

Documentary Film Analysis

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Athlete A

The film I chose for this documentary analysis was inspired by my life as a gymnast and the realization of how close I was to the abusive culture by being involved in the world of gymnastics. In reflecting on the gymnastics community, there are many instances where non-elite athletes would have the opportunity to spend time with the elite coaches and training staff. For example, although I was not invited to train at the Karolyi Ranch, Bela would frequently travel to training camps and teach non-elite gymnasts (see Appendix A). As local training facilities are expensive and specialized for gymnastics, the area I grew up in only had a choice of three gyms to attend all run by a coach named Steve (see Appendix B). Little did I know that I had a one in three chance of being enrolled at the gym with the Steve (Infante) who was convicted of child rape and molestation of his fourteen-year-old athletes. I also attended the overnight gymnastics summer camp where the abuse occurred and am horrified at what had happened as quoted by the Middlesex District Attorney Gerard T. Leone Jr. during the sentencing “This defendant took advantage of his position as a coach and mentor to these victims, violating the trust of these young girls and their parents by engaging in a pattern of inappropriate, prurient behavior and grooming in order to force these vulnerable victims into submitting to sexual assault” (Tuz, 2010). To think that I was in the age range of the victims while attending the overnight camp at the same time the sexual assaults were occurring made my head spin to think of why this type of abuse keeps occurring and how organizations continue to fail athletes. Steve Infante was banned by USA Gymnastics (USAG) in 1998 and before diving into the film synopsis of *Athlete A* (Netflix, 2020) let us reflect on a statement from Leslie King who was the spokeswoman for USA gymnastics that year “We have a zero-tolerance policy for any type of inappropriate behavior with our athletes” (Pratt, 2007).

Film Synopsis

Before watching the documentary *Athlete A*, I was under the impression that the film would focus on the main story uncovered by the Indianapolis Star of Larry Nassar's sexual assaults under the guise of medical treatment for over twenty years while at USAG. However, the film went much deeper into uncovering how USAG created a toxic culture that focused on silencing insubordination in their athletes to care more about profiting through winning medals over the health of the girls. As policies on abuse were ignored and allegations covered up by USAG (also Michigan State University) Larry Nassar was able to continue his assaults to eventually total over 500 reported cases. The sociological analysis of the film will be discussed in further detail taking us through the evolution of this toxic culture and how a sports marketing businessman capitalized on this environment to become president of USAG while sitting at the forefront of the abuse scandal.

Toxic Culture: The Karolyi's

In 1976 Nadia Comaneci, a fourteen-year-old Romanian gymnast, scored the first perfect 10.0 at the Olympic games and immediately modeled a new aesthetic for women's gymnastics. The film describes how USA gymnastics "copied and pasted" the Romanian approach to try to dominate the sport through the Karolyi's bringing their coaching techniques to the United States. The athletes were easily controlled through strict methods of verbal abuse, physically smacking their bodies, forcing extreme weight measures (to keep childlike aesthetics), and ignoring injuries. As USA started to dominate the world of women's gymnastics this "successful" cruel coaching methodology become accepted while the Karolyi's Ranch became the official training camp of the women's national team. Unfortunately, the shiny medals did not reflect the emotional and physical costs that became the norm for elite gymnastics culture and along with it

overconformity to these excessive “norms.” Collective overconformity is described by Coakley (2021) as athletes bonding together to encourage each other to get through the deviant overconformity required by sport as exemplified at the Karolyi Ranch. As the girls were all underage I wondered if they were too young to realize that they lacked autonomy to make their own decisions or conceptualize the dangers performing at all costs can have to their long-term health. The athlete’s parents were not allowed at the Karolyi Ranch which forced the parents to blindly trust that the system would keep their children safe and promoted unhealthy athletic identities for the girls through limiting interactions with the outside world (Coakley, 2021). This culture promoted overconformity to sport through encouraging the athletes to push through pain at all costs while the injuries that were ignored by coaches feed the athletes directly to Nassar. After the girls endured an environment of fear, intimidation, and silence from coaches, Nassar swooped in to use manipulative strategies to befriend the girls by showing kindness and bringing them small gifts. He then took advantage of his position of power as a medical professional to subject the girls to physicals where they were completely naked and performed gloveless finger entry into their bodies while alone in the treatment room with him. After Nassar “treated” one athlete who would later be known as “Athlete A” she expressed confusion over the treatments as they did not feel like regular physical therapy. After Maggie Nichols (Athlete A) talked with her parents, they reported the abuse to her coaches. The USAG community then covered up the allegations by convincing her parents to keep silent as they lied that the case was being handled with the police and that they could jeopardize the case by speaking about it. Maggie’s parents had to trust that USAG would look after welfare of their athletes; however, as they eventually did not keep quiet, Maggie may have suffered for not keeping silent. At the 2016 Olympic Trials Maggie had come in 6th place but was mysteriously left off the team and alternate

