

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

A NETFLIX ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY

# ATHLETE A

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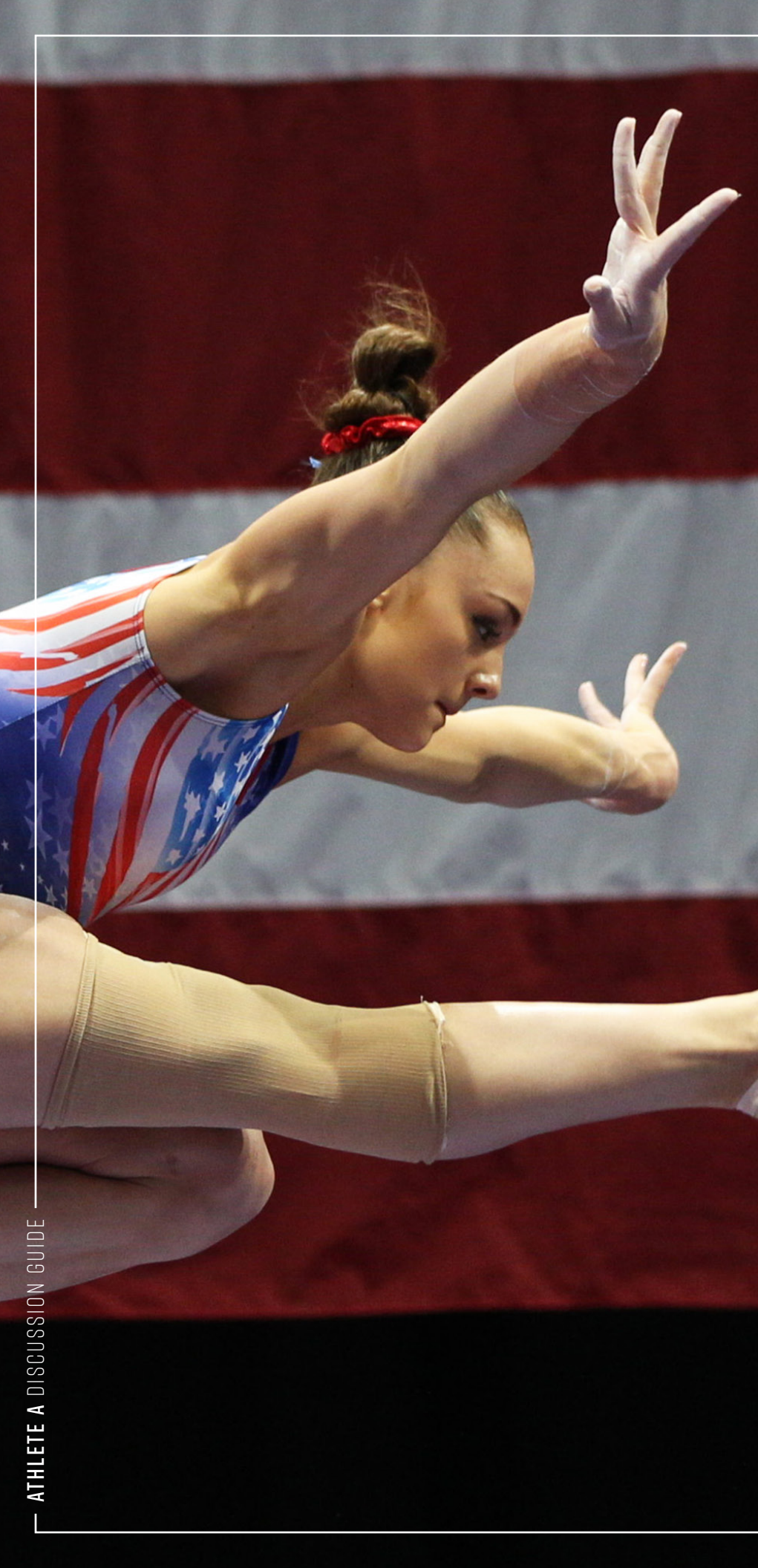
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**“WHEN THE NASSAR STORY CAME OUT, WE WERE TRYING TO GET ON TO THE BIGGER STORY, OF WHAT’S WRONG, AT USA GYMNASTICS. WE WANTED TO ESTABLISH THAT IT WENT FAR BEYOND NASSAR. WE KNEW IT DID, BECAUSE OF WHAT WE WERE FINDING OUT ABOUT THE CULTURE.”**

**– STEVE BERTA, REPORTER FOR THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR, IN *ATHLETE A***





# USING THIS GUIDE

*Athlete A* is an important documentary for anyone who loves sports - the athletes, parents, coaches, sports organizations and teams who work so hard and believe in the healthy benefits of engaging in competition. It is also a story about how investigative journalists uncovered how gymnastics, especially at the elite level, took athletic discipline to the extreme, overlooked abuse for the pursuit of power and money, and failed the very athletes it purported to protect.

The Discussion Guide developed for *Athlete A* provides a framework and resources to help audiences dig deeper into this story by focusing on these key areas:

- ▶ **How multiple institutions and individuals failed to protect children;**
- ▶ **How investigative journalists uncovered this story and provided unbiased and accurate reporting;**
- ▶ **How the justice system held Larry Nassar accountable and continues to pursue ways to hold others complicit in these crimes accountable;**
- ▶ **And to support and uplift the voices of survivors of sexual abuse and highlight the courage it takes to tell your story.**

