Hanging in the Balance: Gendered Identity in Elite Sport

by

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ABSTRACT

Elite experience and careers in judged female sports complicate the binary categories of retirement while they are especially exposed to cultures of abuse, pressure and subjectivity. This thesis is comprised of multiple voices and experiences from the elite female athletic perspective, including my autoethnographic narrative. Highlighted and discussed are the topics of sexual assault and abuse, family pressure on children to do and excel at sport, the National Team experience representing the United States and subjected bodies and judging. It is an aim of this thesis to culminate all of those factors in the final chapter and hold that the experience and the cultures of athletic identity within synchronized swimming, gymnastics and figure skating not only cannot be explained by current research on athletic identity through retirement but have the capability to retire undeveloped young women by overdeveloped athletic identities. Through a sampling of voices and experiences across different female judged sports, over three decades, the reader will observe similarities that cause these sports to have a culture of solidarity through the aspects they hold in common with each other. The narrative highlights pivotal moments in the lives of the elite female athlete within these sports, which add to the calculation of their athletic identities and the lack of their personal identities. Through reflection and analyses of not only my story, but the interviewees from my original research and that of Joan Ryan's as well, I aim to voice a mutual experience of elite athletes. Consisting of multiple factors throughout many years we will see through my autoethnography, paralleling with other voices and experiences, how it all intersects and contributes to this: Who am I now and where do I go from here?
DEDICATION

To my family. If for nothing else, it is my hope this narrative brings closure, understanding and awareness to all we experienced.

To all of my sporting sisters, may you find peace and appreciation in your past, present and future.

And to the spirit of sport, may you once again find purity and hope for future generations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My family and the webs we have weaved are complex and my recollection and perspective of my childhood and my family are anything but definitive. It is important for me to tell my truth while conveying the respect I have for my family and the heartfelt gratitude for all they have done for me. I will include the moments I feel should be included, but out of respect for my family, past, present and future, I will not include certain names and may change the identities of those who took part in the stories I tell. I would like to thank my brother and my mom, especially, for the opportunity to open this conversation and be honest with each other.

In addition, I would like to clearly state my intention regarding United States synchronized swimming. My full intention is to write everything that is truthful and honest and I will not fabricate any situation I experienced to over dramatize my participation in the sport. All sports are tough, cruel at times, rewarding at others and unique in their challenges and politics. synchronized swimming is not immune. And just like every other sport, these aspects have direct effects on their participants. I am proud I was a synchronized swimmer. The synchronized swimming governing body in the United States allowed me the privilege to represent myself and my country at some of the highest levels of competition we have in this sport and for that, I am and always will be grateful. Also, please note synchronized swimming has recently gone through a name change to artistic swimming. For this project, I will regard the sport as synchronized swimming or “synchro” as this is the name I grew up with and the content within this thesis pertains to a time when the sport was called synchronized swimming.

Further, I would like to acknowledge the interviewees who add their invaluable history, realities, experiences, emotions, and perspectives to this project and to my life. The
expertise and insight the interviewees provide adds an incredible amount of depth to the voice of those who have experienced the implications of elite athletics.

Thank you, also, to my partner, who is always willing to drop what he is doing to listen to me read through this document, come up with questions and support all of the effort and time that went into this. Thank you for your love and enthusiasm.

Lastly, I would like to thank Arizona State University’s Social Justice and Human Rights program for giving me an incredibly fulfilling experience, Dr. Allan Colbern for being my voice of reason, anchor and mentor, Dr. Lindsey Mean for giving valuable insight and knowledge into sport research and academia and Dr. Jeffrey Kassing for being the catalyst to this document and believing my story is worth telling.
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INTRODUCTION

The Myth

Sports should empower, but this is a myth that harms female athletes. Synchronized swimming is a judged and largely female sport. The score, ranging from a 0.0 to a perfect 10.0 is the factor of which all rankings are created, and all audiences anticipate. This judgement may hold the key to history books that reveal past champions in each event category. The score may even dictate an athlete’s career: To be or not to be a champion, to be or not to be an Olympian, to be or not to be a finalist. However, the score alone that is so visible to the outside spectators and, no doubt, has influence on the internal athletes and their experiences, only tells a small part of a much larger narrative. Imagine a National Team athlete who wants to suppress and forget about her past 15 year career where she was crowned champion dozens of times, where she earned the opportunity to travel around the world to compete and where she got to wear red, white and blue in the name of competing for her country. Shame… Not on her but on the environment that caused an impact such as this. As I will show in the thesis, two interviewees, who were also on the National Team Program, stated that they hadn’t thought about their experience since they happened 6-7 years ago! How do we spend in the upwards of 15-20 years doing something we seemingly love just to try and suppress all of our successes and experiences once we retire? Where is the pride to represent Team USA? Where is the so-called empowerment the sport should have given you?

Drawing from interviews and autoethnography, this thesis presents the reality that exists when sports fail to empower. Under this light, it becomes clear how it is just easier to
suppress traumas experienced during one’s athletic career, rather than share them, understand them, or even acknowledge that they happened. It is better to forget than to remember the verbal and emotional abuse from some National Team coaches, the subjective judgment and selection based on the muscle-to-cellulite ratio and the length of your thigh, the overwhelming pressure, scrutiny and control from your coach, who was supposed to be your parent, and for some, the physical sexual abuse that rendered decades of young women and girls voiceless and invisible. There is a story behind a 15-year career representing the United States, getting to travel around the world, wanting to be forgotten, ignored, pushed aside, rejected.

Sports should empower. This is widely believed by society and re-affirmed by parents, children, grandparents, college athletes, Olympians, Professional Baseball players and most everyone in between. The power of sport as an institution, where athletes are taught memorable life lessons like “Never give up,” where they learn to work with a team, where they learn character building traits, strong work ethic, and fierce determination, has deeply engrained this myth that sports empower. Society believes in the teachers, coaches, yoda’s and guru’s who exist in institutions of sport. That is their profession. They’ve won X amounts of championships. They were so-and-so’s coach. They came from the dominating Eastern Bloc. They must know what they’re doing. They’ve created champions, but more importantly, your child can become a champion. Indeed, it is this very belief that provides us a peace of mind when dropping off our kids at the gym for 8 hours a day, or at the pool 6 days a week. Little concerns is placed in leaving them with their trusted coach. This thesis explores the harms experienced by female athletes from a very early age, throughout their careers, and into adulthood, revealing how this sport’s empowerment is problematically mythologized. Empowerment is possible; but it is often the exception, not the rule.
Coaches have the capability to be a lead influencer in a child’s life. Sometimes, a coach spends more time with the child than a parent does, depending on their training schedule. A coach can shape the values of the child, become a role model, and arguably make the biggest impact on a child’s life, for better or for worse. Their words can become weapons or can be used to teach or as we (I say we, but I mean you because I know better now) like to think, empower. Their reactions can become tragically traumatic or a reassuring relief to the child. As childhood is such a pivotal and developmental era in a person’s life, the influential role a coach serves can affect the child even after they have left the athlete role, meaning long after they have retired (we’re talking long term effects here peeps!). If we regulate teachers and monitor their every move like their discipline behavior and political comments in the classroom and if we report parents to the police at the earliest sign of visible abuse at home, how then does society let abuse that is physically, emotionally and mentally exploited throughout judged female sports, go ignorantly unregulated, neglectfully unchecked and whimsically and, if we are being honest, faithfully, unquestioned? I will argue throughout this thesis that injustices in sport occur, in part, because of the myth of empowerment that blinds us.

Sports should empower, yet judged female sports still exist with the mindset that champions cannot be molded and crowned victor unless the girl is sacrificed. The abusive cultures that sports demand hold a prevalent weight in female judged sports because the age of the elite athletes is that of children. However, the cruelty endured by these children who prove to be exceptional athletes by any standard is ignored by the public, even their parents, and further, the environment in which these machine-like children are created is left unregulated and their coaches left unquestioned.
Sports should empower, but throughout this thesis, it is my intention to unpack the failure of this myth with conviction, detail, reasoning, evidence and analysis. Above is what happens when the spirit of sport, molded by greedy parents, power-hungry coaches and nationally backed governing bodies, finds its meaning in the color of a medal instead of the holistic empowerment of a child. When training regimes make children question their worth, when aesthetic preference creates a silently violent culture of eating disorders among teenagers, when a lifetime of abuse ignores and forgets the development of the human behind the soulless eyes, a perfect recipe emerges: A lost, confused, vulnerable and broken young woman who experiences the world outside for the first time, where being a champion no longer matters. She only has the scars of one.

**Literature Review on Athletic Identity, College and Retirement**

This section includes current research on the topic of collegiate athletics, athletic identity during a collegiate career and retirement from college level sports. Much of the current research is conducted by surveys and close ended interviews that leads to findings that are easily quantified. The bulk of this research is conducted in relation to the years the athlete is in college.

With many NCAA student-athletes beginning their sports career before the age of 12, they and their families have a vested interest in their professional and collegiate sports career. This familial factor weighs in on the strength of the athletes' athletic identity. “Many current NCAA student-athletes had high parental/family expectations of playing college and/or professional/Olympic sports that started at a young age” (NCAA). This heightened pressure from factors such as family, personal expectations, economic needs for
sports scholarships to reach higher education, among others, creates unique challenges for student-athletes.

How the youth begin to define themselves at an early age is the foundation in which this athletic identity grows. “For individuals who are involved in sport, the extent to which they identify with the athletic role and define themselves in terms of similarities with other athletes is a salient and potentially important dimension of the self-concept” (Jimenez, 2016). The athletic identity plays a big role in the athlete’s life as they are beginning to define themselves and who they are by it. “As a self-concept, athletic identity can define the way in which an individual evaluates their competence or worth. The amount of worth and competence an individual places on self-concept may influence their self-esteem, affect and motivation” (Pottratz, 2015).

Retirement from sport can be traumatic as one is losing their identity. This is what makes retirement from sport more difficult in many ways than retirement from a professional career at an older age. “Retirement is equivalent to a life changing event for certain athletes and may cause similar irreparable damage” (Lavallee, 1997). This is a chapter in the person’s’ life where he/she must begin to reinvent themselves and start to develop the other roles within their identity they had been neglecting for so long. “Retirement marks the first time in an athlete's life when he is deprived of the satisfaction which sports has always given him. It is in his adjustment to a lifestyle in which he cannot rely upon sport to provide these satisfactions that the athlete experiences difficulties in retiring gracefully” (Hill & Lowe 1974). Additionally, Hill and Lowe (1974) stated the satisfaction one does not receive from retirement that they did receive in sport in combination with underdeveloped identity roles may leave athletes feeling lost.
The early age of entering sport creates important challenges that the scholarship has identified for athletes retiring, examining two different ways that athletes transition out of sport: voluntary and involuntary. The involuntary retirement path occurs from de-selection by a team or injury, which scholars consider “non-normative.” This is contrasted by voluntary retirement that results from “goal satisfaction or lost motivation”, which scholars place under the conceptual lens as being a “normative” choice (Stambulova, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Recognizing the significance between normative and non-normative should be noted. Normative forms of retirement are more common and are more predictable while also being easier to prepare for. Further, this form of retirement puts more control in the hands of the athlete. Non-normative forms of retirement leave the athlete with little or no control, are unpredictable and can be rarer while catching the athlete often without a plan on how to handle the retirement as it hasn’t been prepared for.

Involuntary retirement in particular is linked to anxiety and depression (Alfermann & Gross, 1997), loss of self-respect (Crook & Robertson, 1991), and loss of self-control (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Lavallee, Grove, and Gordon (1997) found that athletes who endured non-normative or involuntary retirement experienced much greater and negatively impactful difficulties transitioning from sport to post sport life. Generally, for both involuntary and voluntary pathways to retirement, it is the athlete’s identity is likely being challenged and even disrupted. Unlike most people, as an individual’s athletic identity strengthens, their identity from other life-roles become underdeveloped. Most of their effort, time and money goes towards athletics.

In a survey conducted by the NCAA on where and how student athletes spent their time (athletics, school work, and academics), they found that most had no time to spend on professional development opportunities such as internships. Alder and Alder in 1991 noted
that basketball players who had devoted themselves fully to the athletic role neglected other responsibilities that are required of student athletes. Donnelly & Young similarly explain, “[t]he pursuit to develop such talents may come at the expense of developing other aspects of identity” (1988). Given that athletes begin to specialize at a very early age, and thus, spend most of their time and energy on sports only, it is critical to expand the scholarship well beyond the college experience. This thesis builds on the scholarship by covering the entire experience of female athletes.

**Literature Review on Gender and Joan Ryan**

Gender inequality and gender specific experiences in sport further shape how the myth that sport empowers might harm an athlete. The NCAA did a study in 2010 where results showed that women currently make up more than 50% of the student body, 53% to be exact, yet female student athletes only represented 46% of the school athletes. Additionally, the study showed schools spent much less money on female athletics than their male counterparts. “Women’s teams received just 41.4 percent of the money spent on head coach salaries, just 36.4 percent of the recruiting dollars, and just 39.6 percent of overall athletic expenses” (Dusenbery, 2017).

It is public knowledge the WNBA players earn dramatically less than NBA players. “Last year, the average WNBA salary was $71,635, and this year appears to be closer to $75,000. The maximum veteran salary is $113,500. Meanwhile, for the upcoming NBA season, the minimum salary of a professional NBA player is $838,464” (Lough, 2018). Nancy Lough, a Professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, continues as she draws attention to the argument of revenue. “Of course, the NBA rakes in far more revenue.
However, in the 1971-1972 season – the year the NBA started drawing the same number of fans that the WNBA attracts today – the average salary was $90,000, which would equate to roughly $500,000 today” (Lough, 2018). Further, “WNBA player salaries constitute 22 percent of league revenue, while NBA player salaries amount to roughly 50 percent of league revenues” (Lough, 2018). This inequality is justified by the fact that the WNBA does not make the revenue that the NBA makes. But it is important to note here that women sports coverage is 2% of all sports coverage, which makes this a vicious cycle of no interest leading to no coverage leading to no raise in pay leading to disparate income between sexes.

What does the WNBA have to do with college athletic identity? The WNBA is one of the only professional sporting opportunities women get and it is vastly underpaid in comparison to 1) all of the professional sporting opportunities men have and 2) the amount in which men are paid in professional sport. This leads to female student-athletes having to look elsewhere for careers, forcing a higher percentage of female student-athletes to retire after they graduate college.

The research findings of inequality between men and women exists within the coaching staffs as well. “For example, Bonnie Henrickson, who coached the University of Kansas' women's basketball team until last season, earned $505,000. Her men's team counterpart, Bill Self, will make close to $5 million this season—pre-bonuses. *” (Ross, 2015). However, this is justified under law. “Men's college sports are far more profitable than women's sports are, and a federal law—the Equal Pay Act of 1963—stipulates that the salaries of men and women must be equally tied to the profit their respective programs bring in” (Ross, 2015). This same disparity exists between men who coach women’s teams at universities. The head coach of women’s basketball at the University of Connecticut makes about $2 million per season while Duke University’s men’s basketball head coach takes in
about $10 million per season. Gender discrimination creates havoc as well throughout university and collegiate athletics. An example of this is the case of Shannon Miller, the head coach of the women’s ice hockey team at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. “Miller started at the university in 1998 and has had one of the most impressive careers in the sport: She won five NCAA Division I titles and secured 300 wins faster than any coach in Division 1 history” (Ross, 2015). Despite an outstanding career, Miller “was told that her contract wouldn't be renewed because of financial constraints” (Ross, 2015). Miller is taking to the University to court over Title IX and gender discrimination.

The trend continues for collegiate student-athletes. “Although many student-athletes say they would feel comfortable talking to coaches about mental health issues, such comfort is much lower among women” (NCAA). There is clear evidence of disparities between women and men who are student athletes. For example, on average, female-athletes at a Division I school receive just under $30,000 of financial aid each year, while their male counterparts on football teams average over $100,000 annually. Yet, they face equal athletic demands in effort and hours spent training, causing them to forego other forms of career advancement opportunities while in school.

There is a massive underrepresentation of coverage contributing to the cycle of gender inequality. Mary Jo Kane, a Ph.D. in Achieving Educational Equity, Improving Health revealed the findings of her research on women, sports and the media. She states, “Even though 40% of all sports participants (and 43% of all scholarship athletes) are women, women’s sports still receive only 2% to 4% of all sports coverage... This glaring disparity reflects the fact that the media doesn't just under-report women’s sports, it actively suppresses information about it” (Kane, 2017). This suppression of information leads to lack of public interest for women sports, causing female sports coverage to remain
at the same low percentage year after year, making room for the big-ticket items like college football and men’s college basketball. Indeed, there is a deeper issue in the coverage that women do get. Kane additionally speaks to the fact that when women find their rare moment in the spotlight, they are often shown out of uniform and in ‘highly sexualized poses’ as to emphasize their aesthetic, not their athletic ability.

While gender plays a big role in sport, across the disciplines, it plays a specific and very significant role in elite judged sports like gymnastics, figure skating and synchronized swimming. Gender within these sports add to unique retirement factors that harm athletic identity from a much younger age, compared to the rest of sporting disciplines.

Alexa and I are former National Team members for the United States synchronized swimming team. Alexa is also one of my interviewees for this thesis. When asked about our stories, one question always comes up. So, did you go to the Olympics? We moved for the sport from different states, won over 70 National Championships collectively, got named to 5 National Teams each, traveled around the world representing the United States, spent 60 hours a week at the pool and the answer is no, we never went to the Olympic Games. Our families split up, our home was taken, our moms and us lived together in a ‘synchro apartment’ and the answer is no, we never reached the goal our families set for us and the dream we had fantasized about. “You tell people you were training for the Olympics and they ask did you go? I say, ‘Well I was on the team’. And you don’t want to go into detail about that. I’m not embarrassed anymore although I was embarrassed for a long time. Now it’s a laughing matter because it’s like an ‘almost’. What’s the correct answer to that question?” says Alexa.

When you don’t reach your goal because of a lack of skill or an injury or ranking and it causes you to leave the sport, it’s called retirement. When you don’t reach your goal
because of a lack of the desired look, regardless of incredible skill, a healthy body and a lifetime of championship titles and leadership roles within the National Team, what is this called? Moreover, can it be categorized in the broad and vague binary qualitative views of retirement? Take the following quote by Alexa where she shared with me her view of retirement from a 15-year career, representing the United States and earning over 50 National Titles:

“... Celebrities are so much in the spotlight, so famous, have so much pressure on them and then all of the sudden they go crazy. I felt like that is what happened to me... Leaving the sport like I did, burning all of my bridges, I chose to do that and thought they'll (USA Synchro) get what’s coming to them and at the end of the day if you look at the system now it is so completely broken. Nobody cares enough to even fix it. You just sit there and think if they just did things differently in our era can you imagine where we would be right now? It’s interesting to watch that whole process unfold and just destroy itself”

Life experience and identify formation is often hidden in quantitative and qualitative data. The levels to which elite athletes are stripped of their identities by reasons that cannot be justified by procedures or logic or by the spirit of sport. These voices cannot be reduced to a chart, graph or statistics. The semi-structured interviews and surveys conducted through positivist research by organizations like the NCAA limit the extent to which the viewer of the data can relate to the life story of the subjects, or rather the knowledge producers. And let me tell you, absolutely none of it felt like it related to what I had experienced and what I am still experiencing... It all felt percentage based and like I
was just one of the statistics. None of us are statistics. We are humans and my research in
this thesis strives to exhaust this point by showing the very inhumane experiences we
endure through sports, that *should* ultimately empower. It didn’t acknowledge traumatic
events surrounding sport and their impacts, rendering them invisible. And it didn’t show
real life experiences of the elite athlete... until I read, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* by Joan
Ryan.

