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EXPECTATIONS SUSTAINED IN THE SPORT OF GYMNASTICS

Fei McMahon

Gender constructs, as developed by society, continuously permeate the sports realm. Although many sports practices have evolved over time, they emphasize the distinctions between men and women that have been established to fulfill the social demand for conflict and opposition. This study is a discussion of the social impact on gender, gender in sports, and the perpetuation of gender structures in the sport of gymnastics.

The ways in which gender stereotypes and ideals are upheld in gymnastics are examined through the analysis of the gendered doxa and habitus within gymnastics, the fulfillment of social demand, the role of mass media in sustaining gender structures in gymnastics, and the future direction of gender in gymnastics, sport, and society.

INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes are evident in most, if not all, facets of society. As Michael A. Messner has shown in his work, Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain, the conceptions surrounding masculinity and femininity within our society have been paralleled in the evolution of sports and continue to have a significant contribution to the institution today. Although modern sports practices have changed considerably, they are still apparent. In this work, I will specifically demonstrate how gymnastics perpetuates gender constructs using thorough analyses of gender within society and the perimeters of sport as well as a discussion of the evolution of gymnastics in the nineteenth century through today and into the future. This discussion will involve the recognition of the gendered doxa and habitus within gymnastics, the fulfillment of opposition between men and women in the sport, and an analysis of the role of mass media in sustaining gender structures in gymnastics.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT ON GENDER

Unlike sex, gender is not biological. The concept of “gender,” and the ways in which this abstraction is employed, relies on society. Gender is used not only to identify oneself and others according to one’s self-recognized and affirmation of feminine and masculine traits, but also as a standard or expectation that each sex should abide by or aspire towards. These standards can appear in the form of stereotypes that tend to contrast one another when comparing those that are applied to men and women. Traditionally, narratives of masculinity are constructed as brave, strong, intelligent, dominant, assertiveness, and independence. On the other hand, individuals who represent epitomes of femininity are constructed as just that, a body. It can then be understood that the complexities that link sex, the body, and gender together permit each to gain an identity and to be constructed in parallel with one another, causing biological sex and the body to be normalized. In conforming to these constructs through which no “pure body” may be referenced, society refutes the “reality of bodies, [and] the relevance of science…” Through Butler’s argument, the notion of a “correct” gender is misguided and the concept of gender in nature is baseless. As Messner has argued, children play an active role in shaping their own worlds. This includes their role in gender construction through social processes by means of social situations; social relations, including those with adults; and the recreation of shared practices to form and reaffirm gender ideologies in their daily lives, as described by Thorne’s concept of “gender play.” Thorne’s idea of “gender play,” or how gender is formed through “group life” and social interactions, can be applied in the analysis of the importance of gender in different situations. Through communal practices, gender has maintained its purpose of dividing those of different biological sex, and those who are perceived to convey traits of the “incorrect” gender by society, from the majority. Butler claims that even the body and sex have become social concepts through the forced materialization of gender ideologies throughout history. This is because the complex relationship between sex, the body, and gender has led sex to function as both a social norm and a social force with the “power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls.”

whether that is biological sex or gender, gender boundaries are constantly referred to when describing or identifying a person. In this way, they are informally and formally structured into the division of rules, labor, power hierarchies, and values. These gender
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body to be normalized. In conforming to these constructs through which no “pure body” may be referenced, society refutes the “reality of bodies, [and] the relevance of science…” Through Butler’s argument, the notion of a “correct” gender is misguided and the concept of gender in nature is baseless. As it is often difficult to speak about an individual without indicating his/her sex or gender, gender boundaries are constantly referred to when describing or identifying a person. In this way, they are informally and formally structured into the division of rules, labor, power hierarchies, and values. These gender
structures can otherwise be referred to as the gendered doxa or the social institution that revolve around gender and work to maintain the gender habitus that has been passed on through generations and exists today. This gender habitus, however, is therefore formed at a young age. It shapes individuals and allows society to direct them to think in a certain way, i.e. ignoring gender construction and accepting gender as a natural occurrence.

