

Written by Dwight Normile
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We hear it all the time: "The sport is called Women's Artistic Gymnastics." It is the most common rebuttal from those who staunchly defend an age limit. However, I believe it is more accurate to say "it *used to be* Women's Artistic Gymnastics."

When the sport gained global interest thanks to **Olga Korbut** in 1972 and **Nadia Comaneci** four years later, Women's Artistic Gymnastics began its slow transformation. Korbut, 17, and Comaneci, 14, were teenagers more than they were women. And very acrobatic teenagers, at that. They also displayed artistry in their routines, even though some of Korbut's contortions broke the conventional mold of good form at times.

Since the trend toward more difficulty has escalated since, the gymnasts most capable of executing, if not performing, the current trick-filled routines are *still* teenagers. I just can't imagine 1964 and '68 Olympic champion

Vera Caslavka

or 1972 winner

Lyudmila Turischeva

— two wonderful examples of women's artistic gymnastics — ending their floor routines with a piked full-in, for example. Granted, they lacked spring floors back then, but the idea of sacrificing execution to add another twist or flip was considered a gymnastics sin back then.

Case in point: When

Nellie Kim

performed one of the first tucked double backs on floor in an Olympics (1976), she did it with her knees together and toes pointed. How often (or seldom) do you see that skill done with clean form today on

any

women's event?

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Had Nadia presented her mind-boggling routines in 1976 with sloppy form, well, few would really remember her today. It's interesting that she is known mainly for her impeccable execution — her seven scores of 10.0 — but her difficulty at the time, particularly on uneven bars and balance beam, was just as noteworthy, maybe even more.

Difficulty continued to grow after Nadia, and it is generally agreed among gymnastics purists that the 1980s were the "golden years" of women's gymnastics. After that decade, perfect execution began to lose some of its importance, and Women's Artistic Gymnastics became Female Acrobatic Gymnastics.

By the 1990s, certain Code changes contributed to the beginning of the end of that glorious time in the sport. More and more acrobatics began to take hold, often at the expense of good form and proper technique, which usually go hand in hand. Then, in 1997, compulsories were dropped and the age limit was raised to 16, which is where it stands so divisively today.

Sixteen isn't so sweet for many gymnasts, who find themselves battling their physical maturation and the most demanding Code of Points ever. Professional golf has the senior tour, where 50-somethings get to play shorter courses. But it's quite the opposite for female gymnasts, many of whom are expected to compete the hardest gymnastics of their careers when their bodies can barely do what they could a few years earlier. Taped ankles and/or braced wrists are practically the norm because of the physical strain of today's routines. The Code of Points even states that "bandages *must be beige-colored*" so as not to "detract from the aesthetics of the performance."

In reality, the sport is only going through its natural progression, since gymnasts and coaches will forever strive to be better than the rest. Difficulty will always have its rightful place in the sport, but it is up to the FIG to manage this trend effectively and responsibly. Which is valued more: execution or difficulty? Strangely, the new, more stringent execution evaluation for women's gymnastics has further bolstered the clout of difficulty. Gymnasts know that the quickest way to increase their scores is to add harder tricks. After all, the execution mark is capped, and even the best routines are lucky to approach 9.0.

In the last 13 years, the age limit of 16 has slowly contributed to a decline in women's gymnastics as we once knew it, and the lack of depth in major all-around competitions is alarming proof. The age limit simply closes the window of opportunity for many gymnasts. Few are born at precisely the right time to hit their competitive peak at 16 or 17 in an Olympic year.

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Fewer still can remain healthy and motivated until they are 19 or 20 and give it another shot — with easier routines, no less.

Evolution can only be stopped by extinction. So with the current age limit combined with the high premium on difficulty, is Women's *Artistic* Gymnastics nearing such a fate? Or has it already?