Joan Ryan is the author of the book, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: The Making and
Breaking of Elite Gymnasts and Figure Skaters*. She is an award-winning journalist and
she has authored four more books. Ryan “was a pioneer in sports journalism as one of the
first female sports columnists in the country... earning thirteen Associated Press Sports
Editors Awards, the National Headliner Award, the Women’s Sports Foundation’s
Journalism Award and the Edgar A. Poe Award from the White House Correspondents
Association” (Author’s Bio in Book). Dubbed by Sports Illustrated as one of the “top 100
sports books of all time” and by the Guardian as a “top 50 sports books of all time”, *Little
Girls in Pretty Boxes*, reveals “a longstanding culture of abuse (that make) young gymnasts
perfect targets for a sexual predator, and continues to plead for sanity, safety, and an end to
our national obsession of winning at any cost” (Back cover).

Even the gymnastics community, when *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, hit the shelves
for the first time in 1995, couldn’t cope with the fact someone was targeting them in the
name of revealing the myth’s faulty claim that sports *should* empower. In the 2018 edition
foreword, written by Jamie Dantzscher, a former gymnastics Olympian, recalls the time
when the book first came out. “My coaches, along with so many others in the gymnastics
community, said the book was a horrible misrepresentation of gymnastics and that no one
should support it. They said the regulations and changes Joan Ryan advocated for were
completely unnecessary and would weaken the sport. They dismissed her and everyone she interviewed in the book as losers and whiners” (P. xv). Jamie admits that if she had read the book then, she would have been reading her own reality of daily abuse. After all, it was Jamie who was the first of 265 women who helped put Larry Nassar (see Chapter 4) in prison for over 150 years for sexual assault and abuse.

Ryan’s book was driven by two ultimate questions: “How do the extraordinary demands of their training shape these young girls? What price do their bodies and psyches pay?” (P. 15, Ryan). Ryan exposes the realities the rest of society avoids because the rest of society wants to believe in the myth while Ryan drives home (even sometimes in the homes of these athletes) the need for us to question and to regulate sport. And she does this by composing, in one heavy-hearted but extremely important book, the answers to her driving questions told by the casualties of the institutions (See Chapter One) of gymnastics and figure skating.

Before this book became an idea, Ryan was on a three-month research leave for the *San Francisco Examiner*, striving to answer some of the questions that relate to the topics discussed in the book. At the end of the three months of interviews, she decided to take a full year’s leave to include not only the champions in these sports, but the young women and girls who never made it as well. *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* provides the accounts and experiences of dozens of elite female gymnasts and figure skaters, revealing their personal stories only their voices can convey. Ryan, additionally, provides in-depth, informative, deeply intuitive and utterly compelling analysis’ of how the abusive environment has been conducive for these tragic stories her chapters reveal: If It Isn’t Bleeding, Don’t Worry About It: Injuries, They Stole Her Soul and They Still Have It: Eating Disorders, Be Thin
While Joan Ryan boldly presents evidence that the myth sport should empower is not true, all of those she focuses on in her chapters like the sporting institutions, the coaches, the parents and, ultimately, the broken young women who don’t speak out about their experiences all either, intentionally or unintentionally, reaffirm the myth.

_Little Girls in Pretty Boxes_ presents stories as told by those who experienced firsthand accounts of abuse. Ryan interviewed dozens of families involved in figure skating and gymnastics as well as officials from the sports. Additionally, Ryan interviewed athletes who are still involved with their sport as well as athletes who are long retired. Ryan tells the life story of those who have experienced the abusive cultures of these sports. Joan Ryan also brilliantly and significantly includes not only Olympic Champions, but those who identify as “almosts”, which incorporates those who have literally died trying.

Although Ryan’s impressive background and work accomplishments involve and highlight her journalism career, her work in _Little Girls in Pretty Boxes_, can be understood through a feminist approach both to her research and her analytical strategy to reveal. In their recent book on feminist methodologies, Michele Ollivier and Manon Tremblay (2000) identify three defining principles of feminist research: New knowledge production accompanied with social impact, the meaning women give to their world and diversity of perspectives. Ryan reveals truths, voices and experiences that had never before been researched, exposed and told. In her book, she calls for structural, cultural, social and justice reforms within the sports of gymnastics and figure skating. Ryan calls out the patriarchal dominance that has allowed for the oppression of females in sports, citing the male form of coaching without the physical, biological, mental and emotional recognition,
awareness, understanding and knowledge of the female child, teenager and young woman. She does this by giving a platform on which the voices and experiences of these young women are heard through detailed accounts of their abused realities by either direct or indirect actions of males within their patriarchal environments. Joan Ryan demonstrates, through who she interviewed, diversity, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary through race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, champion status, retirement status, family structure and geographic location. She also speaks to the traditional marginalization of the female athlete in judged sports through the abusive culture of such environments, eliminating empowerment and causing the deprivation of the human inside of the athlete’s frame.

Joan Ryan’s meaning making and analysis’ speak in dialog with the voices of the interviewees. Ryan weaves the content of her interviews into the strong narrative, creating a structure that enables the reader to see how each voice contributes to the overarching argument. While she does an incredible job at uncovering the realities of the abusive environments in both gymnastics and figure skating for young girls and women, she is missing a key puzzle piece that belongs in the picture of the female judged sport family: synchronized swimming. This piece and its realities will contribute to the larger argument that sports should empower, yet, when exposed, they can have immediate, short-term and long-term effects on the female athlete. I will strive to fill this puzzle and strengthen this argument by adding synchronized swimming to this significant, delicate and frightening conversation. I will aim to speak in dialog with Joan Ryan’s book throughout this thesis, as experiences cross-sports both parallel and intertwine with each other, revealing the myth that so many leave unquestioned.

Joan Ryan’s book in conjunction with my original research fills a gap that current research on athletic identity and retirement leaves open. Research on collegiate athletics
and retirement from college level sporting careers does not show the athletic identity formation from a young age, rather it just shows the snapshot of a collegiate career. Further, it does not draw on the life experiences that happen outside of the sport from a young age (even before sport) through retirement (even years after sport).

Joan Ryan published a lifetime of athletic and personal experiences in her book while I draw on the pivotal moments personally and athletically that I and other former National Team members experienced throughout our lives, not just our careers. If we want to better understand athletes, their accomplishments, retirement from sport and everything in between, one needs to look at the whole lifetime and the individual story that fills it.

Overview of Chapters to Come

The first chapter in this thesis provides my choice for the methodology that structures this narrative. I begin by discussing feminist and interpretive approaches, what they are, how they pertain to my thesis and why they are the best choices to approach this undertaking. I then move to discuss the reasoning behind why I chose to include my autoethnographic narrative. Further, I tell what my autoethnography adds to the project. I follow by telling the logic behind open interviews for my interviewees and lastly, by explaining the necessity for secondary source interviews from Little Girls in Pretty Boxes. The analytical strategy involves a more detailed explanation of the concept of revealing, how it will situate the structure and overall organization of the thesis.

Chapter two, which I call “Visibility,” begins to reveal the more visible layers of the empowerment myth and its many harms. I begin by exploring the institutionalization of the myth itself, where it exists, lives and breathes and is sustained, and who sustains it and
why. I then unpack the concept of winning, an important feature of the myth, as it pertains to the narrative of three gendered sports: figure skating, gymnastics and synchronized swimming. The next chapter reveals how female athletes become disembodied as the chapter title eludes to: Subjected Bodies and Judging.

Chapter four, “Haze,” explores the less visible sides of the myth and female athlete’s experience, including: family pressure on children to do sport and excel, the result of many fractures involving multiple voices, a story called, A Dinosaur Named Blue, and a compilation of voices discussing blurred lines between mothers as coaches and coaches as parents. Chapter five, “Invisibility and Silence,” reveals the most invisible experiences and harms like sexual assault, which includes my own story and hidden voices of gymnasts. The thesis concludes with final remarks about justice, power, visibility and empowerment, and spotlights the last narrative from my own experience, “Puzzle Pieces.”
CHAPTER ONE
METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodological approaches and analytical techniques that guide the thesis. I first provide a brief background to the feminist approaches that ground the questions I address about the myth, as well as the ways in which interviews and auto-autoethnography are collected, with critical, gendered-based reflections to my questions always at the front-and-center. Lastly, I explain how and why I combine autoethnography, open interviews and use of secondary interviews (from Ryan’s work) into the narratives for the thesis.

The Feminist and Interpretive Approach

Given the unique development of athletic identity, it is not only important to cover these experiences throughout entire careers in sport, but also equally critical to place gender at the forefront. Specialization in sport and gender form a common foundation for the injustices that female athletes face, which go unnoticed due to the myth.

Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow in 1986 categorized five characteristics in feminist methodology including: women and gender as the focal point for the research, the significance of awareness, seeing women as knowledge producers rather than subjects, ethical concerns, and striving for social change and power balance sourcing from women’s empowerment. Feminist research holds an anchor in the study and awareness of power relations within the research process. It is mindful of the power relationship and always strives to minimize power structures between the researcher and the subject. Often, feminist research is rooted in the perspectives and realities of women.
While it is important to note here my research in this thesis can be linked back to feminist research, I also take an interpretive methods approach to my analytical strategy for making meaning of the research from a reflexive perspective. Although feminist research can be done through quantitative and qualitative methods, more freedom in research exists within this methodology. Depending on the research project, different methodological choices can cater to the research to best situate the context.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, authors of *Interpretive Research Design*, situate interpretive researchers as those who are trying to understand from the reflections of the knowledge producers. The research in this thesis is directly drawn from the life experiences of those everyday actors. It would be most accurate to categorize this research as “reflections on contemporaneous activities” as those who were interviewed by me were asked to reflect on their past. I hold a unique role in this research as I am both a researcher and an everyday actor, calling on my own experiences and making meaning out of them in conjunction with the other interviewees. My internal knowledge for the subject of athletic female identity in elite judged sport comes from a lifetime of experiences and reflections. This internal knowledge also equips me with the relationships and contextual information needed to achieve a better understanding of the research. It should also be noted it was my own experience through retirement that inspired much of the research in this thesis as I strived to make sense of my life after sport.

To include my own experiences in addition to the experiences and voices of those that share this local knowledge of the research, or rather have experienced National Team and the sport of synchronized swimming at the elite level is to say the data from the research is co-generated. Interpretive research then differs from positivist research in this
Unlike positivist research where the researcher strives “to control for and prevent”, the interpretive researcher seeks to be transparent throughout the research process.

This thesis consists of three different data-generating sources: autoethnography, open interviews and secondary source interviews. The reasoning behind using three knowledge production techniques is the representation of like experiences and common realities of the elite female athlete in judged sports. Spanning three sports, through different lenses and at different times in the past few decades, the reader will see the unique experiences can be revealed in same broader topics. The chapters themselves are situated in the thesis to go from revealing failures of the myth, sports should empower, and its harms that are visible to the public, hazy to the public and finally, to failures and harms that most people never see.

**Concept Formation**

The concepts that the thesis helps develop are that of “disembodiment” and “specialization.” These are recurring conceptual themes throughout, which first debut in chapter two. Specialization is a characteristic of elite sport whereas the athlete will start that sport at a young age and from then on, do nothing else. With this specialization of sport comes the pressure for the athlete to mold into the body type demanded of that particular sport.
Research Design: Autoethnography, Original Interviews, Secondary Interviews

It is the very personal experiences of female athletes that provide the most clarity to the questions addressed in this thesis. Therefore, the primary form of research I draw from is my own auto-ethnography, which seeks to unpack and critically reflect on my own stories. Autoethnography is used when a researcher utilizes their own experiences within their particular context for research.

Having been in a judged sport since the age of 8 and at the elite status since the age of 12, I have 15 years of experience with the topic at hand. I have intimate experience with each of the main topics that will be revealed in the next chapters. In my sport, I have served as not only an athlete, an athlete representative and a captain but also as a coach for 8 years and a judge. I have made five National Teams, traveled the world representing my country and traveled around the United States representing multiple clubs and my undergraduate university. I hold over 20 national titles and have been named an All-American and All-Collegiate. I have experienced small clubs as well as the most dominant in the country. I have been coached by and coached alongside a variety of coaches, spanning from no experience to seven-time Olympic coaches, one of which was my mother for the first 5 years of my career. I have traveled around the United States doing clinics with all ages and skill levels. I have experienced sexual assault and the aftermath of that occurrence. I struggled with some form of an eating disorder during my career and witnessed those whose bodies start to shut down because of them. I have experienced the elite athlete’s worst nightmare of burn out and come out the other side, credit to my mother and a team of people who helped me through. And now, I have experienced my first year of retirement from sport. When trying to make sense of why leaving the sport was unbearably tough and
why retirement has made an emotional roller coaster out of me, I looked to do my own original research to help my transition.

Having prior knowledge about past National Team members from competing at that level for roughly 12 years, I used my internal database to reach out to a few for interviews. The range at which I knew the interviewees varied. One interviewee, Alexa, swam with me from the time we were 12 all the way through our 19th birthdays. We even lived together at one point with our mom’s who had been or still were our coaches. We also traveled around the world together competing and often, as a duet. Another interviewee, Monica, is someone I have a single great conversation with on a coaching trip in Minnesota one Summer. While we grew up in the same region, she is a little younger than me which put us in different age groups from time to time so I never got the opportunity to swim with her. Once these two said yes to the interviews, I gave them a few weeks to think of five pivotal moments in their sporting careers, either personal or athletic. I thought of this same question for my autoethnography as well. I wanted to see how or even if all or some of our moments paralleled each others in similarities. I found that they absolutely did. Moreover, multiple of their moments filled into the same category like subjected bodies and judging. I recorded each of the interviews, uploaded them and transcribed them onto a document.

My two other interviewees were actually family members, my mother and my brother. My question to them was: Tell me about the decision to move to California (mom and I) for me to train for the Olympics. From there, I just let the words flow from them. I recorded these interviews as well, uploading them and transcribing to a document.

Open interviews reveal. I had no expectations. I didn't know where any of them were going to take it. I wasn’t aiming for them to cover this or that. I simply just wanted to hear the story from their perspective, write it down and then see what the bigger picture was
from all of their life stories they shared with me. It was as if each story shared with me, along with each story Ryan had recorded in her book from gymnasts and figure skaters, in addition to my own voice were all puzzle pieces. And I was the lucky one that got to see the big picture that is this thesis. Although, it is nowhere near exhaustive of the experiences of the elite female athlete in judged sport, I do add another sport to the conversation, reaching more young female athletes and increased awareness. It is another contribution in the “ode to sport”.

As I read *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, I felt like I was honestly reading a lot of my own stories on its pages. The young girls, teenagers and women involved in the content of the book were direct and indirect reflections of myself... and we aren’t even in the same sports. I knew I wasn’t the only one.

When was the last time you heard the words synchronized swimming? Some common answers are: Austin Powers, 2 a.m. at the Olympic Games on television or a spoof done by a news team where a bunch of old men try to put pink swim trousers on and do synchronized swimming. I don’t blame you. With synchronized swimming not a popular media topic and a steady recognition of it NOT being a sport, but instead a show that belongs in Esther Williams movies and not the Olympic Games. But that is all a topic for another thesis another time. My reasoning for adding Joan Ryan’s book can be summed up in three compelling statements. 1) It is a no BS, tell-all with gusto that reveals the life stories of elite athletes, not just the fluffy stuff fans die to know. 2) Gymnastics and figure skating are some of the most well-known, popular and televised sports, especially the women. Adding the sport of synchronized swimming to that conversation is key to causing and strengthening the awareness society should have for female athletes in these judged
sports. 3) If we all fight battles that are special to us, let us be aware that these stories are not unique and there are many as we are many.

Adding *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* into my own conversation allows me to go beyond my own sport and expand to not only two other sports, but two major heavyweights in the sporting arena that reach hundreds of thousands of other young female athletes. My original research in this thesis is meant to complement Ryan and put the two in dialog with each other to add to the conversation.

**Thematic Organizational Strategy**

Part of my use of interpretivist methods, the thesis is organized to slowly uncover the many layers of the myth that sports *should* empower. Each chapter covers a layer of visibility, from the very public (but ignored) to the very personal, invisible features of the myth that directly harm female athletes. Chapter Two, for example, explores the idea of winning, the need to win, the institution that puts this in place, and the life conditions of the athlete as they experience the elite career. Placing these very visible features up front, the chapter is able to challenge the myth through the perspectives provided from autoethnography and interviews of female athletes. Once the reader is oriented around this critique of the most visible features, the thesis moves on to chapters that cover less visible and invisible feature that are equally, if not more harmful. They explore how family dynamics, sexual assault and abuse within and out of sport shape the female experience in sport.
CHAPTER TWO
VISIBILITY

Synchronized swimming demands a different kind of physical, mental and emotional endurance. It demands a type of lung capacity reasoning and logic would deem mutated, but no, it’s trained, engrained and expected. This chapter provides an institutional history of the sport and how the myth of sport should empower is created and reinforced. Additionally, provided are feminist and interpretive critiques of the myth by drawing out the concepts of specialization and body type.

From a young age, ages 6-12, the lungs are trained by the coach’s and the sport’s expectation of the child. Imagine six-year old’s practicing 25-meter laps under the water, congratulated and celebrated if they make it from wall to wall without coming up for air. This is comparable to a coming-of-age ceremony in synchronized swimming. But beware, once you have made a full underwater lap once, you will for the rest of your career be expected to hold your breath, no matter what. The young child either learns to pass this test or quits. This test isn’t like chores around the house. For the first and possibly only time in the child’s life will they be asked to endure panic as they experience the first stages of drowning and not only endure it but train it and have it demanded of them. One lap underwater takes, on average, 20-30 seconds.

In the early teenage years, coaches and the sport demand more. One lap is not enough. 50 meters it is. Two laps in the pool, from wall to wall to wall, is what is expected and what is trained. Various exercises are thrown into the mix to increase lung capacity. Imagine a 14-year-old performing 25 perfectly executed squat jumps on the pool deck, then diving into two laps of underwater swimming, not being allowed to come up for air until you complete the 50 meters. What happens if they don’t make it and they come up for air before
completing the exercise? Repeat. No matter how many times it takes. Two laps underwater take, on average, 45–60 seconds.

A 16-year-old now trains a 75-meter underwater swim, taking approximately one minute and thirty seconds. The sport and coaches call for more. At this point, at the elite level of the sport and especially within the elite clubs and National Team programs, you train to hold your breath for up to three minutes. Nothing happens if you see a teammate pass out; it’s just another day at the pool training synchronized swimming. At an early stage in life, athletes specialize through lengthy breath holding sessions, where they also learn to accept their teammate next to them convulsing and losing control of their body, and at time, their consciousness. The athlete knows very well that at any given time, they may have to drag their teammate to the wall, lift her outside of the pool and watch her be resuscitated. Athletes are expected to hold their breath no matter how dehydrated they are, over ten hour training sessions in the sun and under conditions of severe hunger. Training included growing up scared, with a body that is weak due to little food to sustain it. Contrary to the myth that sports empower, this experience is the norm. While the challenges of training and specializing in sport is well-publicized, it is also problematically romanticized. My experience and those of my teammates has become invisible as a result. While those who watch synchronized swimming in the Olympics are fascinated by how long the athletes hold their breath, rarely does anyone ever look into the disembodied training it took to get there.