Social structure does not determine the way in which children and parents perceive their gendered performances; however, it does restrict and fix limits, ranging from embryonic stage to adulthood, when observing his son’s soccer team, Messner noticed a trend in which gender was addressed by both the children and adults attending the event.12 Instances like these showed him to prove that all children are intrinsically gendered by society through specific interactions between children, his beliefs were altered.12 Instances like these college professors showed him to prove that all children in which gender was addressed by both the children and adults attending the event. Contrasts between the boys and girls rejected one another because watching the teams in the opening ceremony and the performances; however, it does restrict and fix limits, not to say that gender constructs have been eradicated and work to maintain the gender habitus that has been passed on through generations and exists today. This gender habitus, however, is therefore formed at a young age. It shapes individuals and allows society to direct them to think a certain way, i.e. ignoring gender construction and accepting gender as a natural occurrence.

The美化 descriptions provided above that comprise ideal men and women have begun to change. This is easily illustrated through men’s and women’s performances in sport.20 This is a prime example of the use of the gender habitus that exists within sports. Athletes who dispute society’s standards of gender are therefore ostracized and their achievements are often considered failures.13 However, girls’ achievements are away from their accomplishments, minimizing their value as athletes, and focused on their lack of conformity to masculine and feminine ideals that exist largely due to discerned physical differences between men and women. New data, however, negate this belief as it shows that few brains, between zero and eight percent, contain all female or all male structures; meanwhile, other individuals possess a mix of regions that fall in between.14 It shows that spectators are not only concerned with the game. Rather, fans are interested in the cultural, institutional, and ideological space in which sports act as vehicles for the constructs under which they function.

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in the cultural, institutional, and ideological space in which sport operates. Gender is informed and created by society through specific interactions between individuals, such as competitions between men and women.15 It is clear that this learned disposition of gender persists in the social order despite its contradiction of empirical information about the substantial similarities between boys and girls. This conveys the very strength of the gender habitus, a quality that has allowed it to perform the sports realm. In this way, sport is an arena through which individuals can enact agency to conform to and champion, actively or subconsciously, the gender norms they have helped maintain in society.

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Social structure does not determine the way in which children and parents perceive their gendered performances; however, it does restrict and fix limits, regardless of certain sex differences that exist, when observing his son’s soccer team, Messner noticed a trend in which gender was addressed by both the children and adults attending the event. Children expressed how different the boys and girls were. In response, one of their totems (Sea Monsters and Barbie, respectively), the two sexes were rarely recognized or verbalized. After and girls were emphasized while similarities between adults attending the events. Contrasts between the boys in which gender was addressed by both the children and girls were emphasized while similarities between the two sexes were rarely recognized or verbalized. After watching the teams in the opening ceremony and the way the boys and girls rejected one another because of their totems (Sea Monsters and Barbie, respectively), Messner writes that the team’s performances illustrated how different the boys and girls were. In response, one coach said that he was once convinced by the research his college professors showed him to prove that all children are essentially the same, yet in observing his own children, his beliefs were altered.13 Instances like these illustrate that although the preservation and repeated use of gender assumptions are experience-based, the socially constructed idea is naturalized or is attributed to chemical differences in the biological foundation of humans. Despite analytical data and scientific studies, society is determined to believe that gender differences are intrinsic to individuals and not formed by society itself. To say that gender is an innate property of the body, however, is a flawed statement. As determined through Butler’s argument and by gender scholars, the idea is not formed by society itself. To say that gender is an innate property of the body, however, is a flawed statement. As determined through Butler’s argument and by gender scholars, the gender habitus, a quality that has allowed it to perdure the sports realm. In this way, sport is an arena through which individuals can enact agency to conform to and champion, actively or subconsciously, the gender norms they have helped maintain in society.