roster. I remember being at the trials (see Appendix C) and thinking how lucky I was to see these amazing athletes; little did I know the underlying rape culture coverup that was occurring by protecting Nassar who was described by those in the USAG as “an important man.” Beyond intimidation techniques to keep these girls quiet, USAG also had athletes sign Non-Disclosure Agreements that showed what was wrong at USAG went beyond Nassar and was a deeper story about the toxic culture of the USAG. This abuse by the people in position of power was accepted by top officials and coaches while those in charge were not interested in protecting the athletes and more interested in the money made through winning medals (Coakley, 2021).

Toxic Culture: Medals and Money

The Karolyi’s were able to replicate the success of the Romanian women’s gymnastics team in the United States and money started pouring into the program. As sports have become highly commercialized, corporate interests gain the power and control to manipulate the decisions made within sport organizations (Coakley, 2021). When sports become highly commercialized the focus shifts away from the athlete’s well-being and towards promoting corporate interests to promote the sport (Coakley, 2021). For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) turned the Olympic Games into the most profitable media sports event in history while brands like Coca-Cola and McDonald’s each paid \$100 million to advertise in the last Olympics (Coakley, 2021). When corporate executives start to brand athletes as young as twelve years old, dependence is on the revenues generated while control in the organizations is shifted away from the athletes (Coakley, 2021).

According to the film, when Steve Penny first joined the USAG his background was in business development focusing on marketing, sponsorships, event operations, television, and communications. Penny would later become President and CEO of USAG while a background

in marketing may have led the organization to focus on maximizing profits as according to Coakley (2021) the downside in promoting economic interests is that they can define athletes as products to be managed. Instead of doing the right thing by alerting authorities of the reported cases of abuse by Nassar, Penny ignored the reports of mistreatment instead of risking the loss of funding, sponsors, or the reputation of USAG (Coakley, 2021). To protect the image of USAG at all costs, Penny used the excuse that unless the allegations were signed by a witness of abuse or parent, the allegations would be treated as hearsay and files would be thrown into a box under his desk to be forgotten.

Toxic Culture: Bankruptcy

After the IndyStar article that uncovered the abuse cases by Nassar and the relentless investigative work by the journalists, USAG declared bankruptcy and ordered to pay up to \$100 million in damages to 265 victims of ignored abuse and Michigan State University to pay up to \$500 million for 300 victims (Coakley, 2021). Nassar was tried, convicted, and sentenced to 40-175 years in prison (Coakley, 2021) and the survivors were finally able to receive some justice. Leslie King who stated back in 1998, “We have a zero-tolerance policy for any type of inappropriate behavior with our athletes” (Pratt, 2007) was still a spokesperson for USAG twenty years later. When asked for a statement after the Nassar story was released, the journalist Ax (2018) could only report “USAG’s spokeswoman, Leslie King, did not respond to requests for comments on Thursday.”

Conclusion

The documentary film analysis of *Athlete A* did not prove the great sport myth to be valid as all sports are not good and true. As Coakley (2021) suggests there is need to study sports to make improvements to help the next 500 athletes in danger of being victims of sexual assault.

Professionally, I can reflect on the great responsibility and need to advocate for those in power differentials as male coaches and medical professionals dominate positions of power in sport (Coakley, 2021). As toxic culture can create an environment where athletes feel as though they have no voice, guidance is needed to help those in need find one when up against powerful organizations. We also need to be diligent in protecting athletes, so we never get to the point to hear statements like the one spoken by Jamie Dantzscher to Nassar “You have no power over me anymore.”

