This book lifts the lid on the high pressured, complex world of women’s artistic gymnastics. By adopting a socio-cultural lens incorporating historical, sociological and psychological perspectives, it takes the reader through the story and workings of women’s artistic gymnastics.

Beginning with its early history as a ‘feminine appropriate’ sport, the book follows the sport through its transition to a modern sports form. Including global cases and innovative narrative methods, it explores the way gymnasts have experienced its intense challenges, the complexities of the coach-athlete relationship, and how others involved in the sport, such as parents and medical personnel, have contributed to the reproduction of a highly demanding and potentially abusive sporting culture.

With the focus on a unique women’s sport, the book is an important read for researchers and students studying sport sociology, sport coaching, and physical education, but it is also a valuable resource for anyone interested in the development of sporting talent.

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Women, Sport and Physical Activity

Edited by Elizabeth Pike, University of Hertfordshire, UK

The Women, Sport and Physical Activity series showcases work by leading international researchers and emerging scholars that offers new perspectives on the involvement of women in sport and physical activity. The series is interdisciplinary in scope, drawing on sociology, cultural studies, history, politics, gender studies, leisure studies, psychology, exercise science and coaching studies, and consists of two main strands: thematic volumes addressing key global issues in the study of women, sport and physical activity; and sport-specific volumes, each of which offers an overview of women’s participation and leadership in a particular sport.

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Women’s Artistic Gymnastics

Socio-cultural Perspectives

Edited by
Roslyn Kerr, Natalie Barker-Ruchti,
Carly Stewart and Gretchen Kerr
Contents

List of illustrations iii
List of contributors iv
Preface vi

ELIZABETH PIKE

Introduction 1

ROSYLN KERR, NATALIE BARKER-RUCHTI, CARLY STEWART AND GRETCHEN KERR

PART I

The history, politics, commercialisation, and diversification of women’s artistic gymnastics 7

Jenny’s story Part I: Frank 7

JAMES POPE

1 Acrobatisation and establishment of pixie-style women’s artistic gymnastics 11

GEORGIA CERVIN

2 Perfectionisation of women’s artistic gymnastics 24

GEORGIA CERVIN

3 The commercialisation of women’s artistic gymnastics since the 1980s 35

GEORGIA CERVIN, ELIZABETH BOOTH AND DIANA-LUIZA SIMION

4 Diversification of women’s artistic gymnastics since the fall of Communism 51

NATALIE BARKER-RUCHTI, ELIZABETH BOOTH, FRANCESCA CAVALIERO, GEORGIA CERVIN, DIANA-LUIZA SIMION, MYRIAN NUNOMURA AND FROUKJE SMITS
PART II
The gymnast experience 65

Jenny’s story Part II: An unexpected event 65
JAMES POPE

Living with stories of gymnastics in higher education 69
CARLY STEWART AND MICHELE CARBINATTO

Media narratives of gymnasts’ abusive experiences: Keep smiling and point your toes 81
ASHLEY STIRLING, ALEXIA TAM, AALAYA MILNE AND GRETCHEN KERR

Trampoline gymnasts’ body narratives of the leotard: A seamless fit? 99
RHIANNON LORD AND CARLY STEWART

PART III
Coach-athlete relationships 117

Jenny’s story Part III: Worries and pressures 117
JAMES POPE

Power in coach-athlete relationships: The case of women’s artistic gymnastics 121
SOPHIA JOWETT AND SVENJA WACHSMUTH

When the coach-athlete relationship influences vulnerability to sexual abuse of women’s artistic gymnasts 143
GRETCHEN KERR, ASHLEY STIRLING AND ERIN WILLSON

Critical reflections on (adult) coach-(child) athlete ‘no touch’ discourses in women’s artistic gymnasts: Out of touch 158
MELANIE LANG AND JOANNE MCVEIGH

PART IV
The multiple actors involved in creating an elite gymnast 173

Jenny’s story Part IV: Enough’s enough 173
JAMES POPE

The sorting of gymnasts: An Actor-Network Theory approach to examining talent identification and development in women’s artistic gymnastics 177
ROSLYN KERR
12 Using a multilevel model to critically examine the grooming process of emotional abusive practices in women’s artistic gymnastics 190
FROUKJE SMITS, FRANK JACOBS AND ANNElies KNOPPERS