# FILM SYNOPSIS

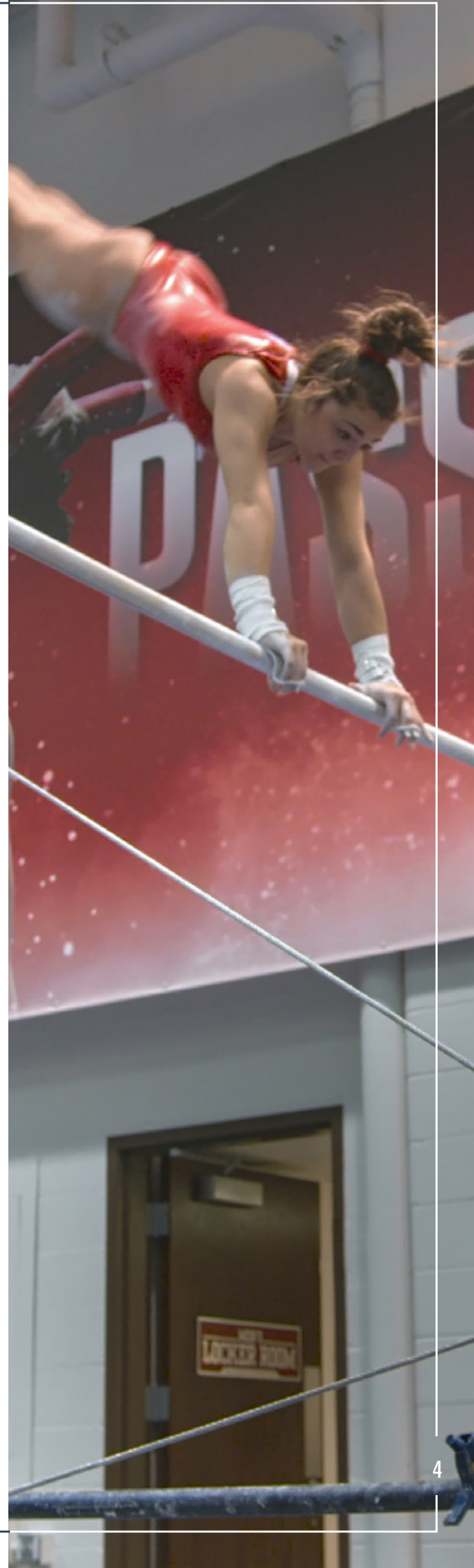
Maggie Nichols devoted most of her life to being on the national gymnastics team. Like other Olympic hopefuls, she'd given up almost everything to achieve this goal. She was on the road to the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. But her dream was shattered after she reported being sexually abused by USA Gymnastics (USAG) team doctor Larry Nassar, the allegedly caring physician and pillar of his suburban community.

Also in 2016, a team of *Indianapolis Star* journalists— Mark Alesia, Tim Evans and Marisa Kwiatkowski—reported on a story in which predatory gymnastics coaches had been moved from gym to gym, but never charged with a crime. Their story revealed that USAG protected coaches, and often broke the law by failing to report allegations of abuse to authorities. Former competitive gymnast Rachael Denhollander read the explosive *Indianapolis Star* article and thought “Now’s the time.” She called *The Indianapolis Star* about the abuse she suffered at the hands of Larry Nassar. National Rhythmic gymnastics champion Jessica Howard read the same article and also called the newspaper with a similar account of abuse by Nassar. Yet another gymnast, Olympian Jamie Dantzcher, spoke to her attorney who also contacted *The Indianapolis Star* regarding her Nassar allegations.

Meanwhile, reporters wondered: If there were three Nassar victims contacting the newspaper, how many more could there be?

Turns out many many more: at least 500 reported thus far, including 9 Olympians. In training its lens on athletes vying for a coveted spot on the American Olympic team, as well as junior gymnasts coming up the ranks, ***Athlete A*** investigates systemic abuse and institutionalized corruption within the world of gymnastics. This includes the scare tactics and manipulation by renowned Romanian-born coaches Bela and Marta Karolyi whose role in the sport was part of the pressure placed on the US gymnastics team to raise the American Olympics profile in the latter years of the Cold War. And the key role of Steve Penny, head of USAG, who for years systematically covered up complaints about Nassar and predatory coaches, and buried reports of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. “The standard of coaching was cruelty,” according to former gymnast and ***Athlete A*** producer Jen Sey. It was a toxic culture suffused with fear, intimidation and silence. Young athletes were used as propaganda. Winning gold medals took precedence over the well-being of the gymnasts. USAG capitalized on the dreams of young girls in order to win trophies and make big bucks. Children were collateral damage.

***Athlete A*** spotlights the horrific sexual abuse of hundreds of young athletes by USAG team doctor Larry Nassar, and shines an even brighter light on the team of individuals working to hold USA Gymnastics and Larry Nassar accountable. *The Indianapolis Star* reporters who broke the story and revealed the cover-up that occurred at the highest levels of the Olympic sport. The courageous group of survivors—Nichols, Denhollander, Dantzcher and Howard—who bravely fought the system. Together with three other determined women—police detective Lt. Andrea Munford, prosecuting attorney Angela Povilaitis and Judge Rosemarie Aquilina— truth prevailed. Justice was served. Nichols was able to find joy in the sport again—at the college level.



# LETTER FROM FILMMAKERS

*Athlete A* tells the story of the tireless investigative reporters and brave gymnasts who together helped send Larry Nassar to prison and exposed the decades-long abusive culture of USA Gymnastics. The story reminds us Americans of the value of the pursuit of truth and justice. With the help of hard-working journalists, discerning law enforcement officials, and determined prosecutors, this group of women fought back against their abusers and prevailed.

Jen Sey, the 1986 U.S. national women's gymnastics champion, asked us if we would be interested in telling the story behind the downfall of Larry Nassar, who at the time stood accused of sexually assaulting several current and former athletes at Michigan State and in the U.S. Olympic program. We knew about Nassar's crimes, but we didn't know that he was the tip of the iceberg. We learned that the cover-up of abuse perpetrated by staff of USA Gymnastics had been going on for decades and that if we started filming right away we would witness the unraveling of the leadership of the sport. Jen had written her memoir, *Chalked Up: My Life in Elite Gymnastics* in 2008, about systemic psychological and physical abuse inside USA Gymnastics. We knew that, together with Jen, we could make a contemporary film about abuse in the sport that had strong historical ties that reverberated back decades.

Before *Athlete A*, we directed *Audrie & Daisy*, a film about the sexual assault and subsequent bullying of high school girls. As parents, we were floored by the experience of getting to know the families of the survivors. We are also big fans of films such as *All The President's Men* and *Spotlight* which highlight the heroic work of journalists. Fact-finding is difficult, painstaking work. Speaking out against your abuser is frightening and painful. *Athlete A* is a marriage of these two worlds. We were privileged to be entrusted with the opportunity to document this special collaboration between journalists and key survivors.

