted text from the book	Narrator: In her book <i>Little Girls in Pretty Boxes</i> , Joan Ryan claims that the world’s best gymnasts are children and that there’s no room for women in elite gymnastics...a statement to which many people disagree.
Video/Photos: B-Roll of gymnasts tumbling	Elfie: I’m not sure that I agree with that anymore. I do see the balance. I see young athletes trying to make this Olympic team that are tiny and you might put them in

and dancing	that category. But then I do see some of the older ones that are mature and add a different element in the sport. To me, it's a thing of the past. I think there's room for many styles and many different body types in the sport of gymnastics and I think that's what's so great about artistic women's gymnastics today. Is that you just can't say, "well she's going to win because she's got the perfect look."
Videos: B-Roll of gymnasts	Narrator: While the little girl image is gradually changing for participants in the sport, the image maintains its strength in the mainstream media.
Video: NBC 1992 and 1996 story	NBC- (1992) It is nothing more than a stamped medal disc suspended from a brightly colored ribbon. But separate journeys toward it tugged on the lives of little girls with oceans between them. Little girls who had traded their childhoods for a chance to dance in the Olympic Games. (1996) There's something in the air on this warm Olympic night. Do you feel it? Little girls dancing for gold in the Olympic Games.
Video/Photo: <i>Time</i> magazine cover with Kerri Strug and Bela Karolyi. B-Roll of gymnasts on beam	Clasen: The image of the cute little girl is such a classic one for the world of gymnastics and it goes hand-in-hand with the male coach figure. The idea of a father figure. If you think about the image of Nadia Comaneci with Bela Karolyi. If you think about then moving that forward to the pictures of him holding Kerri Strug when she won her gold medal. It is absolutely about being fragile, being dependent, and needing that male role there to support you—that they could not be a strong athlete in and of themselves as women. It keeps women from being too threatening to the notion of masculinity. We think in terms of polar opposites. Male and female is one of our standard dualisms. Masculine is a part of male, feminine is a part of female, the two can't cross. Athlete is associated with the masculine male domain, whereas female isn't. So the idea that a female is in the athletic realm is paradoxical. It doesn't fit.
Video: NBC footage	Narrator: Therefore, despite the fact that women gymnasts are becoming older, the media feel the need to rationalize their presence in the sport and continue to perpetuate the Nadia-Olga image of gymnastics.
Video: Shots of magazine articles	CLASEN- Ultimately it also does serve the function of making sure you emphasize the fact there are feminine first. If those women grow up. If they are older and have been in the sport longer, doesn't it become more of a threat?
Photo: <i>Newsweek</i> "It Hurts" cover	Narrator: In addition to portraying gymnasts as little girls, the media also tend to focus on the negative aspects of gymnastics such as diet, weight, and over-working.
Video: B-Roll of gymnasts	Elfie: I think the question that I've been asked the most often, and I've been covering the Olympics since 1988 is: are they too young, do they eat enough, should they be working as hard as they do. I think there's always the concern of...especially the age factor. I think in some ways I think it's not fair, because they don't always see the big picture, especially when they come on the scene very late in their careers, in particular Olympic years, and maybe they don't see the build up and the years that have gone into their training.

