

Media Impact On Elite Gymnasts

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ABSTRACT

The historic gold medal win by the U.S. women at the 1996 Olympic Games prompted a media blitz resulting in book deals, appearances, prime-time specials and the first professional U.S. gymnastics tour. This research looks at the effects of media attention on athletes. Twenty female elite gymnasts were interviewed about the impact media messages have on their lives. Results reflect the voices and experiences of the elite gymnastics community, yielding responses subsumed under six negative categories and five positive categories of how the media impacts these women.

Keywords: elite gymnastics, media, self-esteem, Olympics

INTRODUCTION

America's fascination with gymnastics has developed with the help of the mass media. The American public is drawn to the stories of sacrifice, hard work and personal struggle. The girls who compete at the elite level of gymnastics are constantly in the public eye. Each year, approximately 30 gymnasts are selected for a spot on either the Junior or Senior Elite National Team. Gymnasts qualifying for a spot on the U.S. National Team represent the United States at major national and international competitions.

Since the pool of elite gymnasts is so small, those making the National Team are thrust into the spotlight. Results are broadcast on television and printed in newspapers and magazines. Their most spectacular mistakes are replayed in slow motion and analyzed by experts. During televised broadcasts of competitions, height and weight are flashed across the television screen. Commentators publicly critique the bodies of female gymnasts and the message that one needs to be thin to win is ever-present. This coincides with Wolfe's (2000) claim that the media's favorite images are skinny models, so it is no wonder that gymnasts are among the favorites targets of photographers and reporters.

Every gymnast has a story, which is told and molded by the media (Ryan, 1995). Historically, when a star gymnast falters in competition, the media never fails to emphasize the intense pressure that plagues her. There have been occasions when a gymnast has faltered in major competition and the media coverage consistently compares it to the fall that knocked sixteen-year old Kim Zmeskal out of medal contention during the 1992 Olympic Games. Ironically, it was the media that pinpointed Zmeskal as the future Olympic gold medallist—two years prior to the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. One moment of failure in a career full of glory gave the media an opportunity to run rampant with accusations of child abuse, intense pressure and the disappointment of failure.

During televised gymnastics competitions, emphasis is placed on the personal stories of the gymnasts. In an effort to build consistency with the Olympic movement, NBC established five principles—story, reality, possibility, idealism and patriotism. "Story is what connects the gymnasts to the viewer; it is what gives life to the facts" (Borcilla, 2000, p. 125). NBC's stories are what Brooks (1976) sees as the crucial site of melodrama, "the drama of recognition" (pg. 27). Storytelling is a familiar media entertainment strategy (Smith, 2001). Melodramatic segments about gymnasts from impoverished countries, media-hyped rivalries and personal struggles dominate televised competitions. Foreign gymnasts are often portrayed as being forced into gymnastics as a way of making a life for themselves or to bring pride to their homeland. In reality, their goals are the same as the American gymnasts, to be the best they can in a sport of their choosing.

There are also stories about previous failures or falls that have marked gymnasts like Kim Zmeskal, Vanessa Adler and Kerri Strug. "The injection of soap opera into sports is the result of targeting a female audience who say they are more interested in story than in results" (Reibstein, 1996, p. 34). The story of eighteen-year-old phenomenon Vanessa Adler supports Reibstein's claim. At age fifteen, Adler was singled out as the gold medal hope of the Sydney Olympics. Feeling the pressure of "failing" even before competing in the Olympic Trials, Adler left her longtime coaches in search of a change. For months, her departure was the topic of every televised competition. In a journal entry on her official website, Vanessa spoke candidly about her situation:

I will stand firm that it was personal reasons I chose to leave, and in all interviews I gave, I said I wanted a change, but no one was satisfied with only that explanation. I do feel if my coaches had not given the interviews they did that this situation would have gone away. So that's what is bothering me the most. The coverage has made me and my family look like I had no feelings and just coldly left. Please use common sense and don't read into the media because they only want a good story. The reasons I left are personal, between my coaches and myself, and I am not going to let the media push me into a mud sling (www.atler.com).

Atler's story is different from the stories presented by the media, and reflects the need to hear the voices of the elite gymnasts' as they make sense of how the media impacts their lives.

This research uses storytelling as a conceptual framework. Fischer (1989) claimed that the narrative paradigm presents "an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication—assuming all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture and character" (p. 57). It is the individual stories of each gymnast's positive and negative experiences with the media that will shape the results of this research.