What is visible in synchronized swimming are the physical representations of the athletes themselves. The sport is reminiscent of dancing in the water to music, often with teams of eight people. One of the goals of synchronized swimming is to show as much of you as possible, always striving to get as much of you out of the water as you can. The judges
and the audience are drawn to and can only visibly see what is outside of the water. This is why many may not know we don’t touch the bottom. The pools are often twelve feet or more in depth. What is outside of the water is what is judged. How pretty are your legs upside down? How skinny and how long? And how perfectly matched are all eight members of the team aesthetically? Again, these young girls, through the very subjective selection and attention to their body types, are disembodied by the demands of the sport.

This culture of disembodiment through sport has not only corrupted the spirit of sport, as it has become mutilated, ugly and malicious. It contradicts the belief and dream that sports should and do empower athletes. What is seen and what is invisible are the result of structural, cultural and systemic processes that carve athletes into robots, specialized to do one thing very well. They are manufactured, tested and put to work. For synchronized swimmers, this includes building the endurance to hold one’s breath for long periods of time. Only winning models of the robot get the stamp of approval. Everyone else—repeat, repeat, until you convulse, until you pass out, until you develop an eating disorder, until the sport and its demands become your hard drive and you can no longer identify who you are separate from the sport as you, a robot, become disembodied from yourself, a human.

Synchronized swimming is a hybrid sport: a true mix of many sports altogether showcased in a four-minute performance. Imagine an acrobatic gymnast who has the swimming ability of both water polo players and swimmers, the elegance of a dancer, the endurance of a marathoner, who performs all her floor, vault, bars and beam routines holding her breath. In synchronized swimming, there are multiple events: the solo, duet, trio, team (8 members), combo (a combination of solo, duet, trio and team with 10 members), and recently, the mixed pair event (one male and one female). From the time one
begins synchronized swimming to age 14, the athlete competes in the one or more of the above routine events as well as technical figures (explained later in this chapter at the end of the National Team section). To put it simply, figures are individual technical moves that are to be performed as slow as possible with absolutely no movement back, forward, left or right at the highest possible level out of the water in accordance with the figure description in front of a panel of five judges. Each competition, excluding National Team trials competes 4 figures. The overall ranking of the competition for each routine is determined 50% by the routine score and 50% by the average total team collective figure score. At age 15, the athlete competes one or more of the routine categories and also switches from figures to an element routine. For example, each solo routine also must compete in a technical solo routine, filled with the same 5 elements for all competitors. The same rules apply the duet and team performances.

The different avenues a synchronized swimmer can take are as follows: recreational, club, elite club (although there is no formal difference between club and elite club, a severe cultural difference calls for separate categories), college and National Team. Recreational, club and elite club ages range from age 4 to age 20. College ranges from 17 to 28 (pending time spent on National Team), and National Team ranges from ages 10+ (Depending on the age bracket). There is an 11-12 year old National Team, a 13-15 year old National Team, a Junior National Team (15-18) and a Senior National Team (15+). The ages coincide with the age group categories at the club and recreational levels as well.

The myth that sports empower begin to shatter under these institutional realities of synchronized swimming, with different degrees of harm depending on what level of competition. Recreational synchronized swimming, for example, is not comparable to National Team level synchronized swimming even if the recreational swimmer is 18 years
old and the National Team athlete is 11 years old. The level at which you compete, not necessarily your age, determine the severity of specialization and body type.

Specialization in synchronized swimming is measured by the amount of time you dedicate to the sport. This has a direct correlation with the amount of sacrifices and the severity of the sacrifices made in the name of the sport, both by the individual and by the parents of that individual. Elite synchronized swimmers, including elite club athletes 15 and older as well as National Team athletes, train from 40-60 hours per week. Practices sessions involve gym work, cardio training, swimming workouts, technical time, gymnastics training, stretching and routine perfecting and choreography. Synchronized swimmers can spend hours and days perfecting one 8 count of their routine with the eight team members. All of the counts, the moves, the hand positions must be matched perfectly with all of the athletes. With the increased specialization that the sport calls for, the athlete is then indirectly or directly forced into the body type the sport and the level of competition demands. The body type desired in synchronized swimming has, in the last two decades, has become like a prima ballerina: very long, slender legs, no chest, no hips, no butt, simply put, nothing to obstruct lengthy aesthetic lines. Anything else is considered not desirable and is not chosen for National Teams. When specialization and body type morph together to form one model, the myth, sports should empower, becomes institutionalized.

In the Name of Winning

Specialization and body type have formed into one model, with the goal is to win. Joan Ryan highlights this winning culture with interviews from elite gymnasts and figure
skaters, providing a multitude of voices that reflect my own experience in sport. What I call the “specialization and body type” model is illustrated by Ryan’s reflection:

“Whether we see any changes instituted to protect these young athletes hinges on our willingness to sacrifice a few medals for the sake of their health and well-being. Our obsession with winning, with dominating opponents and reveling in victory, is not considered a character flaw. On the contrary, few traits are more admired in this country than hard-driving ambition. And we expect sacrifices to be made in the name of great success. But when the sacrifices mean a childhood spent in the toils of physical and psychological abuse, the price if too high” (P. 245, Ryan).

Digging deeper into Ryan’s interviews helps to not only reveal this harmful model that has taken hold of my life in synchronized swimming, it demonstrates that specialization and body type is a more common feature across sports that are uniquely applied to women.

Debi Thomas became the first African American National Champion in figure skating. When training for the Olympics, society saw Debi Thomas as an Olympic bound champion going to represent the United States. Yet, we she saw and what she experienced was more like Hell. In preparation for the 1988 Olympics, her practice schedule increased, her outside schooling decreased and she was given no time off after becoming National Champion. Her Olympic experience involved off site training and living. She didn’t mingle with the other Olympians, didn’t attend the Opening Ceremony and did not take part in any Olympic festivities. She said, “Too much money was at stake and too many sacrifices had been made, draining the sport of any fun”. After being told by her coach to “Do it for America!”, she claimed a bronze medal and recounted this of her Olympic experience: “It was like one of those tortures in Dante’s Inferno. I just wanted to get it over with. I don’t
remember much of it. I've blocked a lot of the Olympics from my memory”. “It’s nice when I run into people I used to skate with and I see that they came out okay, because there are some people with a lot of emotional scars. A lot of them just never really realized that life does not revolve around skating. They’re still hanging on to it. They never saw that there was something more”.¹

The training culture in America has been built on the idea that more is more. It is glorified by the great sporting movies of our time like Any Given Sunday and the Rocky Trilogy where it comes down to the extra inches, minutes and will of an athlete to train in order to be crowned champion status. Joan Ryan in her own words explains the institutional and cultural need for America to win, no matter the cost: “If there was any doubt that the most important mission of the country’s Olympic movement was not to instill life lessons on fairness and sportsmanship but simply to win, it was confirmed in 1988. After disappointing results at both the Summer and Winter Games, the United States Olympic Committee appointed a much-publicized task force, headed by New York Yankees owner, George Steinbrenner, to figure out how the United States could win more medals” (P. 212, Ryan).

First hand accounts from athletes is critical because research on the effect of time in sport on athletes has led to contrary conclusions. Dr. Anthony Kalinowski, a researcher at the University of Chicago, published a study that found the more hours an athlete trained, the more accomplishments he/she would achieve. This is where coaches take their belief in more training yields better results. More is better. However, Kalinowski found that more hours of training was only a factor that could lead to more achievements by participating in more training over time. This meant that national champions may start training at age 10 but Olympians started training at age 6 and having participated in more training over
time. Additionally, a Florida State psychologist, Dr. Anders Ericsson, found in his study that much of the best performers in music, sport and chess spent no more than four hours per day training. Ericsson also found that after the fourth hour of training had passed, there was a significant negative change within the person that leads to irritability and fatigue and non-performance.

In sport as well as in life, the veteran is often disregarded, ignored and pushed aside to make room for the younger and the newer to shine, often with the assumption the latter is better than the former. The world watched this play out in the 1996 Olympic Games at the Georgia Dome. A 1992 Olympic Team member, Kerrie Strug, was categorized as a veteran at 18 years old at the '96 Games. Dominique Moceanu, the baby of the team at 14 years old, was the expected favorite to shine. The team competition standings in the final day of the team competition was Russia in first, the U.S. in second and Romania rounding out the podium. After the first rotation of the team competition, the American team had gained a small lead over the Russians. After each of the four events, the American lead increased: .472 after the bars, .497 after beam, .897 after floor. 32,000 people watched this spectacle inside of the Georgia Dome that 1996 Summer.

Moceanu and Strug were the last two competitors for the United States going into the final round of the team competition. With less than a point between the first and second place teams, there was little room for error on the vault for the American team. Moceanu, the young prodigy and America’s new hope, fails both of her vaults, falling down on the landing of each one of her attempts. It is up to the veteran now, Strug, as the last competitor for the U.S. team. As Strug landed on her first vault, she rolled her left ankle as she fell. With a facial expression representative of sheer pain, she headed back to the runway start.
It is in these moments: the fight or flight, the experience or the fear, the responsibility or the pain, athletes must decide between the former and the latter. This decision, often made under the pressures of what it is to be an elite athlete, finds its consistency in experience. In these moments of, what would be, crippling fear, insurmountable pain and pressure far too heavy to drop on the shoulders of any human being, the experienced athlete enters a familiar arena in which they choose to fight through this experience once more and in Kerrie Strug’s case: all while taking on the responsibility of a nation to win a Gold medal. This decision, becomes not only a defining characteristic in the athlete, but additionally, a defining moment of the Olympic Games.

Kerrie Strug didn’t know she had torn an ankle ligament in her first vault but she knew she had thirty seconds to either decide to scratch her second vault and save what was left of her ankle or win the Gold medal for the United States women’s gymnastics team. Joan Ryan describes the scene that would go down in Olympic history as arguably one of the most willful moments of the Games. “She took her place on the runway. She sprinted, leapt off the springboard and flipped in the air, knowing the searing pain that was waiting as her feet sailed toward the mat. She nailed the landing, tearing a second ligament. She quickly pulled her foot off the mat, hopping on one foot to salute the judges before collapsing in pain” (P. 249, Ryan). In the name of sport and the Olympic Gold medal, Kerrie Strug became a United States hero.

The video from the 1996 Olympic Games is a tear jerker. It is a beautiful moment in Olympic history where the United States is pinned against the Russians, yet again, to take home the Gold medal. This can only be done through sheer grit, determination and the will to win and overcome excruciating pain in the name of winning. Nobody asks how Kerri could possibly nail a one-footed landing on the biggest stage of the world for the first ever
Gold medal for the U.S. Society just accepts that she did. Nobody notices the fans screaming, cheering, smiling and most importantly celebrating the snapped second tendon Kerri just obtained in the name of winning. Society just notices she did it for her country. Nobody notices that Bela Karolyi commands her to do one more vault and by God, she does it. Society just notices her discipline.

To be able to nail a one-footed landing on the biggest stage in the world experiencing extraordinary pressure and unfathomable pain, you have to have trained under those conditions your whole life. You must have experienced that culture of perfection through the pain and ignoring your body for years on end. The will and need to win had to always be bigger than the need to live. To survive, you must be a champion, no matter the cost.

Ryan provides a similar analysis of how the myth that sports empower has become institutionalized in problematic ways. “It’s about the elite child athlete and the American obsession with winning that has produced a training environment wherein results are bought at any cost, no matter how devastating” (P. 17, Ryan). The athletes are only the point of focus when this benefits a romanticized image of winning. As a person, this is a disembodying experience of success, because no once asks how they are doing. Results, not the athlete, is all that matters.

While most elite athletes endure through such experiences and succeed, there is something to be said about the elite female athlete in judged sports like synchronized swimming, gymnastics and figure skating that cannot be said about male dominated or objective sports like football and track. So much of the grueling training, success and stardom in female judged sports occurs when the girl is still young. “Because they excel at such a young age, girls in these sports are unlike other elite athletes. They are champions before they can drive. They are the Michael Jordans and Joe Montanas of their sports.
before they learn algebra. Unlike male athletes their age, who are playing quarterback in high school or running track for the local club, these girls are competing on a worldwide stage” (P. 19, Ryan). Female elite athletes in judged sports often either quit because of burn out or go to college to receive a scholarship for their sport. They use the sport as a means to pay for school and enjoy what is left of their career. They have reached the elite level by the time they drive and experience burn out by the time male high school football players start hitting the gym. The female elite athlete in the judged sport reaches their peak not in college like so many track stars and football players looking for a NFL contract, but instead they reach it before they are legally adults.

Often the bodies of the elite female athlete in judged sports is already worn down by the time they reach adulthood. Their life has been all consumed by sport, specializing in their craft from a young age. Many have a decade long elite resume behind them by the time they are 18. They have given up traditional schooling and friends outside of the gym, rink or pool. Their days are scheduled around their practices and their worth is defined by their success. While the adolescent boy is dreaming of playing for the Patriots in his lanky undeveloped body, the elite female athlete has been molded like iron physically, mentally and emotionally while winning National Championships and representing her country. Unlike the high school football player, they do not go to Homecoming or prom, much less are they the Kings or Queens of such events. They aren’t the stars of the high school social scene. They don’t go to drive-in movies on dates. The identity of the elite female athlete in judged sports is defined and measured by her performance, involvement and commitment to her craft. She knows sacrifice. She knows pain. She knows a great responsibility she has to her country on the world stage. She knows what it means to be under pressure in a way 99% of the population doesn’t. She knows exactly who she is when she enters her own
arena. Her entire life has been measured by a margin of error so thin and pressure so thick, all she knows is the chasing of perfection. She knows little of anything else.

I have experienced first-hand how this narrow margin of error in synchronized swimming has structured my life away from other critical experiences outside of sport. Sport for me has been all-consuming. This is also reflected in Ryan’s analysis of gymnastics, who explains:

“Even lesser, almost imperceptible mistakes can spell doom in gymnastics. The margin for error is as thin as a judge’s pencil. The gap between gold and silver in the all-around at the 1992 Olympics was 12/1000 of a point. A bobble, a hesitation. Most sports build a cushion for failure, an opportunity for redemption. Runners who slip in the starting blocks and swimmers who get a slow jump can make up for their mistakes during the race if they are fast enough. Pole vaulters and high jumpers are allowed three attempts to clear a height. A long jumper gets six jumps to register his best distance. A tennis player gets two serves, a batter three strikes, a quarterback four downs. Gymnasts and figure skaters get one shot.” (P. 134, Ryan).

An example of how much one moment, one mistake and one split second can change your career is World Champion, Kim Zmeskal who competed in women’s gymnastics at the 1992 Olympic Games. Her life changing second happened as she stepped out of bounds on her floor routine. Two inches out of bounds costs her not only an Olympic medal but drops her 20 places in the rankings. There is no possibility for a comeback. Dropping out of school in seventh grade to train full time, Kim’s life has been summed up in these two inches. Female judged sports call for a different kind of pressure. They do not get the luxury of dozens of chances to catch the ball like a running back in football does. Even Tom Brady, as
seasoned as he is, makes mistakes throwing the ball, getting sacked, making the wrong call on a play. These female elite athletes do not train and practice to make perfect; They train perfectly *every time*. They can spend eight hours on a 10-second skill. “They must distill an entire childhood of training into one perfect performance, and they must do it on the largest stage in the world” (P. 132, Ryan).

**The National Team Experience**

In this section, I will, through revealing different experiences of the National Team environment from various perspectives, reveal injustices and critique the myth sports should empower. It is the telling of these stories that gives a voice to the athletes and, consequently, a profound act of empowerment.

The following is my own self-reflection spanning 15 years, from the time I started synchronized swimming, 2004, to the year I fully retired, 2019. I begin with my current reality to give context as to where my autoethnography will take the reader in this section. I then move to 2004 where I begin my journey. All of the moments I describe are intimately intertwined to my Olympic dream and my experiences within the U.S. National Team. Immediately following my 2012 autoethnography are interview excerpts from two former National Team members where they voice their own National Team experiences. U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A! Who knew three letters could be so emotional?

**Alyson Autoethnography**

*2019:*
I still tear up every time when I hear that chant, even if it’s on a television somewhere in the background at a bar when a soccer game is on. You can often see me carrying around my very first National Team backpack. Almost every time I wear it, a stranger will come up to me and say, "Hey! Your bag is about to break!". I will calmly reply, “OH thank you but no, this bag has been torn strong since 2008.” The bag itself can symbolize my life. I earned it in 2008 when I was named to my first United States National Team. It is now a faded blue all over, red and dirty white stripes around the first of two pockets. It has USA in big letters on the front, SPEEDO under that. It has two netted side pockets with holes leading to either the very inside of the bag itself or the ground. Both straps are about 3 inches thick, but 2.5 of those inches have been torn from the seams. For more than a decade now this bag has been a fighter and a trusted companion of mine. It has traveled with me all over the world and held itself and my contents together no matter how much I stuffed it and stressed it. People sometimes ask why I don’t fix the straps at least. I don’t want to forget my scars. I don’t want to cover them up and pretend they never happened. I don’t want to be ‘good as new’. I want to be reminded of my past and of my journey and the memories that filled it, not because I can’t move on but because I know I need to have a reflexive understanding and an inner peace of what makes me, me, in order to know who I am and move forward with everything I am.

2004:

My family, like a lot of American families, instilled the importance of hard work into my brother and I. It is one of the founding characteristics of our nation: Work hard and you’ll be able to achieve anything. I thought this was great! I loved to work hard. If this was the only variable, I naively thought, there was no way I wasn’t one day going to be an Olympian for the United States. Athens 2004 was the first Olympics I watched
Synchronized Swimming. The U.S. placed third in the duet and team events earning a bronze medal. To add to my seemingly euphoric experience watching the sport I participated in on the TV, there was a member of the duet and team named Alison. It’s meant to be, I thought.

2005:

My family had a calendar made to help raise money for my training. The calendar is for the year 2005 and it held photos from a photoshoot Alison (the 2004 Olympian and then one of my coaches as she moved to Las Vegas for a year after the Olympics) and I did in the water. It was us side by side doing some well known synchro moves like we were a duet. The caption for the calendar was:

Alison Bartosik - 2004 Olympic Bronze Medalist
Alyson Haylor - Aspiring Future Olympian

Just keep working hard I thought. Hard work and maturing through the years is all it will take. I’ll be an Olympian someday.

2007:

Based on my Age Group National Championship results, I was one of the dozen or so of us who got recruited into the very first Talent ID program. This meant we got to spend about two weeks in Colorado Springs, Colorado at the Olympic Training Center working on our skills, technique and routine swimming with the National Team Coaching Staff.

If you ever want to see what American pride looks like, there is nothing quite like the OTC (Olympic Training Center). The American flag can be seen around every corner. The Olympic Rings stand stoic and still, silent and calm for the generations that come to dream about them. The grounds are brilliant with statues, memorials, plaques and dedications to those who gave so much of themselves to the epic battle the public anxiously...
and eagerly waits for every two years: The beautiful war that ceases violence, mends relations, builds legacies, promotes opportunity and gives hope to all. The young are inspired, the adults reminded of their strength and the old given hope for the future generations. The Olympic athletes become memorialized like soldiers, bronzed with muscles etched into great stone and their eyes telling a story of the days they fought for their country. The dorms at the Olympic Training Center are the barracks and the many sporting facilities are the training grounds.

