

Gymnast questions judges

'10' too commonplace

United Press International

LOS ANGELES — On a July evening in 1976, Romania's Nadia Comaneci was awarded a "10" by a panel of gymnastics judges and the world praised her perfection.

Now the score of 10, the highest a gymnast can achieve for a routine, has become almost commonplace.

"I don't think you can win a gold medal at these Olympics unless you get a 10 somewhere along the way," said American gymnast Bart Conner. "And as amazing as you might think it is, it might be possible to get a 10 for a routine here and when you average it in with your other scores, you might not even win a medal."

The winners in gymnastics, as they are in such sports as diving and figure skating, are determined by opinions. And those opinions, influenced as they are by national favoritism, often make more news than the competition itself.

But the problem that has surfaced in gymnastics the past decade is that the judges have too high an opinion of the people they are judging.

"I think it all started when Comaneci got those 10's at Montreal," said Conner, who at 26 is the old man of the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team. "People started thinking about perfection."

Now the judges are apparently thinking too much about it.

"It has gotten to a point where a score of 9.9 is nothing more than a certificate of participation," said Conner.

Conner leads a U.S. men's team that is expected to battle Japan for a silver medal in the team competition. With the Soviet Union boycott, China (winners of the 1983 world title) is the heavy favorite for the gold.

The Americans already have received a break since they will do their compulsory routines during the evening of July 29. Both the Chinese and Japanese must perform during the morning session that day.

The difference in drawing a morning or evening session again has to do with the odd manner in which scoring develops during a gymnastic competition.

"Usually, you find lower scores

awarded in the morning," said Conner, a member of the stay-at-home American Olympic team of 1980. "I guess they figure that if they give good scores in the morning, they won't have any better scores to give in the evening."

That, in essence, is the whole problem.

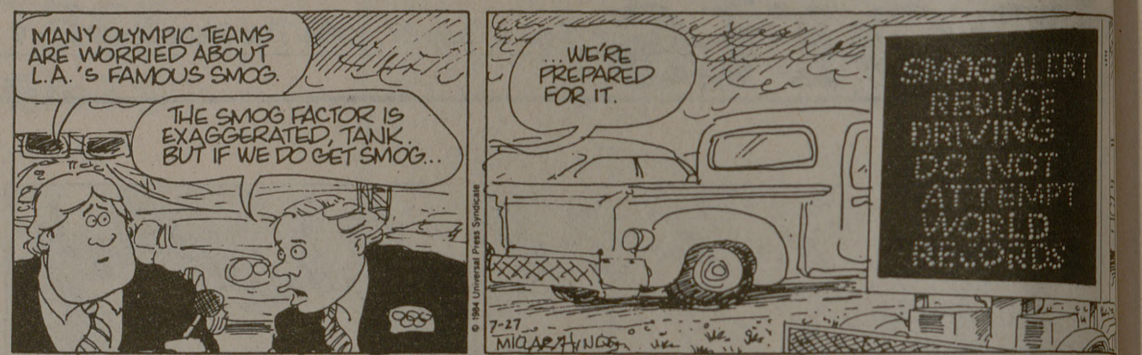
"What happens when you give somebody a 10 and then somebody comes along and does better," said Conner. "You can't give them a 10.1. We saw people getting 10's in the world championships at Bucharest (last year) and not getting medals."

"Sometimes you see a mediocre routine getting a 9.8 early in the day and there are more than 70 gymnasts left to perform. There isn't much room left before you get to 10."

"What you need to see is a re-vamping of the scoring system and I think you will see it happening soon. It doesn't make any difference what the winning scores might be. You just need to be sure the relative difference between the competitors is maintained."

TANK McNAMARA®

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Stones can't psyche Jianhua

By MILTON RICHMAN

United Press International
Sports Editor

LOS ANGELES - I've got a message for Dwight Stones, still looking for an Olympic gold medal in the high jump. If he's trying to psyche out Zhu Jianhua, the world record holder, he's wasting his time because Zhu doesn't understand a word of English, and in more ways than one he's the Chinese equivalent of Fernando Valenzuela.

