

# Olympic Gymnastics Wrap-up AKA "How to Cram a Billion Controversies into a Sport in One Week!"

Contributed by trc  
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Well, to say this year has been a year plagued of gymnastics controversies would be an understatement. It almost seems as if we couldn't get through a single event without someone screaming "Cheater!" or "Robbed!" or "What the hell?!" And while the first two comments are clearly the bellyaching anthems of over-opinionated idiots, if you found yourself proclaiming "What the hell?!" in regard to the new scoring system this year, then as far as I'm concerned that sentiment is fully justifiable.

So there. You get an official Coach Jon seal of approval for the evening.

But having watched NBC's coverage of the games, I also have to say that the commentating team behind the camera was a little controversial itself. While they seemed to work better during the men's events, by the time the women's routines were underway it was as if all professionalism had been thrown out the window in favor of raising issue with every gold medal being awarded. And while there's nothing wrong with expressing professional opinion along with giving the audience side information, sometimes even commentators can get out of hand with their choice of words and biased enthusiasm. When that happens, you really need to watch the tongue lest ye find yourself making a total moron out of oneself.

So tonight I go head-to-head against the head honchos of the FIG, the scoring system of the Beijing Games, the bellyaching bloggers around the web, and the dynamically dimwitted duo of Tim Daggett and Al Trautwig.

Read on for the grit...

First, let's start with the grand daddy of all gymnastics competition: the Olympic Individual All-Around. The All-Around Gold Medal is that prized holy grail for any young gymnast looking to put their mark on the Olympic history of their sport. And when you think about it, it's easy to see why. Past winners have included a full list of household names, including the famous Nadia Comaneci who effectively launched the Romanian Golden Era of Gymnastics, Mary Lou Retton who put the USA on the map for this sport, Tatiana Gutsu whose routines had levels of difficulty even gymnasts today shy away from, the "complete package" of Ukrainian wonder Lilia Podkopyayeva whose perfect mold of artistic talent with technical flawlessness translated into never having a weak event, the outstanding Andreea Raducan who led Romania into a gold-silver-bronze sweep only to have her medal stripped away for taking cold medicine, and the hard-fighting Carly Patterson who fought to the bitter end against Russian rival Svetlana Khorkina to secure her spot as the Olympic Gold Medalist in the most recent Athens Games!

So who would join them in the test of time at these Beijing Olympics?

Well, for most of us who looked at this line-up as unbiased as we possibly could, we seemed to favor Shawn Johnson of the USA. I admit I did. But there was definitely something to be said for the other American competitor Nastia Liukin, who defied the analysts and performed near-flawless at every rotation, effectively seizing that golden prize for herself. Let's face it. Nastia earned this medal fair and square and for the first time the USA was able to take a one-two medal count with gold and silver at the All Around Competition.

History for the country was indeed made.

The Chinese would have probably given the US more of a run for that title had gymnast Jiang Yuyuan not suffered so early on with a poor vault score that she frankly couldn't recover from. None-the-less, she finished the race (so to speak) with pure class, never once even looking damaged by the fact she would not be medaling. Now THAT is what being an athlete is all about.

The Chinese did, however, manage to take in Bronze by way of Yang Yilin, who was their other competitor for the event. And it was Yilin who kept the race alive against the Americans through all of the rotations... even if she did trail them to a point that this really seemed to be a Shawn vs Nastia slugfest.

The All Around was devoid of controversy, but the same could not be said for the next gymnastics test, which would be the Vault Finals. And wow, what a poor showing that was. If we were to forget about the gold and silver medalists and just focus on everyone else competing then we would probably be scratching our heads and asking, "Was this really an Olympic Event Final?"

But it's here that we have to stop for a moment and take a breather. Because just as soon as Chinese gymnast Cheng Fei's score was recorded for the world to see, controversy started to throw its ugly head back onto the gym floor. Cheng Fei landed on her knees during her second vault, yet still won the Bronze medal. And that's where the bellyaching began.

What's interesting to speculate is that it would have likely ended there, been accepted as a judging error (which does happen in subjective sports) or perhaps just dismissed all together as another confusing call resulting off a new system. But there was one tiny hitch that prevented this from being the case:

Cheng Fei beat someone out for that Bronze medal. And suddenly a nasty word etched its way onto the airwaves courtesy of professional gymnastics commentator Tim Daggett. That word just happened to be "robbed."

And why use such a controversial word on air?

Well, consider the fact that the woman Cheng Fei happened to beat out was none other than Alicia Sacramone, the American gymnast whose poor showing at the Team Finals essentially resulted in America losing ground against the Chinese during their medal pursuit.