Like many Americans, we are also fans of watching women's gymnastics every four years as part of the Olympic games. In their sport, gymnasts show us what is possible by defying the laws of gravity. In their commitment and performances, our American Olympians serve as inspiring reminders of the incredible potential of human beings. But, along the path to winning medals, wooing sponsors, and making money, something went awry in the Olympic movement. Those in power first took advantage of and later attempted to silence scores of young athletes. Fortunately, these athletes and their supporters reminded us once again of the power of human potential by speaking truth to power. *Athlete A* is their story.

**BONNI COHEN & JON SHENK**  
**DIRECTORS**



# SCREENING EVENT QUESTIONS

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## Pre-Screening Questions:

- Where do sports fit into our lives, our children's lives?
- When is competition healthy? What factors make competitive and elite sports less healthy, or harmful?

## Post-Screening Discussion Questions:

- What are your reactions to this story?
- What do we learn about American culture from this story?
- Does this film change how you think about gymnastics, or other sports? In what ways?
- What are ways to support and amplify the voices of survivors?
- How do you think this story would have changed were it not for the investigative reporting of the *Indianapolis Star* and other papers?
- How would you describe the relationship between money, power, and sports?
- If your child or a child you love participates in sports, what do you know about the organization that runs the sport? What policies do they have in place regarding hiring? Training? Reporting abuse?

**IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAS EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ASSAULT, HELP IS AVAILABLE. THE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION RAINN'S WEBSITE OFFERS LIVE CHAT AND A NATIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE AND ASSAULT HOTLINE:**

**800-656-HOPE (4673)**

# LEARN AND INVESTIGATE

## A (TOXIC) INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

The culture of an institution or organization encompasses the environment, values, and behavioral norms of a particular workplace or organization. Institutional culture is not static, but dynamic and reflective of organizational leadership, customs, and personnel.

In *Athlete A* we learn of how the multiple layers of mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse within USA Gymnastics were covered up, and how institutions such as the US Olympic Committee, Michigan State University and the F.B.I.were similarly complicit by suppressing reports of abuse and prioritizing their reputation, money, and power over the health, well-being, and safety of its gymnasts.

**“THERE WERE SEXUAL PREDATORS EVERYWHERE (IN USA GYMNASTICS). THEY WERE IN MY GYM. THE NATIONAL TEAM COACH, DON PETERS, WAS A KNOWN SEXUAL ABUSER. THEY WERE EVERYWHERE ACROSS THE COUNTRY, AND WE KNEW WHO THEY WERE. BUT MORE BROADLY, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE WAS ACTUALLY THE NORM. AND WE WERE ALL SO BEATEN DOWN BY THAT AND MADE SO OBEDIENT THAT WHEN WE KNEW THAT THERE WAS A SEXUAL ABUSER IN OUR MIDST WE WOULD NEVER SAY ANYTHING. WE FELT UTTERLY POWERLESS.”**

**– JEN SEY, ATHLETE A, FORMER GYMNAST, AUTHOR OF CHALKED UP**



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What message do you take away from Jen Sey's and Steve Berta's observations?
- When you think of a healthy institution, what words or ideas come to mind?
- How would you describe USA Gymnastics as an institution?
- What went wrong within USA Gymnastics that enabled the abuse and its widespread cover-up for so many years?
- What rules and policies need to be in place to create an institutional culture that protects its constituents and/or members from abuse?
- What needs to happen to change institutions with entrenched cultures of complicity and inaction?
- Who is ultimately responsible when an institution is negligent, or causes harm?





## INDIVIDUAL COMPLICITY AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

**“WHY DOES THIS [SEXUAL MISCONDUCT/ABUSE WITH MINORS] SEEM TO KEEP HAPPENING? WHY DO PEOPLE NOT REPORT AS THEY’RE REQUIRED TO DO?”**

**– MARISA KWIATKOWSKI, THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR**

Sexual abuse in USA Gymnastics did not begin with Larry Nassar. The *IndyStar* reported that over a 10 year period USA Gymnastics compiled more than 50 sexual misconduct complaints that were never investigated, and their illegal policy was to file those in a drawer in an executive’s office. In fact, “those coaches went on, according to police and court records, to abuse at least 14 underage gymnasts after the warnings.”<sup>1</sup>

Mark Alesia, former investigative journalist at the *IndyStar* says, “The extent to which certain powerful people will go to protect their salary, their powerful institution, their position in life. Here the extent was covering up child sexual abuse. I’d like to think no matter how powerful or how much money I made, I’d never cover up something like this.”<sup>2</sup>

### Here are a few cases the *IndyStar* uncovered:

- ▶ **William “Bill” McCabe:** As early as 1998 USA Gymnastics received a complaint of sexual misconduct by McCabe. Three more complaints were filed the following year. USA Gymnastics never investigated the complaints and for the next seven years McCabe continued to coach young gymnasts. Arrested in 2006 he was charged with molesting gymnasts as young as 5th grade, secretly videotaping young girls changing clothes and posting their naked pictures on the internet. He pleaded guilty in 2006 in Savannah, Georgia, to federal charges of sexual exploitation of children and making false statements. He is serving a 30-year sentence.
- ▶ **Mark Schiefelbein:** In his trial it was revealed that USA Gymnastics had a file on him with previous complaints that were never investigated. In 2003 he was charged with seven counts of aggravated sexual battery and one count of aggravated sexual exploitation of a minor. He is serving a 36-year prison sentence.
- ▶ **James Bell:** “USA Gymnastics had a sexual misconduct complaint file on James Bell at least five years before his 2003 arrest for molesting three young gymnasts in Rhode Island.”<sup>3</sup> He went on the run in 2004 and was finally caught in 2017. He pleaded guilty to three counts of child molestation and is serving eight years in prison.
- ▶ **Marvin Sharp:** Sharp was named 2010 women’s coach of the year even though USA Gymnastics had received reports detailing allegations of inappropriate conduct with underage gymnasts. He continued coaching until his arrest in 2015. Shortly after he was charged in an Indianapolis court, he killed himself in jail.<sup>4</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What pressures and motivations might lead individuals to be complicit, cover-up, and fail to report sexual abuse of their colleagues?
- ▶ Who should establish and foster professional ethics within an institution such as USA Gymnastics?
- ▶ How should professionals, such as the coaches in USA Gymnastics who did not emphatically act to protect the gymnasts, be held accountable?
- ▶ What kinds of support, including policies and training, would support and encourage individuals to report abuse when they see it?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/investigations/2016/08/04/usa-gymnastics-sex-abuse-protected-coaches/85829732/>