References

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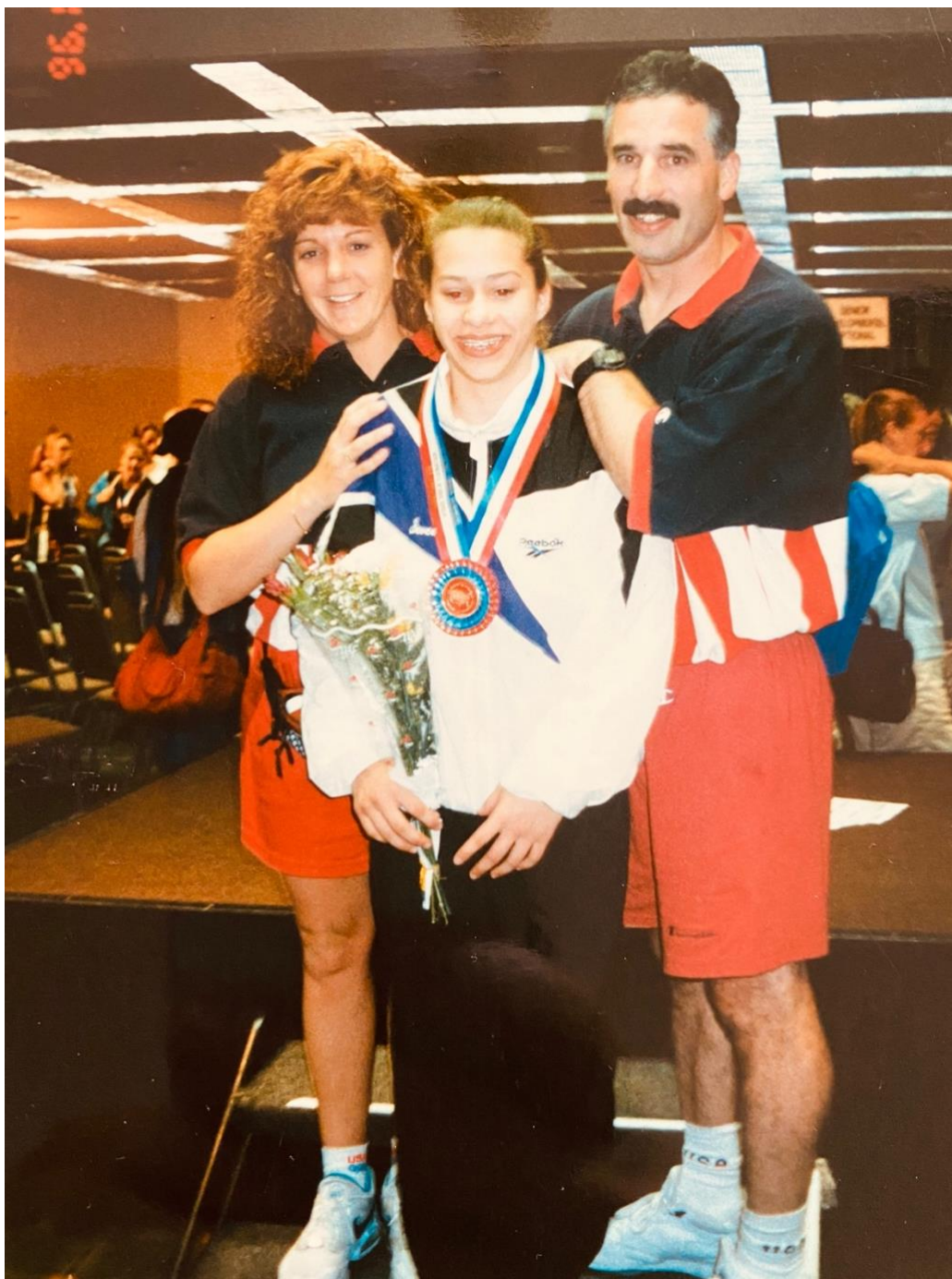
Appendix A

Picture of Bela and I in my awkward youth gymnastics years at a training camp. Outside of the Karolyi Ranch Bela would smile and joke around.



Appendix B

Picture with my coaches (Moe and Steve T.) where I was fortunate to enjoy my youth gymnastics years instead of at Steve I's gym who was convicted of child rape and molestation with his fourteen-year-old athletes.



Appendix C

Picture at the Olympic Trials in 2016 and unaware at the time that USAG was covering up Nassar's abuse scandal.