13 A figurational approach to women’s artistic gymnastics 203
CLAUDIA PINHEIRO AND NUNO PIMENTA

14 Navigating sports medical practice in women’s artistic gymnastics: A socio-cultural analysis 216
ASTRID SCHUBRING AND NATALIE BARKER-RUCHTI

Conclusion 231
ROSLYN KERR, NATALIE BARKER-RUCHTI, CARLY STEWART AND GRETCHEN KERR

Index 235
Illustrations

Figures
1.1 Vera Caslavska at the Olympic Games in Mexico, 1968 15
1.2 Romanian gymnasts warming up at the Olympic Games in Moscow, 1980. The different body types to those exemplified by Caslavska (Figure 1.1) can be clearly seen 19
2.1 Romanian gymnast Christina Elena Grigoras during her floor exercise at the Olympic Games in Moscow, 1980 25
8.1 The dyadic power–social influence model 132
12.1 Dutch WAG multilevel model (drawn by author) 192
12.2 Discourses and discursive practices in Dutch WAG multilevel model (drawn by author) 194

Tables
4.1 Conditions and events that have shaped the six countries’ WAG development prior to and since 1989 55
5.1 Sample of gymnasts 72
8.1 Major power theories (taken from Simpson et al., 2015 with permission) 130
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The world of women’s sport and physical activity is complex and often fast changing. While the opportunities for participation in sports have increased among females in many countries in recent years, these trends mask a range of issues that continue to confront women and girls in sporting arenas.

It is important to acknowledge that sport has moved a long way from traditional views that sport was the exclusive domain of men. For example, while Pierre de Coubertin, the man credited with being the founder of the modern Olympic Games, is often quoted as claiming that women’s involvement would be impractical, uninteresting, and improper, in recent Olympiads women have made up almost half of the participants at the Games. However, it is also the case that women lag a long way behind men in leadership roles; at the Olympics, as in other major sporting events, the proportion of female coaches is rarely more than one in ten of the total number; there continues to be shocking evidence of abusive regimes in many sports; and we are still relatively early in fully understanding the intersectionality of gender with factors such as race, age, disability, or the experiences of trans and intersex athletes.

This book provides detailed attention to a range of issues that continue to be experienced by women and girls in sport by focusing on the world of women’s artistic gymnastics (WAG). This includes exploring the complex social contexts which frame, enable, and constrain sporting opportunities for females; the social worlds within which female athletes compete, all too often requiring the sacrifice of wellbeing for sporting achievement; alongside the possibilities for hope with stories of humane and empowering policies and practice which demonstrate progress in many areas of WAG, and in women’s sport and physical activity more generally.

The analysis of WAG is given breadth and depth by the way the authors draw on multiple methods and theoretical approaches to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this sport and the experiences of its participants. Woven through the book is Jenny’s story: a fictional but realistic narrative of the life of one participant in WAG. Jenny’s story invites us to ask serious questions about women’s sport and physical activity, and
challenges anyone who cares about sporting worlds to contribute to debates about the future of sport.

I am delighted that this is the first book to be published in the *Women, Sport, and Physical Activity* series. It will challenge anyone who is complacent about progress in women’s sport and physical activity; provide guidance for students, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers engaged with the future direction of WAG and sport more widely; and deliver insightful and thought-provoking reading for anyone concerned with women’s sport.
Introduction

Roslyn Kerr, Natalie Barker-Ruchti, Carly Stewart and Gretchen Kerr

Women’s artistic gymnastics (WAG) has long been one of the most popular Olympic sports. For the 2020 Tokyo games, ticket prices for the finals are some of the highest priced of any sport (Tokyo Organising Committee, 2018). The appeal of the sport is claimed to be due to its unique combination of spectacular acrobatics and artistic grace. At the 1952 Olympic Games, the four apparatus were confirmed as vault, uneven bars, balance beam, and floor; each require a different type of mastery and allow individual gymnasts to showcase varied abilities. At the same time, particularly historically, the sport has also been considered an icon of feminine appropriateness (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Cervin, 2015).