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted by Blueshift Education, June 3, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/investigations/2016/08/04/usa-gymnastics-sex-abuse-protected-coaches/85829732/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



## SPEAKING OUT: SURVIVORS' STORIES

**“ONE PERSON ALONE CAN’T DO THIS (SPARK THE INVESTIGATION). WE NEED TO HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THAT IT TAKES A TEAM AND A COMMUNITY TO RESPOND – HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE – TO GET SURVIVORS’ STORIES HEARD.”**

**– RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER<sup>5</sup>, FORMER GYMNAST, ADVOCATE, AUTHOR OF *WHAT IS A GIRL WORTH?***

For every survivor who chooses to come forward, there are many more who do not. The reasons a person might not report sexual abuse or assault vary, but many have to do with cultural constructs around sex and sexuality that lead victims to believe they are at fault, to doubt their own experience, or to fear the consequences of reporting.<sup>6</sup>

It is estimated that **for every 1,000 sexual assaults, 230 are reported to police, and of those, only four perpetrators will serve time in prison.**<sup>7</sup> In Larry Nassar’s case, it took a team of hundreds of survivors, coaches, investigators, journalists, law enforcement officers, attorneys, and many more to bring Larry Nassar to justice.

In order to increase the number of assault survivors who report, and perpetrators who are held accountable, we need to believe and support survivors. Everyone can be a part of the solution and prevent future abuse from happening by believing survivors, validating their experience, and helping them heal.

### JAMIE DANTZSCHER

“Larry, you saw all the physical, mental and emotional abuse from our coaches and USAG national staff. You pretended to be on my side, calling all of them the monsters. But instead of protecting children, and reporting the abuse you saw, you used your position of power to manipulate and abuse as well. You knew I was powerless. I’m here today, with all these other women, not victims, but survivors, to tell you face-to-face, that your days of manipulation are over. We have a voice now. We have the power now.”

### RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER

“I will be filing a police report with the hope that the DA picks it up and presses charges for First-Degree Sexual Assault. I know that means that if the DA picks it up, I’ll be testifying, with great detail in open court, in front of him (Larry Nassar), knowing that we both have the same memories. And I hate that idea. I hate it. But if I don’t, he can continue, and I hate that idea more.”



<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system&sa=D&ust=1592503666876000&usg=AFQjCNHfN5HCcLTvv82X2H2bUaxNiHSm4g>

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Blueshift Education, June 8, 2020

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/us/kavanaugh-christine-blasey-ford.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5366>

## JESSICA HOWARD

"When something hits you like, that realization, that it was sexual abuse, and you haven't known, haven't thought about it, it becomes so real. Like it was yesterday. Like it just happened to you, like you are 15."

## MAGGIE NICHOLS

"USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee did not provide a safe environment for me and my teammates and friends to train. We were subjected to Dr. Larry Nassar at every National Team Training camp, which occurred monthly at the Karolyi Ranch. Up until now, I was identified as "Athlete A: by USA Gymnastics, the United States Olympic Committee and Michigan State University. And I want everyone to know that he did not do this to Athlete A, he did it to Maggie Nichols."

- Gina Nichols reading Maggie Nichols' impact statement at Larry Nassar's trial

## JENNIFER SEY

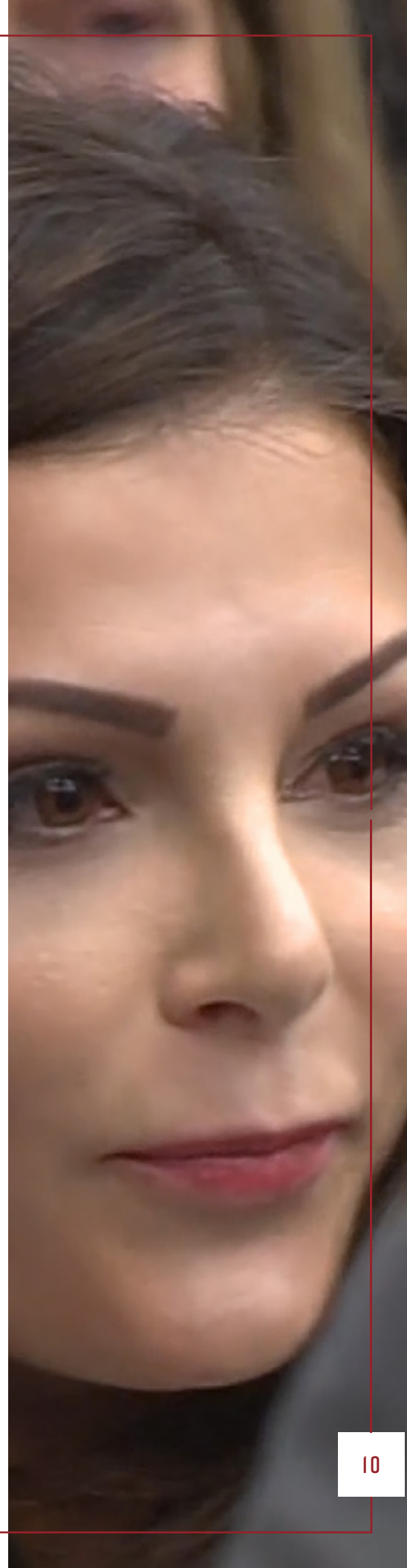
"You know, in other sports, the athletes are adults. They can reasonably make choices about what they want. I don't think that is true in gymnastics. These kids go to these National training centers when they're ten years old. They are abused and mistreated, for years, so even by the time they're of age, the line between tough coaching and child abuse, gets blurred.

So, then when real obvious abuse, sexual abuse, happens, you already don't believe your own take on things. Because you think you're hungry, you think your ankle hurts, you think that you're working really hard, and you're screamed at that you're lazy and you're fat and there's nothing wrong with your ankle. I can only imagine that what you feel is, I'm lucky to be here, so I'm not gonna say anything."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- ▶ What do we have to learn from the stories of survivors shared in *Athlete A*?
- ▶ What are ways to support survivors who do not receive the amount of media coverage or the corroboration of other survivors that come forward, as happened in this case?
- ▶ The impact statements given by survivors at the trial of Larry Nassar were negotiated by the Assistant Attorney General Angela Povilaitis as part of Nassar's plea deal. It was evident that these truth telling efforts were both difficult and empowering. What did you learn about the healing process from the survivors who shared their impact statement in *Athlete A*?
- ▶ Jamie Dantzscher declares, "We have a voice now. We have the power now." How do you understand voice and power within the context of her impact statement? What are some of the ways we learn that survivors gained their voice and power over the course of the documentary?



