

Time-Out: China's "Controversial" Gymnastics Rise!

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Holy shit! The Chinese gymnasts are way too young! Oh my God! It's the end of the world! They're cheaters! They're cheaters! They're cheaters!

If you've heard that argument anytime recently, you've probably been reading way too much about the sport of gymnastics and the rise of Chinese dominance in the sport. Fortunately for you, I'm not in the band that's been playing that tune. To me, the "controversial" topic of Chinese gymnasts being too young to compete in the Olympic Games should really not even be a topic this year at all. The question is not their ages. The question is where the hell these complainers were four years ago.

You have to understand that for me, timing is pretty important in taking a stance on this argument. And it's because of the poor timing of these accusations and allegations against the Chinese women that PO's official coach is now calling an official time-out on gymnastics at the Beijing Games.

Read on for the huddle...

First, let's be clear. I don't condone cheating. I find it despicable. Who wouldn't? You won't find a great deal of people to jump up and shout, "I condone and love cheating in (insert sport title here)!" No. Won't happen. And to be fair, if the Chinese gymnasts are under the legal age of competition and the IOC is serious about enforcing the age requirements, perhaps there should have been road blockers along the way to locate these types of things. I certainly see no problem with that.

But there weren't any.

And it's not like this is a "new issue" for the sport. Bela Karolyi admitted earlier this week that the ages of athletes are sometimes changed to gain admission into international competitions as a tactic used by some authoritarian governments. So since people knew this type of activity took place, why wasn't there a huge movement to create new admission processes for athletes to get into the Games?

If you haven't noticed, there are none. The topic has been ignored. Nobody cared.

Well, until now. You see, the difference between right now and back then is that this time the "alleged younger athletes" may have directly "cheated the Americans out of a gold medal."

And that is the only difference. As soon as China became a gold contender, this became an issue. Not before it. Go back and look for yourselves.

So here's my problem and my dilemma: What is this growing group of dissenters concerned about? Is it ethics in sports? Enforcing rules to prevent cheating? Or is it merely, as I believe it is, to win gold medals?

As it is, even if the Chinese women do turn out to be younger than the legal requirement (which I personally don't know or care if they are)... would it really matter at this stage, after the fact? The FIG has already accepted the passports as a confirmation for the age requirement for these athletes, which the IOC have already claimed is sufficient enough for them as well. They've put their pretty little stamp of approval on each of them and admitted them into the Games. Lord knows, when they take a position on something they rarely change their minds... even defying common sense when it smacks them in the face sometimes.

If there's one thing the world can agree on, it's that the IOC is one hell of a stubborn organization.

So yeah, the Chinese women might be under the legal age. Sure. It's a possibility or it wouldn't even be a topic for discussion. But isn't it also possible that the Chinese women ARE the right age? Certainly it's POSSIBLE, right? To put some perspective on things, most experts in the sport tend to agree that gymnasts usually look younger than the average person. That's an assessment shared by former Olympic gold medalist Dominique Dawes who is quoted to having recently said that the Chinese ALWAYS have looked younger in competition... and that even the US team looks younger in person than the average sixteen year old. Farther items to consider include diet habits which can sometimes change how youthful a person appears.

So even if Dawes statement cannot be used to prove the Chinese are 16, it CAN be used to prove that this has been going on for a LONG, LONG time and that nobody has cared enough to bring the topic up as an international concern.

Hell, I myself can remember watching the Athens games and during the Chinese events I do recall thinking to myself that the women looked a lot younger than sixteen. But I, as well as our modern day dissenters, simply didn't care back then. Let's face it: When the Chinese weren't a threat for gold, NOBODY cared.

But today is obviously a much different picture for everyone. A rude awakening, if you will.

Again, the timing of the argument is ridiculous and even laugh-worthy. After all, when you allow a wound to grow, you shouldn't be surprised when it eventually begins to hurt you.

There weren't a great deal of people screaming back in 2000, the first Olympic year in which this ridiculous age requirement took effect. If you remember, before then it was perfectly legal to have a fourteen year old on your gymnastics team. Even our own US Gold Medal Winning Olympic Team had a fourteen year old on it. But even though

age was clearly a factor in the Chinese lineup, and even though the Chinese won a Bronze medal in Team Competition for the year 2000, nobody cared to bring the topic up.

Or how about 2004, when the Chinese made a huge stride in getting a competitor as far as gaining Bronze in the All Around Individual competition. While clearly that gymnast was not "under age" it was the first time an individual Chinese gymnast had made it that far (I don't count the appointed medal to Liu Xuan in 2000) and if the world didn't expect for more great things to come from this rising power of gymnastics (a country whose female gymnasts have ALWAYS at the least looked younger)... then they were really playing it dumb and keeping their head in the sand.

The issue was there. People failed to make a big stink of it, either from lack of concern or lack of interest. And now we're here today, with a Chinese team which could very well be under age and now have won themselves a gold medal.

Nobody really cared until they became the number one team on the planet. And now people expect me to think this is some random, out the blue occurrence that nobody saw coming? The evidence was there all along. Go back and watch the tapes of the 2000 and 2004 Games. Watch them. Tell me your verdict on the ages. Then watch how impressive the Chinese have become over those years in this sport. And then tell me again that NOBODY saw this coming!