To appreciate a narrative approach, it is important to understand how stories emerge. Essentially, life is a series of experiences. With each positive and negative experience, individuals must go through the process of sensemaking. Three questions ground the theory of sensemaking: (1) how do members construct realities, (2) why do they attempt to do so, and (3) with what effects (Weick, 1995). Once we understand how a situation or event affects us, we then are able to share our story with others.

The stories of elite gymnasts are embedded in strict training and personal growth. Elite gymnasts typically train 35-40 hours each week and range in age from 13-24, a period which marks significant personal development. Like teenagers worldwide, elite gymnasts struggle with body image issues. In 1998, the Bread for Life Campaign surveyed over 900 young women, ages 18-24 and published their results in its 'Pressure to be Perfect' report. The report found that 25% of young women were happy with their weight, 61% felt inadequate compared to the media's image of beautiful women and 91% felt it was bad that the media always portrayed so-called perfect women. Like teenage girls worldwide, elite gymnasts must deal with issues of body image and self-esteem. The difference is that elite gymnasts are forced to grow up in the public eye.

Self-esteem is defined as the way in which "...one consciously thinks about oneself as one considers the discrepancy between one's ideal self, the person one wishes to be, and the perceived self or the realistic appraisal on how one sees oneself" (Reasoner, 2000).

Battles with self-esteem are not limited to teenagers, as it is human nature for all individuals to struggle with self-esteem at some point in life. Brigham (1986) explains how esteem is not static:

We develop and maintain our self-concept through the process of taking action and then reflecting on what we have done and what others tell us about what we have done. We reflect on what we have done and can do in comparison to our expectations and the expectations of others as well as the characteristics and accomplishments of others (p. 59).

While outside factors such as socialization and peer interaction help to shape us, the mass media is a key factor in the development of the female self-concept. Clothing labels, media hype and gender stereotypes all contribute to the ways in which girls form their identity (Fitzell, 2000). Self-esteem, self-concept and identity are closely linked to communication, as individuals are constantly checking, confirming and altering their sense of self through acts of communication. This checking occurs with interpersonal communication and media messages (Cathcart, 1986).

In a sport that demands perfection, it seems likely that the pervasive media coverage has an influence on the self-esteem and self-confidence of elite gymnasts.

It is easy to see the potential sensemaking effects of media coverage on elite gymnasts; however, there is currently a lack of empirical research on this subject. In addition to the pressures of competing, elite gymnasts face constant media coverage. At a time in their lives when self-concept is crucial, it is likely media coverage plays a part in shaping these girls' sense of identity. The best way to understand how messages of self are communicated via media is through the sensemaking and storytelling of the elite athlete. Thus, the following question is advanced for research:

How do the messages sent by the media influence an elite gymnast's sense of self?

METHODS

This study is descriptive empirical research that takes a qualitative/interpretive approach. Qualitative research allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of some phenomenon. In-depth interviews allow the voices of the participants to be heard. As such, semi-structured interviews were used, meaning that although the nature of the questions was the same for each participant, the results and experiences were unique.

Because this research is based on the concept of storytelling and personal narrative, the researcher used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) developed by Query and Kreps (1995). "This method involves gathering self-reported data about subjects' most memorable positive and negative experiences within a specific, social context. It is a straightforward, powerful, systematic, tightly controlled, yet adaptive, qualitative research strategy" (Query and Kreps, 1995, p. 63). This method is extremely useful in identifying behaviors that contribute to the success or failure of individuals in a specific situation. This technique, accompanied by probing questions on the part of the researcher, yields personal, powerful data.

To be eligible for selection, subjects were required to meet at least one of the pre-established criteria set by the researcher: 1) gymnasts must have won a medal in World or Olympic competition, and/or, 2) gymnasts must be U.S. National Team members with international experience. This criterion ensures media coverage and exposure. Prior to interviews, a consent form was mailed to each potential participant. Once the form was returned, emails were sent out to each subject to secure an interview date.

Data was obtained by conducting interviews with 20 female gymnasts who met the criteria and were interested in sharing their stories. Interviews were conducted either in person or via the telephone. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their positive and negative experiences with the media. On average, interviews lasted 20-30 minutes. All interviews were recorded using speaker phone and a handheld tape recorder. Immediately following interviews, the researcher transcribed tapes, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant, and all tapes were destroyed.