By this time, Sacramone had managed to gain herself quite a sympathy card. A good number of fans had already cuddled her after her uncharacteristically horrible performance at the AA. To give you an idea, consider the fact she was second only to Michael Phelps in Google searches for Olympians after the Team Finals. I don't need to tell any gymnastics fan how amazingly popular an athlete can become simply for having performed poorly. Hell, just look at the launching pad of Olga Korbut's international fame! It wasn't a flawless routine that made Olga a household name. No. It was a really, really poor performance on the Uneven Bars. Don't get me wrong, though. Korbut won her gold medals and was certainly an amazingly impressive gymnast by all rights. But that isn't what made her famous. It was the scene of her wiping those tears from her face after a disastrous routine at the Olympic Games.

So with this sympathetic fanbase at Sacramone's side, it seems obvious why so many people were very fast to repeat Daggett's word "Robbed!" across the internet, if for no other reason than they had the justifiability of a professional commentator having launched the vocabulary himself. And pretty much all of them wanted Sacramone to find some sense of redemption at these Games. Daggett opened that door, even saying of the event, "that isn't right," which only

helped solidify this as a controversy.

And for whatever reason, Daggett didn't stop there.

Instead, he joined former US National Team Coach Bela Karolyi the following day for a segment during the Olympic coverage to express their disdain over the judging, claiming that Cheng Fei's score was just simply "too high."

While I expect this from Karolyi, it seemed strange that Daggett was joining him there. I mean, Karolyi has no official title any longer but still maintains a visible presence in the sport by way of doing commentary and analysis during events. He's about the closest thing this sport has ever had to a "pro wrestling style color commentator" due to his expressive excitement yet clear bias in favoring the US National Team at every opening. And most of us love him if for no other reason than the fact he's entertaining to watch. His emotional comments about the Vault Final being unfair, repeatedly asking "Why you do this?" against the judges turned into a means of rallying more people into the cause.

And just so we're clear, I'm not saying the judging during the Vault was that good. I agreed with Daggett's frustrations over the new system, in fact, but it seemed out of place for him to continue to dwell upon it. Bad judging errors during events have happened before in this sport with much less "controversy" hype. Usually they get mentioned as "that score seems too high" or "that score should have been higher" and then are effectively dropped from ever being mentioned again.

Not this time, though.

And while at first glance it seemed Daggett's real interest was in blasting the new judging system for creating such an "unfair" end podium result, there remains the question of the Balance Beam Final, where a very similar event took place without the same ridiculous terminology of "robbed" being slung around by Tim Daggett. In fact, from where I'm sitting, it seems Daggett dropped the issue with that particular event all together.

So let's analyze what the difference between the Balance Beam and the Vault was.

Well, during the Balance Beam Final, all three commentators seemed to agree that Cheng Fei was once again over-scored, just like they all agreed during the Vault Final. And also once again, Cheng Fei received a Bronze medal for what they considered to be a "controversial" score. But unlike with the Vault, where they bellyached incessantly, there was no complaining about anyone being "robbed" of a Bronze medal on the Balance Beam. It was dropped as soon as we had moved to the next competitor.

But why? Wouldn't it have been the logically consistent thing for Daggett to express strong disdain here as well? To say "that isn't right" and bellyache about the results again? Well, maybe it had something to do with the fact that both Americans scored above Cheng Fei in this event... Shawn Johnson taking the gold while Nastia Liukin seized silver.

Perhaps the athlete who came behind Cheng Fei, Russian gymnast Anna Pavlova, wasn't worth being "robbed" by Tim Daggett's hard-to-predict standards of gymnastics controversy. Who knows? But the only reason I have to bring it up is because he is the one who opened the door. And unless he's going to be consistent in saying some gymnasts are "robbed" by a judging system he finds unfair, then I think he really needs to assess what he was talking about in the first place.

To be fair, though, the new scoring system doesn't make a lot of sense to anyone... and sadly even the judges seem to not fully understand what they're doing half the time with this new system. Do I think the judging was poor on the Vault? Possibly yes, though right now it remains arguable. Was it at least confusing as to how the scores were made? Definitely. Do I think any of this was purposeful? Of course not. But I think the performances of the athletes were sub-par enough all around to make the word "robbed" a ridiculous accusation in the first place, especially coming off the lips of professional commentators.

Now that's not to say Cheng Fei was better than Sacramone on Vault... after all, her routine had more errors than just the landing. But we certainly can all see that the vault DID have a higher starting value, meaning the deductions would be taken off from a higher score. But the judging still remains impossible for most of us to decipher as to how the deductions were made, even considering that fact. What likely happened is that the judges didn't see the deductions or that this new system is changing the way those calls are made. But let's be honest here. The claim of Sacramone being "robbed" is kind of stupid, especially when this sport has had far more pressing "robs" in the past, including the horrible judging of the men's final in 2004, which effectively "robbed" Yang Taeyoung of a gold medal prize.