Remember Fernando when he first came up with the Dodgers? They'd say all these marvelous things about him and he'd listen impassively without ever changing expression, waiting for the comments or questions to be interpreted into Spanish for him.

You should see how well he's learned, though.

About a month ago, he had been roughed up for three runs in one inning by the Padres and Tommy Lasorda thought he could use a little verbal support. Speaking to him in Spanish, Lasorda told him if he didn't give up any more runs, the Dodgers would win the game for him.

"Are you sure?" Valenzuela challenged him in perfect English.

Stones isn't sure about Zhu, either, not only because the 21-year-old, 6-foot-4, 150-pound Shanghai native has next to no knowledge at all of English, but even when Stones' remarks are interpreted for him, he attaches about as much importance to them as he does to a Chinese fortune cookie.

When it comes time to stand up, Stones has never been caught sitting down. Anytime he feels something should be said, he says it, and if what he has to say is any way related to help him beat an opponent in some

high jump competition, so much the better.

Zhu soared to the top of all the high jumpers in the world when he cleared the bar at 7-9 1/4 in Peking during the spring of 1983. But a couple of months later, whether he ate too much before the meet or simply couldn't get off the mark, the bespectacled, dark-haired

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stringbean from China was a big disappointment in Helsinki when he could do no better than 7-6 in finishing third.

What the cocky but knowledgeable Stones has been saying is that the Chinese have mismanaged Zhu. They didn't handle him the way they should've. They didn't get him enough international competition, Stones says, wondering how Zhu is going to react in front of close to 100,000 people in the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Like Valenzuela, Zhu has quite a bit of kidding about his height which is altogether different from Fernando's, and like the Dodger pitcher also, he's pretty much a key in most things he does.

When the Chinese high jumper was asked if he felt any burden being as a role model for all the people in his country, he said: "Not really. It's a great honor."

There's a typical Fernando Valenzuela answer right there.

Listening to Zhu and to the members of the Chinese delegation including Lu Jindong and Li Jirong, two assistant Chef de Mission, I couldn't help but be reminded of my trip to the Peoples Republic of China with the U.S. Track and Field team in 1975. At the time, the Chinese were getting ready to apply for re-entry into the Olympics and this is the first summer one they have been in since 1936.

On that trip nine years ago athletes competed in three separate meets with the aspiring, learning Chinese in Canton, Shanghai and Peking. As near as I remember, the total final score of the three meets was something like 92 to 3 in favor of the U.S., but that didn't favor the Chinese a bit. They kept saying the same thing all the time: Friends first, competition second.

They're enjoying their return to the Olympics and say the same thing now.

Zhu even says it doesn't matter to him at all whether he wins a medal or not.

So take that, Dwight Stones.

Johnson gets shot at medal

United Press International

LOS ANGELES — Everywhere she turns, Kathy Johnson is reminded of how old she is.

She calls herself the "graceful old lady" of gymnastics, and she good-naturedly goes along with the steady flow of "old" jokes directed at her. She has been reduced to tears knowing she is well beyond retirement age, and she now accepts that the day of decision is just a step away.

By gosh, Kathy Johnson is all of 24, although at 5 feet and 100 pounds, and with a soft, small, open face, she easily can pass for a teenager.

"Every once in a while," she says in reflection, "I look in a mirror, see my ponytail and leotards, and say, 'This is a heckuva way for a 24-year-old to carry on!'"

Johnson's conflict with reality stems from the nature of gymnastics, where a 20-year-old is considered over-the-hill. Her teammates on the United States Olympic team are as young as 15, making Johnson almost a mother figure to them.

"They joke about me being an old lady," Johnson said. "They like walking around the (Olympic) Village and getting people to guess my age. Someone guessed 16; they just loved that."

Johnson calls herself a very emotional person, one who "can laugh and cry at the same time," and one reason she still is active, and is finally getting her first chance to compete in the Olympics, is she just didn't know how to quit.

"I used to break down sometimes thinking about it," she said. "It would break my heart to quit, and I'd ask if that meant I would be a gymnast till I was 50. I had to dig deep down sometimes to hang in there."

