

# Despite olympic gymnastics' woes, sport is mostly positive for teen girls

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The sexual assault conviction of Larry Nassar, former doctor for the USA Gymnastics Women's National Team and Michigan State University, has renewed criticism of a culture of abuse in women's elite gymnastics.

However, a study by a sociologist at the University of California, Davis, paints a far more positive picture of the experiences of high-level (though not international level) teen female gymnasts.

Rachel Nickens, a doctoral candidate in sociology and a USA Gymnastics coach and judge, spent a year observing training sessions and competitions, and conducted in-depth interviews at three gyms with 20 gymnasts ages 11 to 17 in Junior Olympics levels eight, nine and 10. The interviews were part of a larger ethnographic study on youth gymnastics. Nickens also drew on data from another 18 interviews with adolescent male gymnasts, coaches and parents.

Nickens will present her study, "Not Just 'Little Girls in Pretty Boxes': The Everyday Experiences of Adolescent Female Gymnasts" in Philadelphia

at the 113th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association on Aug. 11.

Her title refers to a 1995 book by journalist Joan Ryan, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: The Making and Breaking of Elite Gymnasts and Figure Skaters*, about physical and psychological abuse suffered by young girls striving for Olympic medals.

"There is a popular narrative about women's gymnastics: young girls sacrifice their childhood and adolescence in a race to peak before puberty," Nickens writes in introducing her study. "They perform superhuman feats, and they do so while looking precious in their pigtails. This narrative, of course, is intrinsically tied up with ideas about gender: Its central figure is the perfect, passive, and submissive adolescent girl, who does just what is asked of her."

The girls she interviewed are prospects for college gymnastics teams, spent 13 to 24 hours a week training, and know they must be "in shape" and hard-working, but do not believe gymnasts need to be small, thin, passive or perfect, Nickens said.

"In competition settings, girls know they should look and move in feminine ways. However, when gymnasts define and explain their athletic participation, they mostly talk about practice, teamwork, the joy of physicality, and the reward of overcoming challenges and fears. While they define themselves as gymnasts, they also define themselves as athletes and students, friends and leaders."

Nickens said that at the moderately high level, gymnastics might not be all that different from any other sport—both in its rewards and in its challenges.

She said her study highlights the importance of studying sports at all levels, not just the elite.

Provided by UC Davis

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