## EXPOSING THE TRUTH: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

**“I VIEW INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AS SHINING A LIGHT ON THINGS WHEN THEY’RE NOT WORKING THE WAY THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO.”**

**– MARISA KWIATKOWSKI, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST<sup>8</sup>**

At the heart of *Athlete A* is the team of investigative journalists, whose commitment to truth and accuracy, and ultimately to stopping further harm to the athletes within USA Gymnastics, brought the abuse and the cover-up to light so that the perpetrators, would be held accountable.

Michigan Assistant Attorney General Angela Povilaitis said at Nassar’s sentencing, “If *IndyStar* journalists didn’t help expose the sexual abuse of young gymnasts by Larry Nassar, it could have gone on even longer. We, as a society, need investigative journalists more than ever. What finally started this reckoning and ended this decades-long cycle of abuse was investigative reporting. Without that first *Indianapolis Star* story in August 2016; without the story where Rachael (Denhollander) came forward publicly shortly thereafter — he would still be practicing medicine, treating athletes and abusing kids.”<sup>9</sup>

Investigative journalists play a significant role in the pursuit of truth and justice. Recent examples include: Watergate, 1972 (*The Washington Post*); the My Lai Massacre, 1969 (St. Louis Dispatch); the Pentagon Papers, 1971 (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*); and the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault case, 2017 (*The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*). One common denominator in each of these stories is adhering to a strong code of professional ethics and principles set forth by the [Society for Professional Journalists](#).

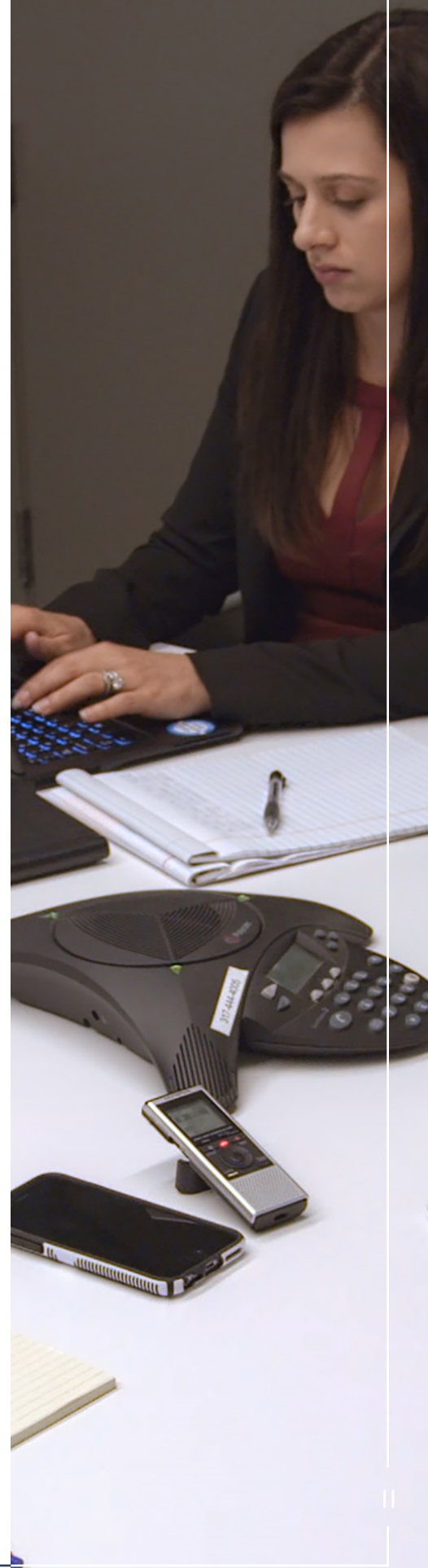
- **Seek Truth and Report It**
- **Minimize Harm**
- **Act Independently**
- **Be Accountable and Transparent**

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the role of investigative journalism in our democracy?
- In what ways did the journalists in the film adhere to the ethical principles?
- In your opinion, what is the relationship between investigative journalism, the law, and justice?
- What further questions would you hope journalists would explore and investigate in regards to this story?

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Blueshift Education

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2018/01/24/what-prosecutor-said-indystars-reporting-larry-nassar-case/106236001/>



## OVERSIGHT, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND THE LAW

**“I DIDN'T KNOW WHO MAGGIE WAS, BUT SHE TOLD ME THE STORY AND TOLD ME THAT HER DAUGHTER HAD REPORTED IN JUNE OF 2015. AND THEN I KNEW EXACTLY WHO I WAS DEALING WITH. I WAS DEALING WITH AN ORGANIZATION THAT DIDN'T GIVE A RAT'S ASS ABOUT CHILDREN, THAT CARED ONLY ABOUT ITSELF, AND THAT WAS COVERING UP RAPE.”**

**– JOHN MANLY, ATTORNEY, IN *ATHLETE A***

### Mandatory Reporting and Child Abuse Laws

Historically, societal understanding and agreement about child abuse is relatively new. The 1962 publication of the article, *The Battered Child Syndrome*<sup>10</sup> helped doctors, for the first time, recognize the widespread prevalence of child abuse, its short and long-term effects on children and the adults they grow into, and the need to report it to authorities. Prior to that, child abuse of all kinds was not broadly understood as a common issue, or one for debate in public. Since that publication, legal and medical frameworks for child abuse have arisen across many fields.<sup>11</sup>

In 1974 Congress passed the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act](#) (CAPTA), which has been updated and expanded upon many times, to write protection for children into our national law.<sup>12</sup> Notably, CAPTA mandates that every state create provisions for certain individuals, such as doctors, social workers, educators, and others, to report known or suspected cases of child abuse to appropriate authorities.

Additionally, in 2017 Congress passed the [Protecting Young Victims and Safe Sport Authorization Act](#) which created the [US Center for SafeSport](#) and mandates cooperation with rules and policies meant to prevent abuse and to encourage reporting within the USOC and all the NGBs it oversees.