"Now I want to retire, and there's a difference. There's no shame in retiring; there is in quitting if you're scared."

A year and a half ago, she decided to give the sport one last herculean effort, so she left her home in Atlanta to move to Huntington Beach, Calif., where she could work under

Don Peters, the Olympic coach.

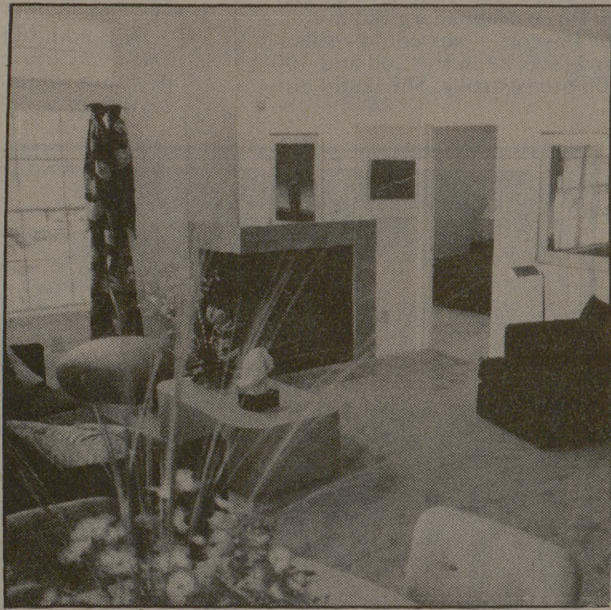
Training at least four hours a day, five to six days a week, Johnson devoted herself to earning a berth in the Olympics, an honor that was denied her because of the 1980 boycott. Although she rates behind teammates Mary Lou Retton and Julianne McNamara, the petite blonde has a shot at a medal.

"This is an extra sweet experience for me," Johnson said. "The Olympics allows you to learn a lot about yourself. It's such a high goal. This will be the highlight of my career, but my whole career is a highlight."

Johnson dismisses the things she has denied herself, such as a prom, or an ice cream, or a slice of pizza, with singular unimportance.

"Although I can never go to the prom, if I had quit I'd never have this," she said. "There are so many people who went to the prom but haven't gone to Japan, China, Germany or Switzerland. They haven't felt the highs I have finishing off a routine you've tried so hard to perfect."

We can take the Heat



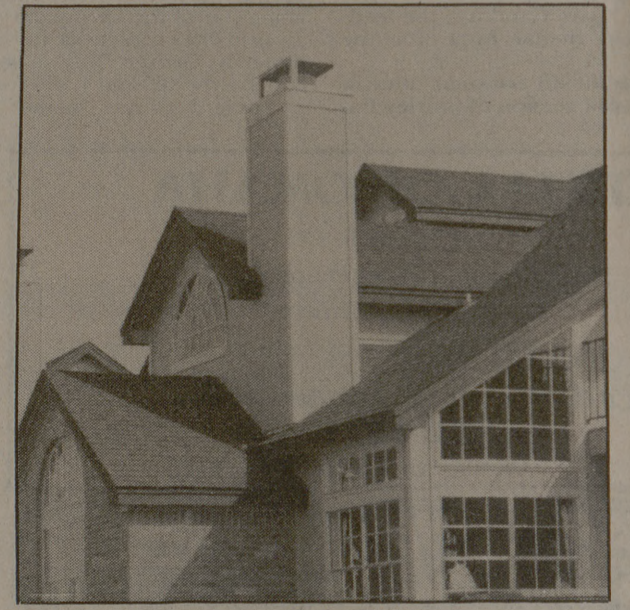
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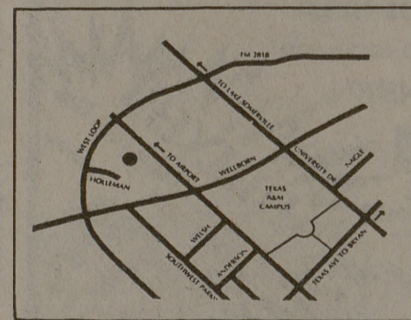


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