For many sports, the relationship between sport and gender is defined by masculinity. Sport, in being originally designed for boys and men, showcases traits generally deemed masculine, such as strength and aggression (Messner, 1992). Indeed, some traditional male sports, such as football (Caudwell, 2011; Skelton, 2000) or rugby union (Pringle & Markula, 2005), have been critiqued for their reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and poor treatment of women. Such sports focus on the men’s game as of far more importance, and women have struggled to gain pay equity and support to participate (Caudwell, 2011; Travers, 2008).

For gymnastics, the story is very different. Although it has historical links to men’s military training, it is the women’s form that has gained greater popularity and attention (Chisholm, 1999). Particularly due to the performances of Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci in the 1970s, and followed by stars such as Svetlana Khorkina in the 1990s and the current champion Simone Biles, WAG gained immense worldwide attention and eclipsed men’s gymnastics as the preferred form of the sport. The emphasis on flexibility, dance and expression was seen as feminine appropriate (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Chisholm, 1999). Nonetheless, the relationship between WAG and femininity is far from simple.

The aim of this book is to explore WAG’s many complexities: the sport’s unique history, the individual experiences of gymnasts, the complicated coach-athlete relationship and the wider actors that affect the practice of
gymnastics. As a sport dominated by female athletes, it is unusual but, at the same time, gymnasts and coaches have struggled with the same male–female power imbalances experienced by many other women in sport. WAG therefore presents a fascinating and fruitful case for study.

As detailed in the first section of the book, originally gymnasts were mature adult women with sexually developed bodies and over time the body types that dominated the sport became younger and less mature. As a result, child-like bodies became the norm, arguably owing to their biomechanical advantages in performing acrobatics. Thus, an ironic situation developed, where on the one hand gymnastics celebrated women and femininity in a way most sports did not, while on the other hand the sexually immature bodies on display lacked markers of female femininity such as breasts and hips.

The second section of the book explores the lives and voices of gymnasts, as they battle with the intense demands of the sport that have often included abuse, and the difficulty of living with their own body–self relationships, associated identities, and stories. The amazing skills that gymnasts perform are the result of countless hours of training per week over many years, and many gymnasts derive pleasure and satisfaction from the abilities of their bodies. At the same time, gymnasts are also constantly subjected to the demands and gaze of others, such as coaches, judges, and spectators, and are required to wear the most revealing of garments as they both train and compete.

Exacerbating this contradictory scenario is the norm of men coaching prepubescent girls, with the coach-athlete relationship being the focus of the book’s third section. From the 1970s onwards, it became a common sight on the competition floor to see an older male coach looking after a team of very young girls. Therefore, what could have been an opportunity for a sport to showcase women as powerful athletes in their own right instead became an example of male domination. Yet regardless of the sex of the coaches, the coach-athlete relationship offers its own set of complexities. As this section points out, the same closeness that is needed for a successful coach-athlete relationship also leaves athletes vulnerable to abuse, particularly due to the power imbalance that exists within the relationship. It is further complicated in the case of gymnastics because of the need for coaches to touch athletes in order to assist them with learning new skills. Whereas in other sports it may be possible to ban touching in order to protect athletes, the situation is more problematic in gymnastics.

Yet while coaches are acknowledged as one of the major figures in a gymnast’s life, they are not the only figures who affect the way gymnastics occurs. The final section of the book considers how parents, sports scientists, doctors, judges, and technology all contribute to the making of the gymnast. This section uses a variety of theoretical approaches to highlight the networked or figurational nature of the various actors that work together
to create gymnastics. It demonstrates how at times these actors end up converging to disempower the athlete, but also shows how, for some medical personnel, they struggle to reconcile the demands of the sport with their medical ethic.