To learn more [click here](#) to find the mandatory reporting laws. Read an overview of Federal and State Reporting Laws from SafeSport [here](#).

### United States Senate Report: “[The Courage to Report](#)”

Just a day after Larry Nassar was sentenced Senator Jerry Moran (R-Kansas) and Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), who have oversight authority over amateur sports, including USOC and its affiliated NGBs, convened the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, Subcommittee on Manufacturing, Trade and Consumer Protection. They were determined to turn their shock into action and investigate how such a systematic failure of oversight occurred. Their goals included:

<sup>10</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/327895>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/battered-child-syndrome\\_b\\_2406348](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/battered-child-syndrome_b_2406348)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/about.pdf>

**DEFINITION OF OVERSIGHT:** (noun) / ōvərsīt/ 1. watchful and responsible care; regulatory supervision (eg: congressional oversight) 2. an inadvertent omission or error.

**DEFINITION OF ACCOUNTABILITY:** (noun) /əˈkəʊn(t) əˈbɪlədē/ 1. an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.

- ▶ Understanding the alarming and dysfunctional systems that continued to put athletes at risk.
- ▶ Gauging and understanding the prevalence of sexual abuse across other sports at different levels by interviewing survivors of Larry Nassar as well as survivors in a range of other sports to know who else was at risk, and how the Subcommittee could act to prevent future abuse.
- ▶ Last, to identify legislative and oversight actions that Congress should consider to protect amateur athletes from this kind of sexual abuse and ensure perpetrators are held accountable and prevented from harming others.<sup>13</sup>

For a year and a half the Subcommittee waded through documentary evidence, convened four hearings on sexual abuse in amateur sports, and interviewed more than dozens of athletes and survivors, coaches, parents, advocates, USOC, USAG and NGB officials, SafeSport officials, law enforcement, and others before publishing their report. From the conclusion of the investigation, The Senate Report, "The Courage to Act" was published. It recommended along with a massive personnel and policy change at the US Olympic Committee, and throughout the National Governing Bodies it oversees. To date these changes are still evolving.

The results of the inquiry into the FBI's inaction remain in question. On June 17, 2020, more than 120 of the case survivors sent a letter to the Department of Justice demanding that portion of the investigation be made public.<sup>14</sup>

### Highlights of Senate Findings<sup>15</sup>

- ▶ Officials at USOC, USAG, MSU and the FBI sat on evidence of sexual misconduct for over a year and failed to act - allowing for additional sexual abuse of dozens of other girls.
- ▶ Nassar was able to abuse over 300 athletes over two decades because of ineffective oversight by USAG and USOC.
- ▶ USAG and USOC failed to uphold their statutory purposes and duties to protect amateur athletes from sexual, emotional, and physical abuse.
- ▶ USAG and USOC knowingly concealed abuse by Nassar, leading to further abuse beginning in the summer of 2015 - September 2016.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What is your understanding of mandatory reporting? How might that system be bolstered and expanded to create more awareness of and responsiveness to abuse when it happens?
- ▶ After watching *Athlete A*, what systems of accountability failed and which succeeded?
- ▶ The Senate hearings and report held the agencies involved in the abuse and cover-up accountable, resulting in personnel and policy change. What systems of accountability are in place for organizations that are not overseen by government agencies?



<sup>13</sup> United States Senate Olympics Investigation, The Courage of Survivors: A Call to Action, July 30, 2019, [https://www.moran.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/c/2/c232725e-b717-4ec8-913e-845ffe0837e6/FCC5DFDE2005A2EACF5A9A25FF76D5382019.0730-the-courage-of-survivors--a-call-to-action-olympics-investigation-report-final.pdf](https://www.moran.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/c/2/c232725e-b717-4ec8-913e-845ffe0837e6/FCC5DFDE2005A2EACF5A9A25FF76D5382019.0730-the-courage-of-survivors--a-call-to-action-olympics-investigation-report-final.pdf), p. 3

<sup>14</sup> "More than 120 Larry Nassar victims call for DOJ to release report on FBI's handling of case", NBC News website, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/more-120-larry-nassar-victims-call-doj-release-report-fbi-n1231211>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3- 5.

# TAKE ACTION:

## PREVENT ABUSE, SUPPORT INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Prevention of childhood sexual abuse is an urgent problem in our society. The first step in prevention is raising awareness about the problem. **It must be clear that children cannot consent to any sexual activity with an adult, and that the responsibility for preventing abuse, and stopping it when it happens, lies with all adults.**

### **PREVENTION OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ASSAULT MUST HAPPEN ON MULTIPLE LEVELS.**

#### → **Families:**

Talk to your children openly about your values around healthy relationships and sexuality. Let them know that they can speak openly with you no matter what happens. Ask questions about the hiring practices and policies around sexual abuse in place at any organization your child may become involved with.

▶ **Further resources available for parents at:**

- RAINN.org: <https://www.rainn.org/safety-parents>
- PreventChildAbuse.org: <https://preventchildabuse.org/resources/ptow/>
- [Parenting Tips Poster](#)

#### → **Schools and Universities:**

[Title IX](#) of the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights guarantees that students are free from sex discrimination at any public school. Title IX enforcement has included policies and procedures related to sexual harassment, abuse and assault at schools. Ask your school about their policies and hiring practices, and how they train teachers to comply with those policies.

▶ **For more information visit:**

- [KnowYourIX.org](#): A student-led movement to prevent sexual violence in high schools and higher education campuses.
- <https://www.rainn.org/safety-students>
- Infographic for [Schools and Organizations](#)

#### → **Youth-serving Organizations, including sports, faith groups, and others:**

Have a clear policy about how your organization protects its members from sexual harassment and abuse, and train staff and volunteers on those policies, as well as on how to report any suspected or known abuse.

▶ **For more information visit:**

- [Safety Suggestion Poster for Schools and Youth-Serving Organizations](#)
- Futures Without Violence: [Coaching Boys into Men Playbook](#)

#### → **Community-Wide Efforts:**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published [technical assistance guides](#) for communities looking to implement evidence-based violence prevention, including strategies for raising awareness, promoting youth-led and women-led empowerment programs, and supporting survivors.

