

The Sources of Eating Disorders in Female Gymnasts

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In sports there can be an enormous amount of pressure placed on athletes to keep an ideal figure. This pressure to attain the "perfect body" creates dramatic side effects, leading to eating disorders devastating to the athlete's health and their career. Sports that have had the highest number of participants with eating disorders are women's cross country, women's gymnastics, women's figure skating, women's swimming and women's track and field. (McVey, 1994-2003) From a 1992 University of Washington study, it was shown that of 182 female college athletes, 32 percent suffered from an eating disorder. Within college gymnastics, 62 percent suffered eating disorders. (Ryan, 1995, p. 63) Although there is an equal possibility for males to suffer from an eating disorder, the incidences are extremely low. The enormous pressure placed on athletes originates from coaching techniques, competition officials, and the athletes themselves.

Depending on the individual and the coaching techniques employed, an athlete will go to great lengths to please their mentor. Coaches pressure their athletes to be thin by criticizing them or making reference to their weight. (Thompson, 2002) At age 17, weighing 96 pounds, gymnast Kathy Johnson was told by her coach that she looked like a balloon, and that he wouldn't enter her into the American Cup Competition until she lost at least 4 pounds. Johnson recalled that this remark was like being told that she was a horrible person; it devastated her. She began fasting, counting calories, and even pushed a chair in front of the refrigerator to stop herself from eating. (Ryan, 1995, p. 84-85) Another gymnast, Kristie Phillips, weighed 98 pounds and was called an "overstuffed Christmas Turkey" by her coach, who also stated that she would never make it in life because she was going to be fat. (Ryan, 1995, p. 10) While traveling, Bela Karolyi, the

most well-known coach in the USA, fed his gymnasts very little and monitored their hotel room doors to ensure they were not sneaking in any food. Karolyi tends to be extremely up front with his girls about their weight. Some say that he is far too abusive with his athletes, and some excuse his behaviour because of the successfulness of the athletes he has produces. (O' Connor, 1997) Some coaches, though not necessarily through verbal abuse, also push their athletes into eating disorders. At a gym in Texas, where the American Olympic Team trains, the gymnasts are weighed as they enter the gym every other morning. If their weight goes up by any noticeable amount then the athletes are expected to train longer that day. Not only does the girl whose weight went up put in extra training, but also all the girls on the team put in more time. He says that this makes them resent each other, which creates a good athlete in competition. (Ryan, 1995, p. 70) These girls take everything their coaches tell them to heart. They want to please their coach no matter what, and if that means losing weight, then they will sacrifice their food and health. When these gymnasts lose weight and their coaches tell them that they look great, it reinforces that they are doing the right thing. After taking a break for a few days from the gym to go see her family, Kathy Johnson had lost weight, changing her body type from strong and muscular, to thin and balletic. She returned to the gym only to be praised by her coach with compliments like, "You look great!" and "you' re skinny!" (Ryan, 1995, p. 85) Although telling herself to keep dieting, because it was pleasing her coach, Johnson was extremely weak. Tricks she had performed easily in the past were suddenly the most difficult. She even shattered her elbow joint days after returning from her break. (Ryan, 1995, p. 85) The way coaches push their athletes today is damaging to the potential success of the individuals and the team. Gymnasts are being

centralized in gyms around the USA to train to be the best only to years later come out with no Olympic dreams being fulfilled and a diminishing health through an eating disorder.

