

Simone Biles Chose Herself

Camonghne Felix . New York ; New York (Sep 27, 2021).

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

[...]on the fifth day of competition, she pushed off the vault and discovered she couldn't see herself in her head, couldn't see the map of the floor in order to land. Biles is naturally inclined toward humility – she likes people to know she is a glass-half-full kind of girl – but when she talks about the narratives that critics spread during Tokyo, her indignation builds. Biles has always been able to power through possible mental roadblocks in gymnastics and in her personal life. The Indianapolis Star broke the news of Nassar's longtime abuse of hundreds of young women and girls in 2016, followed up by another report revealing USAG knew about his conduct and had covered it up.

FULL TEXT

This article was featured in One Great Story, New York's reading recommendation newsletter.

Simone Biles has a keen air sense, the ability to let muscle memory pilot against the brain's logical judgment. She can clear her mind and think of absolutely nothing. Catlike in her reflexes, she locates herself in space and lands on her feet every time. This has been the mark of her genius since childhood, the thing that made her different. Watching her is like trying to catch light. You think, *Did that just happen?* She flies higher and is more nimble than her competition, with more room for failure because what she attempts is that much more difficult. She has beaten the records of her idols –Nastia Liukin, Shawn Johnson, Alicia Sacramone –and they think she's the undeniable greatest too. She's what superheroes are made of, except she's made of bones and muscles that strain and break. This time, though, the break wasn't a bone; it was something in her spirit, an injury that could not be explained by CAT scan or X-ray. The past few years had been the most trying stretch of her personal and professional life. In 2018, Biles revealed she had been sexually abused by former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar; the organization she was winning medals for had covered up his crimes. Still, going into the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 2021, after a successful competitive year, she expected things to go as they always did. Then, on the fifth day of competition, she pushed off the vault and discovered she couldn't see herself in her head, couldn't see the map of the floor in order to land. It wasn't just unexpected –it was terrifying. She immediately withdrew from the finals. "My perspective has never changed so quickly from wanting to be on a podium to wanting to be able to go home, by myself, without any crutches," Biles tells me over brunch at a hotel facing the south side of Central Park in early September.

Today, the 24-year-old gymnast is radiant and relaxed, her face lightly dressed with makeup. She's wearing a crisp white T-shirt that looks like it was pulled straight off a Uniqlo shelf. She suggests mimosas. It's 10 a.m., but why not? The ease of postseason Simone Biles is an art. In the months when she's competing or preparing to compete, she's focused, regimented. Today, she seems more open to going with the flow. Life is no less busy, but the stakes are much lower. She has just begun rehearsals for Athleta's Gold Over America, a nationwide gymnastics tour that she stars in; in a few days, she will present at the VMAs and walk the Met Gala red carpet. We chat about matcha and Telfar. In conversation, she is reflective and warm and has a bighearted laugh. It is easy to see why little girls scream when she walks into the room.

While Biles is generally honest about her feelings, she is skilled at presenting them in a rehearsed package. When we approach the subject of Tokyo, it begins that way. "You know, there have been highs, there have been lows," she says, sending her gaze up toward the ceiling as she considers the stakes of the discussion. As she continues, she no longer seems interested in being quite as careful. "Sometimes it's like, yeah, I'm perfectly okay with it. Like,

that's how it works. That's how it panned out." She flips her 1b-colored, bra-length jumbo box braids over her shoulder. "And then other times I'll just start bawling in the house."

Biles is naturally inclined toward humility —she likes people to know she is a glass-half-full kind of girl —but when she talks about the narratives that critics spread during Tokyo, her indignation builds. She recounts the absurdity of some of the assumptions the public made about her performance, Twitter threads accusing her of giving up because she just didn't feel like competing. "If I still had my air awareness, and I just was having a bad day, I would have continued," Biles says. "But it was more than that."

After training for most of her life for these Olympic Games, after a grueling season, after years of discussing her abuser publicly —how could anyone think the Games went the way they did because she just didn't *feel* like showing up? How could they think that after all this time, all this effort, she would travel all the way to Tokyo to just quit?

"Say up until you're 30 years old, you have your complete eyesight," Biles says. "One morning, you wake up, you can't see shit, but people tell you to go on and do your daily job as if you still have your eyesight. You'd be lost, wouldn't you? That's the only thing I can relate it to. I have been doing gymnastics for 18 years. I woke up —lost it. How am I supposed to go on with my day?"