The four sections of the book were conceptualised after a 2016 conference, in which a ‘research tree’ approach was utilised to thematically identify the most important areas of research in WAG. Efforts have been made to focus not only on issues of particular importance to gymnastics, but to wider sport as well. For example, macro global processes such as globalisation and scientification are referred to alongside an acknowledgement of the significance of studying the micro interactions between gymnasts, coaches, and others involved in the sport. To study these disparate areas, the book draws on research from several disciplines, primarily sociology, history, and psychology.

Overall, the book highlights how many in the sport are subject to immense pressures, which have led to significant issues in terms of athlete welfare. The book emphasises how, as shown in a large number of reported cases of abuse and maltreatment, the culture of WAG is dominated by surveillance and control, by coaches and a range of other actors. Through many of these influencers, the belief in needing to be both thin and young in order to win has dominated, with many gymnasts developing eating disorders or other health problems as a result of an inadequate diet. In some regimes, not even water was permitted to be drunk during 4–5-hour-long training sessions. Most recently, the conviction of Larry Nassar, the US gymnastics team doctor, for sexually abusing female gymnasts, is the most prominent example of the extreme control that gymnasts have been under.

At the same time, the Nassar case suggests that perhaps the tide is turning, that gymnasts are able to embody female athlete empowerment at last. The testimonies of over 250 gymnasts bring hope that gymnasts may finally have a voice. There is also evidence to suggest that the accepted representations of gymnasts may be expanding beyond tiny white girls. The domination of youth appears to be reversing, with the average age of the World Championships now around 20 years old (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017), and the field now filled with many gymnasts in their 20s or higher, led by Oksana Chusovitina, who will contest her eighth Olympic Games in 2020 at the age of 45. The last two Olympic Games have been won by African American gymnasts, who, while recognised as receiving some racially driven-criticism (Eagleman, 2015), indicate that success is possible for gymnasts outside of the traditional white stereotype (Chisholm, 1999)

In this book, we bring together a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives in order to explore the many complexities of WAG. The book is timely, since recent events, such as the Nassar case, the increased age of gymnasts, and the heightened profile as a result of the star status of Simone Biles, have highlighted many contradictions in the sport. However, often the
sport can be difficult to understand for those less familiar with its unique ways of working. Therefore, to provide an entry way into the world of elite gymnastics, we draw on the power of storytelling.

Each of the four sections of the book opens with a section of a fictional story detailing the career of a gymnast called Jenny. At the outset, Jenny is a child, inspired by some historic gymnastics figures, and the story follows her career under the care of a demanding coach until she reaches adolescence. Jenny’s four-part story is informed by a creative fiction tradition. Such an approach, while informed by empirical evidence, need not be based on real events or real people other than suggesting these things may have occurred. Recognising that good stories have certain capacities to move and affect people and things in the world, we worked with professional fiction writer James Pope in order to do this as effectively as we could have. The process was one of dialogue and reflexivity that involved bringing together gymnastics stories from research with our own experiences and self-awareness to co-create a story which brings to life the embodied struggles of the fictional character, Jenny. Framed by narrative devices, we hope to have animated a plausible plotline, characters, scenarios, behaviours, and emotion that speak to all sections of this book. This said, we encourage readers to think with and about the story, to respond but not finalise any interpretations that might be made. If the story is heard and retold through a multitude of interpretations, it is doing the work we would like it to do. That is, to create new stories and leverage opportunity for change.

References


Jenny’s story Part I: Frank

James Pope

When you watch real champions, you see this amazing skill, amazing strength and control and balance, and you just think of the beauty, you never think of what made that beauty, the massive effort that goes into the ‘effortless’ elegance. You wouldn’t, would you? Unless you’re a gymnast yourself or you know someone who is.

I used to watch the TV and my mum’s old videos: her hero was Nadia Comaneci, but I really loved Svetlana Khorkina. The 2000 Olympics when she won gold on the bar. Wow! Tall and slim, not really the stereotype. I was only six or so, and had just started really, but I was captivated and I still feel that thrill of how she impressed me. I still get goosebumps if I watch YouTube videos of her. I still love to watch it. I made a scrapbook with WAG photos, and news stories, and I wrote all my own notes on the pages. I’ve still got that scrapbook, and I see how absorbed I was. I got hooked quickly.

