Culture

Simone Biles, of the United States, celebrates after performing in the floor exercise during the women's artistic gymnastics all-around finals in Bercy Arena at the 2024 Summer Olympics, Aug. 1 in Paris, France. (AP photo/Charlie Riedel)

by Ellie Roscher

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I was 4 years old when Mary Lou Retton stuck the landing of her vault to earn a perfect 10.0 and the individual all-around gold medal in the 1984 Olympics. I was instantly hooked and started the sport immediately. At the end of my first practice, I asked, "Can I come back tomorrow?"

I was competing by age 7 and started traveling for bigger meets. By the 1988 Olympics, I studied International Gymnast and USA Gymnastics magazines. I was a little girl with big muscles and dreams of moving to Texas to train with Bela Karolyi. Flipping, twisting and flying were all I wanted to do.

During the 1992 Olympics, I was a 12-year-old watching 16-year-old gymnasts compete. I was already taller and heavier than most of them. Puberty signaled the end: When other athletes were just getting started, gymnasts had "peaked." Although I continued to compete in Division III college gymnastics, it was at age 12 that I understood I must adjust my dreams. I was too young to realize the human-made structures that allowed some gymnasts to thrive more than others.

Then Simone Biles hit the scene and changed the sport forever.

Before 2006, the gymnastics code book changed every four years. Each skill was worth a certain amount of difficulty. A gymnast's job was to create a routine that was worth a 10.0 in difficulty, and then perform it perfectly. Setting perfection as the goal influenced gymnasts to make their routines as easy as possible, while still being worth a 10.0.

But in 2006 the International Gymnastics Federation changed its scoring system, and the idea of the perfect 10 disappeared. In the new scoring system, the harder the routine is, the higher the score could be — and the highest score wins. This change set Simone Biles up to become the best gymnast in the world.

Strong and powerful, capable of big skills no one else can perform, she is able to fly as high as she can and win even if she breaks form or even falls. Unlike gymnasts of yore, she is not limited by the weight of perfection.

Since winning both the team and individual all-around gold medals in Paris, Biles has secured a total of 39 medals between the Olympics and world championships. She

currently has five skills named after her (for being the first one to compete them). She is the only gymnast ever to have competed four skills valued at H or higher on the floor exercise. Under the new rules, big gymnastics is encouraged — and Biles has the biggest gymnastics the world has ever seen.

But the new scoring system hasn't just encouraged big, imperfect gymnastics, it has also encouraged longevity. The sport from which I felt washed up at age 12 is over. Four of the five women on the 2024 Olympic team are returners, compiling the oldest U.S. women's gymnastics team since 1952.

2024 marks the third Olympics for Simone Biles, who is Catholic. She is now 27 years old. She's married. She's a woman. The rule change is giving girls who are watching a much different runway for their dreams. What's more, four of the five women on this team are women of color, making it the most diverse team in history, too. This also matters deeply for the little girls who are watching.

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I was theologically raised by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. One of the many things they taught me was when a rule, policy or law was passed, we should look to the margins and see how the most vulnerable people in society will be affected. I was taught that noticing who makes the rules — and probing their self-interest — matters, and that it takes a compassionate community to call for rules that support a preferential option for the poor.

Sure, elite gymnastics is not public policy; but because of how the nuns raised me, I watched the 2006 rule change with rapt attention. Who was making the rules? Who would thrive under those rules? The little girl inside of me, the one who thought she was too big and too old to dream, was happy to see how the scoring change shifted impressionable children and teenagers away from an obsession with perfection.

The rule changes supported Simone Biles to thrive. And in her thriving, Biles is changing the sport by speaking up about abuse, harassment and mental health. In 2018, Biles revealed that Larry Nassar sexually abused her. She also said USA Gymnastics failed to protect her and knew that she was abused. Then in 2021 at the Tokyo Olympics, after balking on a vault in warm-up, Biles decided to withdraw from the competition, citing mental health issues.

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Biles' decision to withdraw was criticized by some, but I joined many others in being deeply heartened. As a young gymnast, I learned to ignore my body even when it was trying to communicate danger to me. I thought my job was to conquer fear, but there is a cost to pushing through at every turn. As a Catholic who believes in Mary's holy "Yes," I believe that "No" can be just as holy.

When Biles joined the other gymnasts in naming Larry Nassar as an abuser, called USA Gymnastics to do better protecting athletes and withdrew from the Olympic competition to protect her own well-being, I thought of all the little girls watching. May they understand that Biles' "No" was a holy one — and that "No" is a complete sentence.

I hope more young athletes — and indeed, all of us — can take her cue and be brave enough to listen to our bodies and prioritize our physical and mental health instead of pushing through when it feels unsafe. I hope more of us can say, "*No. Enough.*"

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