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Athlete A: The Impact of Abuse on Athletes, Coaches, and Culture

Toya Marie Ballinger · Thursday, July 2nd, 2020

Gymnastics was my first love, that will never change. I love that sport. I believe in it. Even after being marred by a devastating sexual abuse scandal, I still believe in the fundamental goodness of gymnastics, and have always credited it with saving my life in many ways. But watching the newly released *Athlete A* has brought up a myriad of intensely uncomfortable feelings for me. This documentary is one that needs to be seen, but is also acutely painful to sit through. I expected it to be difficult to watch. What I did not expect was for it to make me question everything I thought I knew about the sport and my nearly 20 year dedication to it.

Seeing the same footage I grew up on of the '96 and '00 Olympics, the girls I once idolized, was unsettling. As a little girl I looked at their faces and saw their dreams coming true, saw how excited and proud they were, saw my own dreams personified. But I look at their faces now, see Bela Karolyi carrying Kerri and pushing her hand up to wave to the crowd, see her hobble onto the podium and force a smile through sobs while getting a gold medal, and it is heart wrenching and disturbing. As a girl watching Kerri Strug, I saw a gymnast who had done what we were trained to do, what we had all done at some point in our careers: ignore immense pain or serious injury and power through. And as a result of that choice, as a result of her bravery, of her silence in the face of pain, Team USA made history and won gold. Our country was catapulted into gymnastics greatness. Now, I see that her choice to do that second vault on a broken ankle, her sacrifice for her country, her silence in the face of injury, was not a choice at all. I don't see proud young women on that podium anymore, I see the faces of broken down little girls with no agency, who were so young and innocent that they lacked the emotional maturity to even understand the weight of the sacrifice they made. The same footage I looked at with wide adoring eyes as a child will haunt me now.

As a young gymnast, I loved Jamie Dantzscher as well. She was a powerhouse and an all around amazing competitor. Hearing her describe in her interview the memory of getting the flu and throwing up for a week straight only to come back and have her coach applaud her for losing 6 pounds made me burst into tears. There was a time when I also had gotten the flu and was out of the gym throwing up for a week. My first day back at practice I had lost the same amount of weight and felt terrible, weak, and could barely keep up. The owner of the gym saw me and his face lit up. He gave me a big hug and told me how GREAT I looked, so skinny, and to keep up the good work. I will never forget that day. I went home from practice that night, pulled my leotard off in front of the mirror and looked at my stomach. It did look skinny, it looked gaunt. And I felt proud. I thought, *wow, the owner noticed me*. I threw my lunches out at school for months after that. I went to practice having only eaten an apple, talked with my friends about how strong I was if I could make my body believe it wasn't hungry. I don't remember how long I did that for, but I do know that to this day if I can pinch anything on my stomach I equate it with being fat. In gymnastics, the tiniest girls always fly the highest and get the most attention, and I wanted to fly too. Being too big was the worst thing in my tiny world.

These body image issues have stuck with me my entire life. I have never been skinny enough, small enough, good enough. As gymnasts, our bodies develop in a very particular way and for many of us they stay that way into adulthood. I look at gymnasts and love their strong muscular bodies. But I was teased relentlessly for it in school. My muscles weren't feminine, my hands were ripped and calloused, my period was delayed, I didn't develop like the other girls did, didn't need a bra, even got mistaken for a boy in public once. I still look at myself and hate my broad shoulders and back, my muscular arms, I shy away from dresses and feminine clothing because I feel like I don't look like a girl in it, don't look beautiful in it. I look at a girl with small arms, a slender back, a small waist, full hips and I think see? She looks like a real woman and I don't. I pinch my stomach or see a spot of cellulite and feel disgusted with myself. I still deal with that.

Watching this documentary has also made me take a hard look at myself as a coach in this sport. I grew up in that era, was a product of it, coaching was different then than it is now. But I brought much of the rigidity and level of expectation I was coached with into my own style. I even found myself using the exact same phrases my coaches did, sometimes even before I realized what I was saying. I know I was a tough coach—at some gyms I was the toughest coach there. I didn't know how to be any other way. I wanted a tiny little army of tiny little girls in matching leotards, all performing the same way. Perfection was expected. Anything less was unacceptable. I think sometimes, much the same as many of the coaches of the athletes in this film, I failed to look at my gymnasts as individuals outside of gymnastics. Gymnastics is ALL there was, nothing else in the world mattered. This sport is so much about discipline, uniformity, obedience, choreographed movement, minute details, mathematically perfect timing, absolute perfection and nothing short of it. You must be both gymnast and physicist in order to excel. There is so much beauty and strength in these qualities, but there is also no room for error. No room for who you are as a person not tied to how you performed that day. That's what I knew as a gymnast, that's what I expected as a coach. In reality, these girls are more than a tiny army of perfectly groomed athletes, they are children with hopes and dreams and the desire to please. Just as I used to be. They want me to love and praise them, just as I needed that love and praise and would do anything to get it. I was once a little girl who came from an abusive home who adapted and modified my behavior daily, hourly, in order to please so that maybe if I did this right or that different, it would save me. It never did, but that pleasing behavior stuck with me long after the abuse stopped, it stuck with me throughout my years as a gymnast, was amplified and strengthened even by the sport, and in many ways has followed me into adulthood.

None of this is to say that I did not love my coaches. I absolutely loved them, I still do. They were my second parents. I wanted them to love me too. But I was also terrified of them. Terrified of disappointing them, terrified of being punished or chastised in front of my teammates, terrified of the frustration when I couldn't perform a skill to the level that was expected, terrified of their position as absolute authority figure which I had come to learn could so easily turn into a figure who might violate me. But despite all of these fears, nothing deterred my desperate desire to please, that craving to be good enough, talented enough to receive their praise. And praise, in the eyes of a child who'd been abused and was unfamiliar with positive reinforcement, was love in verbal form.