With transcription complete, Constant Comparative Analysis was used to analyze the data. Constant Comparative Analysis, developed by Straus and Corbin (1990), is a way to categorize qualitative data. This study used open coding, which utilizes a three-step process. The first step was to separate data into one of three lists (positive comments, negative comments and "other" comments). The result was three separate and lengthy documents. The second step was to combine the statements and to create mutually exclusive labels, resulting in 51 negative comments, 98 positive comments and 40 "other" comments. After careful thought and scrutiny of this data, all of the data was subsumed under six broad categories of negative comments and five broad categories of positive comments. The "other" comments contributed to the overall conclusions of this study.

RESULTS

Through open coding in Constant Comparative Analysis the researcher identified six categories of negative comments, which encompassed the overall responses of the participants. The six categories are represented in the following table.

Table 1. Negative Categories of Gymnasts' Experiences with Media

Category 1:	Misrepresented By The Media
Category 2:	They Created Media Darlings
Category 3:	Made For TV-The Effects of Dramatization
Category 4:	The Exploitation of Personal Issues To Sell A Story
Category 5:	The Impact On Self-Esteem As A Result Of The Media
Category 6:	I Was Thrust Into The Spotlight

Misrepresented By The Media

Results of the interviews showed that misrepresentation by the media was a main concern. Participants consistently commented that they had experienced times when their words were twisted around or taken out of context. As a result, a totally different message was sent to the public. Three common fears emerged from the participants: "I was always worried about saying the wrong thing," "I don't want the media to get the wrong impression of me," and "I worry that the media will take an innocent situation and twist it around." The following direct quotations help exemplify these fears:

Because I was so shy I think I came off differently than I actually am. I came off soft-spoken and just this little quiet person who didn't really say much or feel much. That's what I was pretty mad about. They thought that I didn't have any feelings just because I wasn't bubbly or excited all the time.

You want to portray yourself in the right light. You learn after awhile that they can cut-and-splice and do what they want. You'll think, "wait, I didn't say that!" It can be very hard at times.

When I was younger media coverage was a stressor for me. I wanted to prove the commentators wrong or show everyone that I could do this. Or maybe I made some comment about one of my teammates that came out wrong-it was extremely upsetting.

Obviously these three participants were not prepared to deal with the media and learned the hard way how to portray themselves. Their experiences were negative until they learned, through time, how to deal with the media. It is likely that members of the press are used to dealing with individuals who are seasoned in speaking with the media and forget just how green elite gymnasts are in dealing with the media.

They Created Media Darlings

With every Olympic cycle, the media creates a new "darling." Unanimously, it was Kim Zmeskal in 1992, Dominique Moceanu in 1996 and Vanessa Atler in 2000. Several of the participants spoke candidly about the creation of "media darlings" and what it's like to be favored by the media:

My life changed dramatically following the Olympics. I knew that the media would be watching every move I made and everything I said would be recorded. I was fully aware that my life as I knew it was over. I was not prepared at all for this change. My family was not prepared either. In fact, I think that the whole experience has really affected my parents to this day. I come from a very small coal-mining town and my folks lead a very slow and simple life.

My parents were bombarded with hundreds of requests daily to be interviewed. They were not comfortable in front of the cameras and still not comfortable to this day. I had to get comfortable with it all because I had no choice.

The following quotation is typical of many gymnasts' feelings: "The media attention was great, except that even now I feel like I have to live up to gold medal standards in all aspects of my life." Obviously, the build-up of media has had profound effects on the participants of this study as they acknowledge how difficult it has been to deal with the aftermath, when glory fades and they must branch out into other facets of life.

While certain participants were media hyped, others were constantly fighting for attention. Participants spoke candidly about how frustrating it is to constantly be overlooked by the media:

I felt like no matter what I did, it didn't matter because I wasn't the darling. It's not like they were outright mean, but I was overlooked. No matter what I accomplished it just wasn't good enough. After awhile I was like 'screw this! I'm on top and your darling isn't.'

On multiple occasions, participants spoke not about themselves, but teammates who had to fight for a chance in the spotlight:

There were girls like Cathy (fictional name) who the media never favored and never gave the benefit of the doubt. Commentating-wise, it was horrible. At certain events she would look like she was going to win the meets and they wouldn't even highlight her in the coverage. I remember at one meet, her coach marched out of the filming because they were so upset that the "darlings" kept getting the spotlight. She'd been around a lot longer and didn't ever get the respect.