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The crude descriptions provided above that comprise ideal men and women have begun to change. This is easily illustrated through the example of baseball and football. When players are selected for these teams, it is generally assumed that young men possess the skills needed to play these sports. However, there is no reason to believe that young women do not also possess the skills needed to play these sports. In fact, women have been successful in sports that were previously dominated by men. For example, female athletes have won Olympic medals in a variety of sports that were previously considered “men’s” sports, such as gymnastics and swimming. This reflects the changing attitudes towards gender and sport. Despite this change, however, there are still challenges that women face in sports. Women are often subjected to gender stereotypes and biases that can limit their performance and opportunities. This is particularly evident in sports where gender has been traditionally associated with certain roles. For example, female athletes are often expected to be more feminine and less assertive than male athletes. This can lead to a lack of respect and recognition for female athletes’ achievements. This highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality in sports and the need for continued efforts to challenge and overcome gender stereotypes.
and habitus, as well as the claim that the naturalization of this phenomenon. He begins his discussion with notions of “gender” and the characteristics associated with each work,7 and duties.30 This shows that, although gymnastics was considered the main source of income for the family—men are the patriarchs and are considered the main source of income for the family—women and their responsibilities were classified as feminine and essentially弯 the rules that encompass gender.38 He concludes that there is a need for the division of power and opposition within social structures and writes that the conflict between the male and female is arbitrary unless likening the gender disparity to up and down.110 The construction of divergent gender ideologies is then trivialized in nature and logic, as its purpose is only to provide a space of conflict; sports and gymnastics are maintained and fulfilled. Take, for instance, the events in which men and women practice and compete in artistic gymnastics. As stated by the Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, in a sport such as gymnastics, where flexibility and a small size are advantageous, men excuse themselves from these characteristics, which women gymnasts generally display, and only participate in those that seem to suit them the most. By doing so, men separate themselves from women. They place themselves into an entirely different category despite the two events shared between the sexes. Men focus on the hand, while the women focus on the lower body, which requires extreme strength and control. On the other hand, women focus on the hand and execute the flairs that states it is a “very difficult mount. You see the men do that on the pommel horse… [it takes/she has] tremendous strength.”34 While men have been known to be able to show that their abilities match those of men, their show of athletic potential has not been enough to break gender barriers within gymnastics. In addition, this produces opposing circumstances which can deter men from becoming or staying involved in the sport. Again, this produces opposing circumstances which can deter men from becoming or staying involved in the sport. Further evidence supports Bourdieu’s argument and the notion that sports have the ability to endorse disparities between genders. This is illustrated when examining gendered doxa, which people have mistakenly accepted as something that opposes power and strength. In juxtaposing brawn and toughness, athleticism promotes the social identification of certain qualities which can deter men from becoming or staying involved in the sport. Again, this produces opposing circumstances that divide men and women, as demonstrated by Bourdieu, required by society. Further evidence supports Bourdieu’s argument and the notion that sports have the ability to endorse disparities between genders. This is illustrated when examining gymnast mentalities concerning gender and their reactions to gender norms. For example, an interview with Kelly McKeown, the head designer for GK Elite, a gymnastics outfitter, conveys how gymnastics perpetuates gender structures in even the most detailed aspects of the sport such as the attire.43 In her interview, McKeown discusses the leotards and competition shirts female and male gymnasts wear, respectively, during their competitions. She notes that the significant cost difference between the men and women’s wardrobes is due to the number of crystals on the women’s leotards and lack thereof on the men’s shirts.40 This bedazzling of the women’s gear signifies the efforts to portray a more feminine appearance when compared to the men’s conservative shirts and shorts. Another way male and female gymnasts are distinguished from one another in the sport, McKeown explains that the men on the US team are all shaved for their competition outfits should look like and she comments that the men have turned down offers to have metallic colors and crystals put into the leotards because “they want to be very manly and masculine.” Her recognition of the men’s sentiment and need to fulfill male gender expectations and maintain a contrasting image to their female counterparts, continues to support the argument that gymnastics as an institution in which gender constructs are sustained. In addition, Aly Raisman, a successful two-time Olympic gymnast, has spoken out against gender expectations, particularly those surrounding women and their bodies in society and gymnastics. In the media, women are commonly portrayed to be suitable for specific fields. This applies to the way in which women are illustrated as individuals who are tailored for sports containing an artistic element.21 This artistic component in gymnastics is often perceived as something that opposes power and strength. Gymnastics has evolved over time, as most sports have.34 This preservation of “traditions of Republican Motherhood and the sanctity and opposition within social structures and writes that the conflict between the