Biles knows she is the greatest. She has had four gymnastics elements named after her —one on beam, one on vault, two on floor. With a combined total of 32 Olympic and World Championships medals, she is the most decorated gymnast of all time. "It's kind of unheard of to win as many things as I have," Biles says. "I don't physically understand how I do it." She seems genuinely bummed she can't answer the question. Is it mental? Is it physical? If she knew what it was, she could bottle it up and sell it. "No," she concludes. "It was a God-given talent." For an athlete of Biles's ability, the mind remains the most important organ. It tells the body what to do, and the body remembers. Anything that shakes that clear-mindedness is a life-risking liability. Biles has always been able to power through possible mental roadblocks in gymnastics and in her personal life. She powered through when she ended up in foster care after being taken away from a mother who struggled with addiction. She powered through thousands of hours of grueling training; through injuries like a bone spur in 2013 and a shoulder strain in 2015. She powered through years of sexual assault and through endless attacks on her spirit as she relived that assault publicly.

I have been doing gymnastics for 18 years. I woke up —lost it. How am I supposed to go on with my day?

The Indianapolis *Star* broke the news of Nassar's longtime abuse of hundreds of young women and girls in 2016, followed up by another report revealing USAG knew about his conduct and had covered it up. Before then, the Biles we knew was quieter —diplomatic to everyone and singularly focused on the game. She showed up to meets, beat her competitors graciously, and went home, thanking everyone for a good time. The months that followed were difficult. "It was hard to be in the gym mentally some days," she recalls. She kept the abuse to herself for two years; when she spoke out about it in 2018, her voice was a knife in the discourse. "I've felt a bit broken," she wrote in a Twitter statement, "and the more I try to shut off the voice in my head, the louder it screams." Every day for months, this was her life: headlines and news chyrons with her name next to Nassar's, public events where she'd sign autographs for little girls in one moment, then address USAG via broadcast in another. Something in her self-perception shifted at this point; she was no longer willing to be gracious. You could see it in her eyes in 2019, ahead of the Nationals in Kansas City, when reporters asked her about the cover-up, as she tearfully lambasted USAG: "You had one job! And you couldn't protect us." She was no longer okay with being a champion ghost. She wanted those who caused her harm to see her as human.

Amid all of this, she never lost a meet. And in some ways, she felt stronger than ever —the gym had become her safe space away from the world, and she was at the top of her game, even landing the Yurchenko double pike, a move so difficult no other woman has attempted it. While she trained for the Olympics, she went to therapy, where she learned coping mechanisms and to listen to how she was feeling day to day. By the time the Games rolled around, Biles recalls, she told her therapist, "I'm good enough to go. And they were like, 'Yes, you're good enough to go and do your stuff, but you have to come back.' And I was like, 'Nah, I'm good.'" She felt the wound had been

closed, the injury fixed.

She stepped onto the flight to Tokyo with confidence. But there were variables she didn't anticipate this time: COVID testing, breakthrough cases. "There was no crowd, no parents," she explains. It was going to be harder, mentally, to get into the game. Once she arrived, anxiety set in. *Everything will be okay*, she thought, but she had a nagging feeling that things were not *right*. The coaches went through the typical pep talks, reminding each person of their unique purpose on the team, but the words weren't landing with her the way they usually did. "Leading up to it, I got more and more nervous," she says. "I didn't feel as confident as I should have been with as much training as we had."

The trouble started after qualifiers. She fumbled event after event. Biles and her coaches moved frantically to find fixes. They tried using foam pits and surfaces that might make her feel safer. Nothing worked. "I was not physically capable," she says. "Every avenue we tried, my body was like, *Simone, chill. Sit down. We're not doing it*. And I've never experienced that." Biles is known in the sport for her independence. Even among coaching staff, she is respected for her ability to self-moderate, to pull back when necessary. But rarely does she pull back because she *can't* do something. Things were already a bit rocky in the qualifying meet, the first event of the competition, where she fumbled the dismount on beam. By the time of her vault performance, two days later at the women's team final, Biles knew something bigger was off. She went for a 2.5 flip and only completed a 1.5. It wasn't just a technical error. She had the "twisties," which is when an athlete's mind and body lose connection and muscle memory fails to kick in. Let any gymnast describe them to you, and it will sound like a unique hell: 1988 Olympian Missy Marlowe called them "a nonserious stroke." "It's so dangerous," Biles explains. "It's basically life or death. It's a miracle I landed on my feet. If that was any other person, they would have gone out on a stretcher. As soon as I landed that vault, I went and told my coach: 'I cannot continue.'"

With her coaches, she put together an alternate strategy that would ultimately deliver Team USA the silver in the team finals. "I'm sorry, I love you guys, but you're gonna be just fine," Biles re-assured her teammates afterward, hugging them one by one, like a mom dropping her children off at soccer camp. "You guys have trained your whole entire lives for this ...I've been to an Olympics; I'll be fine. This is your first —you go out there and kick ass, okay?" She texted her teammate MyKayla Skinner, who had spent the Games in the stands and was set to fly back home to Arizona the next morning. She told her to cancel her flight —Skinner would need to replace Biles as an alternate. "Are you sure?" Skinner texted back. "Yes, you're staying," Biles replied.