	Moceanu: I believe sometimes in certain interviews or certain reports on gymnastics they do focus on the weight, the body of the gymnast a lot more than maybe the mental aspect of the sport. But I think sometimes people lose the beauty of the sport when they focus on the negativities of it.
	Narrator: What about the media that don't follow gymnastics? Do they acknowledge the trend of older gymnasts, or are do they stick with the stereotype?
Video- B-Roll of gymnasts	Ziert: I think they think they are very young. And I think they think they are young girls who primarily do what they are told to do and they don't have any personalities and all they do is go to the gym and they never do anything...they don't have any other life...and they only eat salads. And that's what bothers me because our kids in reality are very, very normal young ladies, but they haven't been able to be allowed to show that, and that's very bad for our sport. The reality is that that's the persona they present because either the coaches or the directors of the program in the federation tell the girls that that's how you going to be.
	Narrator: So, the media are not the only ones to blame for the stereotype.
Video: Carly Patterson and Courtney McCool on studio TVs being interviewed B-Roll of gymnasts lined up	Ziert: If you've done interviews with them, you know. I just was speaking to somebody before; I got so upset with the athletes. You ask them, "how do you think you're going to do" before the meet. "I'm going to try my best." Oh my god, I hate that answer! Do you think there's anyone out on the floor who's not trying their best? I mean, that's like saying nothing, isn't it? It doesn't tell you anything about the girl. Oh good. You're very normal. Everybody tries their best. How are you different? We have no...we have no sass. The girls don't have sass. And we need a little bit of that...a lot of that.
Video: Marta Karolyi	Narrator: Despite Ziert's frustration with gymnastics officials' and the federation's control over gymnasts' images, former President of USA Gymnastics says that the federation does not try to control the image.
Video: Jumbotron in arena	Colarossi: We can't control the image. What we can do is control the sport. So we focus on developing well-rounded athletes. We educate athletes. We educate coaches. We educate parents. We have a holistic approach to what we do with the kids. It's all about good nutrition, good values, good work ethics. We let that work speak for itself. How the media portrays it is so far out of our hands that it's not something we even think about.
Video: Jumbotron in arena	Narrator: No matter whose fault the stereotype is, it is important to look at the impact such a stereotype might have.
Video: Mohini on beam	Sian- One thing that we've been studying in my lab is a phenomenon called stereotype threat. And this is the idea that when you're aware, someone presents to you a negative stereotype about how you should perform. So if I—taking it just in a different domain—I tell you women are really not that good at math. We know men are better at math. We've shown that just by giving someone that information can actually lead to the manifestation of a negative stereotype. So if an older gymnast get up to do their routine and they think "oh gosh, I know everyone thinks that I'm older and I'm bigger and therefore I should do more poorly," just being aware of

	that stereotype may cause a—what we think—may be a choking under pressure.
OLDER GYMNASTS COMEBACKS	
Text: “I hope that my perseverance in gymnastics, in spite of all the dim predictions that I was getting too old to compete successfully, has demonstrated to people that this is no longer a sport just for young girls—but also a sport for women.” - Shannon Miller “Gymnastics Balancing Acts”	
Text: Shannon Miller-Phillips- 7-time Olympic Medalist Video/Photo: Shannon Miller-Phillips interview Shannon Miller Dominique Dawes Kerri Strug	Miller: It’s hard to say why gymnasts are deciding to stay in the sport longer nowadays. I think part of it is just seeing that it’s been done. In 1992 it was really kind of a weird thing because after the 1992 Olympics almost everybody quit, and I was back in the gym three days later because I didn’t know any better. I didn’t know that you were supposed to stop then. It was just you didn’t know you were supposed to hang around for two Olympics, you know. And I think that now that more people have and then you see Dominique Dawes stay in for 3 Olympic Games and you go, “Wow! That’s possible! You can do that!” and all of a sudden it’s possible. It’s ok to want to stay in longer.
Kim Zmeskal: 1992 Olympian—made comeback at 22-years-old. Video: Kim Zmeskal interview Kim Zmeskal Or other 1992 Olympians	Zmeskal: I think we finally had a group of athletes that were so passionate about gymnastics at an elite level So once our gymnastics career was over for us in high school it was kind of “Where do we go?” “If I still love this and my body is still able to and financially I am still able to go in this direction, I am going to still do it.”
Video/Photo: Shannon Miller during comeback	Narrator: It was the love of gymnastics that kept Shannon Miller in the sport. A five-time Olympic medalist in 1992 and a two-time Olympic gold medalist in 1996, Miller made a comeback into the sport at 23-years old to try for a third Olympics.
Video/Photos: Shannon Miller interview Shannon Miller 1992 Olympics Shannon Miller 1996	Miller: I did gymnastics at some very odd ages. I did my first Olympics when I was 15. I was the young one on the team kind of the newcomer that really wasn’t expected to do much. And I got to go into those Olympic Games kind of as an unknown. I wasn’t really expected to medal so there wasn’t this- although there was pressure- there wasn’t just this huge heap of pressure on me. And when I was 19, I