male and female is arbitrary unless placed in the context of the social system of opposites, while men are specifically enrolled to build the endurance required to complete daily chores in their homes and to groom suitable housewives. The participation of women in gymnastics for this purpose is evidence of how the sport has not only perpetuated gender roles—i.e. women are subservient to men and domesticated, while men are the patriarchs and are considered the main source of income for the family—but also illustrates how sports have supported masculine dominance. Gymnastics has therefore acted as an agent through which gender disparities are emphasized and traditional gender expectations are solidified. This patriarchal origin of gymnastics in the United States is just one example of how the sport has sustained and even championed constraining gender ideologies and typical gender criteria mentioned since its introduction. Although gymnastics has evolved over time, as most sports have. The modernization of gymnastics and the efforts to compete has changed, it continues to perpetuate gender constructs. Some suggest that the contrast between the sexes has its foundation in biology and is irrefutable. However, studies illustrate that differences in biological sex are less important in terms of athleticism than one’s consistency.31 This preservation of “gender” and the characteristics associated with each throughout the evolution of the sport. As a result, gymnastics are conveyed even in the foundation of that which is practiced. In his work, Michel Foucault attempts to explain this phenomenon. He begins his discussion with notions similar to those of Butler, concerning gendered doxa and habitus, as well as the view that the naturalization of the body by society has the ability to justify “the socially constructed difference between the genders.”10 He concludes that there is a need for the division of power and opposition within social structures and writes that the conflict between the male and female is arbitrary unless placed in the context of the social system of opposites, values dynamic and static balance, coordination, explosive strength, and aesthetics.23 These aspects of gymnastics give rise for both men and women to partake in the sport, as they can be classified as both feminine and masculine. However, participation by and coverage of women in the sport is greater than that of men today.35 This may be due to the emphasis on aesthetics in artistic gymnastics. In the media, women are commonly portrayed to be suitable for specific fields. 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For example, an interview with Kelly McKeown, the head designer for GK Elite, a gymnastics outfitter, conveys how gymnastics perpetuates gender structures in even the most detailed aspects of the sport such as the attire.43 In her interview, McKeown discusses the leotards and competition shirts female and male gymnasts wear, respectively, during their competitions. She notes that the significant cost difference between the men and women’s wardrobes is due to the number of crystals on the women’s leotards and lack thereof on the men’s shirts.40 This bedazzling of the women’s gear signifies the efforts to portray a more feminine appearance when compared to the men’s conservative shirts and shorts. Another way male and female gymnasts are distinguished from one another in the sport, McKeown explains that the men on the US team are all shaved for their competition outfits should look like and she comments that the men have turned down offers to have metallic colors and crystals put into the leotards because “they want to be very manly and masculine.” Her recognition of the men’s sentiment and need to fulfill male gender expectations and maintain a contrasting image to their female counterparts, continues to support the argument that gymnastics as an institution in which gender constructs are sustained. In addition, Aly Raisman, a successful two-time Olympic gymnast, has spoken out against gender expectations, particularly those surrounding women and their bodies in society and
works were released that expressed the importance of gymnastics and its ability to help a woman form a full chest, keep good posture, and develop morals. The sport was thought to help mold women to embody the “true womanhood.”30 This shows that, although gymnastics was implemented in educational organizations between 1830 and 1870, female colleges and seminaries committed to helping prepare young women for future housework and duties.31 This shows that, although gymnastics was generally used to help increase the athleticism of its participants, women were specifically enrolled to build the endurance required to complete daily chores in their homes and to groom them into suitable housewives. The participation of women in gymnastics for this purpose is evidence of how the sport has not only perpetuated gender roles—i.e. women are subservient to men and domesticated, while men are the patriarchs and are considered the main source of income for the family—but also illustrates how gymnastics has supported masculine dominance. Gymnastics has therefore acted as an agent through which gender disparities are maintained and traditional social expectations are solidified. This patriarchal origin of gymnastics in the United States is just one example of how the sport has sustained and even championed constraining gender ideologies and typical gender criteria aforementioned since its introduction. Although gymnastics has evolved over time, as most sports have, the tradition of gymnastics practicing and competing has changed, it continues to perpetuate gender constructs. Some suggest that the contrast between the sexes in gymnastics has its foundation in biology and is irrefutable. However, studies illustrate that differences in biological sex are less important in terms of athleticism than the environment they are placed in.32 This preservation of “gender” and the characteristics associated with each throughout the evolution of gymnastics are conveyed even in the foundation of that which is practiced. In his work, Bourdieu attempts to explain this phenomenon. He begins his discussion with notions relating to “the socially constructed difference between the genders.”33 He concludes that there is a need for the division of power and opposition within social structures and writes