But the Vault was just a painful event to watch. Pavlova scored a zero for starting before the official green light came on. I mean, what is this? The Olympics? Is that the kind of mistake you make at the Olympic Games? At the end of it all, the judges made their call as to who came out for bronze. There was no basis for an inquiry. They clearly were looking at Cheng Fei's routine with a different pair of eyes. It's just the way the cookie crumbles in subjective sports sometimes. Most of us have learned to accept that by now.

So we moved on to the next event, which was the Floor Exercise Final where Romania's Sandra Izbasa took home the gold medal, the first and only gold medal that the country would attain for itself during women's gymnastics this year.

That's right. The Romanians took home a gold! I was energized by this revelation! Could there be hope for this country's future in the sport? They managed to medal during the Team Final, a feat indescribable by itself this year considering their struggling program. Personally, I hope to God they get it together. Because I am not ready to say goodbye to that incredible gymnastics program which spanned Nadia Comaneci to Catalina Ponor.

Now since we're on the subject of who won gold, I also have to bring this up because even though Izbasa won the event, Tim Daggett commented that he felt Johnson's performance was much better. A few nights later we were given the pleasure of hearing Tim speak about how he'd spoken to several "people" around "the world" who all felt Johnson should have gotten a gold in that event.

It began to seem as if Tim Daggett wasn't going to be satisfied until he could take over the judging booth, give the American women every gold medal being presented, and finish the night by offering us high praise of how the Americans had really brought their A-Game to the event finals.

Anyway, let's move onto the Uneven Bars where things got even more screwed up for this sport. In fact, this is where I finally had the last straw of the bellyaching. Had this event not received the ridiculous commentary it did, I probably never would have sat down to write this article in the first place.

To start off, I have to ask if someone could please tell me why the hell every time a Chinese gymnast happens to be on camera, Al Trautwig has to inform his audience that "this athlete is at the height of the age controversy" followed by rhetorically asking each of us "does she look sixteen to you?"

We get it, AI. There is an age controversy. Hell, I assure you that the entire planet knows about it by now. You really, really don't have to bring it up before every Chinese gymnast does her routine. I mean, is there really a point in bringing it up anymore? Is there NOTHING else to say regarding the Chinese gymnasts? How about talking about their past in the sport? Their styles? What they've changed in their routines from past competitions? What they've improved upon? What they've had trouble with? Their hobbies? Anything but their ages would suffice, I promise! You could even talk about how much chalk they were using to prep with! Anything!

But no... every fucking time, all we hear from AI is his rhetorical question for the audience, "Does she look sixteen to you?" Great way to get the audience against the athlete, Trautwig. Now instead of watching the event and being amazed at the athletic skill of that performer... you've gotten the spectators thinking, "She doesn't look sixteen to me at all. She probably shouldn't be here."

Is bringing this topic up going to change anything? No. It's just going to keep the wound open. It's time to drop it. It was time to drop it during the Team Finals. It was time to drop it back in the qualification rounds. The FIG has made their decision. Deal with it.

But if that comment annoyed me, what AI Trautwig said at the end of the UB Final full-out pissed me off:

"Does she really think she won?"

That was what he asked when China's He Kexin was standing to receive her gold medal for her outstanding UB performance. Hell, I guess it seemed more insightful to him than "Wasn't she impressive?" or to mention how hard she must have worked to get there. That's what we were treated to when Shawn Johnson won Beam. Hell, when Johnson won it turned into a contest of who could one-up the other by praising Johnson's flawless performance between Daggett and Trautwig. And don't get me wrong because I was impressed with Johnson's performance there. She SHOULD be commended during her victory ceremony. But shouldn't the Chinese women ALSO get that treatment? To completely shun every medal these women have taken at these Games is almost to the point of being cruel. And to drool over every American medal goes beyond being biased... it's outright laugh-worthy. Hell, these two morons were congratulating Johnson even before Japanese gymnast Koko Tsurumi had finished her routine. Sure, I know Koko didn't stand a chance to medal there after her horrible fall. But don't you think you should at least wait until the routine is over before you start commentating on the end game? Not only is that unprofessional, it's disrespectful.

Almost as disrespectful as the comment made toward He Kexin's gold medal finish.

But hey, what can I expect from these dimwits? I mean, it's not like He Kexin didn't give us a fantastic uneven bars routine. She didn't fall. She had her errors, true, but they were few and far between. Kexin earned that spot and earned that medal. She worked her ass off to get to those Games and to have the question "Does she really think she won?" posed toward the viewer was a slap to the face to everything that young athlete had worked toward. Instead of getting the respect she had earned from her opponents, her claim to the gold medal was now being questioned by a second-rate commentator who frankly knows very little about the sport to begin with and is only there to fill a vacant seat.