Olympics	<p>tried for the 1996 Olympics obviously I was the older one and at that time 19 was <i>extremely</i> old to be a gymnast. We were the veterans, and we were the kind of old fogies, and they weren't sure we could cut it, and I got asked those questions a lot--do you think you can make it you're so old and that was hard to deal with. And then when I was 23 it was like You're just way beyond old we don't really know what to tell you and kind of the pressure was off again because I really didn't have anything left to prove at that point. I had medals I had gold medals and at this point it was just for me.</p>
Video/Photo: Shannon Miller 2000 Olympic Trials Shannon Miller 2000 Nationals	<p>Narrator: While Miller injured her knee at the 2000 Olympic Trials and was forced to withdraw from competition, she did prove that older gymnasts can be competitive, winning the silver medal on bars at the 2000 U.S. National Championships.</p>
Video/Photo: Shannon Miller Interview Shannon Miller 2000 Olympic Trials Shannon Miller 2000 Nationals	<p>Miller: I hope me being able to even try for the Olympics Games, and actually even being up there and it even being a possibility that I would have made the team at 23 I hope that that helps others see that there is gymnastics after 16, and after 19, and even after 21. I think maybe we needed an American to do that to show the American girls that you can do this too. It doesn't have to end if you don't want it to. I hope I was able to do that.</p>
Video/Photo: "Comeback Kids" IG cover	<p>Narrator: Miller's 1992 Olympic teammate Kim Zmeskal also made comebacks...first in 1994, which ended in injury...and again in 1998, when she placed 11th all-around at the National Championships.</p>
Video: Zmeskal during comeback	<p>Mary Lee Tracy: Kim Zmeskal started coming to Cincinnati for a job. She had finished her career, she thought and she wanted to coach with me. So she came here and we coached together for not quite a year and she came up to me and said "Mary Lee, would you coach me?" Of course I was honored, flabbergasted, and said yes. And Kim and I had a great time together and she pursued her career as long as her body felt like it could And she did things that she didn't think she could ever do again. And then when she decided it was time to stop, she coached for a while with me, again, and then moved on to owning her own gym in Texas.</p>
Video/Photo: Kim Zmeskal Interview <i>International Gymnast</i> cover "Comeback Kids" Kim Zmeskal comeback footage	<p>Zmeskal: I never felt done--I guess kind of is the best way to explain why I didn't want to stop. And really when I finally stopped at 23—a month before I was 24—I felt that it was time for my body. I started noticing injuries consecutively when I had very few when I was growing up. So I felt to be best for my body I should pay attention to these signs. You know what, I've had a good run and I've really enjoyed doing this, but I never really wanted to stop.</p>
Video/Photo: Dominique Moceanu 1996 Olympics	<p>Narrator: Training with Zmeskal during her comeback was Dominique Moceanu. A 1996 Olympic gold medalist, Moceanu made comebacks to the sport in 1998 and 2000.</p>
Video/Photo: Dominique Moceanu interview Dominique Moceanu competing/working out in	<p>Moceanu: I wanted to make my comeback for personal reasons. I wanted to prove to people that I could still be a great gymnast as I got older. People started to lose a little bit of faith in me and thought that I couldn't handle it or hack it as an older gymnast. And that wasn't the case.</p>