that the conflict between the male and female is arbitrary unless placed in the context of the social system of opposites, likening the gender disparity to up and down.34 The construction of divergent gender ideologies is often trivialized in nature, and its purpose is only to provide a spectrum of expectations. These differences are therefore adequate stages on which the social demand for opposition, particularly that between genders, is maintained and fulfilled. Take, for instance, the events in which men and women practice and compete in artistic gymnastics. As stated by the Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, in a sport such as gymnastics, where flexibility and a small size are advantageous, men excuse these characteristics, which women gymnasts generally display, and only participate in those that seem to suit them best. By definition, men send themselves to women. They place themselves into an entirely different category despite the two events shared between the sexes. Men compete on the floor exercise, pommel horse, still rings, vault, parallel bars, and horizontal bar, which are events that normally require extreme strength and control. On the other hand, women send themselves to men. They execute the flairs that states it is a “very difficult mount. You see the men do that on the pommel horse... [it takes/she has] tremendous strength.”35 While men have been able to show that their abilities match those of men, their show of athletic potential has not been enough to break gender barriers within gymnastics. In addition to the advantages of a small stature and flexibility, gymnastics values dynamic and static balance, coordination, explosive strength, and aesthetics.36 These aspects of gymnastics give reason for both men and women to partake in the sport, as they can be classified as both feminine and masculine. However, participation by and coverage of women in the sport is greater than that of men today.37 This may be due to the emphasis on aesthetics in artistic gymnastics. In the media, women are commonly portrayed as being suited for specific fields. 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McKeown explains that the men on the USA team all have strawberries for their team colors, which their competition outfits should look like and she comments that the men have turned down offers to have metallic colors and crystals integrated onto their uniforms because “they want to be very manly and masculine.”41 Her recognition of the men’s sentiment and need to fulfill masculine gender norm expectations through a contrasting image to their female counterparts, continues to support the notion that gymnastics is an institution in which gender constructs are sustained. In addition, Aly Raisman, a successful two-time Olympic gymnast, has spoken out against gender expectations, particularly those surrounding women and their bodies in society and...
the contrast between “big/small” and “male/female” and gender, in individuals starting at a young age. Perceived body as it is socially doubly determined” and again communicates the instilment of specific doxa outwards.44 By analyzing the basics on which society has created for women and those gymnastics She expresses that “[female] gymnasts are supposed to gymnasts and the pressures to have a specific body type. An accomplished gymnast, Raisman has also used her conversations surrounding male and female athletes and declarations that she is “not the next Usain Bolt or Michael tradition seems unfeasible at the moment. Due to some photographs did convey the weightlessness.51 Some may argue that the media acts as an outlet through which women’s gymnastics coverage often pays tribute to the gymnasts’ power and seemingly masculine qualities, commentators are careful not to forget to emphasize and “preserve” the feminine image of the female gymnasts at the same time.46 These are ways in which gender expectations are validated and perpetuated in gymnastics by means of the media. Some may argue that the media acts as an outlet through which athletes are able to push boundaries and that it does not support gender disparities in sports, Simone Biles, for instance, has used the media to fight traditional gender roles in sports. She argues, declaring that she is “not the next Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps. (Rather, she is) a gymnast and a woman.” In a similar comment, Biles removes herself from the stratified conversation surrounding male and female athletes and their accomplishments. She makes a name for herself and as a World Champion and Olympic gold all-around medalist on Team USA.53 In this way, Biles uses her influence and the media to move towards the shadows of accomplished male athletes, showing it can be used to challenge gender constructs. Despite these efforts, the above claim is overpowered by the media’s support of gender ideals. Prime examples of this are illustrated in a study performed by Weber and Barker-Ruchti (2012). In their study, they analyze photographs of female gymnasts in the 1970s. They found that the 1970s were a time during which a “new” ideal of femininity, the favored a muscular tone and physical fitness, was reflected in the photographs. Female gymnasts’ bodies were characterized by the slight divergence from past expectations for female gymnasts, Weber and Barker-Ruchti’s analysis attests to the role media plays in constructing gender ideals, especially those applied to the body. They claim “gender is naturalized and emerges as a product” in the media, which is an argument that parallel the feminist theory of the formation of the body, sex, and gender in society, as well as the lack of reality or nature within them. In the images they reviewed, female gymnasts and their bodies were commonly depicted to represent traditional gender attributes such as “mature grace and elegance,” passiveness and fragility,52 and weightlessness.53 Some photographs did convey the female gymnasts’ strength, agility, and self-control, but were even more associated with “feminine expressiveness.”54 In turn, when the girls failed to find harmony between masculinity and femininity, they were perceived as “manly” and were even scolded for the inapt for mother- and womanhood.55 This study and the above examples illustrate the power of suggestion and influence the media has in conveying and sustaining gender norms within gymnastics.