There were plenty of other controversies in the sport back in those days, though, right? We didn't have time to think about the Chinese because frankly there were more interesting stories to go delve ourselves into. There was still the Romanian Powerhouse Team to compete against in 2004, who were steady and flawless at every turn. That's where people focused their gymnastics controversies for that year: On the coaching methods and headline stories of Octavian Belu. This eventually caused his retirement, which effectively ended the golden era of Romanian gymnastics. We also had the story on America's Paul Hamm "winning" gold for 2004, only to later find out that the real winner of the competition was South Korea's Yang Taeyoung. Not that it mattered because Taeyoung will forever be robbed of a gold medal. And why?

That's a good question. Maybe you should ask the IOC, because frankly those idiots don't seem to know what the hell they're doing half the time.

In 2000, as you recall, we had the Romanian gymnast Andreea Raducan, who was also robbed of a gold medal... but that time it came after the fact. And although the IOC stands firm on that decision, what's interesting to point out in that case is that the drug Raducan was disqualified for using (essentially a cold medicine) was later dropped off the "banned list" and now can be taken legally. In spite of this, and in spite of the fact that the "appointed" gold medalist still insists Raducan to be the victor, the IOC refuses to reconsider the standings.

Controversy. It killed Bela Karolyi's appointment for the US Team. It has changed this sport inside out. We now have "feel good" gymnastics coaches who fret at showing any anger for fear of being labeled "abusive" and thus have generated a lot of very wobbly gymnasts who lack the discipline of the former champions. And now controversy is rearing its ugly head at the Chinese gymnastics team to make yet another round of poison.

To many people, the argument of bringing up the topic of the Chinese gymnasts ages makes sense. It makes sense because instead of looking at this situation from a historical perspective, they are looking at it with blinders on and pretending like this is the very first time China has participated in gymnastics at the Olympic Games. If a team is breaking a rule, then it should be exposed. Sure. I can buy that. Let's face it, we all can. But what I can't buy is that this is the real issue. What people are really upset about is not that these women might be too young but rather that the Chinese women have brought home a gold medal for this sport. That they have "cheated" (their words, not mine) the American women of a gold medal ceremony. Otherwise, why weren't people rallying for this cause four years ago? I keep asking that question because NOBODY can give me a good answer for it.

Bela Karolyi is at the height of this argument, though his stance is clear in that he is not blaming the gymnasts themselves but rather the Chinese government for "issuing" them "fake" passports. In his opinion, which is shared by his wife, the age requirement should be lifted because he points out that it can never be enforced. And maybe that's the right way to go. You won't find me arguing against him.

In Karolyi's opinion, the gymnasts from China did not have as much pressure placed upon them as the other international gymnasts because (as he very vocally believes) they are younger. And if they are younger, as he claims they are, then they are more immune to the pressures the other athletes feel. And if the Chinese are indeed younger, then he probably has a very good point.

But again... I ask why now?

If the goal is to change the medal lineup, to rob China of doing exactly what they've always done (if they even did it) would defy logic. It would essentially be a method of "gold steering." And I think there has been enough gold steering in this sport in the past.

In conclusion, let's face one solid fact: The American women did not earn a gold medal in the team competition. Argue however you want about them "earning" a medal there, but I'll direct you to watch Sacramone on Beam and Floor, then ask you to watch how the rest of the team responded to those mistakes. Even Shawn Johnson stepped out of bounds on Floor, clearly phased by the team's flaws. The Chinese, on the other hand, gave a gold-worthy routine at every rotation. They asserted themselves to be exactly where they needed to be.

In short, they did something no other team did do that night. They earned a gold medal.

And when it came down to the Floor Exercise, it was Chinese gymnast Jiang Yuyuan who pretty much showed the world why her team deserved that place in Olympic history. For myself, there is no controversy concerning this clean win.

And if the IOC were to ever rob these women of their gold for any "age mishap" that they verified themselves (or, at least, condoned the FIG's verification methods)... the only real loser out of this entire charade will have been the Chinese women. They would have become the latest victim of the IOC's medal-stealing conquest. If we want to change the rules or come up with better ways to enforce current ones, then that's A-okay with the coach. But let's not go rewriting history

when it's merely a matter of convenience.

To be fair, maybe the IOC should change the age requirement, which would end the arguments all together. But then again, the IOC should be doing a lot of things differently. Why don't we start with giving Raducan her gold medal back? Because I'm never dropping that issue. And personally, I see more controversy there than in the ages of China's gymnasts. We should let them have their moment of glory. They've earned it. They deserve it. And the rest of the world needs to shut the hell up about it and deal.

To the dissenters, I ask you to search within yourselves as to why this issue is so important to you. Because even if it comes out that China's gymnasts were too young to compete, we will never move past the fact that it was only an issue when it "robbed" the American Team of a gold medal. Which begs the question of priorities: What are we really concerned about? Ethics in sports? Or just winning gold medals? It may not matter so much to some people. But to me, it's the difference between doing the right thing and destroying a human being's greatest of achievements.

Final verdict? The IOC should change the rules or have the FIG change the manner by which they enforce them. Just about everyone can agree with that. But when it comes to the Chinese winning gold at the Beijing Games, there is no room for calling "cheat" at a clean victory, especially when the basis is rooted in a detail that was never questioned in the past.

And now it's time to break.