2008:

All 30 of us sat in the lobby of the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. We had just spent 3 ten hour days being tested, pushed, measured and ranked for the 13-15 year old National Synchronized Swimming Team. We had become friends, even though we came from all different parts of the country to fight for one of 12 spots on the team. The coaches called us in one by one. It had been hours since they started these meetings. Some of us fell asleep, some of us were too nervous to speak, some of us were speaking to keep our mind off of our life changing any moment. Nobody noticed at the time, but all of the people who were called into meetings didn’t return to our group sitting there in the lobby. Finally, we saw the coaches and they started walking our way. It was past dinner time but we were all thinking of the trials and not the sounds of our stomachs growling. The coaches told us they were sorry it had taken so long, they knew it was late and wanted us to get some rest. We looked around in bewilderment wondering when we would all have our meetings. We wouldn’t. There was 12 of us left. This was the team. The first day of the three month training for the UANA Age Group Pan American Championships started in the morning.
Something was put on my shoulders when I first represented my country, when USA was seen on my back. When the National Anthem is played, it is as if I am going into battle again in the only arena I have ever known: Sport.

2009:

My duet partner, Alexa, and I had moved in with each other a few months prior. She is from Michigan and, like me, moved to train with one of the biggest clubs in the U.S. Her mother, also like my mom and I, had moved with her. We trained all of that 2009 Summer to represent the United States for the first time as a pair. She was the soloist for the 2008 13-15 National Team we were on while I was in the duet. We had competed against each other for years on the National scene and now we were coming together to grow as a pair to represent Team USA. We were both enrolled in Independent Study and spent the days and nights training while everyone else went to school. Her mother was one of our coaches and would remain so our whole duet career.

Our debut as a pair was the 13-15 Comen Cup, a 13-15 World Championships of sorts. We traveled to Belgrade, Serbia together to compete. This was my first time overseas and while I was absolutely unaccustomed to the kissing on the cheek European ways, I could get used to standing on the podium seeing the American Flag being raised for a 3rd place finish behind Russia and Greece. This was the beginning of a beautiful, unique and emotional journey for Alexa and I. There are two events in the Olympics for Synchronized Swimming: Duet and Team. With our school and training regime and having started training as a pair, we were on our way to the Olympic Games.

American Woman played in the background as Alexa and I danced out on the floating mass of a stage for the 2009 World Trophy Cup in Montreal, Canada on the American Thanksgiving holiday.
It was the only competition that the athletes could use props, obnoxious costumes and coordinated themes. Teams could swim with 12 instead of 8 members at this competition for their highlight routine, which is a routine stacked with as many acrobatic and thrilling lifts as possible. Solos swim to the theme of their respective countries while duets swim to the theme they come up with of the host country. This was the only competition as well that was for money.

We were both panting as we set up our deck work pose waiting for our routine music to start. We were the youngest people in the competition by far at 15 years old. We were panting because we had practiced literally up until the last minute. We single handedly canceled the traditional Parade of Athletes because we were still in the pool practicing and were the first draw to go so they couldn’t even start the parade and by the time we were ready we needed to start the competition so they just canceled it altogether. We didn’t even have time to put on lipstick! Our swim was good, no major errors and we enjoyed it. It was an easier routine because it was a minimal pressure, fun competition. As I said, we were the youngest by far and the first ones to go so when our scores and rank were announced on the jumbotron, we made sure our coaches got a photo of our ‘Rank 1’. We quickly dropped to 2nd place after the reigning World and Olympic Champions from Russia swam after us. There is nothing like a little humbling when you’re younger. But in all seriousness, we did well. Ranking highest of all of the United States routines and as the youngest, we came in 5th earning some money for the USA.

2010:

Alexa and I found ourselves as the Junior World Championship Duet after winning the Junior National Championships by over 7 points and simultaneously renouncing the spots we had earned on the Senior National Squad that was training for the 2012 Olympic
Games. We figured it wasn’t our time for that stage yet. We were the youngest members of the Senior Team by at least 4 years at 15 years old and in all honesty, we needed to improve greatly to even have a shot of getting in pattern. I distinctly remember that coach telling me I needed “to learn how to swim”, a compliment compared to the other corrections I got. Our coaches and us wanted to work on our basics, keep competing as a pair and go the Junior Category Route. Alexa was the soloist, we were the duet, we were both in team and I was in the combination routine. Training was three months. Two of those months were in San Antonio, Texas and the last month would be in Indianapolis, Indiana where the United States would host the Junior World Synchronized Swimming Championships at the IUPUI Natatorium.

I wish I could come up with a more intelligent and impressive word to describe that Summer but it was just strange. For example, I remember often being told not to think by the Head Coach of that team that particular Summer. I was raised to be a good student of the sport knowing the how’s and why’s we do things the way we do, the science behind the art of Synchronized Swimming. Sports should be thoughtful, no? Of all the Olympic stories I had ever heard, I never heard anyone say they made it all the way to the pinnacle and ‘winged it’.

In any case, this was the first year I got to compete on Team USA in the USA. The U-S-A chant takes on a whole new depth on home soil.

It’s as if you are no longer an individual but a direct representative, you are no longer a team but now you are a country. Walking on the stage built for the Junior World Championships at the IUPUI natatorium as the last country announced as we were the hosts during the parade of nations was a feeling I’ll never forget. If we looked to the right, we saw the wall that held the names of the 1996 United States Olympic Gold Medal Team,
the only team in the history of our sport to ever receive a perfect score. Their names were etched into the wall because that team was chosen there at IUPUI; it is where the trials for the 1996 Olympic Synchronized Swimming Team was held. If we looked to the left, we saw the body of water that would hold all of us and all we represented; this is where we would leave so much of our hearts, spirit and will. If we looked behind, we would see the American Flag as a backdrop to the stage, knowing full well what it meant to be an American at that moment. And as we look ahead, feeling the rumble of the U-S-A chant under our feet as it reverberated throughout the natatorium, we would realize the vision of the red, white and blue sea made of our families and of proud Americans who didn’t even know us or know what Synchronized Swimming was for that matter, but were there to stand with us in solidarity for in that moment we upheld what it was to be a proud American fighting for our country.

2012:

The 2012 Junior World Championships were held in Volos, Greece. We were warned before going that tensions were high between the people of Athens mainly and the United States government. We would have bodyguards the entire duration of the competition to and from all of the events. We were a representative of our country and more likely than not, in the eyes of others, a representative of our government and its values, no matter what the climate, no matter who is in charge. We were there to compete. We weren’t expected to mend relations but were absolutely expected not to cause any further damage so we were on high alert in our behaviors and actions.

As the United States Captain for that team, I had the great honor of carrying the American flag in the opening ceremony. Our hotel was right on the sea. The opening ceremonies took place on a bridge that jetted our over the five shades of blue water. It was
September so the weather was perfect, around the 80’s at night time. The ceremony commenced at sunset and the sky filled with hues of pink, orange and purple. Crowds were all around in the city’s busy waterfront cobblestone street. I was followed diligently by my bodyguard. He was a sweet older man who would stand and walk by my side through the ceremony. Little did he know it was my 18th birthday and while I didn’t hear from my stepfather who raised me as he left my life a year prior, I was grateful to have a stranger stand by my side as I raised the American flag over the Mediterranean. This would be the competition that would forever alter my life.

In Junior Synchronized Swimming half of your overall score is based on the combined average individual technical score from the figure competition. In the figure competition, all swimmers compete individually in four different technical moves each in front of a panel of five judges. You take the average of the eight people swimming in the team event and combine that with the routine score to reach the team placement and rank. I was consistently ranked top five in the figure competition in the U.S. I had five years worth of two private lessons per week just to work on these figures, as it was always my weakness. Because of my consistency in figures in the U.S. and my top performance consistently in routine swimming, I was a part of the core 5 who would not have an alternate in the team event. The bottom three of the eight man team often switched out with their alternates just in case they did not perform as well in competition and we had to switch people. But these top five were always expected to perform well. However, in the words of my private lesson coach and this particular National Team Coach, “No one is irreplaceable”.

The figure competition lasts a grueling 12 hours at Junior Worlds. These are the best athletes in the world ranging from 15-18 years old. Each figure lasts approximately 3-4
minutes, most of which is spent under the water. After a swimmer has aged out of the Junior category, they no longer perform figures. I cannot express how much I was looking forward to this figure competition... it would be my last one after a 10 year struggle with figures.

I successfully performed each figure, nailing it and leaving everything I had there in the pool. Out of 350 swimmers, I would be the last one in the pool finishing up my last figure. The competition ended as I exited the pool and my coach would tell me it was my best figure competition ever and to wait and see where I landed in the rankings. We got back to the hotel around 7 p.m. where the coaches told us to wait up for the results to come in. They would then have to calculate and average all of our scores and see if we needed to make any personal switches before completing the Team Finals event the next day. One by one my teammates would go into their meetings with the coaches to see their results. The time was approaching 10:30 p.m. when I was called in, the last one. I walked into my coach’s hotel room where I saw all of the coaching staff, manager and a teammate of mine and one of my roommates for the competition standing in the corner hysterically crying. She got taken out of team I knew from her reaction.

The conversation went something like this:

**Head Coach** (the one who said no one is irreplaceable and my private lesson coach for the past five years): Al, how do you think you did today?

**Me:** Good, I left it all out there and felt like it was my best figure meet ever.

**Head Coach:** We thought so too Al. But it wasn’t good. You got last place on the team, coming in 10th out of 10 teammates who competed for the U.S. You ended up in the later 200’s out of 350 girls. (Mind you, two years prior at 15 at the same meet in Indianapolis I ranked third on the team and got in the 70’s out of 350 swimmers)
Me: Alright, put the alternates in, that’s why we have them, for situations like these.

Head Coach: That’s why you’re the last person to have an individual meeting. We asked the alternates if they would swim in your spot. Each of them said no. And we asked each swimmer who they wouldn’t swim without in team and they all had the same answer: Aly.

At this point I broke down into tears. My teammates, my fellow comrades showed up for me at the culminating moment of our entire journey together. They gave me strength the days I couldn’t imagine going to the pool. They gave me reassurance when everything in my personal life seemed to be crashing down around me. And they gave me a reason, the only one I needed to Captain them: To be there for others in strength and courage when you cannot be there for yourself. At that moment, our team decided it wasn’t all about rank, but instead about representing spirit and the will of woman to recognize the mountains climbed together form bonds results will never be able to convey. This would be my last time swimming for the United States.

As it may seem I was a swimmer deemed by her teammates to be irreplaceable, in the years to come, without consideration or acknowledgement of my leadership capabilities, routine swimming performance and value as a strong woman, teammate, communicator, Captain and coach, I would be replaced, forgotten and rejected by the National Team and its Director because of my body.

Testaments from Former National Team Members

Monica: A Four Time National Team Member and Three Time Collegiate National Champion
“The National Team Coach (at the time) would verbally abuse us and psychologically play mental games with us and make us think that we were nothing and that we would never amount to her expectations of us. She would give us punishment sets even though we were doing the work that she wanted us to do. She would just get herself so worked up that she didn’t even want to look at us so she would just play the music and we would just do run throughs for hours on end. People were passing out. One of my teammates was getting seizures weekly where we would have to grab her from underwater because her body just couldn’t take it. The coach would have us do intense physical workouts and training that was not in the scope of what we should have been doing and was excessive. It’s not like we couldn’t take the work, we were obviously there to work hard but... our bodies were just shutting down.

I’m a pretty tough person and I would cry every single day. It didn’t matter, I would walk in the pool and have to put my goggles on right away because I was already sobbing and couldn’t make it through the day. When you’re young and you’re in those circumstances you just want your coach to be right because she’s in charge of you and she’s supposed to be handling you and protecting you and training you. So anytime a mom would try to say something we would say you don’t know what you’re talking about which is a sign of abuse because you think someone who is supposed to be taking care of you really isn’t. When you’re a teenager you seek that kind of validation that you’re doing right and that you’re doing your training correctly and you’re making all the right moves. Now that I’m looking back on it, I have talked to some of my teammates from that Summer to discuss it. Some of my teammates had to go through some sports psychology afterward and some of my teammates couldn’t even get into a pool for months after because they were kind of
traumatized. Anytime they went to the pool all they could think about was what happened and the kind of things that were said to them and about them”.

**Alexa: A Six Time National Team Member**

“I’m just going to speak freely here and say I had been working my butt off for so long and my parents made the ultimate decision to move me to California for my own benefit and my future. In tearing our family apart when my mom and I moved here was a big decision for us because we’re such a close-knit family. I feel like I did everything in my power that I could.

I definitely had some attitude problems, not going to lie about that. I was a teenager but I was doing everything in my power to do the best I could do and winning all of the competitions. I was getting first place and grand slams (Winning every event an athlete is entered in) at every single U.S. National meet. And for me, I started feeling like I wasn’t good enough even though I was getting first place in everything and swimming all of the routines. Maybe I was just clouded by hormones or judgment, but I just felt like I wasn’t getting enough support from my coaches at the time. I was doing my best... to be the best in the U.S. and it wasn’t good enough.

That started weighing on me because everyone was questioning my talent even though I was putting in so many extra hours that nobody saw. They would always question it especially towards the end when the weight issue was cracking down on us when she came into the National Team Director position. The politics of it affected me. You only have so much that you can take and that was my breaking point... My parents did everything they could in order to give me support and motivation. There’s nothing that your
teammates can really do because they’re under the same pressure and scrutiny. I feel like the whole system just could have been run differently. And you could say that about anything at this point but I just feel like the way USA Synchro was run at the time... They focused on the wrong things. They’re so focused on getting this group of perfectly toned girls with absolutely no skills and throwing away the people that have been veterans and proven themselves.

It could have gone a lot differently. There could have been a lot more support, maybe a sort of therapy. A lot of the girls were troubled and struggling internally and I feel like the coaches and the system didn’t care about that. That’s why so many people quit. They felt like they weren’t being taken care of and nobody cared about them. Maybe I could have spoken up for myself more and said hey look if you want me to look a certain way or act a certain way, provide that kind of attention and care to your athletes other than talking about them behind their back or hearing it from the third party or the grapevine. For me, you feel like your actions and how you look directly affect your team, duet partner and teammates and you feel that responsibility”.

Argumentative Recap

Through my autoethnography and the open interviews I conducted with Alexa and Monica, I have revealed the direct impacts the specialization concept and practice has had on athletes from a young age to a time when they get older, into adulthood. These impacts are visible through the telling of these stories and life experiences. The collection of our voices shows cultural and systematic injustices such as abusive coaching to the point of the shutting down of a body, political corruption to the extent in which a whole champion
athletic career is disregarded, and severe retaliation for defending the athlete, to name a few.
CHAPTER THREE
SUBJECTED BODIES AND JUDGING

This chapter thoroughly describes the pressure to be thin, the need to fight against nature and motherhood and the desire for institutions to hand pick the body type regardless of technical and historical accomplishment, including the capability to lead. I begin by taking excerpts from Joan Ryan and her interviewees from her book, Little Girls in Pretty Boxes. Pulling from this book will allow the reader insight on gymnastics and figure skating as this issue of body type is negatively emphasized. After the excerpts from Joan Ryan’s book, I will then give an autoethnographic story on my own experience with subjected bodies and judging. Lastly, I will conclude this chapter with original research from my own interviewees, Monica and Alexa, as they tell, in detail, their realities from different perspectives regarding body type. The reader will notice Monica as the ideal long, skinny legged athlete who is named to National Teams over those who rank higher than her. She reveals how she dealt with this and how she experienced this injustice to others. Alexa, on the opposite side, regardless of her rank, was always threatened to lose weight and be thin, no matter what the cost.

Joan Ryan develops her concept on disembodiment as she navigates her own meaning making pulling from interviews she conducted with athletes, officials, coaches and parents in both figure skating and gymnastics.

“Society has allowed women to aspire higher, but to do so a woman must often reject that which makes her female, including motherhood… (Such sports) remove the limits of a girl’s body, teaching it to soar beyond what seems
possible. Yet they imprison it, binding it like the tiny Victorian waist or the Chinese woman’s foot. The girls aren’t allowed passage into adulthood. To survive in these sports, they beat back puberty, desperate to stay small and thin, refusing to let their bodies grow up. In this way the sports pervert the very feminity they hold so dear. The physical skills have become so demanding that only a body shaped like a missile— in other words, a body shaped like a boy’s— can excel. Breasts and hips slow the spins, lower the leaps and disrupt the clean, lean body lines that judges reward. “Women’s gymnastics” and “ladies’ figure skating” are misnomers today. Once the athletes become women, their elite careers wither” (P. 18, Ryan).

Kim Kelly finished sixth at the U.S. gymnastics championships and came in fourth place at the Olympic trials for the 1992 games in Barcelona. This meant she would be part of the seven man training team for the Olympics. Only six athletes got to compete and there would be one traveling alternate. The gymnastics federation clearly stated that 30% of the Olympic team selection process would be the ranking of the U.S. championships and the remaining 70% would be the ranking from the trials. After the trials, Kim Kelly received a letter stating a selection procedure change or changes: The federation called for another trial with the 7 athletes already named and, internationally known, Becky Okino, who could not compete at the trials or the U.S. championships because of injuries. So, six would be named to the team, one would be alternate and the last one would pack her bags. Additionally, the trials would be held in the home gym of the athlete who had come in last place with the combined ranking of the championship and the trials, giving her an advantage. If that wasn’t subjective enough, the new trials would not be judged, but
instead, the coaches of the athletes going would observe the trials and vote for the athletes who should be named to the team. But as in all sports, especially and aggressively in judged sports, politics comes out to play. The coaches dynamic looked like this: “Karolyi had three gymnasts competing: Becky Okino, Kim Zmeskal and Kerri Strug. Rick Newman, who had worked for Karolyi for ten years, had Michelle Campi. Steve Nunno, who had worked for Karolyi for a year, had Shannon Miller. Rita Brown, who owned the gym where the meet was held, had Wendy Bruce. The only coaches with no edge among their colleagues were Kelli Hill, who trained Dominique Dawes, and Bill and Donna Strauss, who had Kim Kelly” (P. 193, Ryan). Kim Kelly was the only athlete injury free. She was also the only athlete with hips and breasts. Kim was cut from the team with plenty of remarks about her look witnessed as the coaches decided who to cut. After proving herself at all of the trials and championships, justified by her ranking, it was her weight that ultimately determined her worth.

Dr. Lyle Micheli, a pediatric orthopedist at Harvard Medical School and former president of the American College of Sports Medicine stated, “Some of the biggest offenders are the elite coaches. If they have to sacrifice seven kids to get one champion, some will do it”. Dr. Micheli advocates for coaches to have some educational background basic child psychology and physiology, potentially making them more aware of what drives athletes to eating disorders and the negative impacts on dangerous training. One of the factors that weigh into this demand for certain bodies is the influence of males in sport. Historically, sport has been male-dominated, both in the athlete category as well as the coaching aspect. Women and girls were just meant to be spectators according to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Olympic Games. And as spectators, surely, they had no place being a coach. All things sport were dominated by the male. Even medically, researchers and
doctors alike insisted that women, biologically, were unfit for sport. In contemporary times, seen as the norm in these subjective sports, the culture speaks to a thin, curveless, almost boy-like shape. Joan Ryan includes this topic within an academic context to describe how this abusive culture has been created.