THE FUTURE OF GENDER IN GYMNASTICS, SPORT, AND SOCIETY There is the question of how gender will be defined within sports and society. It is uncertain as to whether gymnastics can ever be steered completely away from the historical gender dynamics under which it functions today, as they exist from past expectations for female gymnasts, Weber and Barker-Ruchti argue that the working relationship between mass media and organization and structure, so changing the rules too much and steering predominantly in a direction away from tradition seems unfeasible at the moment. Due to this, we are more likely to find success in trying to change how gymnasts are perceived. It will be important to strip away the stereotypes that constantly haunt the athletes so they can express themselves and work toward their goals without being scrutinized. As a result, female gymnasts will no longer have to fear being called manly or masculine with an implied negativity for being muscular and strong. Male gymnasts will not have to constantly worry about maintaining their masculine reputations or be apprehensive of being referred to as feminine if they decide to incorporate more dance elements and a greater degree of the sport freely and without constraint. How can this be accomplished? To answer this question, one must look at the relationship between sports and society. The role of sports and society influence one another. The working relationship between these institutions gives each the ability to change the other. As a consequence, the identity of gender within sports, as a result of social constructions, is...
IDELOGIES SUSTAINED IN GYMNASTICS

The role of mass media in gender ideologies sustained in gymnastics

Mass media plays a significant role in gymnastics’ continued ability to preserve gender ideologies. This is because the media validates and perpetuates gender constructions to a global audience. Barker-Ruchti’s analysis concerns gender and those regarding the gendered doxa are solidified when media figures make comments about gymnasts and women as a way that trivializes their accomplishments. For example, during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, one NBC anchor commented that the gymnasts ‘could be standing in a mirror’ when referring to USA’s women’s gymnastics team as they gathered and held discussions on the events sidelines. Through this statement, the commentator diminishes the importance of the gymnasts and their successes on a world stage by comparing them to girls in a mall with no greater purpose than to talk. By doing so, he denies the hard work, focus, and dedication they demonstrated to be a part of the team and win the team gold. Although gymnastics coverage often pays tribute to the gymnasts’ power and seemingly masculine qualities, commentators are careful not to forget to emphasize and “preserve” the feminine image of the female gymnasts at the same time. These are ways in which gender expectations are validated and perpetuated in gymnastics by means of the media.

Some may argue that the media acts as an outlet through which athletes are able to push gender boundaries and that it does not support gender disparities in sports. Simon芭ile, for instance, has used the media to fight traditional gender roles in sports. She has declared that she is “not the next Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps.” Rather, she states that, “It is a matter of opinion, comment, Biles removes herself from the stratified conversation surrounding male and female athletes and their accomplishments. She makes a name for herself and as a World Champion and Olympic gold all-around medalist on Team USA.” In this way, Biles uses her influence and the media to combat the stigmas from the shadows of accomplished male athletes, showing it can be used to challenge gender constructs. Despite these efforts, the above claim is overpowered by the media’s support of gender ideologies. Prime examples of this are illustrated in a study performed by Weber and Barker-Ruchti (2012). In their study, they analyze photographs of female gymnasts in the 1970s. They found that the 1970s were a time during which a “new” ideal of femininity, those favored a muscular tone and physical fitness, was reflected in the images of the female gymnasts. They note that the slight divergence from past expectations for female gymnasts, Weber and Barker-Ruchti’s analysis attempts to use the media role to play in conserving gender constructs, especially those applied to the body. They claim “gender is naturalized and emerges as a product” in the media, which is an argument that participants talk about the formation of the body, sex, and gender in society, as well as the lack of reality or nature within them. In the images they reviewed, female gymnasts and their bodies were commonly depicted to represent traditional gender attributes such as “mature grace and elegance,” passiveness and fragility, and weightlessness. Some photographs did convey the female gymnasts’ strength, agility, and self-control, while others featured and “feminine” expression. In turn, when the girls failed to find harmony between masculinity and femininity, they were perceived as “weak” and even licensed to be “inappropriate” for mother- and womanhood. This study and the above examples illustrate the power of suggestion and influence the media has in conveying and sustaining gender norms within gymnastics.