It is apparent that participants had strong feelings about being a "media darling." They fully understood that sometimes the media selected their "darling" based on personality, not results. While all concluded that media coverage is necessary to promote the sport, participants agreed that the media places too much emphasis on one individual and disregards the rest. Then, later, when a non-hyped gymnast wins big, the media suddenly wants to shower them with attention. Coincidentally, there was also lengthy discussion on how being so heavily favored can physically and mentally affect elite gymnasts.

A lot of the time they put so much pressure on one person. The last Olympic cycle it was Annie (fictional name). It was all her. It's too much pressure to put on one person who needs to be worrying about their sport. It pretty much broke her down. You can't do that to someone and expect her to be fine. They built her up and as soon as she failed, they turned on her. It was hard to watch. I can't even begin to imagine the way she felt.

Made for TV-The Effects of Dramatization

The world is captivated by the stories and personalities of the gymnasts, so the media delivers. But where is the line between reality and dramatization? Elizabeth (fictional name) describes her frustration at the intentional dramatization of her decision to switch gyms.

What I am most upset about is the TV coverage. This has been the most painful thing for me, even more than missing out on my dream to be an Olympian. I tried so hard to put an end to the whole situation. My family and I turned down interviews about all this, hoping it would go away. But it never did. This isn't anyone's business and I don't know why they can't let it go.

In addition to frustration about intentional dramatization, participants claim that the media inappropriately feeds gymnasts lines in order to add drama to a story. In doing so, the gymnasts often felt uncomfortable and unable to express themselves accurately. Instead of telling a story in their own words, they are expected to deliver a line for the camera.

We had to say these lines that the TV crew fed us. On the broadcast they had this clip of me introducing myself and saying, 'I am a World Champion.' My friend told me that her friend asked, 'Why is she saying it like that?' and my friend was like, 'she was told to say that.' I guess it kind of gave off the wrong image. I would have never said that, but that's what they wanted me to say.

It is evident from the collected responses that the drama weaved into broadcasts of competitions, it is at times, overkill. Lydia (fictional name) explains, "I like looking at the Olympic stories, but when every single athlete has some saga story it gets to be unrealistic."

Unarguably, the entertainment industry is huge in the United States. Viewers need to be entertained. It is not surprising that networks have integrated the entertainment component into sports broadcasts.

The media coverage in the United States is so different than the international coverage. Here they make stories out of everything-there always has to be drama. In Europe we get straight coverage of the events, minus the fluff.

The Exploitation of Personal Issues To Sell A Story

Eating disorders, coaching struggles, family problems, rivalries, psychological problems and injuries are all examples of recurring topics that are discussed in context with elite gymnastics. While these topics make interesting stories for the general public, they are rarely treated with sensitivity and often times blown out of proportion by the mass media.

It is one thing to try to overcome a negative situation, but having it be the focus of a newspaper article, book or television profile brings an entirely new level of stress and pressure into the life of an elite gymnast. Sarah (fictional name) talks about the uncomfortable experience of having personal issues made public.

It sucks when the media starts digging into your life and brings up a personal problem. When someone has a problem, they need to talk about it, but not with the media, because then everyone in the world knows about it. It makes an already difficult situation worse, because you start to worry what the public thinks and you feel like people are always waiting to see what will happen to you next.

Sarah's concern is representative of the feelings of the majority of elite gymnasts who contributed to this research. Discussion of weight and eating disorders was prevalent, particularly since gymnastics revolves around appearance, body lines and form. A number of participants felt that the elimination of displaying the height and weight of competing gymnasts across TV has helped to move the broadcast media away from focusing on weight. Katie (fictional name) expressed her feelings on the subject.

The media needs guidelines, especially when dealing with height and weight. They have stopped putting them on TV, which is good, but they still need to step cautiously around these issues. One comment can hurt so badly. I don't think it even needs to be mentioned. Why does it even matter?

Ultimately, if weight is an issue for an elite gymnast, it is up to her coaches and parents to help correct the situation. Listening to reporters make comments like, "she's gotten a little chunky" or "I bet she misses the days of being skinny" do nothing but anger the gymnasts and make them feel bad about themselves.

Another topic of frustration among participants is the constant negativity towards the age of the elite gymnast. Historically, elite gymnastics was a sport for the young. Ever since 1996, there has been an influx of older, talented gymnasts proving their ability to compete again at the elite level. Kellie (fictional name) was constantly questioned and critiqued by the media purely based on the fact that she was a 19-year-old elite gymnast.