“Back when sports were exclusively male, coaches didn’t need to know much more about physiology than how their own bodies and minds worked, which is vastly different from having to know the anatomy and psychology of children and teenage girls. Women have taken great strides in athletics over the last thirty years, but the coaching hasn’t caught up. For the most part, girls still are coached on a male model without regard to bone density, menstrual cycles, growth plates and eating disorders, as well as the very real self-esteem issues that weigh on teenage girls. Research on young female athletes has been accumulating over the last decade, including that generated by a groundbreaking 1992 national conference called ‘The Female Triad’ at which scientists addressed the physiological impact of intensive training on young female athletes. The conference, organized by sports medicine doctors and researchers, hoped to highlight their growing concern that early and excessive training could invite long-term damage. But few coaches in elite gymnastics or figure skating keep abreast of the latest research. Most aren’t students of the sport as much as they are students of winning” (P. 242, Ryan).

An eating disorder includes vomiting, laxative usage, diet pills or diuretics. The University of Utah in 1994 found that of the gymnasts that were training for the Olympics
59% confessed they participated in at least one form of eating disorder while a 1992 study at the University of Washington found that roughly 32% of female college athletes in general admitted to having an eating disorder. Further, that same study found that 62% of college gymnasts fought an eating disorder. And to add evidence, a 1992 survey by the NCAA, found that 51% of college gymnastics athletes were involved with eating disorders. Gymnastics’ percentage of eating disorders reported higher than any other sport.

While figure skating and gymnastics have changed their scoring systems from the perfect 6.0 or the perfect 10 to a system which judges open ended depending on the difficulty of the routine, synchronized swimming still judges on a scale of 0-10. All three sports have developed a culture of perfection which includes a ‘look’ that must be demonstrated in order to be successful. And while gymnasts and figure skaters often times compete as individuals, synchronized swimmers experience another layer of pressure because they compete most of the time as pairs and as a team of eight people. All athletes in the team and the pair must demonstrate not only perfect synchronization throughout the routines but aesthetically perfect synchronization in the form of all of the members looking long, lean and curveless. Regardless of skill, a member of the team may be thrown out because they are not as skinny as the others. This fact, especially in recent years, of look superseding skill and rank has become so much a norm that it doesn’t even have to be explained or stated in the selection procedures for a National Team. This throws away hundreds of some of the very best athletes. This way of thinking, judging and selecting conflicts entirely with the integrity of sport; to crown champion the athlete or athletes who prove their skill the day of competition. The champion athlete may be known by name but defends their skill at each competition to be crowned champion. The judge must judge the
skill that is in front of them at that moment, not a look, not past performance and not future potential.

Aesthetic sports like Synchronized Swimming complicate the current binary perspective of retirement: Voluntary and Involuntary. De-selection in aesthetic sports is a decision made by the human eye and the skewed opinion. It is a decision that can be based on a body, instead of a skill set, performance record, mental capacity, or any other measurable factor. It is as if that body will not be chosen on the assumption it cannot perform the skills at the level needed. However, results show and prove time and time again, the body is not the only factor that shows the individual can perform to the required level. Further, if the skill set is ranked as sufficient to participate in the team, how can the selection committee justify not naming one to the team or deselecting based on a body when the skill and rank overall has qualified for the team?

In female judged sports, the athletes are conditioned to be thin from a young age. Coaches often look at a girl’s parents to see what the girl may grow up to look like. Will she be thin, tall, big breasted, wide-hipped? Joan Ryan says, “Some might argue that many sports require specific, even freakish, body types for participants to excel. One must be tall to play professional basketball, bulky to play certain positions in professional football, obese to compete in sumo wrestling, light and tiny to race horses. However, unlike athletes in those other sports, the world’s best female gymnasts are children” (P. 78, Ryan). The Russian athletes, sponsored by the government, live together, eat together, and train together in a very controlled dormitory style environment from the time they are hand-picked from their local clubs to the time they are old enough to live on their own, making their teenage years and adolescence absolutely controlled. American gymnasts, figure skaters and synchronized swimmers are often reminded of just how skinny, lean and
perfectly sculpted the Russian team is. One of the biggest influencers of this style of training and this aesthetic preference came from Karolyi and other like sports adopted it, especially when the Russians started dominating judged sports like Russia’s five-time Olympic Gold Medal streak in synchronized swimming. “He trained them like boxers, like little men, introducing rigorous conditioning and strengthening exercises to his workouts, transforming their bodies into muscled machinery. Karolyi insisted on small young girls for his team, not only for their pliability and resilience but for the little-doll look he believed enchanted the spectators and swayed the judges” (P. 206).

Christy Henrich was one of the most devastating casualties of this new training regime and Joan Ryan interviewed her parents for her book. “According to Christy, her coach once remarked that she looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy, and frequently reminded her how wonderfully thin the Russian gymnasts were” (P. 71, Ryan). Christy, an Olympic hopeful, ended up dying from her eating disorder of anorexia when all of her organs failed. “She was simply demanding of herself what her sport had always demanded of her: perfection. A perfect body, a body with no disfiguring fat, a body lighter than those of the Russians, lighter than air” (P. 73, Ryan).

Joan Ryan compares the training building and environment to that of a lab and eludes to the image of athletes as Gods that have been created in these labs. “Their gym was the laboratory where they set out to distill the human form and spirit to its purest elements. If they could clear away the human flaws and limitations: pare away the fat, elasticize the limbs and spine, numb the pain, control the nerves— they could create a body light and fluid as a ribbon rippling in the wind. They could deliver the ultimate promise of athletics: to reveal the gods within. (P. 206, Ryan). The number of athletes affected by a training regime so heavily focused on the need to be thin and the necessity to be perfect is
impossible to count. Joan Ryan recounts the many names Bela Karolyi called his athletes. “He (Karolyi) called Erika Stokes a pregnant goat as she began to go through puberty. Betty Okino was a pregnant spider. Kristie Philips was an overstuffed Christmas turkey. Karolyi belittled and ignored his girls for one reason: he got results. He winnowed out the weak and prodded the strong. Julissa Gomez left with her confidence shot. Erika Stokes left with an eating disorder. Kristie Philips left feeling suicidal. Chelle Stack left resentful and disappointed even though she had reached the Olympics. Danielle Herbst, Tricia Fortsen, Karen Reid, Alicia Ervin, Amy Jackson, Laurie White, Cindy Sauer—the list goes on—all arrived fresh, young and hopeful and left disillusioned and often broken” (P. 214, Ryan). But it is not the athletes who remain broken, it is the people, the women who possess these indistinguishable athletic identities. It is those behind the worth that has been defined by a number, determined by a look and destroyed by the need to be perfect in an environment that rewards just that: Perfection.

Is it possible to be both a champion and a woman? Not when the sport values “its roots in a system that plays favorites and whose obsession with beauty, class and weight conspires against the basic equation of most athletic endeavors: Talent + Hard Work = Success” (P. 137, Ryan).

1996 Olympic Gymnasts compared to 1992 Olympic Gymnasts (3 gymnasts of the six were in both Games)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Difference</th>
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<td>1 year and 9 months older</td>
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<td>1.5 inches taller</td>
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<td>10 pounds heavier</td>
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Shannon Miller, who competed in both Olympic Games, for example, grew 4 inches taller and weighed 19 pounds heavier between the ‘92 Games and the ‘96 Games. “They have more finesse, more composure, more self-confidence,’ Diane Amos, who coached 1996 Olympian Amy Chow, said of Miller, Strug and Dawes (returnees from 92, all adults). ‘I think the older girls are doing this more for themselves, which is what competition is all about. It’s no longer their parents making decisions, their coaches making decisions. They’re doing it because they want to do it” (P. 246-247, Ryan). The difference between the 1992 Olympics and the 1996 Olympics was that of freedom: the freedom to be a woman when nature took its course while still proving the skill needed to perform at an elite level in sport on the world’s biggest stage. The freedom to become a woman came at the absence of the overwhelming pressure to remain a child, defying the laws of nature.

Dan Bernadot, the National Team nutritionist hired in the late 90’s by the USAG said, “The United States was the biggest, tallest, heaviest team and also the fittest on the floor. We proved that as long as you’re strong and healthy, you don’t have to try to stop growth in order to be a successful gymnast” Under his supervision, he did not allow the athletes to be weighed in. He disregarded any talk of an athlete’s height and weight as well. His emphasis was solely on the athlete’s strength in regard to her natural size. Athletes were evaluated by doctors on their overall health, which included looking for potential eating disorders. “If any showed symptoms of eating disorders, the issue was addressed directly with the girl, her parents and her coaches. The gymnast was put in touch with a nutritionist, a sports psychologist and a medical doctor. And she was told she would not be allowed to compete until she received a doctor’s clearance” (P. 252, Ryan). Finally, a commitment to coach the talent within the individual athlete by cultivating her natural potential without breaking her spirit or her body.
However, this commitment was short lived and contradicted by the International Gymnastics Federation or, FIG. They moved the eligible age for the Olympic Games from 15 to 16 while increasing the difficulty level of the skills required for competition. So essentially, the federation allowed for more older athletes to compete but they could only rank if they could execute the skills that were designed for child’s bodies: Bodies of the light, the petite and the new, allowing for a logical reason to have an eating disorder and a direct correlation to having a quicker burn out rate. To put it in perspective, with the new skills put in place, the 1991 World Championship Gold medal routine would be given the score of a 7.9.

In sports like gymnastics, synchronized swimming and figure skating, the world has witnessed feats that defy what the human body is supposed to be able to do, much less what a child’s body, constricted and imprisoned inside of its form denying nature, should be able to do. The champions we watch on the television have helped create the ideal for young girls to look up to, their parents to push for and the coaches to exceed. Over time, the culture of abuse, subjected bodies and corrupt selections has produced such champions, but attention must urgently be called to not only those champions but to those who never made it. Those champions were the product of so many thousands of other young girls and women being thrown away just because they didn’t fit the mold, measure small enough or hold their childish figure long enough to be seen on a world stage.

**Alyson Autoethnography**

*Thanksgivings were always a complicated situation. A holiday meant for eating and feasting an obnoxious amount existed only in my dreams. A holiday with days off in itself*
proved a challenge to mom and I. The deal always was Thursday I would have off then
Friday, Saturday and Sunday we had to find a pool and practice each day before we
travelled back to California. Thanksgivings for most of my life were in Flagstaff, Arizona
where one set of my grandparents and my brother was for a time. Grandma always set up
chocolate boxes around the house filled with Lindor Truffles and Hershey’s assorted
chocolates for me specifically. I was the sous chef alongside my grandfather cooking up
turkeys and hams and stuffing and mashed potatoes and gravy and bread rolls and
homemade cranberry sauce. Everything was homemade really. And everything was made
with the thought process that butter had its own section in the food group pyramid.
When it came time to eat, the buffet was elaborately spread on the separate counter that I
was sure was constructed specifically for Thanksgiving feasts. Finally, the holiday of
eating. I could eat. I could stuff my face. I could have seconds and thirds. I could have bread
and potatoes! This played over and over in my mind as I waited in the buffet line. I would
grab my plate with a big smile on my face. Finally!

I think you become self-conscious of eating or filling your plate when you are in an
aesthetic sport. Like it just comes with you entering the elite level. You could be having the
healthiest meal of your life filled with uncooked spinach, tomatoes and grilled chicken with
no seasoning and you would still feel like everyone and their mother was staring at your
plate in judgement... Well Alyson should you really be having a full piece of chicken? And
you bet it worked the other way too! I found myself and my teammates throughout the
years constantly staring at other plates, not always in judgment but in habit and
sometimes, in striving for approval. Well if she is having dressing on her salad, I can too.

Thanksgiving was no different. It was the epitome of self-conscious eating. Could I
have bread? No. Could I have dressing? Hell no! Potatoes? Think again. I could barely have
the beautifully seasoned meat and salad with dressing already on it. Are those croutons? Did I find a loophole? One look at my mom gave me the answer. I would give them away. Can I have more meat mom or more salad? I think you’ve had enough Alyson. And the truth was I had had enough to eat. I had a lot of meat because I knew that would fill me up and keep me full because dessert time was always a killer for me.

Mom was usually lenient in letting me have dessert on Thanksgiving night. The other nights? Nope. But for one night she was okay with it. She watched my plate as I came to sit down at the table and if I had taken too much, she would have some bites of mine. My family would stare at my plate too because they felt bad. They knew I was being watched and controlled and limited even on Holiday. This explained the secret chocolate boxes and me getting to taste test everything unbeknownst to my mom.

Was mom wrong for this? No. She was just trying to help. I was a big eater as a younger kid. I never had a weight problem earlier in my career. I would eat three fast food meals a day with my step father without mom knowing. I could out eat my brother who is three years older and double my size. I would finish my plate and then take on his! I became a binge eater when I had to start watching my food. This started when I was 14. I would eat really well for a few days and then eat five meals in one sitting when I was alone, and no one was watching me. The problem was my coaches and mom started mentioning my weight because I was of age to begin my menstrual cycle. The women in my family started theirs between the ages of 11 and 14 so people thought I was due any time soon. So, to save me from myself and from the side effects of a menstrual cycle like weight gain, body changes, cravings, I was put on diets from 14 on. The problem was I wouldn’t start my cycle until I was 17 years old. So, for more than three years, my metabolism was still relatively quick while I was limited on my caloric intake. To add, I had a history of eating immense
amounts of foods with no restrictions, which did not help my situation because I had already formed certain cravings for foods like the sweet stuff especially. If my mom didn’t intervene on my eating, I wouldn’t have known any different and would have exponentially expanded without a doubt.

Did I take it personal? Abso-freakin-lutely! Imagine: I would get to the pool at 8 a.m. and immediately get weighed in. The number had to go down from the previous day or else you would be in trouble. In my case, if I didn’t drop the weight, I wouldn’t even be put in the routine. Captain or not, I had to look the part. And the part was 20 pounds lighter. I was one of the few who got weighed because I was a member of the self-proclaimed ‘Fat Five’. We had to make fun of ourselves to make us feel a little better and to find solidarity knowing we were in this dieting together. Can you blame us? We would be at the pool for ten hours. We got a 30-minute lunch break while the others got an hour. Why? To limit our eating and to do 30 minutes of extra cardio while the others continued to eat. Our meals would all be monitored at the pool. We would have food logs. The team nutritionist and coaches would be on our asses. Around 6 p.m. we were done and got to go home. I would come home so hungry but almost too tired to eat. Mom would remind me what I got to have for dinner. Mom was part of the food police squad. Let me tell you what the diet was for that Summer. This was in 2012.

Breakfast: Black coffee- nothing in it.

Lunch: As much raw spinach and tomatoes as I wanted- It was effective... It was so disgusting to me I just didn’t end up eating.

Dinner: 1 8 ounce steak with no seasoning- Gotta love it.
Each day changed a little bit with the exception of breakfast. That shit always stayed the same. Sometimes for lunch or dinner I would get to have fruit, a saving grace if you ask me. Hallelujah.

My weight didn’t always threaten to get me kicked out of a routine. Sometimes, it prevented me from being on the team all together.

At the end of my Freshman year of college, I had miraculously fallen in love with Synchro again while simultaneously gaining a good 25 pounds. No one told me calories were the same in college as they were before college. I was under the impression they, all of the sudden, ceased to exist the second I stepped on campus. Oh, sweet freedom comes at a cost.

Also, at the end of my Freshman year I had undergone surgery to remove a salivary gland. I had had half a dozen surgeries on salivary gland stones under my tongue throughout the years, but this one was the big kahuna to get the whole defective gland taken out through an incision in my neck. Not heart surgery but put me on my ass for some weeks. And, more importantly, I couldn’t get in the pool because of the skin glue over my scar.

The 2016 Olympic Trials were a no go for me because of the surgery. They were scheduled at a time I could not get in the water yet. So, I petitioned in. A petition is where you send in your accomplishments over your synchro career and you state your case on why you couldn’t attend the trials. After over 20 National Titles and a well-known name backed by a respected reputation in the small sport, my petition was accepted. I had four months to get the extra weight off, or ‘love’ I like to call it and get back to the basics, something you don’t really focus on in college.
It was October of 2014. I had gone back home to California to train for trials with my mom during the Summer. My college coach agreed to play the routine music at the end of every practice after everyone got out of the pool, so I could run through the routine as many times as possible before people were changed and ready to go to class. By the time trials came around I felt ready. I was going back home to try out which made me feel more confident as well. My mom and Gail, a 7-time Olympic Coach and my long-time coach, coached me for warm ups. It was kind of like the last shot. Gail had believed in me since she saw me when I was 9 years old swimming a Scooby Doo themed solo routine, when she told my mom I would win Regionals, which I did.... By 10 points. And mom was there who, of course, had been my anchor from the beginning. I wore my USA Olympic Team Jacket I got from Gail to the pool that day. The whole day I was either warming up, competing or practicing, making the most of each moment and doing my job-a sweet balance harmonizing love and thoughtfulness, passion and detail.

A few weeks later my college coach calls me up late at night. The conversation went something like this:

Al, have you checked your email?
No, why?
Check it, then call your mom. Fuck yeah swimmer!

I did exactly that. I pulled up my email on my phone. I found an email from the National Team Director and Coach titled ‘Senior National Squad’.

Hi Alyson,

Please find below results of the Petitioner ‘Swim-Off Process’ Part 1 and explanation of the next steps are for you:

1. Results attached. You are currently 6th (note that the Technical Elements seem to have
been scored a little higher than in June).

2. As per my previous email, please complete the 'Pike Hold' and the 'Pull hold' tests. Please send me a video of your test by Friday October 24th.

3. The Selection Committee has selected you participate to Part 2 of the Petitioner 'Swim-Off Process' for Senior Squad 1. This means that you will need to come train with the Senior Squad 1 for two days. The Senior Coaching staff and myself will evaluate you during those two days to see whether you can join the team or not.

4. However, your selection to Part 2 of the Petitioner 'Swim-Off Process' and to the Senior Squad 1 is pending you do some nutrition work. As per the Discretionary Criteria, we need to ensure 'Athletic Impression' and 'Nutrition'. You need to lose some weight to match the rest of the team and demonstrate the Synchronized Swimming look.

5. In order to achieve this, I would like you to work with our National Team Nutritionist as soon as possible. We will set some markers to achieve before you can be selected to the Squad. If you agree to the conditions of your selection to Part 2, I will then put you in contact with her so that you can start the work immediately.

5. Since you are currently in school at Lindenwood, I suggest that we plan the two days of training with Squad 1 during your Christmas break in December or January. Please let me know when you will be in Northern California during that period so that we can organize.

6. I will send you the video and sheet counts for the Senior National Team Technical Team routine soon so that you can learn it. The routine will be finalized next week. You will need to learn the routine before you come to the two days of training.

7. If you are selected to the Senior National Squad 1, you will be require to train full time with the Squad at the National Training Center in Moraga, CA.

Please let me know if you have any questions and if you agree to the conditions of your selection to Part 2 of the Petitioner 'Swim-Off Process'.