But now when I think back, it’s as if there was a different person there, not really me, although of course it was me, is me. I’ve left it behind, on purpose left it behind … but it’s all still just there, somehow, in the wings of my memory.

So … well, my mum had been a gymnast in her childhood and teens. I’ve seen some old videos, and she was pretty good, to be fair, but maybe not really good enough to go far. I know she competed at regional level. She did know her stuff, and she knew people, and I definitely wouldn’t have got anywhere if she hadn’t been in the sport before me, to guide me.

Mum didn’t push me into it at all. She just said, ‘You don’t have to do gymnastics. And even if you do, you can choose artistic or rhythmic.’ I
know she had to give up in the end because she had an injury. She did artistic and injured her back and had to stop, so I think maybe she wasn’t so keen on me doing artistic. It was up to me though. She said, ‘You could do swimming, maybe?’ She did want me to do something, but that wasn’t pressure: she just didn’t want me kind of doing nothing. Anyway, I chose artistic, probably because I knew Mum had done that.

I remember the very first session. I was just excited, not nervous, because at that point I had no idea what was really going to happen. It just felt like going to brownies or something, but a lot more glamorous. Mum had bought me a leotard and shoes. It felt exciting! My first coach, I’ll call him Pete, was so lovely and friendly, and the whole thing seemed so welcoming. It wasn’t too hard to begin with. I mean, we did practise, and we did learn things, but it was just super fun for the first couple of years: I met other girls and we used to chatter and laugh and the coaches would sometime get a bit irritated. But it was lovely. And I fell in love with it. And, I was good. I didn’t really know I was then, but I suppose I must have been, because when I was eight Mum said I was going to have a new coach. ‘You’ve been noticed,’ she said. That phrase stuck with me. I didn’t know what it even meant, but it seemed important!

So I swapped to be with Frank. And I think I sort of swooned when I met him properly and he shook my hand. I’d seen him before of course, because he worked with other girls at the gym. But when Mum actually introduced me, I went a bit melty inside. Frank was old, or that’s how he seemed to me – much older than Mum. But he seemed so big and strong and like a grandad in some way. I remember seeing his big brown forearms, and the black hairs on his arms. It’s odd what you remember, but his arms were so big! So, I wasn’t frightened of him at all. You do hear some people who say they were frightened of their coach, but I wasn’t scared of Frank. I was definitely excited. He had a reputation too – he’d worked in Russia in the past, and that made him like a star. Mum said he was brilliant.

I do remember being a bit nervous to meet Frank again – but the first few sessions were fun, and I loved it immediately. A new level. The buzz when you began to be able to do things you’d never done before. It felt like flying! I was so into it, I couldn’t get enough. I would go home and make up routines and spin and leap around in the garden, pretending I was in the Olympics. Being with Frank seemed to turn me up a notch, or something. Something happened inside me and I was 100% into it. And, also, I always wanted him to like me, that was the thing, so I always tried my best. I wanted him to be pleased with me, and when he was pleased I felt amazing and Mum loved it too.

The first time Frank got angry, I cried, and I remember that made him even more angry. I can’t really remember what I did, or didn’t do, but he yelled at me and made me do the exercise again, and then I started crying
even more, and then I remember he came over and comforted me, so I calmed down. I told Mum about it and she said, ‘Well, Frank is the best, Jenny. He had a good reason to shout, I’m sure. He wants you to do your best, that’s all it is.’

And in a way, she was right. He did want me to do my best, and so did I, and so did Mum. It’s not like I was resisting it. I just remember the sudden shock of his voice, so loud, out of the blue, and then it felt confusing maybe, when he was comforting me.

Anyway, it’s a bit hard to remember everything. I was just doing it, not really thinking about it.

So, we carried on, and I got better. Frank did shout a lot, but we always ended up friends, and I know I always wanted to go back. I never refused. Dad used to ask how it had gone, and I would tell him I’d learned this or that routine and he’d be pleased. Mum was a bit like Frank, I guess, now I think back – she wanted me to improve all the time. I was entering local competitions almost right away, even before I started with Frank. It quite quickly became my whole life. I trained five days a week, before school and after school. And if there was a competition coming up I would get pulled out of classes, because I think the gymnastic club had a link with our school, so they didn’t make a fuss. And I suppose the school quite liked having someone competing in events – probably it looked good for the school’s image. Maybe, I don’t know. I didn’t mind missing school, of course! Who would? I thought I was getting kind of free holidays when all the other kids had to slog away.