In '96 they kept saying how I was 'over the hill' and I let it get to me. It was really tough on me, cause I felt like I had to prove myself because I was older. So by 2000 I got to the point where I didn't give a flyin frick what they said. They could have said that chickens were gonna fly and it didn't even phase me. I had my mind made up. I knew I was 23-years-old and that my body was going to ache differently than those other little girls. But I didn't care. As long as I was having fun and accomplishing my goals, then it was like 'screw em'. I stopped reading articles and watching TV because I didn't want to hear it.

In addition to age, participants expressed concern over the media's need to discuss family struggles. Participants described hearing commentators discuss their parent's divorce on national television, which was extremely painful. In one very public situation, a private family dispute was plastered across the front pages of newspapers, the focus of magazines and aired on television shows like *Dateline*. Not only did the media coverage invade this gymnast's privacy, but it tarnished a reputation and destroyed a family. For the participants of this study, this situation was damaging to both the sport and the gymnast.

When the media gets a lead, they run with it. Like with Amy (fictional name) after she divorced her parents. All gymnasts want media coverage, but when the turn it against you it can be catastrophic. Whose business is it if she divorces her parents?

The Impact On Self-Esteem As A Result of The Media

In discussing the effects of media, participants made it clear that negative media coverage has the potential to affect self-esteem. For younger gymnasts, new to the elite scene, being an overnight sensation is stressful, especially since with the accolades comes criticism. Casey (fictional name) recalls her experience:

It took me a long time to learn how to blow things off. A lot of times I won't even listen to the commentators on TV. A lot of girls need to learn how to deal with the negative. It takes a lot out of you. I know my self-esteem about myself and my gymnastics suffered because of it.

Comments made by the media can be damaging to an elite gymnast, who still is in the process of forming her identity and opinions about herself. Carolyn's (fictional name) quote is supportive of this statement:

The worst thing for me was the fact that they were always talking about how I couldn't deal with the pressure and that I was always the bridesmaid. You hear that all the time when you are 12-years-old and you start believing it.

While some participants quickly learned to take negative comments in stride, others were unable to ignore comments made by individuals who clearly had no idea of what they were experiencing. Briana (fictional name) gives us her perspective on this issue.

My worst experience was watching the NBC broadcast of U.S. Championships on TV. The commentators kept saying 'she could at least be a little bit happy about it.' They had no idea of what was going on in my mind. Or anything about the pressures that were on me or the fact that my leg was broken in half and I could hardly walk.

The participants agreed that the most damaging form of media is the Internet. This was not an issue of concern for elite gymnasts until the late 1990's. Now anyone in the world can access the Internet and they are free to post anything they wish. While fans have created fabulous websites honoring the accomplishments of elite gymnasts, there are multitudes of message boards and chat rooms where fans, who have no personal ties to the elite community, will pass judgment on a gymnast's weight, routines, personality and success. Cara (fictional name) explains how damaging the Internet can be:

There have been a couple of times when I've been like 'I can't believe they said that.' I've seen stuff on the Internet and just can't believe how rude they can be. People have commented on my weight and stuff. At first you can't believe someone would say that without even knowing you. It takes a strong person to look at their own self-worth and to ignore it.

Participants acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to overlook the comments made by fans. While some participants force themselves not to enter these chat rooms and message boards, others find themselves constantly checking up on the latest gossip and then stressing over the comments.

I Was Thrust Into The Spotlight

The final area of concern is the lack of preparation for dealing with the media. Participants recalled feeling overwhelmed, unprepared and intimidated by the media. Of the 20 participants, five had received formal media training. The other 14 participants received no preparation, which ultimately hindered their ability to interview successfully. The following three quotes were recurring throughout the research. "It took me a long time for me to be comfortable giving interviews." "I just kept laughing and didn't know what to say. I've gotten a lot better now." "I was so nervous at first, especially at the press conferences which are really nerve racking."

The participants felt they would have been able to portray themselves better if they had been briefed on what the media was looking for, how many members of the media would be present at a conference and what type of setting interviews would be conducted. Many participants expressed frustration at not knowing how to be interviewed and then having themselves portrayed incorrectly.

In addition to the negative categories, this research uncovered five positive categories of media messages and impact. The five categories are represented in the following table.