Judge 2/High Performance Director/National Team Head Coach scored the lowest on 50% of the petitioners’ elements. While the other judges were no more than .1 away from the nearest lowest score, judge 2 for the other petitioner was .5 away from the next lowest score on one element and .4 away from the next lowest score of another element. Further, judge 2 was .3 away from the next lowest score on one of my elements and was a whole point away from the next lowest score on another of my elements. This type of scoring anomaly on low judging only occurred with judge 2 with the petitioner’s trials. It is
important to note here that I, in fact, won this portion of the trials process which amounted to 40% of the score. However, out of the top 12, I was ranked 7th for the measurement portion of the trials, covering another 30% of the overall ranking. Two of the three athletes who would be named to the duet squad were ranked lower than me. This included the measurement ranking.

Yet, I was not allowed to be named to the team, pending nutrition work. Imagine Simone Biles winning the Olympic Trials widely televised on all of the major sporting channels and not being named to the team pending nutrition work. The bottom line here, connecting to the broader issue of team de-selection in judged sports, is: Is the body a more important factor in team selection, regardless of skill level, past achievement and character? It has not been proven that the body type or even body fitness level, to an extent, deems an athlete’s ability to perform the skills at the necessary elite level impossible. And how can judged sports justify this type of team selection rejection when the skills needed to perform the sport at the level required rank among the best in the country?

I called my mom immediately. This was a moment we both had thought about for years. In this moment, I was pleased. But I would be lying if I said I was happy. Something was not fulfilling about the whole thing. But nonetheless, I made the decision to go through with doing a few practice days in December. I mean why wouldn’t I? This was my dream wasn’t it?

I am sure you have heard this before. Life happens in unexpected ways. It absolutely does. Every year, my University team would go to Texas for a week of Winter Training before we headed home for the holidays. During a water practice, my teammate and very good friend kicked me full force with her foot in my head. All I heard in the moment was a big ‘clack’ kind of resembling that very first boom of thunder, but not the rolling sounds
that follow. I didn’t think of my disorientation because I had been hit before many times and we still had a few hours left of practice. I also didn’t think anything of it because in two days’ time I was to practice with the National Team to see if I fit the mold. Nothing was going to stop me from that.

The next days are a blur, literally. As my mom tells me: I was really delayed in my responses, often looking into space for a good 10 seconds before I answered or acknowledged anything.

I noticed it when I was at National Team practice. I was doing well, keeping up, doing everything that was asked and feeling good about my performance. Then came routine time, my favorite. I was so excited to show my routine swimming and perform and outperform. But something wasn’t right. I couldn’t get the changes the girls were making to the routine. I couldn’t mentally grasp the changes, something that has never happened before. Normally I was so quick to get modifications. Often, I would be the one to teach the changes. Not this time. I couldn’t focus, and I couldn’t retain.

At the end of the practice, mom was waiting there on deck for me. She could tell by the look in my eyes, something was wrong. I told her I couldn’t get the routine changes, something was wrong and I wasn’t mentally right. She told me about my delayed response time and my glazed eyes. I told her about the kick I took to the head. Together, we told the National Team Director and she excused me from the rest of the training days. I felt like it was probably a relief for her I wouldn’t be there. I went to the doctor where I was diagnosed with a concussion, no swimming for the rest of break. No trying to fit into the mold for me. Like so many defeats in sport, they come with lessons. The downs must be accompanied by the ups. This is balance.
The defeats make you rethink your life, your priorities, your wants, your needs and your journey’s path. I remember this night as clear as day. It was about two months after I got back to school after Winter Break. I was walking back to my house alone after a long day at school. I stopped as I passed the empty baseball fields. I sat on the bleachers. And I cried…. Hysterically. I pulled up the email I had received months earlier and looked at the results from the trials and then took a good look at the conditions again. What were my priorities I asked myself. School. Now, I wanted my degree. I had already delayed it once when I graduated High School at 16 and took two years off before starting college in hopes I was going to be an Olympian. What were my wants I asked next. I wanted what I had in that moment. I had proven to myself I could make the team. I truly loved my sport again after so many years of bitterness. And I had a team full of friends, support and laughter. National Team had a way of sapping you of yourself, draining you of your personality, spark and uniqueness. It had a way of creating hollow souls, stripped of all light and energy. This was happening especially in these years because of the National Team decline in results and funding. Nobody believed in the Olympics anymore. People either quit or tried to earn one of the few collegiate scholarships available. What were my needs I thought. I needed what I could only get exactly where I was. A home. Safety. And stability. I had moved six times in six years back in California, bouncing from apartment to apartment, wherever we could afford, and no credit check was needed. I had been working to help mom pay bills since my step dad kicked us out of the apartment. I had been trying to encourage my mom to stay alive after she became so depressed by the splitting up of our family. Different men came to the house for mom, making my truck the only option for naps between practices and work. I had been trying to still captain the team in California when I was so far gone myself and couldn’t get my act together to even bother to show up to
practice sometimes. I was breaking down in spirit. Reality was hitting, and it fell on me like a waterfall, suffocating and blinding and destructively heavy. Guilt, if not present before, was now carving into me like a mighty river would to make a canyon.

What was my path now? I was so sure for so long I wanted to get to the Olympic Games. I visualized myself daily at the opening ceremony. I heard U-S-A, U-S-A, U-S-A in my head and in my heart. I had taken all of the steps to get there. What happened to that little girl with big dreams?

I think it was in one of the Rocky movies that Rocky’s trainer, Mickey, says Rocky isn’t ready to fight Clubber Lang. He will lose Mickey tells Rocky. Mickey’s reasoning didn’t make sense to me until I sat at my school’s baseball field deciding not to go train for the Olympic Games. I got civilized. Further and more importantly, I was happy in that. I can take it if someone said I didn’t work hard enough, I didn’t have the extension, I didn’t have the height or the technical ability. I just wish someone told me when I was 8 years old I would never make it to the Olympics because of my body.

Monica’s Interview

“We did Junior Team Training in Riverside. We were 15, 16, 17 and we didn’t really realize the magnitude of the situation. Looking back on it, I think she was a pretty emotionally and verbally abusive coach. We were out there for 3 months and kind of living on our own in a cottage or something on this University’s campus. And we were training 10 hours a day, 7 days a week. A lot of the things that she said to us were not okay and I think with how times have changed even within the past five years, I think if that situation were in current times it would be taken a lot more seriously. She body shamed us and made us
feel like we were really overweight and untalented. From that Summer, I watched a lot of my teammates get pretty aggressive eating disorders and body dysmorphia. I mean, at 15, when someone’s telling you that you’re overweight and unattractive, you’re going to lose the weight, even when you don’t have a lot to lose because you’re training 10 hours a day. Looking back on that, I mean at 15, I didn’t realize there was something more I could do but we definitely should have stepped up. But also when you’re in those kinds of situations where someone has that kind of power over you, you don’t really know what you can do, especially when you’re in your teenage years. Everyone developed an eating disorder and our bodies could not handle the physical workouts we were doing because we were so underweight.

The next moments are from National Team. A lot of it has to do with weight, eating and body dysmorphia, a lot of the things that have to do with synchro. The years that started to be a thing, probably 2011, 12 and 13, is when our National Team Selection people and Director started to really look at the long, skinny, tiny athlete that was the “image”. I realized a lot of my teammates weren’t making National Teams just solely off of their weight and the way they looked. All of these teammates were always better swimmers than me. One of my teammates from Arizona and two more athletes I very vividly remember did not make the team just because they didn’t have the look even though you and I both know they’re very talented athletes. They were great swimmers, very physically fit athletes but just because they don’t possess this ‘look’ they were not being selected to National Teams. I think that’s when we really started to see a shift in our National Team Programs and their unfair ways of selecting teams.

Another person that I ended up swimming with in college competed with me for the Junior National Team tryouts and the National Team started shifting the way they were
selecting. It was a lot of the physical stuff on land like push-ups and pull ups, how fast you
could do something or throw a ball and catch it with the other hand. This tryout was
heavily weighted on the land portion and not necessarily on the swimming portion. So this
swimmer did really well in the land portion and was a beautiful swimmer and she ended up
coming in third at these National Team Trials. And they just didn’t take her on the team.
The coaches and directors said yea you did well but you’re not going to be on this team. I
mean I can’t even imagine her disappointment after being the third one ranked then the
selection committee saying no, sorry. You made it but you didn’t make it. So this is one of
the big moments I noticed that it was unjust to her and unjust to the people who were
abiding by the rules the selection committee and National Team put in place for tryouts.
The girls that were abiding by those new rules and regulations just weren’t making the
team because they didn’t look the way the committee wanted them to look even though they
were talented, doing the training, had potential and could do very well.

I felt guilty for being part of the team because there were people that ranked above
me and they weren’t making it. Why am I here? Just because I have skinny legs means I
can make a National Team? That’s where I felt a guilt on being on a National Team when I
realized there were better people who should have been there”.

Alexa’s Interview

“The Summer of Junior Worlds when we went to Greece was a mentally and
emotionally hard Summer for me. I think overall the team morale was down and it felt like
the team was divided. Especially because I don’t think the coaches did a very good job with
the whole weight loss thing when they separated us into the group that does need to lose
weight and the group that doesn’t. That made me go into my shell more and made me start questioning myself as an athlete and not thinking I was good enough”.

**Argumentative Recap**

My autoethnography and the voices from Monica and Alexa’s interviews show varying perspectives of the body type concept and practice that occurs alongside specialization and elite sport. Alexa and I, similarly, were singled out as ‘too big’ and not the right look for most of our careers, which was systematically deemed a bigger issue than working on any skill or technique. For example, our weight kept us off teams or threatened to kick us off teams while those who lacked a required skill or technical level were not kicked off, not named or threatened to be cut. Monica had a different lens. She was the ideal in the form of body type for synchronized swimming. However, she saw her teammates unjustly treated, despite their skill level or ranking. It is these perspectives that show the negative impacts of body type pressure experienced by elite female athletes.
CHAPTER FOUR
HAZE

This chapter focuses on what is less visible to the outside: the family life behind an elite athlete and her career. Beginning with Family Pressure on Children to do Sport and Excel, I navigate through Little Girls in Pretty Boxes highlighting the stories pertaining to the pressure children feel to do and excel at sport at well as perspectives from the coaches and parents. This section also includes my personal autoethnography, original interviews with my mother and brother and an interview of me from a magazine. Next is a section titled, A Dinosaur Named Blue. This ethnographic excerpt speaks to the relationship, or rather, the bond my brother and I have and had during my athletic career. I end this chapter with, Blurred Lines, that follows Alexa’s interview I conducted and includes her personal account of living with a mom who was also her coach. These lines sometimes blurred, mutated or became one instead of two.

Family Pressure on Children to do Sport and Excel

In this section, I pull the experiences from gymnasts and figure skaters found in Little Girls in Pretty Boxes to voice not only their experiences as children to do sport and excel but also included are the experiences of some coaches and parents and how they view their children being in the sport. The family pressures athletes feel are less visible to the outside world. These are more hidden pressures that can dangerously weigh on young girls growing up in these sports and excelling at them. By exposing this more hidden reality, the public will start to have a fuller picture of what goes into becoming an elite athlete.
There is no doubt the word, extraordinary, is used in the best of sporting circles, athletic feats and champion accomplishments. Joan Ryan speaks to this word in her book. “Some argue that extraordinary children should be allowed to follow extraordinary paths to realize their potential. They argue that a child’s wants are no less important than an adult’s and thus she should not be denied her dreams just because she is still a child” (P. 24, Ryan). Extraordinary is synonymous with: remarkable, exceptional, amazing, astonishing, astounding, marvelous... the list continues with like words that share a common air of euphoria. Extraordinary is the perfect word to describe what an audience sees when girls and young women are performing human defying yet seemingly controlled and dangerous yet elegantly graceful stunts. Extraordinary can be used to describe “...thirteen-year-old Michelle Kwan, an eighth grader, land six triple jumps to finish second at the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championships” (P. 15, Ryan). Extraordinary happens when, “sixteen-year-old Shannon Miller soar(s) above the balance beam as if it were a trampoline to win a silver medal at the 1992 Olympics” (P. 15, Ryan). Eight young women performing in complete synchronization upside down in the water using nothing more than their muscles to hold themselves up, while shifting their formations, spinning and turning all around with no goggles for upwards of two minutes without oxygen is extraordinary. What the audience sees in these examples is, indeed, extraordinary. But how do these young girls and women get to these levels? These extraordinary paths are not set by children. While a child may fantasize about the Olympic Games or the National Championship’s top step on the podium, someone else has to start them on that extraordinary path and in order to do so, that someone has to want that child’s want either for the child or for themselves. What do these extraordinary moments require and what do these extraordinary athletes go through to get there? “In elite sports, the by-product of a parent’s spirited devotion can be
expectations so high and pressure so suffocating that they can cripple a girl’s self worth” (P. 128, Ryan). “We hear precious little about the young female gymnasts and figure skaters who perform magnificent feats of physical strength and agility, and even less about their casualties. How do the extraordinary demands of their training shape these young girls? What price do their bodies and psyches pay?” (P. 15, Ryan).

Tiffany Chen was a leading favorite for the 1985 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. She was 17. “She was asked at the time how she would feel if she didn’t win... ‘Devastated... I don’t know. I’d probably die’” (P. 19, Ryan). This response shows an intense connection between self-worth and athletic identity and success as if to lose is to die and to win is to live. “Chin recalled recently that when she did win, ‘I didn’t feel happiness. I felt relief. Which was disappointing’”(P. 19, Ryan). So to win became life’s necessity instead of a career accomplishment. As one of the favorites, she was deemed an Olympic hopeful. However, just three months shy of the 1988 Olympic Games Chen retired claiming her legs were failing her. As news spread of her retirement, many in the sport claimed a different reason for her bowing out right before the games: her mother. “I feel I’m lucky to have gotten through it... I don’t think many people are that lucky. There’s a tremendous strain on people who don’t make it. The money, the sacrifices, the time. I know people emotionally damaged by it. I’ve seen nervous breakdowns, psychological imbalances” (P. 19, Ryan). “Pressure weighs on young athletes not only during certain select moments but every day. They hear it in the urgent corrections from their coaches. They feel it in the sidelong glances of their teammates. But most of all, when they look to the bleachers at the edge of the gym or the rink, they see it in the hopeful eyes of their parents” (P. 150, Ryan).

Joan Ryan points to what can hinder a young girl’s identity and self-worth in a sport that should be empowering her. “To lose a competition is to lose the best part of themselves,
the part their parents and coaches reward so lavishly with praise. The child who trains eight hours a day at a sport can’t always distinguish where she starts and her sport ends. Her worth as a child is gauged on her performance as an athlete. So the fear of failure is the fear of losing all that is worthy in her (P. 148, Ryan). Parents play one of the biggest roles in a child’s life. Adding sports to a child’s activities can forever alter some parent-child relationships. A child’s activity can soon become a lifestyle, a way into higher education, a way out of poverty, a second chance for a parent to live vicariously through their children’s accomplishments and/or an identity. “Parents act as a chauffeur, nutritionist, nurse, benefactor, cheerleader, masseuse, maid, politician…” (P. 156, Ryan). The intensity in which the parent pushes the child, often cited by the parent as providing the best opportunities for their child to achieve their dreams (although, whose dreams can be blurry and vague), tips the scales on having an athletic identity through sport and only having an athletic identity, meaning being an athlete is the identity for the child. This often can be seen when the child is being introduced to someone new. The parent may say, “Hey Kim, this is my daughter, Alyssa” and Kim greets the child for the first time, “Alyssa, the gymnast! I’ve heard so much about you”. Children start to be recognized and known more by their sport than their own last name. It is in those early years, we start to see the child being forgotten while the athlete is molded into history. “Two cherished American values came crashing against each other in the debate over Karolyi: the protection of our children versus our will to win” (P. 212, Ryan).

Chelle Stack, an Olympic gymnast, represented more than just herself when she wore USA on her shoulders. “When my daughter made the Olympic Team,” says Carrol Stack, “I told her, ‘You didn’t make the team, I did’” (P. 158, Ryan). Chelle’s family moved from Pennsylvania to Houston in 1988 to train with world renowned gymnastics coaches,
Bela and Marta Karolyi. The bill for gymnastics alone was $750.00 per month and Carrol, Chelle’s mother, never let her forget the sacrifices made by the family for her gymnastics. Just a few months before the Olympic trials, Chelle pleaded with her mother (not for the first time) to let her quit. Carrol responded, “I put this much time and effort into this and, by God, if you think I’m going to let you quit now, you’re crazy. If I have to literally go out there and get up on the beam with you, you’re going to do it. If I have to beat you every day, you’re going to do it” (P. 163, Ryan). By the time the Olympics came around, Chelle’s mother was ready for her daughter to be an Olympic Champion. Chelle, whether she was tired, made a mistake, or was finally collapsing under the pressure of the daily reminders of her family’s sacrifices for her career, fell during her Olympic debut on the uneven bars. Chelle would be no Olympic Champion. “I went back to the hotel and cried. I mean, I bawled. I just couldn’t believe it was over. It was finished. That was it. It was a big letdown. We went through everything and this was it? Everybody had thought she was going to be the next Mary Lou, and she didn’t even make finals. There was no glory” (P. 163, Ryan).

Frank, Chelle’s father was asked if he held any regrets for his daughter’s career in gymnastics. “Frank Stack concedes they would have been better off putting Chelle in tennis or golf because at least then she could have made some money” (P. 164, Ryan). After a childhood of pounding and abuse, Chelle cannot wear high heels, she has almost twenty fractures in her knee and, because she strived desperately to stay thin after puberty for gymnastics by using laxatives, she has trouble digesting properly. Her father continues...

“But real regrets? No. She came out healthy” (P. 164, Ryan).

The price parents pay, from their perspective, for Olympians and champions is large amounts of money, moving whole families or part of a family to a training center, getting another job to help pay for more training, driving their athlete around everywhere they
need to go, etc. “Almost every successful child athlete rides to the top on the shoulders of a parent undaunted by sacrifice and extremes- whether this means sending a child far away to train, mortgaging a home to foot the bills, taking a child out of school so she can train longer hours, abusing her physically or verbally for not performing, or even giving up custody” (P. 156, Ryan). But what is seldom ever talked about or mentioned is the price of an abused, fractured, broken body and psyche of their child. The grotesquely battered well-being of a child is often the disregard of a parent for the cost of a champion. “Overtraining, injuries and psychological damage are common consequences (of elite gymnastics). Parents and coaches, in collusion with the young athlete, may seek to experience vicariously the success of the child, a behavior that could be called ‘achievement by proxy’. We suggest that in its extreme form ‘achievement by proxy’ may be a sort of child abuse” (July 25th, 1996 issue New England Journal of Medicine cited 45 sources of medical researchers).

Erika, a Barcelona Olympics hopeful gymnast, puts herself before gymnastics as she walks out of Karolyi’s gym for the last time. Erika’s quitting became her mother’s mourning. “I was grieving the loss of everything we put into this. I knew she could have walked away with medals at the Olympics. I’ll tell you what it’s like. It’s like death. All the steps you go through when someone close to you dies. It was the same thing. Overnight a door slammed shut” (P. 90, Ryan). Susan Stokes and her family lives circled around gymnastics and they lived through Erika’s gymnastics career so much so that when her family moved back to their longtime home of Houston after Erika walked out of Karolyi’s gym, Susan filed for a divorce from her husband whom she had been married to for twenty-five years. Gymnastics became the normal. Gymnastics became the lifestyle and identity of not only Erika, but her family as well. Susan admits, “This sport really tears families apart.
I remember thinking why can’t we be a normal family? I don’t know if we could ever be a normal family again. I don’t know if we know how to be normal anymore” (P. 90, Ryan).