Really and truly, it was cool. I was a little bit of a star at school, when I was at juniors anyway. There was one other girl at our school who did gymnastics, and she did artistic too. She wasn’t really a friend as such, but what happened was, we spent a lot of time together by being at the club so much. We aren’t friends now. We lost contact. She stopped gymnastics when she went to secondary school. I remember she told me she’d had enough of being ‘tortured’, as she put it.

I didn’t see it, certainly not then. I guess I do now ... ‘Torture’ ... bit strong! But when you had to do oversplits, Frank would make you hold the position, push your legs down until it hurt and then if you looked like you were going to ease up he’d shout, and you’d be so startled for a moment that you’d stretch even harder, and then it would hurt so much! My God, the pain sometimes. It was necessary though – you would get bad injuries in full performance if you didn’t do all the right exercise, but those oversplits were sometimes brutal. But if I ever moaned to Mum she’d say, ‘OK, Jenny, you stop. Maybe take up netball ...’ And right away, I’d be like ‘NOOOOO! I don’t want to do netball!’ It seemed so dull compared to what I did. I already had heroes, and I kind of felt important by doing it. Mum knew that anyway, that’s why she said it. I was going to be like Khorkina. So, I was determined, even when Frank made me want to quit ...
Chapter 1

Acrobatisation and establishment of pixie-style women’s artistic gymnastics

Georgia Cervin

Introduction

At its first Olympic Games in 1952, women’s artistic gymnastics (WAG) was one of the few sports available for women to compete in. It was a graceful, elegant sport, associated with femininity. Its athletes were women in their twenties, performing routines based on balletic training. But 20 years later, pre-pubescent girls somersaulting through the air on all apparatus came to represent the sport. This chapter explores the phenomena of this ‘acrobatisation’ and the key figures and moments behind it. Beginning with an introduction to gymnastics and its nineteenth-century roots, it explores the global spread of the sport, from European men to European (and colonial) women. It then surveys the first 20 years of the sport as it was established in the Olympic movement, and the key actors that came to dominate it.

Locating the late 1960s and early 1970s as a time of change, the process of acrobatisation is then discussed, with particular reference to the role of the media in advertising and popularising this new style of WAG. In doing so, the difference in gymnast cohorts is discussed through the themes of femininity and style, maturity, and behaviour including political engagement. This chapter shows that the European, patriarchal thinking that established the sport in the nineteenth century still had a large effect on its development over a century later, and that it was only through fissures in the system – several actors and events over a number of years – that the new, acrobatic style of WAG was finally able to emerge by the 1970s.

Roots of sportive gymnastics

Gymnastics earned its name from the classical training of ancient Greek warriors and athletes\(^1\) (Pfister, 2013), which was adopted when Johann Friedrich GutsMuths and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn created the modern sport. The two Germans devised of several of the key apparatus of gymnastics: the parallel bars, rings, balance beam, and high bar at the turn of the
eighteenth century. Modern readers will realise that such apparatus is only used in WAG in a modified manner. Indeed, when GutsMuth and Jahn created their system for the training of bodies, they did so thinking only of European men (Pfister, 2013). Jahn’s Turnen was not a competitive sport, nor was it centred around the individual: it was about building the ‘nation’s strength’ and accordingly imbibed with German nationalism (Pfister, 2013). The founder of the Swedish tradition of physical education, Pehr Ling drew on GutsMuth and Jahn’s work to devise ‘educational gymnastics’, which had greater emphasis on training and drill and the authoritarian manner in which it was practised (Barker-Ruchti, 2011). When the Sokol movement in Czechoslovakia grew from the German Turnen, it was adapted to promote Czechoslovakian nationalism. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, national revolutions spread throughout Europe, ushering in new political ideas and the need to formulate systematic physical training regimes to defend the nation. It is no surprise then that gymnastics, as a form of military training and promotion of nationalism, arose in this context and became practised throughout Europe. This was also a time when the nations promoting military strength would soon cast their eyes outward in search of creating an empire. Such political aspirations were premised on ideas of European supremacy, rationalised by emerging disciplines like physical anthropology, anthropometry, and phrenology (the study of skull measurements and intelligence).