Table 2. Positive Categories of Gymnasts' Experiences with Media

Category 1:	Media Coverage Is A Motivator
Category 2:	Increased Coverage of Elite Gymnastics Is A Step In The Right Direction
Category 3:	The Good Guys-The Importance Of The Educated Media
Category 4:	Vaulting Into The Spotlight
Category 5:	Media Exposure Is An Avenue For Personal Growth

Media Coverage Is A Motivator

For most of the participants, receiving attention from the media, in any capacity, is a motivator. It seems that the recognition and extra attention that comes with being an elite athlete drives the gymnasts to maintain their status. Melanie (fictional name) explains this phenomenon: "Media coverage definitely motivates people. Especially around Championships. When the cameras are on, people start doing better."

The participants expressed appreciation for the fact that members of the mass media spend time covering gymnastics. They also were adamant about how exciting it is to read a positive magazine or newspaper article. Erica (fictional name) explains:

I enjoy seeing myself in a magazine and reading a good article about myself. It's a good feeling and it gives me a little boost when I'm not having such a good time. The last couple of years my shin was about ready to fall off and it helped a lot.

The participants made it clear that being on TV and in the public's eye was a big deal. Jenna's (fictional name) comment is representative of this type of response:

It was such a motivator. When I was little I'd watch people on TV. Then when I started getting interviewed it was so cool because I was up there with my idols. Media coverage is always encouragement to keep going and to keep improving.

Increased Coverage Of Collegiate Gymnastics Is A Step In The Right Direction

In what participants agree is a step in the right direction, collegiate gymnastics has received an increased amount of coverage since 2000. Instead of a brief mention in a magazine, collegiate gymnastics is consistently shown on television and receives a wealth of coverage in print. The Internet has been a fabulous tool in promoting collegiate gymnastics, as fans can get live stats from competitions, biographical information on collegiate gymnasts and recruiting information.

A trend has emerged since 2000, as prominent elite gymnasts have maintained their eligibility and pursued collegiate gymnastics careers. This trend has elevated the standards of collegiate gymnastics and given much needed attention to a very important aspect of gymnastics. Lana (fictional name) explains the importance of college gymnastics:

College gymnastics has changed our sport. These girls have made it to high levels and are still competitive, which is awesome. We've moved on from the days of retiring at 17-years-old. These girls made it to the top of the sport, received full scholarships and are right up there with the best in the world. They excel in athletics and academics and are perfect examples of being gymnasts. We need more of it, so little girls can accept that their bodies change and that they can be in control of their gymnastics.

The emphasis on collegiate gymnastics has helped to shift the global image of a gymnast. Instead of waif-like children dominating the sport, audiences can see that older, mature gymnasts can still excel. Cara (fictional name) further explains this shift in perception.

College gymnastics shows gymnasts who are developed. I'm 5'4" and people are always commenting on 'how tall I am for a gymnast.' College gymnastics is all about maturity and is beautiful to watch. If you want to see the high flying skills, you watch elite gymnastics. But if you want to see artistic and showy gymnastics, watch college. It definitely needs to be highlighted more, so people can see that you can be mature and still be a great gymnast.

Responses show that the media coverage of collegiate gymnastics, which emphasizes team, is extremely positive compared to the coverage of elite gymnastics. Participants feel that college gymnastics is an excellent showcase for gymnasts, especially since they do not feel the pressure of being the "media darling." Participants also unanimously agree that collegiate gymnastics is sending out positive messages and is motivating for young gymnasts to watch. They feel that the level of coverage needs to continue, so "young gymnasts can see college gymnasts who are older, bigger and still kicking butt."

The Good Guys—The Importance of The Educated Media

Participants agreed that while a number of the media assigned to cover elite gymnastics are uneducated about the sport, there are some very good reporters, journalists and commentators who work in the field. Participants also agreed that they are more comfortable with members of the media who know the sport of gymnastics, as Molly (fictional name) explains:

I enjoy talking to the educated press and can speak well with them. I really liked it when NBC came to my house to do a profile. They did a very nice, touching piece. I wasn't one of the most popular gymnasts at the time; it was my first year as a senior and it helped me to get a little more recognition. People who hadn't really known me as a junior got a chance to know my personality, thanks to the great job they did.

In recent years, the number of former elite gymnasts who have entered the broadcast communication field is increasing. For the participants, this dramatically helps reduce the stress of doing interviews. Emily (fictional name) gives her perspective on interacting with the press:

Within the circle of elite gymnastics, there are certain reporters you would prefer to talk to. There is a woman doing a documentary on elite gymnastics and she has been following a lot of us around since 1998. She was involved in our careers and a lot of us developed a relationship with her. A lot of the commentators are former gymnasts and it's nice to catch up with them. Some of my old teammates are now commentating, which has helped the sport tremendously. It also takes the stress out of interviewing.