1998 or 2000.	
Video/Photo: Dominique Moceanu Comeback Footage	Narrator: Like the other older gymnasts, Moceanu's comeback was not without criticism.
Video/Footage: Dominique Moceanu Interview Dominique Moceanu 1998 Goodwill Games <i>International Gymnast</i> magazine cover "Look Who's Back"	Moceanu: 00112900: I definitely received negative comments and criticism...people not believing in me was one of them. Just saying that I was older and I couldn't handle it and my body couldn't take it...mentally I wasn't strong enough. I wanted to prove them wrong. Part of my comeback was, "I'm going to prove you wrong." I had that ambition and that desire and I wasn't going to stop at anything. And that's what made my comeback so rewarding. Because I remember winning the 1998 Goodwill Games all around title, and that was the one medal that I was lacking
Video/Photo: Dominique Moceanu 2000 Nationals	Narrator: Moceanu's comeback in 2000 was met with similar success, as she qualified to the Olympic Trials. However, her dreams of a second Olympics were halted, due to a knee injury.
Video/Photo: Kristie Phillips-Bannister Footage (1988)	Narrator: 1999 saw a more unusual comeback when 1988 Olympic hopeful Kristie Phillips re-entered the gymnastics world at 27-years-old.
Text: Kristie Phillips- Bannister- 1987 U.S. National Champion Video/Photo: Kristie Phillips-Bannister Interview Kristie Phillips-Bannister comeback Kristie Phillips-Bannister historical <i>Sports Illustrated</i> cover	Phillips: I made a comeback in the sport...don't ask me why. Actually, I'll tell you why. It was a dare. My husband dared me to do this again. I was working at a gym at the time just helping girls twice a week with choreography and stuff like that and the coach was like, "I dare you. I dare you." I'm like, "Don't ever dare me to do something, because I'll do it!" and low and behold there I was training again at the ripe old age of 27.
Video/Photos: Kristie Phillips-Bannister comeback	Narrator: Phillips' comeback was not without criticism.
Video/Photo: Kristie Phillips-Bannister Interview Kristie Phillips-Bannister Classic Meet	Phillips: think in the beginning people were like, "Yeah right. She's 27 years old." That type of thing. At my first Classic Meet I was called the geriatric gymnast in the newspaper the first day of competition. After I qualified for championships I was the "comeback kid."
	Narrator: Despite the criticism, Phillips' comeback turned out to be a success.
Video: 1999 US Championships standing ovation Kristie Phillips Nationals footage	Phillips: The most rewarding experience in my life and my most memorable was in Sacramento, CA at championships. It was my first year back so everyone was like "Oh my gosh. She's really going to do this." But I was the last competitor on the last event and I got a standing ovation. I nailed my floor routine. The crowd was on their feet. There were tears in everyone's eyes. I still remember Jackie Fie and Muriel Grosfield standing up with tears rolling down their eyes saying "go back on the floor. Take another salute." And I was up there waving, and it felt so good, and I had so much respect from so many people because I did it. It just felt so good.

Video/Photos: Kristie Phillips-Bannister 1999/2000 National Championships	Narrator: Phillips-Bannister successfully qualified for both the 1999 and 2000 U.S. National Championships, and then retired for good.
Video: Annia Hatch Nationals Footage Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals Footage	Narrator: The 2004 National Championships saw two survivors of its own, as Annia Hatch and Mohini Bhardwaj tried to prove older gymnasts could last in the sport and make an Olympic Team.
Video: Annia Hatch Nationals Footage	Narrator: Annia Hatch made a comeback to gymnastics after five years in retirement. A seven-time Cuban National Champion, Hatch moved to the United States in 1997. In 2001 she made a comeback to the sport, competing for her new country.
Text: Annia Hatch- 2004 Olympic Medalist at 26- years-old. Video: Annia Hatch Interview Annia Hatch Nationals Footage	Annia Hatch: Actually it was a quick decision. One day I was watching the internet and Alan was watching the Internet with me, and he saw one of my teammates doing gymnastics. And I said “oh. She has a son right now and she’s doing great. So why not just try and see what happens.
Video/Photo: Annia Hatch newspaper articles	Narrator: While some people had their doubts that Hatch could be successful as an older gymnast, she successfully made the 2003 World Championship team. In 2004, as the oldest member of the Olympic team at 26-years-of-age, she brought back two silver medals.
Video: Annia Hatch Interview Annia Hatch Nationals Footage	Hatch: Before was just “try to make everything. Try to represent the country.” Now, it’s try to just love what I’m doing and enjoy what I’m doing. Of course, try to represent the USA 100 percent.
Video: Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals Footage	Narrator: It was also for the love of the sport and unfinished business that Mohini Bhardwaj made a comeback to gymnastics after a successful college career.
Text: Mohini Bhardwaj: 2004 Olympic Medalist at 25-years-old Video: Mohini Bhardwaj Interview Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals Footage	Mohini: I decided to come back to elite gymnastics after my collegiate career was finished was that I was in a lot better shape after my collegiate career than I was before I came to college. I was more consistent...the skills I was doing were a lot harder, and I kind of just wanted to give it a shot.
Video/Photo: Mohini Bhardwaj 2001 World Championships Picture	Narrator: At 22-years-old, Bhardwaj became the U.S. National vault champion and a member of the bronze medal-winning 2001 World Championship team. Despite this success, her comeback was not without difficulties.
Video: Mohini Bhardwaj Interview Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals	Mohini: The only thing that’s hard about being an older gymnast is the fact that you have to pay for it yourself. I don’t have my parents helping me out, and that’s been a huge struggle for me. That’s why I had to quit for a year, because I was in debt.