These ideas played important roles in the creation of modern gymnastics and the ideals it espoused. Soon, the advocacy of these ideals through physical activity leant itself to promoting the supremacy of European women as well as men in imperial contexts. Adapted to be suitably feminine, women’s gymnastics was further differentiated from its masculine gymnastic roots with the new name: calisthenics (Chisholm, 2007). Calisthenics were part of a discourse that ‘sought to propagate a modern mode of disciplinary power that aimed to train and (re)form female bodies and behaviours in accordance with conceptions of (genuine) true womanhood’ (Chisholm, 2007, p. 433). That is, just as gymnastics was originally conceived to instil and promote traditional masculine qualities of military prowess, women’s gymnastics was designed to promote femininity: the ultimate example of which being motherhood.

As early gymnastics was being modified into something more appropriate for women, it was also spreading rapidly from Europe through immigrant communities and physical education institutions. In this early globalisation, the nationalist component of the sport was adopted and adapted in each country. Thus, when the first Olympic Games were held in 1896, gymnastics was both popular and important enough in promoting national prestige that it was invited to participate. But it would take the better part of the next 50 years until women’s gymnastics would reach the same permanent status in the Olympic sporting line-up.
Early Olympic gymnastics

While men’s gymnastics became a core feature of the Olympic roster at the Games’ inception, women’s gymnastics was not a consideration. The Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) had formed in 1881 to reflect the growing interest in the sport, but it would not be until 1928 that a women’s version of the sport appeared at the Games (Cervin, Nicolas, Dufraisse, Bohuon, & Quin, 2017). It was only in 1933 that a committee for women’s gymnastics was formed (Berliox, 1985). But it would be a further two decades before WAG became a standardised sport.

Although the women’s performances at the 1928 Amsterdam Games certainly opened the door for the development of women’s gymnastics as a sport, they were, at the same time, something of an outlier. The competition was a team event only – no doubt influenced by aversion to competitiveness in women (Cahn, 1995; Vertinsky, 1994) – and involved only vault, and the vague ‘apparatus’ which evidently included rope climbing and team drill (Van Rossem, 1928). Not only was the competition format and apparatus not familiar as WAG, the inclusion of women’s gymnastics in the Games was also exceptional: it would not appear again until 1936, then again in 1948.² However, each of these occasions represented one step closer to the modern format. In 1936, gymnasts performed both compulsory and voluntary routines, and competed on vault, parallel bars, and balance beam. But they also performed two group exercises, and the competition was only a team event (Evans, Gjerde, Heijmans, & Mallon, 2016a). In 1948, it was again a team-only event, the gymnasts competed on rings instead of bars, and the group exercises persisted. However, we can see women’s vault was renamed ‘side horse’ by this time, pointing to the evolution in how the apparatus was used for women (Evans, Gjerde, Heijmans, & Mallon, 2016b).

Further details about the contents of the ‘group exercises’ of these Games are not known. But it is possible these included handheld apparatus, influenced by Ling’s Swedish Gymnastics. Certainly, by the 1952 and 1956 Olympics ‘portable’ apparatus remained in the program before it split off into ‘modern gymnastics’: what we now call ‘Rhythmic Gymnastics’. Indeed, the development of Rhythmic Gymnastics in the late 1960s and 1970s is tied to shifting ideas of femininity as women’s artistic gymnastics evolved. But for now, we can conclude that WAG came into being at the 1952 Olympics. These were the first Games where ‘artistic’ was included in the name of the sport, and the first Games where gymnasts competed on the standard four apparatus: vault, bars, beam, and floor (Cervin, 2017). Despite minor changes to the programme over the next 60 years, the basic competition format and apparatus have remained the same.