Participants reported that through positive interactions with the media, time, and maturity, the educated media can make a difference in spreading positive messages about gymnastics. Ellen (fictional name) emphasizes her experiences with the educated press. "In dealing with members of the press who are gymnastics-savvy, I don't look at the media as an adversary anymore, but as a group of people who want to know what's going on."

In discussing the importance of educated media, the participants expressed their concern about how important it is for new elite gymnasts to be able to communicate comfortably and honestly with members of the press. Kelsey (fictional name) expresses the feelings of many of the more experienced participants:

The new elites need to understand that media coverage is such a big part of our sport. Without it, there is no reason to compete. If TV doesn't have access to us, the world doesn't have access to us and then people do not know us. That hurts our sport. We need to be more open to letting the educated media have the access they need.

Vaulting Into The Spotlight

As previously discussed, becoming a "media darling" brings its share of stress and pressure. But for those elite gymnasts who have made it, the experience is unforgettable. Kirsten (fictional name) recalls what it was like to be in the spotlight:

I don't think I'd ever want to get away from it; it's awesome. Not because of the popularity of glory that comes with the attention, but because I am never going to forget my team or my accomplishments. What we did was awesome. There is no way that I am going to dismember myself from it. When I was training for 2000 I focused on what I could do then, not what I did in 1996, but I used that success to motivate myself.

For the elite gymnast who has spent years quietly working in the shadows before making it big, the moment they vault into the spotlight is unforgettable, as Lisa (fictional name) describes:

I worked so long and so hard and it all culminated in Atlanta. Atlanta made me. If the media didn't frame it the way that they did, I wouldn't have received the support and notoriety that I did.

Participants agree that one benefit from the media spotlight is the recognition it brings to all involved in a gymnastics career.

When I made it big, the media coverage helped to get publicity for the sport of gymnastics, but it also allowed us to be some of the most recognized athletes out there. Our coaches and families were recognized, which was great. The media really supported me and my teammates.

Great success in gymnastics can happen overnight and when it does, it can be earth shattering. Natasha (fictional name) explains how drastically her life changed as the result of her success.

1996 was not as bad for me as it was for the other girls. I had my experiences from '92 to fall back on. It was a change though. We won medals in the U.S., in front of the hometown crowd. We had two weeks of in your face-get used to always having a camera on, people lining up for autographs, craziness. You have to understand that if you are going to be successful you will be on TV and you have to get used to that kind of lifestyle.

In an effort to relieve the pressure from one or two gymnasts, the focus has been on giving the attention to elite gymnasts, when it is deserved. Lynn (fictional name) describes this transition:

This is something that has been a big focus. NBC just came in to film the promo for the American Cup and they were a little frustrated by it. The spotlight is great, but it's even better when it's deserved. We are starting to reach a point where they are allowing the girls to prove that they need media attention. It's neat to see that there are these two girls, introducing themselves as 'I am a World Champion' and you know that 99% of America is like 'who are these girls?' It makes them curious and want to know, without hyping the girls up into something that there weren't. I know that the media attention can take a career from awesome to superior and open up a lot of opportunities. But once someone proves themselves they deserve it. Now our World Champions feel like, 'Wow, everyone is watching me.' But they are more prepared and more deserving. It comes with the territory and they have proved that they can handle the pressure.

Media Exposure Is An Avenue For Personal Growth

Reflecting on media coverage from the beginning of their elite career until the end brings mixed reactions from participants. All agree that they have an excellent record of an outstanding period of their life, but even more, they can see their maturity and growth as time goes by. The following responses were common among participants. "I could hear myself communicate and express myself better as time went by," "My people skills and communication skills improved with each interview," and "Media coverage made me aware of my appearance and body language." Perhaps Ariana (fictional name) best sums up the responses:

My comfort level grew tremendously, which was obvious. When I was younger I was intimidated and didn't know what to say. I was clueless. Then I got to a point where I realized that the media is just an avenue that can help you if you want it to. Ultimately, every gymnast has to realize that you have to focus on doing your job, which is gymnastics. Just having life experiences helps a lot.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In response to the research question, media exposure has both positive and negative influences on elite gymnasts' sense of self. In fact, the data reveals that gymnasts need a way to make sense of how media exposure has such an influence in order to understand the difference between who they are and how the media presents them.