Judges push gymnasts into eating disorders by rewarding those who are more petite. In 1976 the average gymnast was 5 foot 3 inches and weighed 105 pounds. In 1992, these averages plummeted to a height of 4 foot 9 inches and weighing only 88 pounds. (Thompson, 2002) Judges of sports where the athletes are evaluated on technical and artistic merit have admitted that they consider thinness to be an important factor in deciding excellence. (Rader Programs) Some officials have even told athletes that they should lose weight if they want to achieve their athletic goals. Fifteen-year-old Christy Henrich weighed 90 pounds and was 4 feet, 11 inches. After returning home to the USA from a world competition in Budapest, she announced to her mom that she had to lose weight. Christy explained that an official in Budapest told her that she would never make the Olympics unless she lost weight. (Ryan 1995, p. 55) This is when Christy virtually stopped eating. Christy trained harder and did everything she could to keep her weight at a sickly low, less than 90 pounds. After recovering from mononucleosis and a fractured vertebra in her neck, she missed the cut for the 1988 Olympic team by 0.118 of a point. Henrich was absolutely devastated. (Ryan, 1995, p. 58) This pushed her even more. She was determined to make the Olympic team the next time around in 1992. To do this she remembered what the judge had told her, "Lose weight!" With many injuries from her weakening body Christy's dream disappeared. She was 18 and weighed 80 pounds. (Ryan, 1995, p. 62) She became so weak and unhealthy that she had to retire from the sport of gymnastics. In another incidence, after the 1984 Olympics, a top American

official told Mary Lou Retton "You know, if I could, I'd take half a point off just because of that fat hanging off your butt." (Ryan, 1995, p. 59) Gymnasts are high achievers and have perfectionist personalities. If someone tells them they could be more successful if they lose weight, they're going to believe them. Judges are the ones who are supposed to be awarding the athletes for their accomplishments, not criticizing them into unhealthy habits that lead to hospitalization and devastation.

A female gymnast knows that she is not physically capable of performing the same once she hits puberty; therefore she forces her body to stay in pre-pubescence. Most women need 17% body fat to menstruate; many athletes strive for 10-14% or less. (anred, 2002) By not eating, the menstrual cycle is virtually shut down. Without the nutrients provided by food the body knows it cannot support a fetus, and therefore stops the arrival of puberty. Without menstruation a girl is not producing estrogen. Without estrogen her bones will weaken and she risks stunted growth along with premature osteoporosis, bone fractures and curvature of the spine. Many female gymnasts starve themselves to keep their child-like bodies, in order to prolong their career as gymnasts. (Ryan, 1995, p. 9) These girls often see their sport as an achievement worth making sacrifices for. They try to justify eating disorders to themselves through their awards and medals. (anred, 2002) After everything she had been through, Christy Henrich taught herself to feel no pain and no hunger. She even trained with broken vertebra in her neck, disobeying doctor's orders of rest and a brace. She starved herself, but never felt hunger or pain. (Ryan, 1995, p. 59) Christie's mom stated, "Eating disorders are not just about weight but about self esteem. These girls feel they never measure up." (Ryan, 1995, p. 60) Shannon Miller, a three time Olympic gymnast, was only able to continue in the sport by keeping her twenty year

old body looking twelve. The nature of a female adolescent is to constantly feel that she is not good enough. There are few girls who accept themselves for who they are, which leads them to mental states of disapproval of their physical appearance and weight. This drives them to become thin, leading to eating disorders, and makes it difficult for athletes to continue in their sports.

The pressure to look ideal and to be thin is placed on gymnasts at such a young age that they cannot comprehend what is right and what is wrong. By the time they are old enough to realize what is happening it is too late. Christie Henrich died at the age of 22; the result of an eating disorder which had plagued her since she was 15 years old. (Rader Programs) These athletes' bodies are constantly being assessed by coaches, judges, and spectators; it is easy to see how they can fall into the detrimental trap of an eating disorder. (Rader Programs) The successfulness of an athlete has become very personal for coaches, and they will tell their athlete anything that they think will make them win. In the past, these sports like gymnastics and figure skating have been about the athletic ability of the competitors. Now not only is it about the athletic ability, but also about the physical appearance of the athlete. These girls know what their coaches and judges want to see and will do anything for a compliment, not always understanding the risks they' re taking. Cathy Rigby, a 1992 Olympian, suffered from anorexia and bulimia for 12 years, and went into cardiac arrest twice as a result. (Thompson, 2002) Eating disorders are serious diseases, and in order for things to change, this must be recognized and emphasized to the coaches, judges, and athletes involved in these elite sports.

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