Footage	
Video/Photo: Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals Footage	Narrator: Despite financial problems and injuries, Bhardwaj came back to surprise many by being named to the 2004 Olympic team. In Athens, she was the team captain and had a considerable role in the team's silver medal success, providing leadership and consistency.
Video: Mohini Bhardwaj Interview Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals Footage Mohini Bhardwaj World Championships photo	Mohini: My age has probably contributed to my gymnastics, and hindered it maybe a little bit. I can't train the amount of hours that the younger girls train because my body can't take it, but I also train completely different. The skills that I'm doing I've been doing for fifteen years. Whereas, some of these girls have only been doing some of these things for a year, two years...something like that. I've had many international competitions. So, I'm used to competing. I competed all through college. So, I'm used to doing lots of numbers. Mentally, it's a little bit of a different game for them versus me. As an older athlete...older athletes are more mentally stable. Their bodies are more mature...so are their minds. Gymnastics is really a sport where it's 80 percent mental, 20 percent physical.
Video: Mohini Bhardwaj Nationals footage	Narrator: So, if the secret to Bhardwaj's success was experience and mental toughness, is being an older athlete an advantage?
Video: Shannon Miller Interview Older gymnasts footage B-Roll of gymnasts	Miller: I think a lot of gymnasts nowadays are finding that they can stay in gymnastics longer because of the mental aspects of gymnastics and staying in there mentally is more important than staying in there physically. The physical stuff will come and you learn if you are mentally tough and you're mentally prepared and you have that experience those years of experience through competition and repetition of your routines you don't have to do as many routines physically. I know when I was doing it when I was getting into my mid-twenties and I was still doing gymnastics, I did a lot of routines in my head. And it sounds silly, but it really made a difference.
Video: Sian Beilock Interview Older gymnasts Footage	Beilock: One thing that older gymnasts might bring to the table, or one advantage they might have over younger gymnasts, is that they have experience dealing with the high stakes or high pressure situations that tournaments often take place in. And one of the findings from our research is that, if you can adapt to the type pressure situations you see in the test, or in the game situation, then you will be better equipped to handle the stressors when you get in that situation. So an older gymnast who has experience dealing with pressure situations know how to handle it, knows what sorts of things work best for them in those types of situations and may have some advantages over younger gymnasts who are experiencing all of this for the first time.
Video: Landing mats Tumble Trak Training devices	Phillips: 13:20:00: I think there's a lot of factors contributing to the older gymnasts coming back. One of them that is really important is the equipment and the type of training that you have now. You have all sorts of new landing mats that take the jarring out of you. There's Tumble Traks instead of always having to tumble on the hard floor. The impact...training devices have aided in less impact on the body so the body is able to physically last longer. So, I think the equipment has a lot to do with that.