In watching *Athlete A* I saw another side of myself, and of gymnastics as a whole and how we coach it. Even as I feel I may have failed my former athletes in some ways, there are also areas in which I am proud to say I succeeded. I took the lessons I learned from the coaches I loved and tried to emulate them, and remembered the attributes of the ones I did not and did my best not to adopt those methods. It's a fine line you walk as a woman in the world at large, and the world of gymnastics is no different. Your every word and tone of voice is scrutinized. If you are too soft you are not respected, too harsh and you run the risk of being labeled the B word. As a young female coach, I understood this line and knew to navigate it carefully. I commanded absolute respect, my girls knew that when they stepped out on that floor it was time to work; but I also gave praise, hugs, high fives, smiles, encouragement, and pep talks freely and frequently. I tried to have a different relationship with each athlete, understood that in a male-dominated world my position in their lives had to be different from that of their male coaches. I definitely had a different experience with my younger athletes as opposed to my older ones. I loved my littlest group of 4–6 year olds, felt I was doing the most important job molding them into the athletes they could be, teaching them not just the physical basics they would need to succeed but the mental toughness that would be imperative as well. The innocence and desire to please in their eyes spoke to me like nothing else has. As for my older athletes, I wanted them to feel like they had someone in me they could relate to, that they could come to me with girl problems and I would understand, that I was there to talk to about things other than gymnastics if they needed. I knew that I was in the position to be that person for this group of young women and I understood that it wasn't a position to be taken lightly. My own past has taught me that you never know what kind of home your athletes are coming from. The gym may be their only safe space, you may be the safe adult or even the only mother or father figure in their lives. Even in the best of homes, teenage girls are going through a huge transition and having a female role model is exponentially important. As a coach, you wear an infinite number of hats, stepping into each of these roles for many of your athletes. You in many ways have more influence on them than their own parents and peers. They're spending more time with you than with anyone else.



When I look back on my time coaching, I always look back on it fondly. It's the only thing I ever loved. But if I ever do go back, I know I will not be the same coach I was. Watching *Athlete A* has changed so much of my perspective. I always looked at my girls with such love and wanted them to succeed, wanted them to take away from me and from the sport all the amazing life lessons of self-discipline, perseverance, tenacity, drive, ambition, passion, and strength coexisting with beauty, that I did. I also wanted them to be the best, to win, expected perfection from them at all times. Now I don't think I can view success in such narrow terms. I will know that sometimes even if the skill looks worse than it did the last time, even if I give them the tiniest correction and they are not able to implement it, that if they come to practice defeated or off, that if they fall 100 times

on something I know they can do perfectly, that it does not mean they are not trying their hardest. That sometimes their best won't look how I want it to look. I will look at them not only as gymnasts but as complete human beings with goals, hopes, dreams, needs, and also fears. In a sport where the skills demanded of you require a superhuman level of fearlessness, I will remember that fear is natural and there is much to be said for working through it with your athlete rather than shunning them for it. I will put greater weight on knowing that my responsibilities as a coach do not begin or end at the gym doors, that these little girls will grow into young women, and that every word I say to them will have an impact on how they see themselves. That when they go home at night after practice, what I did and what I said and how I made them feel, regardless of how they performed that night, will stick with them. That they should not be tying their self-worth to their performance, to being the best or the smallest, to not falling, to winning, as I did, and that they are worthy regardless of how they perform. That more often than not, when you perform the worst is when you need a coach's love and praise the most. I have to remember all the powerful life lessons that I took away from this amazing sport and make sure I impart those to them. But I also have to remember the moments when I felt worthless, defeated, fat, unsuccessful, undesirable... I have to remember that when I felt like a failure in the gym, I also felt like a failure everywhere else. And I have to do my best to make sure that those girls never ever feel like that. Because I know how damaging that is.

It was so hard to watch this documentary through the lense of a former gymnast, a former coach, and also as a survivor of abuse. I'm so disturbed that something so beautiful could also be so ugly, that these adults charged with the care of innocent girls could fail them at the deepest level. I understand what it is to be a little girl failed by the system, and it's damaging to see the system I loved so much is also one that failed so many other little girls. I hope Steve Penny, and all those who turned a blind eye to [Larry Nassar's abuse](#) for so many years, receive the punishment to which they are entitled. I hope that when they look in the mirror they ask themselves if their dream of a nation's gymnastics greatness was worth the sacrifice of generations of its youth. I hope they truly understand the damage they caused, the awesomeness of the responsibility with which they were entrusted, and the lives that are forever changed because of their inability to fulfill that sacred duty. I hope that USA Gymnastics as a system is changed at its deepest levels; only then can we begin to do the work needed to erase the black mark that has been left on this sport. I hope Maggie Nichols, formerly known only as Athlete A, is empowered by coming forward and speaking her name and truth. I hope that even though nothing could ever replace having her Olympic dream deliberately stolen from her, that she is finding her love for the sport again and can take pride in her NCAA titles. I'm so proud of the hundreds of survivors for the strength it takes to speak out and I wish them the continued strength it takes to find healing after this, and I hope it contributes to a broader culture where girls and women are valued, trusted, and protected. I hope this sport continues to succeed and instead of tearing girls down that it can do what it was designed to do: teach little girls that they can be and do anything, and that that is ultimately so much more powerful of a lesson than winning will ever be. We are torn down in so many areas of life, the sport we dedicate our childhood and life to shouldn't be one of them. I hope that one day I find my way back to the sport I loved so much and that I am better and wiser when I do. And I sincerely hope that in my years as a coach, I had half the impact on even one of my girls that all of my girls had on me.

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