Parents of elite female athletes tend to take one of two avenues: They either become physically, mentally and emotionally invested, involved and inseparable from the sport or they hand off their daughter to those who will take her to her potential. The latter positions the coach to assume a parental role in the child’s life, giving the coach the opportunity to plant discipline and values as a parent would. Bill Bragg is an outright example of this giving of a child to a coach. Holly, Bill’s daughter became a figure skater. Bill had divorced his wife and had moved from job to job. Holly’s mother and her lived in a shelter in the Bay Area for six months after the divorce but Holly’s mother soon came to terms that she could not take care of Holly and raise her so she gave custody to Bill. Bill soon lost his job and raised Holly on unemployment checks, handouts and food stamps. With little money and no stability, Bill would never allow Holly to miss out on figure skating. He always found a way to have her practice. Once Holly’s mom found out Bill was sleeping in his car and Holly was sleeping at friends’ houses, she took him to court for custody. Holly’s mom would take her in but refused to let her skate while Bill would take her to the rink everyday but could not provide a stable life for her or even a home. Bill suggested to the court to let Holly choose between her mother or her coach. She chose her coach, Tracy, to keep skating. Bill handed Holly over, in legal guardianship, to be raised and coached by her longtime coach just to give her the best opportunity he could.

Parents can have the motivation to do whatever it takes if they see potential in their child for something extraordinary. However, this can come at the cost of not only the gifted child’s body and psyche but the siblings of that child’s well-being, childhood and family relationships. Kim Kelly is one of four children. She has two sisters and a brother. Kim was
a 1992 Olympic hopeful and her mom and her moved away so Kim could train. Kim’s brother was starting his high school journey while one of her sisters was finishing high school and the other was just entering into college. Kim’s mother “missed all of her son’s high school years, justifying the sacrifices by believing Kim needed her more. Her daughter loved the sport so passionately and had a chance to achieve something special” (P. 182, Ryan). Much like the child athlete who becomes enveloped in sport and develops an athletic identity on steroids while having the other roles within them become severely underdeveloped, the parents of that child can experience a paralleling effect. That particular child and that specific sport become the focus and the identity of the family. All decisions are made with that child and that sport in mind and all decisions, therefore, should benefit that child and that sport at any cost, including the cost of the other children in the name of winning and glory. “They’re (the parents are) feeding at the same trough as the people who buy lottery tickets: though their chances of winning are laughably remote, somebody wins- and that provides enough hope to keep them buying tickets” (P. 244, Ryan).

Parents often act as the manager for the child’s career, making sure the child has routine, structure and standards at home as much as they have in practice. The parent can become the coach and even the nutritionist. After all, they buy the groceries. In female judged sports like gymnastics, figure skating and synchronized swimming, the culture and trends of the sport breed lean and straight lines, leaving no room for the curves of a woman. Because of the nature of these sports, menstruation is delayed for as long as possible to preserve a child’s body well into the teenage and young adult years. “A trainer for the United States Gymnastics Federation once asked the mother of a 1992 Olympian if her seventeen-year-old daughter had begun menstruating yet. The mother said no. He suggested she take the girl to the doctor, citing the potential growth and bone-density
problems. The mother shook her head and said No, we want to keep her this way so she can compete in the 1996 Olympics” (P. 77, Ryan). The young woman’s future health and well-being is outweighed by the skinniest, most child-like body as possible, controlled by her mother.

Parents can manage their daughter’s careers toward the goals set by them. A few examples described above are the management of Olympic goals, parents wanting their children to achieve glory on the biggest stage the world has to offer. Some parents just want to have their child have the best opportunities they can afford like Bill Bragg. When it comes down to it, most parents whether Olympic bound or not, just want a payoff. The difference lies in what that pay off looks like, what is important to the parents. Hillary’s mother stood firm on 20 hours a week of training for the national team in gymnastics even while the other girls and their parents were at the gym 40 plus hours a week. Hillary’s mother kept her in her normal high school, not sending her to homeschooling or independent study like the rest of her teammates. Most of Hillary’s teammates either experienced forced retirement from injuries developed in the excessive amount of training or burn out from the excessive amount of gymnastics and the absence of anything else. Hillary did not go to the Olympics. She chose to go to Stanford and continue her gymnastics career, injury and burn out free for the next four years in college on a full-ride scholarship. This was her payoff. “One can only assume that her moderate training and balanced diet were responsible- a formula so basic and reasonable that it has found no place in the obsessive world of elite gymnastics” (P. 160, Ryan). In these female judged sports, there is a binary vision: Do you want your child to win, or do you want your child to stay healthy?

Parents walk a potentially dangerous or potentially powerful line regarding their child’s athletic career. Joan Ryan sums this role up well. “They must encourage without
pushing. Protect without hindering. Give praise but not too much-a daughter shouldn’t be made to feel her performance determines her worth” (P. 159, Ryan). Linda Leaver, the coach of Olympic Figure Skating Gold Medalist, Brian Boitano, says athletes and parents “... shouldn’t be doing this for an end. They should be doing this for the process. There are so many things that can prevent a child from getting what you sacrificed for. But if you pursue the sport simply as a tool to becoming a better person-to learning about goal-setting, discipline, increasing self-esteem-then you can’t go wrong”

**The Result of Many Fractures**

The following is my own autoethnographic story on the decision that was made for me to leave a club in Las Vegas to go train with an elite club in California and its implications not only on my family but on myself as well. The title of this section, The Result of Many Fractures, came up when I was interviewing my brother for this research. This section is organized by my autoethnography, an open interview with my mother, my continued autoethnography with reflection, an open interview with my brother and ending with an open interview Oyster Magazine took of me.

**Alyson Autoethnography**

_The year is 2008. It was a big year for me, my family and for the world. For me, I qualified for my first ever USA National Team, the 13-15 National Team. At twelve years old I was named to the duet and team events to represent Team USA in Calgary, Canada at the end of the Summer. I was accepted as one of the 200 students out of the 10,000_
applicants who auditioned for Las Vegas Academy’s High School Dance program as a Freshman. I also, almost single-handedly, split my family apart and took us on a journey in which there was no return, major rewards and a heap of consequences and impacts. My mom and step-dad, or dad (At this age, I still wasn’t sure), lost their jobs within a few months of each other in our hometown of Las Vegas, Nevada.

Starting in the Fall of 2008, we filed bankruptcy and went on unemployment. It was the recession. This was what everyone was saying. The whole city, the whole nation. All of our street was uprooted and moving. Everyone had foreclosure or for sale signs up in their yards. On any given day, there would be about a dozen workers lined up outside the neighborhood gas station waiting for landscaping or construction trucks to pick them up for the day’s work. Now, it was at least a hundred men chasing, jumping and falling off of these trucks as they competed each day to try and get work to bring home money. The neighborhood restaurants we went to every weekend were shutting down. It was a ghost town and we became the ghosts.

My brother, a Senior, and step sister, a Sophomore, were still in High School at the Advanced Technologies Academy. My brother worked a lot moving furniture in his truck and my step sister was back and forth at our home and her mother’s. There were no jobs to be had, no homes to be kept and no future it seemed in my hometown. I guess this is why mom had the conversation with me.

Open Interview With my Mother on the Decision to Move to California

“I Talked to Kim on Wednesday and ended up flying out Thursday afternoon to meet with Kim and Gail (Coaches). Gail suggested you fly out Friday afternoon to have the
coaches take a look at you. You went straight to practice, did a rocket (Synchronized Swimming power move) out to your armpits and I looked at the coaches and saw Kim raising her eyebrows at the others as if to say silently, “We’ll take it”.

I remember saying to you that if we do this, you’ve gotta know everyone in this family is making a sacrifice for you. You’re going to do this 100%. We aren’t moving for a month, we are moving for good. I had to have a very grown up conversation with a very young kid because you had to understand we, the family, had nothing left. What was left, we were giving to you for your dream of the Olympics.

Here was a conversation we never had, yet I played it in my head day in and day out. You were such a sweet kid. I honestly didn’t know if you could handle the pressure of the family’s sacrifice. I always wondered if I was setting you up to fail in the case you couldn’t handle the pressures of reality. Life would never be the same and I didn’t know if it was fair to put that on your shoulders. I shouldn’t put you through this at such a young age I thought. You didn’t know what the sacrifice meant for the family. It wasn’t all sunshine. At some point I knew you would realize what the family did for you. Because you were so sensitive and a deep thinker, I didn’t know if you could carry that burden and that load on your shoulders. What if you didn’t make the Olympics?

Ages 16, 17 and 18 hit you like a ton of bricks as you started realizing what happened and transpired during that journey. We put everyone through so much and left Travis (my brother) behind. It made me realize my worst fears and didn’t know if you were going to be okay. Someday I would have to mitigate the fallout from that decision with you. You innocently brought it up and had emotions about it and I had no idea this was coming. Times were really hard on me. I had nobody. You just went into your world of training and I had no company, was alone and was lonely. It was hard for me to not resent the situation
and feel like my life had been ripped out from underneath me. I had no life left in Vegas. But I knew Travis would be okay. I felt like Vegas was blowing up and the brightest light was you. I knew you would find your way and would jump right in and fit in.

I remember being in the U-Haul leaving Vegas, looking back in the rear view of the Vegas skyline. This was not a journey I was excited about. It truly broke my heart leaving, not because I wasn’t excited for you but you, Travis and I would never be the same. I wasn’t ready for it because it wasn’t gradual. It was a very fast decision and was the saddest moment of my life. You were the catalyst. I had faith Travis would be okay because his friends and their families were with him. I needed grandpa to cosign the apartment in California since we didn’t have any money and my credit was destroyed from losing the house. I told him I am not sure if we should do this. He said, “This adventure will be a gift for you and Alyson”- Grandpa

You were such a hard worker and never a screw up. And you had such a love for the sport, you were such a gift as a performer. You had splits and eggbeater, but nothing else. And I couldn’t do anything about the physical look you had, “What kind of wiener dog is she going to turn into”? You were an odd mixed breed and I didn’t know what you would grow to look like.

My biggest fear was that I didn’t know when it was going to come, being so close to Travis, I didn't know when reality was going to hit you. I could help you rationalize it and ease your guilt when you realized the reality of the situation. You never disappointed the family. I would have been disappointed if you had crumbled emotionally, been a baby, or given up. But you never did. You were so strong and such a leader and conquered everything put in front of you, fighting the battles to the best of your ability and doing
everything you could. There’s no regrets here. Even though it wasn’t my journey, you are my daughter and it was our journey”.

Alyson’s Continued Autoethnography

What was the reality mom was scared I would face? I am not exactly sure, but I can tell you what my reality was when it all came together for me. In chronological order...

My family lost their house.

My family lost our car.

My family supported two lives: one in California and one in Las Vegas on unemployment checks.

My brother bounced around working so hard without ever forgetting to remind me to go after my dream.

My step dad who raised me and mom got divorced. My step dad citing resentment for the sport as his reasoning. Later we would find out he was cheating.

My mom and I got kicked out of our 3rd apartment by my step dad.

I began working as a coach at 16 to take care of bills.

My mom was constantly reminding me she didn’t want to wake up anymore.

My mom had men over often so I slept in my truck most days between training sessions.

My step dad and I lost touch completely just under a year shy of my 18th birthday and right after I won the Junior National Team Trials qualifying for my second Junior National Team to compete at the Junior World Championships.

My step sister and I did the same not long after.

All of this had a catalyst: Me and my Olympic Dream.
However, when mom handed me over to the team in California, she had a goal in mind: To have a daughter in 10 years, not an athlete... this was the strongest I had ever seen my mom and a goal so few parent coaches have. From then on, I lost a coach but gained a mother.

My relationship with my mother morphed and changed throughout the years. During my first five years of the sport when I was young, people would witness the weekly violent screaming match between my mother and I during our private practices and ask me if they should call child protective services. All of our fights weren’t about me messing up as a kid, but instead me not making my corrections as an athlete. Before every competition my mother would tell me just how badly I was going to get beat and not win.

During my second five years, from ages 14 to 19, my mom became the coach at home. Though we no longer had practices together, she still could and would remind me if she saw me making mistakes and not fixing the corrections we had worked so hard on years before. She watched my eating and controlled my diet. Every time I didn’t do as well as she had hoped she would remind me how she had to leave Travis and leave home and give up everything for me followed by a threat to pull me out, pack it up and go home to nothing.

During my last five years into my retirement, mom became my biggest cheerleader. She just wanted me to end my career the way I wanted to and get as much from the sport as I could with a scholarship for University. She still gave me corrections at all of the National Championships and Collegiate Championships she went to, but this time around I was the one asking for her help and even more importantly, I wanted her to see the joy in my face as she coached me. In the end, our payoff changed and so did our relationship but all for the best.
Interview with My Brother About the Decision to Move to California

“I don’t remember a talk with the family. I remember mom told us about a club in California and I remember telling her to go. That’s it. It was in the middle of the economic crash. Everything was over. The one thing that wasn’t over was your career. Only one of us was flexible enough to survive in that town at that time and that was me. Everyone else had to go.

The only thing that had any promise was your career. And that worked out well. Everyone was rallying around it and I always reiterated that it would be a good idea and it was the right idea. If anyone ever said different, I would remind them that this was the decision. You know how it is with something like that. It was going to be taxing on some people and some would get tired of it but there was no other choice. I only got tired of it because of the judging. I grew up in the sport too and knew when you should've won or gotten a better score, but sometimes the judging wouldn’t have an explanation for how the results ended up.

It was important you stayed the course until there was nothing left and, even then, stayed long enough after to see if there was anything left. At that time when you were younger, I was involved enough to know where you were at mentally, physically and emotionally. I didn’t know about athletic identity then and am not involved enough now to know where you’re at in the aspects I used to.

There were no impacts to you moving to California in the long run. That decision didn’t fracture anything. That event was the result of many fractures. It was an unspoken agreement for me that synchro was a journey for you and not a destination. Bill (Biological father) wanted you to go to the Olympics. He paid for a lot of your lessons. But for most of
the parties involved, at least on the family’s end, the decision to move for you to train had nothing to do with the Olympics. I knew it was worth it. I knew work ethic wise and talent wise you could’ve made it, but I also knew the reality of the judging so it didn’t matter to me if you made it or not. You being in that sport was the most normal thing that happened. I wasn’t directly in it but looking back on those days, it was the most normal part of childhood.”

**My Interview with Oyster Magazine: Training for the Olympic Games**

“I’m Aly and I’m 17 and I want to be an Olympic Synchronized Swimmer. If you wanna do it for the Olympics, if you want to go that far in this sport, you must live, eat, sleep, breath Synchronized Swimming. For the first year, it was just my mom and I in a one bedroom apartment. I remember mom sitting me down and saying this is your decision… we can stay here or we move and you stay with synchro and you’re in it ‘til the end, which is the Olympics. So we split our whole family up so I could have an opportunity to train for the Olympics. When you realize how difficult it actually is living this synchro life, all of the sudden you wake up one day and say I don’t want this, I want out. So that’s what happened with my dad. One day he just said I’m done and he left.”

At this point in the interview, with all of the camera crew and my teammates watching, I started hysterically crying. At this age this was a topic I just didn’t talk about. I couldn’t. It would bring me to my knees and break me every time. The director had said they wanted emotion at the beginning of the interview, they wanted my story. But at this moment they told me it was too emotional and asked if I could tone it down a bit. I
remember thinking to myself: This is my life you’re talking about. Sarcastically I wanted to tell them I was sorry it was too emotional for them.

“I mean to go to the Olympics it’s such a prestigious event and it is such a mark in your life and so many people can’t say they went to the Olympics. So to be able to... it’s... it’s unreal. It is hard not to feel responsible for the difficulties my family has gone through. And I just have to remember this is a decision we made together and I will stick it out to the end just to prove to myself and to my family that this wasn’t all for nothing.”

Spoiler alert: I’m no Olympian.

**A Dinosaur Named Blue**

This section is simply a means to describe the relationship my brother and I had and continue to have. My brother handed me down two very important things growing up. One was our first vehicle: A 2005 Dodge Ram 1500 Hemi V8. The second was our dinosaur named Blue. It was one of those Sauropods you see in Jurassic Park grazing. Huge, long bodied, long tailed, long necked and gray herbivore. But my brother’s was blue, so naturally, we named him Blue. Later, when my brother first got the truck, he would name her Blue as well. Blue, the stuffed dinosaur, was given to Travis when he was a baby and 4 years later, he gave Blue to me when I was a baby. Whenever I cried, my brother would stuff Blue right next to me in the crib. And then he would fill the crib up with all of our other toys until my crazy haired head was the only thing sticking out of the pile of stuffed animals and toys.
Flash forward 14 years. My step sister was helping my step dad with the weekly garage sales to sell all of our belongings after we found out we were going to lose the house. She asked me if there was anything I wanted her to keep for me. Blue. Just save Blue.

8 months after I initially moved to California to train, I went back home for the first time to Las Vegas to 1) See my brother graduate High School and 2) See my house for the last time. I was home for 36 hours until I had to leave to go back to training. My step sister had oddly moved into my room so I was staying in another. My brother had moved out into his own apartment a few months prior. I took everything I could in from that house: the smell, the paint job we did, the feel of it. I searched and searched. I asked my step sister: Where’s Blue? We sold everything Al. What you see is what’s left.

**Blurred Lines**

The following is an excerpt of an interview I did with Alexa. Here, she describes what her life was like growing up in a sport where her mother was her coach as well and where these lines tended to blur. These blurred lines bring up the conversation of what implications coaching your child can have on the child themselves. Where does the parent act as a mother and where does she act as a coach? When does the raising of a child morph into the grooming of an elite athlete?

“My mom started coaching me from a very young age. We tried different things. I was a dancer for the first portion of my life. My mom didn’t really push me into synchro or anything like that. But I was in the water a lot and when she saw potential in me, we started doing small things and that’s when my mom met one of her best friends from Michigan. They started a club team together and it just went off from there.
I didn't really think anything of it because my mom knew what she was doing. She was a world class athlete. So I started when I was 8, won my first Age Group National Championship at 12. That was a big deal. Nobody had heard of the state of Michigan and here I am. I had a lot of faith in my mom because she knew what she was doing and saw potential in me. That was good.

I started going a little downhill when we initially did move to California. First of all, I didn't want to leave home and then second of all, it was hard to adapt. I was already a Freshman in High School. I had my core group of friends. I had a life back home and here I am having to meet new people, adapt to a new life and be out of my comfort zone. On top of that, I isolated myself and with my mom being my coach. I just crawled into a shell and was like it’s me against the world, nobody understands me! I think it’s hard when you’re transitioning from being a girl to a young woman and you have all of that pressure of being a full-time athlete and on top of that your mom is your coach and she doesn’t really distinguish the boundaries of being a mom and a coach. And I don’t know if she intentionally did that or that’s just the way it is with athletes and their parents but from my point of view that was really hard for me because I felt like when I needed a mom or a shoulder to cry on at the time I had a coach that was yelling at me on a daily basis. The yelling was coming from a good place but at the time I didn’t understand that so I feel like I broke that relationship off. She was still my mom and it wasn’t like I was a bad child but I was very reserved with what I shared with my parents definitely through that time. That was really hard then on top of that you’re traveling a lot and you’re exhausted, and you have all of these training hours so you don’t even have time to start to mend that relationship.
Then as soon as I went to college and as soon as I quit, it was a 180 degree turn. The coach wasn’t there anymore. It was strictly your mom and I hadn’t felt that in so many years that I automatically became best friends with her. I went from never talking to my parents to calling them every day and wanting to talk to them and go home a lot more. My relationship with my mom did a big turn as soon as I was out of the sport”.