In talking with participants, it was exciting to hear them describe their positive and negative experiences with the media. Several participants claimed that this study marked the first time that anyone had approached them about a subject that so deeply impacts their careers. All of the participants were enthusiastic about describing their experiences, which made the task of collecting data much less daunting.

The results reported here reflect the opinions and feelings of a talented and experienced group of gymnasts. While participants reported more positive experiences, they appeared to be more fervent and elaborate in describing their negative experiences with the media.

The researcher has come up with three conclusions based upon the elite gymnasts' experiences. First, media exposure needs to recognize gymnasts for the hard work and effort involved in preparing for elite competition. Second, the tone of media coverage needs to consider the pressures faced by the gymnasts and shift their tone from negative to positive. Third, and most importantly, elite gymnasts need to be trained on how to deal with the media.

When describing their training, participants were adamant about the need for media coverage that demonstrates the hard work and effort involved. The following quotation was common among participants:

We need to push for more recognition of all the hardwork and effort that goes into gymnastics. Not just emphasis on competitions, but more of the day-to-day effort. These girls train 40 hours a week from the time they are six and there are people out there who don't know it or don't believe in them.

In regards to pressure, the majority of participants discussed the need to shift the tone of media coverage from negative to positive. Participants also commented about the increasing need for media professionals to be knowledgeable about elite gymnastics and the sacrifices necessary to excel at the international level.

Pressure needs to be covered in a positive light. Women's gymnastics gets a lot of attention because the girls are so young. Everyone is out to see how "we" are being damaged by the sport. And one of those "damaging" things about gymnastics is the pressure. Most of us thrive under pressure. We train eight hours a day so we can compete well. And with any competition comes pressure. Any elite athlete at that level has such a strong, competitive fire in them and all they want to do is win. Pressure can be good, it helps to get that extra bit of fight out of us."

Based on the responses of the participants it is evident that elite gymnasts need to be trained in the handling of media as another facet of their preparation to excel. For elite gymnasts, whose entire world is based around structure, consistency and preparation, being unprepared for media interviews is an awful feeling. Elite gymnasts train extremely hard to reach success and crave the same type of training in all aspects of life. Becca (fictional name) summed up the need for media training:

Media training is so needed. The girls are young and need to be "coached" in this area as well. My biggest pet peeve is to see an interview with one of our gymnasts and hear the same answer, "I just want to go out there and have fun and hit all my routines." No they don't. They want to go out there and WIN. They need media training to help pull out their personalities.

All 20 participants became elite gymnasts between the ages of 10-12. As their success grew, so did their level of media coverage. For a young child, the transition from interviews with a hometown paper to appearances on network television is quite different.

After analyzing the comments made by participants, three possible media training suggestions have emerged from this study.

1. USA Gymnastics or private clubs should bring in local journalists and TV crews for media training days where gymnasts can participate in mock interviews. It is beneficial to watch teammates and coaches go through the interview process. By seeing themselves on video, the gymnasts will become aware of their body language, speech and overall presentation.

2. USA Gymnastics should hold peer-mentoring sessions with veterans and new elite gymnasts. Mentoring sessions allow for the sharing of personal experiences and an opportunity to express concerns to a trusted group of individuals. Peer mentoring is also a good time to inform gymnasts of their rights.
3. The next generation of elite gymnasts needs to learn to focus on their gymnastics and to do their best to ignore the media coverage. Parents and coaches can help to shelter gymnasts from the media hype.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research. Due to sensitive topics including eating disorders, coaching relationships and rivalries, it was difficult to get some of the gymnasts to open up. The issue of confidentiality was another limitation. There were two media-hyped gymnasts who refused to be interviewed, as they felt their stories were too well known. There were also a few parents who were adamant about keeping their daughters sheltered from the public's eye. These parents felt that participation in the study would generate attention to outside pressures. Although this research represents individual experiences of a unique sample, the experiences of very well-known gymnasts was hampered by the very nature of the research topic.

Memory and maturity also were issues. Some of the subjects were attempting to recall events and emotions that occurred 10-12 years prior to this study. During that time, as the gymnasts matured, their perspectives and opinions had time to shift. Ultimately, this research provides a much needed forum for elite gymnasts to discuss the impact of media. The results of this study indicate a need for media training and present a variety of opportunities for future research.

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