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN GENDER IDEOLOGIES SUSTAINED IN GYMNASTICS

How the sport functions in the “masculine order” of opposition that is required by major social institutions and encompasses society’s gender habitus. Gymnastics therefore stress gender disparities and mainstreams gender and masculine ideals.

THE FOURTH OF GENDER IN GYMNASTICS, SPORT, AND SOCIETY

There is the question of what the future looks like for the role of gender and there is the question of how gender will be defined within sports and society. It is uncertain as to whether gymnastics can ever be steered completely away from tradition. However, the above questions have been shown to pose a smaller percentage in reality, this percentage is unlikely to experience significant change from a biological standpoint. This does not mean that the gender habitus found within sports that are greatly stratified, such as gymnastics, cannot change. The rules of gymnastics will first have to be bent and become more flexible before there is an attempt to disrupt gender expectations at large. Men should be allowed to incorporate more artistic elements in their routines and women should be permitted to opt out of having such aspects in their, for example. Yet, every institution needs organization and structure, so changing the rules too much and steering predominately in a direction away from tradition seems unfeasible at the moment. Due to this, we are more likely to find success in trying to change how gymnastics are perceived. It will be important to strip away the stigma that constantly haunt the athletes so they can express themselves and work toward their goals without being scrutinized. As a result, female gymnasts will no longer have to fear being called manly or masculine with an implied negativity for being muscular and strong. Male gymnasts will not have to constantly worry about maintaining their masculine reputations or be apprehensive of being referred to as feminine if they decide to go against the gender norms and display a fair into their routines. In changing the way gymnastics are perceived, by removing all preconceptions of who they are or who they should be, gymnasts will be able to practice the sport freely and without constraint.

How can this be accomplished? To answer this question, one must look at the relationship between sports and society. How sports, physical activity, and sport influence one another. The working relationship between these institutions gives each the ability to change the other. As a consequence, the identity of gender within sports, as a result of social constructions, is
interchangeable in its role as a product of the movement of other social ideologies within society and as a source of change. In a way, the cause becomes the effect and the effect the cause. Under this premise, the mitigation of gender expectations within gymnastics can be used to set a precedent for other sports. Sports can then act as a stepping stone that causes individuals to start to question gender ideologies in other social facets. This convention can also be used in reverse, so social movements that have success in resisting gender constructs in specific spaces, such as the home or school, can eventually translate into sport structures and sports such as gymnastics. This mechanism then causes one to ask whether individuals have the capacity to fight gender structures in any context. In answering this question, one must consider agency—the ability to choose something other than the norm. This means that by using one’s agency, an individual actively works against social conventions. It must then be decided whether gender structures can be subverted through agency, to give us the ability to select our gender identities. The answer follows that, as gender and any other social standard are complexly related to individualism, agency, communities, and historical structures, it is impossible to completely fracture the principles we live by. From birth, the criteria for an individual to function within society are engraved; at birth, an individual is born into a specific socioeconomic class, is identified by a specific race, and is assigned a sex—and with that, a gender, which immediately insinuates the gendered doxa as mentioned before. Just as it may not be reasonable to dispose of all of the rules in gymnastics that defend traditional gender expectations, it is not rational to believe that gender constructs will ever be completely eradicated from society. Despite the prospective difficulties in deserting the historical constructions that shape society today, there is still hope, as we have the power to mold these structures into forms that will have less severe consequences on social institutions, such as sports, than they do currently.

CONCLUSION

The above examination of gender in society, sports, and gymnastics in the nineteenth century through today and into the future, as well as the analysis of the relationship between mass media and gender, conveys the perpetuation of gender constructions in multiple facets of daily life. The use of gymnastics for the domestication of women both physically and morally and the contrasts between the meaning of participating in gymnastics and the perception of men and women gymnasts demonstrate the extent to which norms affect individuals’ convictions concerning gender. Throughout time, gymnastics has emphasized and sustained the opposing ideologies of masculinity and femininity through the perforation of sport by gendered doxa and habitus. As the gymnastics world grows and transforms, it will be interesting to see if it will eventually diverge from its pattern of gender norm perpetuation, as well as the potential of the relationship between gymnastics, sports, and society to negotiate current social structures.

Despite the prospective difficulties in deserting the historical constructions that shape society today, there is still hope, as we have the power to mold these structures into forms that will have less severe consequences on social institutions, such as sports, than they do currently.

This photo is of the Pantheon in Rome, and was taken after practically sprinting there from the train station before catching another out of the city.