**Argumentative Recap**

This chapter reveals what is less visible: the family dynamics behind elite sport. These family dynamics include high amounts of pressure from a young age, high stakes for the family who counts on their child to be an elite or an Olympian, and high stress situations that can cause a family to implode. The autoethnography reveals, from my perspective, the cost of a family’s sacrifice which ultimately culminated in a breaking moment of spirit by an immense amount of guilt that led to my burnout as an athlete. The open interviews from my mother and my brother reveal another perspective: that of the family that did sacrifice everything for their own to strive to become an Olympian as to follow my dreams. It is also important to note here the difference of purpose my brother had for me to not become an Olympian, but rather to experience a journey in which I had a gift. Alexa’s excerpt from her open interview shows the battle a coach faces when the line is blurred of what it is to be a mom and what it is to be a coach and what it is to want the best for your child as well as for your athlete. Alexa reflects on her journey with her mother acting most times as her coach and it was not until Alexa retired, her mother consistently treated her as her daughter. Moments captured in this chapter are told from different points along a career timeline as well as a general life timeline. This allows the focus to be
on a lifetime of experiences rather than experiences within a certain amount of time, giving a better understanding as to what is endured by a family and by the athlete at a variety of ages.
CHAPTER FOUR
INVISIBILITY AND SILENCE

Taken

Below is my personal account of my experience with sexual assault. This part of my story stayed silent and hidden from everyone else for thirteen years. Here is my truth.

White walls are everywhere. Hallways separated by dozens of square, small rooms. Each room filled with a desk, a computer, a monitor, a trash can, a window with horizontal white blinds looking into the hallway and two desk chairs, one in front of the desk and one behind it. Our everyday playground, brother, sister and I. Mom and dad work here or is it mom and step-dad? Or second dad? Dad. He’s the dad I know. Family. All the family is around, always around. Uncles, Aunts, Cousins, Grandparents. Uncle. Uncle takes me into one of these rooms. Just me and him, no one else goes. Where is brother? Sister? No. Just me. Uncle and I get to a room. I guess I am too young to ask questions like: Why is the door shut? Why aren’t you turning on the lights? Why did you shut the blinds? Are we going to play? I’m glad I didn’t ask these questions. I wouldn’t have liked the answers and I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to play.

I am sitting, sitting in a dark room with Uncle. He puts me on his lap. The computer is on with a blue screen in front of us. Are we going to play on the computer? The screen stays blue. I feel his hands. His hands are all over me. My little dress is shifting and moving about as his hands wander. Dad doesn’t touch me like this. I can’t speak. I sit there silent on his lap where I wonder what I am sitting on that is getting more stiff and hard by
the minute. My long, curly brown hair is half up and the rest is laying down my back and over my shoulders. Uncle takes one of his hands off of my skin and moves my hair aside with it. The left side of my neck and shoulders is exposed. I feel cold. I feel cold even when Uncle’s tongue starts licking my neck. Why is he licking my neck? What is happening? What should I be thinking? I don’t know. Should I scream? No. This is Uncle. He wouldn’t hurt me. “Does that feel good?” “How does that feel?” “You like that?” He asks. I answer with silence. Is that a yes? White. Light. There’s light in the room! Dad. There’s dad! “Come on Al, let’s go”. Dad is very calm. I get off Uncle and go with dad, never speaking of what happened at age 4 until I was 17.

This is my first memory of my life. This moment followed me vividly both subconsciously and consciously in the years after. Nightmares always came to me whenever my eyes closed. These nightmares were always different in story but the exact same in what scared me the most: Silence. In all of my nightmares, even to this day, it is the characteristic of silence that classifies the nightmare as such. It is always a man, whom I do not know, taking me. This take can be just a look, enough to constrict my breathing, make me coil and bring fear into the spotlight of my vision. Or this take can be rape, rendering me voiceless and helpless as my ability to call for help vanishes and becomes absolutely impossible in the midst of my body being violently and deviously thrown, wrestled, handled, dominated, torn, ignored yet seemingly essential momentarily. It’s as if your body is paralyzed while your mind is in the purest form of panic. The outright anger you feel is conflicted between being mad at yourself for not being able to escape from underneath him and being mad at him for having perfect pleasure while literally pinning you down into a fixed silence.
I never saw the aftermath in my nightmares. I never got the image or scene of what happened after the rape or the locking of eyes with someone who had a vested interest in using me however they pleased. It was like I was left to wake up with the unspeakable feeling of the man’s heart, the satanic look in his eyes and the wickedness inspiring each behavior and action he had me experience with him, for him. It was like I was left to revel in those noisy, disgusting and terrifying images when I opened my eyes.

Revealing the Past

This section reveals where I am in the contemporary moment regarding my sexual assault encounter. These thoughts are not dramatized or mythologized. They are an everyday part of my life as I reflect on my past.

20 years after my encounter with sexual assault, nightmares still come to visit me in my sleep. Is he going to find me? Is he going to finish the job this time instead of just foreplay? Will I meet him with silence or with rage? A voiceless rage?

Everywhere I go now I have a heightened awareness of the people around me. I feel the vibes they give off and react to gut feelings I experience around others. I have been known to walk out of a crowded club filled with dozens with no explanation because of one whose presence takes me back to that white walled office room. I can’t stand when my dad stands behind me or gives me a hug from the back or a pat on the back. And I can’t stand how much I don’t know how to tell him why. During this writing process, 20 years after the fact, I finally told my brother what happened. The hyperventilation during my breakdown after this conversation shook me to my core. I was sure I just broke my brother’s, my protector’s heart.
He responded with two messages:

“It wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry I never knew.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just know it is not your fault and you’re still worth the world.”

It was also during this writing process my mother told me a story I never knew...

I was young, between 5 and 7 years old. I was complaining of burning when I urinated. My mother took me into the doctor’s office because she thought I had a UTI (Urinary Tract Infection), which I had been diagnosed with before. It was a standard pediatrician visit until the doctor turned cold, sharp and concerned and told my mom I was going to be taken to another medical facility and my mom wouldn’t be allowed to come with me. She questioned them and voiced her concerns. She was my mother. What was so wrong she wouldn’t be able to come with me? Moreover, they wouldn’t give her answers. I was transported to the other facility and underwent various tests. When the test results concluded nothing was particularly wrong, my mother was allowed to pick me up. It was then she was given answers. During my initial examination for the so-called UTI, the doctor found a cut. The doctor did his obligatory duty and sent me to a child trauma unit in another facility to be tested for sexual abuse, misconduct and rape. Once they found no trace of forceful sexual abuse, they released me. Assuming everyone around me in my life was a suspect, my mom wasn’t allowed to come with me. After she told me this story some months ago, she admitted she should have seen the signs. To her defense, how could she know? I was pretty much always with my siblings and never alone with anyone that she knew of.

I say truthfully sexual assault has had a big influence over my life. I am thoughtful in who I choose to be my partner. All of them have never laid their hands violently on me, although verbal and emotional abuse has occurred occasionally in past relationships.
Through a bit of trial and error, I have found someone who takes care of my emotions, is thoughtful and understanding with my words and loving, respecting and admiring of me as a woman. I strive to not let sexual assault have much control over my life. That job, up until very recently, has been tasked to my family.

**Sexual Violence & Sport**

Sexual assault is one dimension of sport that is not visible. As a victim, with my experience previewed in the autoethnography above, I can say that my assault has intersected with sport in important ways. Sexual assault is an injustice I experienced that is not separate from sport, but rather should be considered as I reflect on my athletic career as part of my life and, therefore, relevant regarding my athletic career. Outside experiences and moments that occur indirectly or separate from sport are necessary to contextualize the study of sport. Sport alone is what is seen and what is visible. The invisible moments like abusive coaching, institutional diets and sexual abuse are testaments to what is unquestioned and largely ignored, pushed aside and reduced to an event that isn’t traumatic and isn’t life changing.

**Hidden Voices, Silent Females**

This section tells of the real-world stories inside the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case within the institution of gymnastics. Joan Ryan, author of Little Girls in Pretty Boxes, dedicates a heaping full chapter specifically to the topic of sexual abuse within gymnastics. It is important to note once a girl has experienced sexual abuse, her self-worth immediately
deteriorates. Something that is hers to give by choice, has been taken by force. Even the call for help is taken as nonsense or attention seeking or money hungry or mentally and emotionally damaged or irrational until 1) the abuse can be obviously seen by bruises and physical representations or 2) collective voices stand in solidarity to expose abuse and all the better if some are famous in the public’s eye.

Only in recent years has the topic of sexual assault been given attention in sport. In women’s gymnastics, this attention was given only when 265 victims came forward to say they had been sexually abused by Larry Nassar. Larry Nassar was a physician, an employee at the Twistars USA Gymnastics Club in Michigan and Holt High School and he was a doctor for USA gymnastics for over 20 years. Of these victims, some Gold Medal names such as Aly Raisman, McKayla Maroney, Simone Biles and Gabby Douglas took the stand in January of 2018, helping put Nassar in prison for up to 175 years. 265 victims, the sheer number of young women abused by Nassar, got the attention of the legal community. But it was the “156 victim impact statements” (P. xxi, Ryan), 156 voices and experiences that made history. While the book that exposed all of gymnastics and figure skating’s catastrophic implications on young women and children, Little Girls in Pretty Boxes, was disregarded heavily by the organizations it called out, those 156 women made sure they would be heard and never forgotten by an America, watching on the television, who just witnessed a truth of the elite female athlete experience in these subjectively judged sports.

In August of 2016, on the day before the Opening Ceremonies to the Rio Olympic Games, the Indianapolis Star published the catalyst to exposing the extensive sexual abuse, misconduct and handling of such cases within USA gymnastics (USAG). The news story would be the first of many in regard to the sexual molestation of hundreds of young women, athletes by over 50 male USAG coaches. It would expose USAG as an organization whose
culture and environment allowed for these social injustices and human rights violations to be not only ignored, but normalized in the name of winning. For it was USAG that decidedly took no action in regards to complaints received about its 2010 Women’s Coach of the Year, Marvin Sharp, who would later, in 2014, be found guilty to having abused a twelve year old female and thrown in jail. Sharp would eventually take his own life while serving his sentence.

This publication would inspire Rachael Denhollander, then thirty-two years of age, and a victim of sexual molestation by Nassar when she was just fifteen. She wrote a letter to the *Star* putting her voice and experience on paper. The newspaper believed her and so the investigation into Larry Nassar began. Denhollander would file “a criminal complaint against Nassar” (P. 6, Ryan) on August 29, 2016. The next to file would be Jamie Dantzcher, a Jane Doe and 2000 Olympic gymnast, who first experienced sexual molestation by Nassar in 1994. The *Star* would publish their stories soon after.

USAG immediately responded to the public by claiming it had fired Nassar in the Summer of 2015, right after it heard complaints against him. Nassar *resigned* from USAG in September of 2015. But because the FBI and USAG let him go quietly, Nassar’s other affiliations had no idea of his misconducts, let alone the multitude, leaving dozens of other young girls and women at risk of being forced to have taken what is theirs to give in the form of sexual molestation and abuse. Between September of 2015, when Nassar resigned from USAG and September of 2016, when Dantzcher and Denhollander did a front-page interview for the *Star* on Nassar, “the *Star* discovered another forty girls and women who said Nassar molested them” (P. 7, Ryan) within that year alone.

The American Psychological Association defines sexual abuse as unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of
victims not able to give consent. Rape and sexual assault is not widely talked about in America's culture. It is still considered taboo when it happens once to a victim. Judged female sports represent another paradigm in the athletic arena. Imagine being in a sport where sexual assault is part of the culture. Abuse is intertwined into workouts. Elite gymnastics is the extreme in the case of abusive sporting environments. Joan Ryan makes the case that gymnastics provides an environment for an abusive culture that allows for the level of sexual abuse Nassar was charged with. The elite level of women's gymnastics

“systematically strips away a girl’s connection to her own body and mind as she is groomed from a young age to distrust what her body and mind are telling her. When she’s in too much pain to train, her coach says she is lazy. When she’s hungry, he says she’s fat and eats too much. When she’s too exhausted for one more high-risk vault, she’s a loser. She comes to understand that her own feelings and perceptions not only are unreliable, they don’t matter. Her pain is dismissed. Her hunger is dismissed. Her exhaustion is dismissed. To fit into elite gymnastics’ reality, a gymnast has to deny her own. She becomes an expert at withstanding all manner of insult to her body. She doesn’t complain or make waves” (P. 3,4 Ryan).

She becomes the perfect silent puppet for which abusers, both sexual and emotional, control the strings. And America just enjoys the show on stage, not knowing or wanting to know what takes place backstage.
Judged female sports like women’s gymnastics, figure skating and synchronized swimming run a higher risk of female child abuse because the body for so much of the career, if not all of the career, is a child’s and further, that of a female whose body is changing. Her body is taken by the sport, the judges, the coaches and her parents and molded into whatever is the ‘ideal’ for winning. Her body becomes subjected to them and she searches for her identity within those who control her strings. The young female athlete becomes so detached from her own reality that she doesn’t listen to her body, her mind or her heart. All she hears is the voices of the judges, the coaches, the trainers, her parents and her medical doctors. This is what makes the young athlete complacent when her doctor sticks his fingers in her vagina and anus as Nassar did with Denhollander and so many other young female gymnasts. “Women who were sexually abused as children have learned silence, and may be unable to enforce appropriate boundaries, given their childhood experiences... And some others suggest that women who have been assaulted early learn to associate sex with pain and trauma, and therefore are less likely to be able to distinguish between consent or coercion” (Mohammed). When everyone else in the young athlete’s life is given control over the athlete in every aspect, the athlete is used to, even trained to, be obedient, never questioning those who have control over them. “A victim is very often disbelieved once. After multiple instances, a forced sexual encounter is seen as their fault, be it the way they dress, the way they conduct themselves or how much they drank. An easy answer is to assume they are trying to cover up regretted sexual encounters, or that they misunderstand the concept...” (Mohammed). This statement about rape victims can be related directly to young female athletes who undergo multiple instances of abuse, be it sexual or not. “Rachael Denhollander said in her victim statement, ‘there could surely be no question about the legitimacy of his (Larry Nassar’s) treatment. This must be a medical
treatment. The problem must be me” (P. 4, Ryan). Denhollander assumed she should take the responsibility for thinking she had been violated and feeling ashamed because, surely, Nassar was just doing his job. Chris O'Sullivan, Senior Research Associate at Safe Horizon, claims a repeated theme prevalent in his research on rape is that women who were raped would more than likely take responsibility for it. If women were likely to take responsibility, imagine the impact it takes on young girls who have very little control over their lives and their bodies. Furthermore, imagine the impact it has on their identity as they enter womanhood.

“Being sexually assaulted greatly increased the risk of future assaults, with one study purporting that being sexually assaulted once meant a woman was 35 times more likely than others to be revictimized” (Mohammed). Additionally, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey in 2010 said the percent of women who were raped at a young age, before they turn 18 have double the chance of getting raped again once they become an adult. With each sexual assault encounter, the victim can experience an increased severity of negative implications in their lifetime. Many victims have a tendency to enter into abusive relationships, mirroring the relationships they had with their reckless coaches, overly intense parents and criminal doctors. The aftermath of childhood sexual assault(s) can have life-threatening effects even years after the incident occurs. “Women may take years to recover from a sexual assault. Being assaulted multiple times can compound the trauma. Sexual assault victims are much more likely to suffer from depression, attempt suicide, develop PTSD, self-harm or use maladaptive coping strategies such as eating disorders or substance abuse” (Mohammed).

Argumentative Recap

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This chapter argues for research to be investigated and found in even the most invisible and uncomfortable of places like sexual assault. It also calls for research to include those events, experiences and moments that do not directly fall under a ‘sporting’ category because it is in these outside moments that many injustices intersect. Studying the invisible will bring context, conceptual understanding and human connection to sport. Studying the invisible additionally allows the researcher to see the many injustices that exist in this realm that is left to function largely unquestioned.
CONCLUSION

Justice, Power, Visibility and Empowerment

If we just study the athlete, we will find out about sport. If we study the life of the individual, we will find the whole story that includes sport in the context of a lifetime. One cannot disconnect life from sport to study sport topics like retirement and athletic identity because these immense and detailed life stories include sport and all of its perspectives.

While I aim to show the negative and abusive factors that impact the realities of judged female sports through the experiences and voices of female athletes in gymnastics, synchronized swimming and figure skating, it is important to note a positive example of how to train to become a champion while developing as a human. Linda Leaver is a U.S. figure skating coach who has coached Olympians like Brian Boitano, a Gold medalist. Her coaching philosophy is based on the fact that, in judged sports especially, there are no guarantees. The outcomes, the rankings, the medals, the score is not up to the athlete. Their execution is the only thing within their grasp. Talent, skill, look... these things are all subjective. Leaver expressed, “The key is to let the child increase his self-esteem. If you feel good about yourself, you can handle a lot of failures and even use them as trigger points to learning”. When asked about the more traditional and widely used approach by elite coaches of more training, more yelling, more sport, nothing else allowed, she responded with this statement, “It works pretty good in the short run. You take kids out of school and they’re great for about a year. Then they burn out. They’re the ones who beat my kids at age twelve, then disappear. But the short-term success gives a false sense that that is the way to do it. And it’s the easy way. It takes more time and energy to create a positive,
nurturing environment and allow athletes to push themselves as far as they’re comfortable doing it”.

Monica told me of her post National Team experience at her Big Ten school. It is another example of a positive training regime while winning Collegiate National Championships. “They (the coaches) don’t want just skinny legs on the team. They want us to be well rounded, healthy people. They want us to eat correctly. They don’t want anyone to think their body needs to look a certain way and they just wanted us to be the people we are and not change us. This was really important to me because I was coming off of those teams where you either look skinny or weren’t on the team... Besides valuing healthy eating, our coaches wanted us to be healthy in the whole package mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, school wise, whatever you wanted to be they supported that. They wanted us to have a healthy vision of synchro where I think a lot of us from age group to National Team had a skewed view of how our bodies were supposed to be and how we were supposed to be as athletes... Things are going to change and no one expects you to be skinny anymore so everything is going to be okay”.

Puzzle Pieces

It’s weird meeting new people now. Because now, I’m Alyson. No tagline. No description. No accolades like Alyson, the National Champion, Alyson, the Synchronized Swimmer, immediately following my name. Just Alyson. Today, I am a puzzle. I am a puzzle in which all of my pieces convey my story, or reveal it. As each piece finds its fit, my story becomes a bigger image frozen in time to show who I am now. Each story told takes up a different corner of the puzzle and illustrates its own micro journey. As the puzzle grows, my athletic identity proceeds to get smaller, although, it does not decrease in value.
That value is foundational. A brick doesn’t lose its value when a house is built on top of it. Athletic identity is a part of my foundation. It rooted itself within me in my formative years and matured inside of me as I was embarking on adulthood. However, it is not my platform as so many Professionals say. It is a part of my foundation rather. So is school. So are my friends I surround myself with. So are my parents and my ancestors who were a part of me even before I was born. Life had already decided what I was going to be made up of. This was not in my control. It is what I do with this foundation that decides my identity and my direction.
References