ARTISTRY AND DANGER

<p>Text: “Before, people watched [gymnastics] to see grace, beauty, poise, and at the same time, tremendous athletic ability. Now, I fear it’s only to see the tricks.”</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">- Olga Korbut “Gymnastics Balancing Acts”</p>	
<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Narrator: While better equipment has allowed older gymnasts to preserve their bodies and give them more airtime to complete their skills, some argue that it can also be attributed to gymnastics’ evolution to a more dangerous, less beautiful sport.</p>
<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts in equipment</p>	<p>Moceanu: The sport has evolved already. Just look at the vaulting horse—it’s not a horse anymore. It’s a vaulting table to help the athletes get more power. It’s wider so the athletes don’t have to worry about missing it. The bars...the uneven bars...are wider now. You can throw bigger tricks. The girls are bigger they don’t have to worry about hitting their feet on the bars. The balance beam has springs in it now so they can do harder and higher tricks so they can fit them on there. The floor has more springs. A little more bouncier so they can handle those hard skills in the air and get the height to do them. So, already it’s evolved so much. How much more can it evolve without asking for things that are unreasonable? Sometimes you have to maybe step back and look at what are we asking of the human body. We can only ask so much.</p>
<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Normille: Well, I feel like as far as acrobatics it’s reaching the law of diminishing returns. You can only do so many flips and so many twists. And they’re pushing the limits so much that injuries are becoming more prevalent. That’s why judges need to discourage the acrobatics by judging harsher. Unless you can do every skill perfectly with your legs together and your toes pointed it shouldn’t be in your routine and you should not be rewarded for it.</p>
<p>Text: Betty Sroufe- Judge</p> <p>Video: Betty Sroufe Interview B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Sroufe: As time has gone by the expectations are so much greater, so much more that they have to accomplish. And secondly the skills have gotten so much better because the tools are so much better. So everything evolves from that. The harder they work, the harder the training, the better they become. I don’t know if you looked at the elite gymnastics but what they’re required to do is just astronomical. You’re just overwhelmed by what they can do. So that’s how it has evolved.</p>
<p>Video: Paul Ziert Interview Gymnasts doing hard skills (Nationals)</p>	<p>Ziert: Most of the problems were driven by changes in the code of points to try to eliminate cheating in gymnastics...surprising enough. They wanted everything to be absolutely empirical...absolute yes, no, yes, no. What you do is eliminate the flow of the artistry.</p>
<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Narrator: Many believe older gymnasts can help bring the artistry, beauty, and maturity back into gymnastics.</p>

<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Hatch: We do bring maturity and experience to the sport. There's no doubt about that. We have more years in gymnastics and we know how to attract the audience. It shows more, and that's good for the sport.</p>
<p>Video: B-Roll of gymnasts</p>	<p>Beilock: When you get to a really high skill level you often stop paying attention to every step of performance and your performance is often on auto-pilot. That's not true when you are first learning the skill—you have to pay attention to what you are doing. One thing that automaticity, or doing at that level can give you is it can free up attention so you can maybe concentrate on the more creative aspects of the performance of a floor routine for example. But if you're having to pay all your attention to exactly how your foot is going down as you start your tumbling pass, then you may not have attention left over to make sure that you're smiling or that you're interpreting everything correctly.</p>
<p>CONCLUSION</p>	
<p>Text: “By continually increasing the difficulty of the sport, we are discouraging younger athletes from starting and continuing in the sport.” - Rustam Sharipov, “Letter to the FIG”</p>	
	<p>Colarassi: The genesis of our sport is that I do a handstand you do a cartwheel. I do a round-off you do a back handspring. When you watch a competition that's what you're seeing. You watch the kids do different things on different events, and they're all trying to outdo each other. In 20 years from now they will continue to do that. And I think that they will continue to make improvements in the equipment too, which will allow them to make it to the next level.</p>
<p>Video: Fast clips of gymnasts</p>	<p>Narrator: But what is that next level, and what might it mean for women's gymnastics? Although the recent trend of women making comebacks and staying in gymnastics longer has revolutionized the sport and countered restrictive stereotypes and gender roles, it is important to look to the future of the sport. While gymnastics has changed tremendously and will continue to change, the contradiction between mental and physical toughness continues to be evident in the sport as older and younger gymnasts compete for top spots. Already, critics argue that the gymnastics federation's push towards “extreme gymnastics” may ultimately make the sport too dangerous and may discourage gymnasts from staying in the sport longer. Therefore, it is important that officials, participants, audiences, and the media acknowledge the importance of artistry and maturity and approach change with an eye on the past and on the future.</p>

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