[Click here](#) for a list of community-based and national organizations working to end domestic violence.

#### → **State and National Government: Legislation and Public Policy:**

At the national level, rules like Title IX in schools, and the SafeSport program govern the way youth-serving organizations are run, and how they are held accountable when abuse happens. Laws at the state and national level govern mandatory reporting rules, definitions of abuse and assault, statutes of limitation, and other laws related to sexual abuse. Find out what's happening in your state here: <https://www.rainn.org/public-policy-action>



## SUPPORT LOCAL AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

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As the way people are consuming news is changing, so is the landscape of support for the kind of local, investigative journalism featured in *Athlete A*. But there is something everyone can do to support independent investigative journalism:

**1. Pay for Your Online News** - paying for a subscription to your favorite news source helps fund further investigative efforts

**2. Support Your Local News Sources**

→ **The Knight Foundation** supports funders of local news efforts

→ **The Fund for Local Journalism** provides a list of local news sources to which you can subscribe.

**3. Get Involved** - there are many non-profit organizations that conduct investigative journalism, and to which you can donate directly or subscribe:

→ **The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)** - Founded in 1977, CIR is the nation's first non-profit investigative journalism organization. Their website, REVEAL, is where CIR publishes its reporting.

→ **The Center for Public Integrity (CPI)** - Founded in 1989, CPI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan newsroom investigating democracy, power and privilege. Our reporting focuses on the influence of money and the impact of inequality on our society.

→ **ProPublica** - ProPublica's award-winning journalism has helped hold accountable leaders at the state, local, and national level. It's also contributed to the passage of new laws and reversals of harmful policies. Its mission is to expose wrongdoing by government, business, and other institutions and uses investigative journalism to spur real reform.

# ATHLETE A CONTEXT

## OVERVIEW USA GYMNASTICS

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USA Gymnastics opened its offices in 1983, replacing the US Gymnastics Federation as the National Governing Body (NGB) for the sport of gymnastics. Its members include more than 121,000 athletes and 3,000 gyms, including private gyms, coaches and athletes who are training for elite-level competition. The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOC) empowers USA Gymnastics to select the teams that will represent the United States at the Olympics, the World Championships, and other international competitions, including the athletes, coaches, trainers, and other staff.

The USOC governs all the National Governing Boards of amateur sports associations in the United States that associate with international athletic competitions. The USOC was formed by an act of Congress, the [1978 Amateur Sports Act](#).

## WHO'S WHO IN THE FILM

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### *The Indianapolis Star* Investigative Reporters

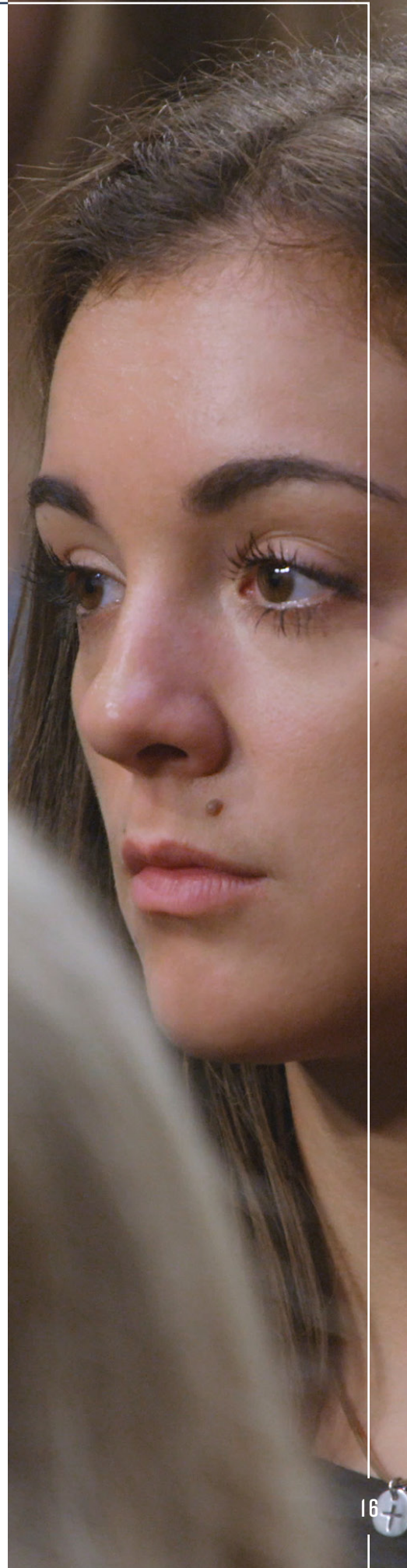
- ▶ **Steve Berta** - Investigations Editor, *The Indianapolis Star*
- ▶ **Marisa Kwiatkowski** - Investigative Reporter, *The Indianapolis Star*
- ▶ **Mark Alesia** - Investigative Reporter, *The Indianapolis Star*
- ▶ **Tim Evans** - Investigative Reporter, *The Indianapolis Star*

### Gymnasts

- ▶ **Jamie Dantzscher** - USA Olympic team 2000
- ▶ **Rachael Denhollander** - Former gymnast, attorney, advocate, and author of *What is a Girl Worth?*
- ▶ **Jessica Howard** - Rhythmic Gymnastics National Champion, 1999, 2000, 2001
- ▶ **Maggie Nichols** - Reigning NCAA all-around champion
- ▶ **Jennifer Sey** - USA National Champion Gymnast, 1986, author of *Chalked Up: Inside Elite Gymnastics' Merciless Coaching, Overzealous Parents, Eating Disorders, and Elusive Olympic Dreams*
- ▶ **Tracee Talavera** - USA National all-around champion, 1981 and 1982, member of the 1984 Olympic team

### Family members of Gymnasts

- ▶ **Gina and John Nichols** - Maggie Nichols' parents







## USA Gymnastics

- **Rhonda Faehn** - Former Head of USA Gymnastics Women's Program
- **Sarah Jantzi** - Maggie Nichols coach at Twin City Twisters
- **Béla Karolyi** - USA national team coordinator and head coach of the USA national gymnastics team
- **Martha Karolyi** - USA national team coordinator and head coach of the USA national gymnastics team
- **Larry Nassar** - USA Gymnastics doctor, osteopathic physician at Michigan State University, and convicted sex offender
- **Steve Penny** - President and CEO of USA Gymnastics - April 4, 2005 - March 16, 2017
- **Geza Pozsar** - Karolyi Choreographer, 1974-2002