Now I do want to put some perspective on AI's poor choice of words, because I want to be fair to even dumbasses. The reason he posed the question was because Kexin won the event after tying with Nastia Liukin for the top score. Now it's important to note that gymnastics does NOT allow dual gold medaling in any of their events and the FIG devised its own tie breaking procedure to ensure that never occurs, which first involves removing the high and low scores the judges give to the athletes and when that doesn't fix the problem it will remove either the next lowest or next highest score (I honestly

don't know all the specifics, myself). The process happens automatically because it is performed through a computer, which means that right after Liukin's tying score was posted, she was moved into the second place position.

After the event, Tim Daggett insisted on seeing the scoring charts and then pointed out for the audience that the Australian judge's score had been unfair. Bela Karolyi would later call it "incompetent" because Bela voices his opinion and that's why we love him. But to be fair to the tie-breaking system, the Australian's score was one of the scores thrown out.

I mean, come on! I know the tie-breaker is a stupid procedure and I agree that gymnastics should have dual gold medaling. But the rules are the rules! We really can't bellyache when a country we favor doesn't win, throwing everything but the kitchen sink in blame as to why it occurred. That kind of thing is what you expect to see in football or basketball by heated fans during the playoffs. Not at the Olympic Games. "Olympic Spirit" isn't just a fancy term we sling around because it sounds good, it's supposed to be the guiding principle behind every single athletic event. That's why you've seen athletes stripped of medals in the past for going against that spirit. Trust me, the IOC is serious about that. These Games promote a kind of international cooperation along with the competition that should never, ever be taken in stride.

The Uneven Bars was perhaps the best event final the women's gymnastics had seen this year. It was the closest, for sure! And the line-up? Outstanding! We had the Chinese UB Specialist going head-to-head against the American All-Around Champ. It was China versus the USA, embodied into two gymnasts with the same SV and both of whom earned top honors for that night. No one had received two gold medals in women's gymnastics this year, and now we had gold medalist against gold medalist both vying for that prize. If you were looking for an event that was going to have two titans fighting over a medal in the sport, this was that event, arguably second only to the Shawn/Nastia battle for the All Around.

Now if we were to go on pure opinion, then I agree that both athletes should have received a gold medal that night. Both anthems should have played. I'm the first in line to say the FIG and IOC needs to change quite a few things about this sport.

But the fact is that gymnastics just simply isn't a sport that allows dual gold medaling at this point in time. Why? Probably because those decisions are made by the same fucking idiots who came up with this "genius" new scoring system that has given us such great Olympic moments as "Cheater!" and "Robbed!"

And with full credit to Liukin, she handled the situation with pure grace and maturity. And that's showing some serious class when you've been outscored by a ridiculous tie-breaking system. Now if only Al Trautwig could take a page from her book and show a little respect to the only female gymnast this year to take two gold medals home... and that would be Chinese gymnast He Kexin.

But even though Kexin was crowned the clear victor, Tim can't say "What a great routine!" about it. No, he has to say something similar to, "That was good, but it wasn't as good as Nastia's." Al can't say, "She fought for it and really earned it!" No. He has to ask, "Does she really think she won?"

So let me sum everything up in closing this article:

This has been a controversial year. No doubt about it when it comes to the sport of gymnastics. The only worthy substance I can see, however, would be in the Vault scores which certainly seem to have merit in being termed "controversial." As for the UB, I hate to admit it in the light of the fact Nastia Liukin tied for the win... but the FIG has its rules and in this case they were enforced exactly as they have been written. He Kexin won. There is no controversy about it. The rules came into play, she came out on top. That's really the end of that story. So let me answer the question posed

by AI so that we can bring some closure to an idiotic inquiry:

“Does she really think she won?”

Yes, AI. He Kexin does really think she won. And she likely thinks she won because in reality she really did win. Imagine that. And if you have trouble with that concept, go read the fucking rulebook for yourself. Please, for the love of God, get the hell off of the Chinese. They really have brought an impressive program to the Olympics this year. And in doing so, they have now presented themselves as a Gymnastics power to be faced. Considering the sensitive state of the Romanian program, it couldn't have come at a better time. This looks to be the gymnastics era of the USA and the Chinese. Every gymnast who medaled for those nations is certainly on the list of jump-starters for the cause. The American women won the medal count this year for their sport, but the Chinese made some unprecedented victories for their nation here as well. Both were outstanding. Both deserve credit.

And if you can't handle that, go find a new sport to commentate. You'll be doing both my ears and my blood pressure a huge favor.