Biles had been expected to win five golds this year. Even the ads for the Tokyo Olympics implied she would sweep on the podium. It was supposed to be her purpose, and just like that, it wasn't anymore. "If you looked at everything I've gone through for the past seven years, I should have never made another Olympic team," Biles says, her eyes filling with tears. "I should have quit way before Tokyo, when Larry Nassar was in the media for two years. It was too much. But I was not going to let him take something I've worked for since I was 6 years old. I wasn't going to let him take that joy away from me. So I pushed past that for as long as my mind and my body would let me."

Sitting at the big desk on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Biles is dressed smartly in a pink plaid blazer and a white undershirt. She's there for a Judiciary Committee hearing on the FBI's handling of the Nassar investigation in September. The jumbo braids have been taken down and clip-ins installed, her dark-brown hair shiny and straight with just a little body up at the roots. From the outside, she looks ready to take on the world. "Before we entered the room, I was in the back literally bawling my eyes out," she tells me the day after the hearing. "And then, of course, you have to pull yourself together and go out there, be strong for just that moment."

She begins her statement by recounting her significant contribution to the history of sport in this country. "I am also a survivor of sexual abuse," she continues, "and I believe, without a doubt, that the circumstances that led to my abuse and allowed it to continue are directly the result of the fact that the organizations created by Congress to oversee and protect me as an athlete, USA Gymnastics, and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, failed to do their jobs."

As she talks about this, her voice breaks. "Sorry," Biles says in a low whisper. She continues, detailing the rage she

felt when she learned, in 2016, that her teammate had told the former head of USAG Women's Program she suspected Biles had been harmed by Nassar too. While an investigation was under way, and others had been informed, neither USAG nor the FBI contacted her or her parents; Biles was not told about the investigation until after the Rio Games.

It has been nearly seven weeks since Biles returned home to Houston from Tokyo. Logically, she knows she made the right call. Some days, she feels certain of that; other days, she's just heartbroken. "It's like I jumped out of a moving train," she says. As much as she wants to recall every emotion and impulse that led to the outcome in Tokyo, she can't. How do you process a split-second decision? "Everybody asks, 'If you could go back, would you?'" Biles tells me. "No. I wouldn't change anything because everything happens for a reason. And I learned a lot about myself — courage, resilience, how to say no and speak up for yourself." At first, it seemed as if her body had betrayed her. But it was actually looking out for her; it had lost the ability to be dutifully compliant.

As an athlete, everything is about timing. Three months to train for a meet. Ninety seconds on the floor. One minute on beam. If you tear a muscle, a doctor can estimate healing time to the day. But not for a spiritual injury. The ache is cavernous and hidden somewhere she can't touch. "I just want a doctor to tell me when I'll be over this," says Biles, letting out a deep exhale. When she has dealt with physical injuries, it typically required six-to-eight weeks of recovery. Maybe three months. "You get surgery, it's fixed. Why can't someone just tell me in six months it'll be over?" she wonders. "Like, hello, where are the double-A batteries? Can we just stick them back in? Can we go?"

She's back in therapy; she knows she can't set a timeline for healing anymore. "This will probably be something I work through for 20 years," she says. "No matter how much I try to forget. It's a work in progress." She's getting ready to tour with Team USA members, but she's no longer training; winning is on the back burner. Mostly, she is spending time with her boyfriend, the football player Jonathan Owens; her family; and her closest friends. She's going on vacation, taking thirst traps in Cabo, learning how to see herself and her own needs and desires more clearly. Early in her life, Biles developed a sense of maternal responsibility. She mothered her little sister when they were in foster care. She mothered her teammates to an Olympic win. It's time now for Biles to mother herself.

I found myself twisted up in the gut listening to Biles's speech on the Senate floor, as I frequently was during our conversations, by what she has had to carry in her small body — all the responsibility that shouldn't be hers at such a young age. The person they bet their gold on had been left alone to suffer abuse. It felt violently familiar. Black women and girls — talented, genius, used up by institutions, forgotten about when we are the ones in need of protection. It's no wonder her body resisted.

I have a theory that if someone were to try and account for the exact amount of labor Black women have forcefully and freely contributed to the U.S. economy and culture, if America had to match us cent for sweat drop, it would be a number so great it would bankrupt all of this country's resources.

"As a Black woman, we just have to be greater," Biles says simply, echoing what many a Black female great has said before her. "Because even when we break records and stuff, they almost dim it down, as if it's just normal." You get surgery, it's fixed. Why can't someone just tell me in six months it'll be over? Like, hello, where are the double-A batteries? Can we just stick them back in? Can we go?