## Attorneys and Law Enforcement

- **John Manly** - Manly, Stewart & Finaldi - Nichols family lawyer
- **Angela Povilaitis**, Assistant Attorney General, State of Michigan
- **Andrea Munford**, Detective Lieutenant, Michigan State University Police

# IMPORTANT DATES FOR ATHLETE A<sup>16</sup>

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- SUMMER 1936  
BERLIN** The U.S. sends its first women's gymnastics team to the Olympics.
  - 1963** USA Gymnastics Federation created.
  - SUMMER 1972  
MUNICH  
OLYMPICS** Russian gymnast Olga Korbut wins three gold medals and her performance redefines the sport from emphasising ballet and elegance to acrobatics and technique. Gymnastics moves from a niche sport to one of the most popular sports in the world.
  - SUMMER 1976  
MONTREAL  
OLYMPICS** 14-year-old Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci, coached by Bela and Marta Karolyi, becomes first ever gymnast to receive Perfect 10(s) at the Olympic games; wins gold medals and a bronze on floor.
  - MARCH 1981** Bela, Marta and Geza embark on a US tour of 15 cities with the Romanian Team; after their last stop in NYC, the 'Transylvanian Trio' defect, skipping their return flight home.
  - 1982 – 1983** The Karolyis begin acquiring land just north of Houston and start training a few girls from the city on the weekends - his reputation as "Nadia's coach" attracts many girls, including Mary Lou Retton.
  - 1983** USA Gymnastics replaces USGF, opens office in Indianapolis with Mike Jacki at the helm. Facing financial difficulty, USAG begins soliciting funds from McDonald's, Dodge, K-Mart, and others, ushering in a new era for the organization.
  - JULY 1984  
LA OLYMPICS** Mary Lou Retton becomes first woman from a non-Eastern Bloc country to win the Olympic all-around title. Bela Karolyi famously runs out on the floor after Mary Lou's win.
  - 1984  
POST-  
OLYMPICS** When Bela returns from the Olympics, girls are "lined up" to be invited to his ranch, heralding a new era in gymnastics vis-à-vis money and sponsorships.
  - 1986** Nassar joins the USA Gymnastics National Team medical staff as an athletic trainer.
  - 1993** Nassar receives osteopathic medical degree from Michigan State University (MSU).
  - 1994** Nassar begins abusing Jamie Dantzscher; abuse continues for six years.
  - SUMMER 1996** US Women win their first team gold in Atlanta, with Marta Karolyi as head coach; Nassar attends his first Olympics with the team; Karolyis retire from gymnastics after 1996.
  - 1996** Nassar is appointed National Medical Coordinator for USA Gymnastics.
  - 1997** Nassar becomes a team physician and assistant professor at MSU.
  - OCTOBER 1998** USAG is first made aware of sexual misconduct complaints against Georgia coach Bill McCabe via a packet of information put together by a Florida gym owner; USAG does not investigate because there is no letter of complaint from a parent or athlete (and they renew his membership the following year).
  - 2013** Larry Nassar first abuses Maggie Nichols.
  - JUNE 17, 2015** First report by Sarah Jantzi to Rhonda Faehn about her conversation with Maggie Nichols regarding Larry Nassar's sexual abuse of her and two other gymnasts. Rhonda Faehn immediately notifies Steve Penny who says he'll report it to the "proper authorities." Two weeks later on June 30th, Jantzi reports she has learned from Maggie that two other elite gymnasts had stated that Nassar had "massaged her oddly as well."

<b>AUG. 4, 2016</b>	<i>The Indianapolis Star</i> launches its investigation: " <a href="#">A blind eye to sex abuse: How USA Gymnastics failed to report cases.</a> "
<b>SEPT. 12, 2016</b>	<i>The Indianapolis Star</i> publishes the first story on Larry Nassar: " <a href="#">Former USA Gymnastics doctor accused of abuse.</a> "
<b>SEPT. 25, 2016</b>	<i>The Indianapolis Star</i> reported more criminal complaints against Nassar: " <a href="#">16 more women accuse former USA Gymnastics doctor of sexual abuse.</a> "
<b>NOV. 22, 2016</b>	Child sex abuse charges filed against Nassar: " <a href="#">Ex-USA Gymnastics doctor's charges are 'tip of the iceberg.'</a> "
<b>DEC. 16, 2016</b>	Nassar indicted on federal child pornography charges: <a href="#">Larry Nassar</a> indicted on federal child porn charges (Lansing State Journal).
<b>JAN. 10, 2017</b>	federal lawsuit filed against Nassar, Michigan State University, USA Gymnastics, and Twistars gymnastics club wherein eighteen victims allege sexual assault, battery, molestation, and harassment.
<b>DEC. 20, 2017</b>	Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney filed a lawsuit against the United States Olympic Committee, USA Gymnastics, and Michigan State University for the multiple organizational failures to "properly investigate, discipline, or remove" sports doctor Larry Nassar after complaints of sexual abuse suffered under his care.
<b>JAN. 24, 2018</b>	Nassar sentenced to 40-175 years in prison on sexual assault charges (in addition to 60 years for child pornography charges).
<b>FEB. 14, 2018</b>	Passage of the " <a href="#">Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017.</a> "
<b>SEPT. 2018</b>	Department of Justice opens investigation into FBI's handling of the sexual abuse claims against Nassar.
<b>OCT. 2018</b>	Steve Penny arrested on charges of tampering with evidence.
<b>APRIL 2019</b>	Maggie Nichols wins the NCAA All-Around Championship for the second year in a row.
<b>JULY 2019</b>	<a href="#">EMPOWERING OLYMPIC AND AMATEUR ATHLETES ACT OF 2019</a> -Blumental/Moran Bill will strengthen and expand protections for US athletes at all levels.
<b>SUMMER 2021</b>	2021 Olympic Games

<sup>26</sup> These dates were compiled from <https://www.indystar.com/pages/interactives/larry-nassar-timeline/> and from Actual Films internal timeline in the making of *Athlete A*



# ATHLETE A

[ATHELETEAFILM.COM](http://ATHELETEAFILM.COM)



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Educator