Those who follow astrology believe each generation shares a Saturn — an indicator of its unique lesson to learn, its "work to do." Every generation of Black women releases a generation of curses as it borrows from the lessons of the past and shapes the possibilities of the future. My grandmother's generation might say they were the last generation of Black women who hid — likelier to hide abuse, to hide desire, to hide their individualities. As a mentor of mine puts it, my mother and auntie's generation was the last generation of fools — inclined to stay in relationships they didn't want, to hold on to jobs that left them unfulfilled.

Biles's generation, which is also my own, is, I hope, the last generation of mules. We're more inclined to set boundaries — to say no to what we don't want, to whom we don't want, to what we don't want to do, to conventions, expectations, demands. Less likely to stay at jobs that make us unhappy, to accept the treatment our mothers and grandmothers were forced to endure. It's what all of my homegirls are telling themselves, one another, me. And if

we've done it right, in the next generation, there will be no mules. We've done enough —the world will have to meet us on our terms.

Sometimes, and especially in the case of Biles, the payment for being the greatest to ever do it is the choice to not have to do it again. Biles tells me about the last book she read. Titled *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, by Mark Manson, it's a study in the obvious. "Life fucking goes on," he writes. "We now reserve our ever-dwindling fucks only for the most truly fuckworthy parts of our lives: our families, our best friends, our golf swing. And to our astonishment, this is enough."

"The girls were laughing at me whenever I was reading that, like, 'You are just so nonchalant about everything now,' "she recalls. "Like, 'This is so nice. How do you do that?' I said, 'Just read the book. You'll learn.' "Something about this slim orange book unlocked a door to self-efficacy. It gave her the permission to provide a little bit less labor, to offer Twitter less face time. She's giving less of a fuck about the cynicism of her haters; the expectations of fans, media, her coaches, her parents; giving less of a fuck about being perfect at the expense of her own health; giving less of a fuck about the demands that take her away from healing. She's giving one less fuck and giving one back to herself.

Biles knows there is a price to setting boundaries, and she's happy to pay it. "It does mean sacrificing some of that stardom," she says. "But at the end of the day, you can't have it all. And if you take care of your mental well-being first, the rest will fall into place." Being the girl who could show up for her team and support it in more ways than winning gold is pretty cool, too. This is the legacy she'd like to leave behind: one of moral fortitude and bravery. In all her years of competing on a national stage, Biles had never been able to just watch. "I've always made the finals. I've never sat in the crowd," she tells me. "I've always wanted to see myself, like have an out-of-body experience, and I feel like God gave that to me. I got to watch the girls and my competitors compete. I was wowed by what they did, like, *How are they doing that?* Like, *How amazing is this?*" That feeling alone, she says, made it all worth it. Because she has already lived her dream —in fact, she got to do it twice. "Making it this far? It was one in a trillion."

I ask her if she thinks there's someone out there right now, someone who could be the next one in a trillion. She pauses. "I think that's definitely feasible," she begins, then reconsiders. "But at the end of the day, to accomplish everything I've done? That talent probably cannot be matched yet. Looking at my stats, especially in gymnastics, where it's so injury-filled —I've never had a huge injury stop me from a big meet. To be so healthy for so many years? That never happens. It'll be a long time for somebody to accomplish what I've accomplished."

And so Simone Biles gets to decide what it means to be Simone Biles now. She gets to decide what she gives up. It's up to her what comes next, if anything at all. She's not sure yet. She's figuring it out. But if she never comes back to competition, that will be just fine —and if she's got anything more to give, she'll let us know.

Thank you for subscribing and supporting our journalism. If you prefer to read in print, you can also find this article in the September 27, 2021, issue of New York Magazine.

Want more stories like this one? Subscribe now to support our journalism get unlimited access to our coverage. If you prefer to read in print, you can also find this article in the September 27, 2021, issue of New York Magazine.

DETAILS

Subject:	Girls; Gymnastics; Olympic games; Females; Sex crimes
People:	Biles, Simone
Publication title:	New York; New York
Publication year:	2021

Publication date:	Sep 27, 2021
Section:	Cover Story
Publisher:	Vox Media
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States, New York
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States, Literary And Political Reviews
ISSN:	00287369
Source type:	Magazine
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2586466269
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/magazines/simone-biles-chose-herself/docview/2586466269/se-2?accountid=14472
Copyright:	Copyright New York Media Sep 27, 2021
Last updated:	2021-10-27
Database:	Music Periodicals Database,ProQuest One Literature

LINKS

[Full Text Finder](#)

Database copyright © 2022 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)