

US gymnast Simone Biles, the Olympic games and “the weight of the world”

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The decision by American gymnast Simone Biles to withdraw from competition during the Olympic team final in Tokyo on Tuesday has drawn censure from various quarters, much of it politically or ideologically motivated.

None of the criticism has the slightest validity. Biles felt herself disoriented and in physical danger in a sport where a fall from a height can lead to crippling injury or death. She had every right, even an obligation, to pull out. Dozens of athletes have responded sympathetically to her decision, including former champion gymnasts, as has the general public for the most part.

Various right-wing pundits meanwhile have denounced Biles for supposed spinelessness, dereliction of duty and “letting down her country.” Texas Deputy Attorney General Aaron Reitz termed Biles “our selfish, childish national embarrassment.” African-American sports commentator Jason Whitlock, a Donald Trump supporter, denounced Biles as a “coward,” adding, “I don’t like what has been done to us and what we’ve allowed. I don’t like the brainwashing. The lack of accountability. The lack of expectations for greatness.” Amber Athey, Washington editor of *The Spectator*, headlined her mean-spirited attack, “Simone Biles is a quitter.”

This is predictably filthy stuff from filthy people, all of whom are secure in the knowledge that condemning Biles will stand them in good stead with the fascistic right and the assorted corporate billionaire moguls who derive excitement from such rubbish, with, in many cases, its undoubtedly racist undertones.

But the “left” argument, that Biles is receiving special treatment, whereas an ordinary worker who refuses to work under dangerous conditions faces firing or harassment, is also not a good one. What the gymnast’s situation demonstrates, first of all, is that in present-day society, one has to be a legendary athlete in order to “get away with” rational, responsible and sensible conduct. In the context of the murderous pandemic, for example, every Amazon, meatpacking and auto worker should have the same right.

The Biles affair concentrates within itself much of what is so horribly wrong about the Tokyo Olympics, contemporary sports and, more broadly, the social order as a whole.

These “2020” games, as every public reference to them bizarrely proclaims, should never have been held. The Associated Press observed in June, “The 6,000-member Tokyo Medical Practitioners’ Association asked Prime Minister [Yoshihide] Suga to cancel. So did the Japan Doctors Union, whose chairman warned the Olympics could spread variants of the coronavirus. Nurses and other medical groups have also pushed back.”

In addition, the *New England Journal of Medicine* said “the IOC’s [International Olympic Committee’s] decision to hold the Olympics was ‘not informed by the best scientific evidence.’ And the *British Medical Journal* in an editorial in April asked organizers to ‘reconsider’ holding the games. ... Depending on how the question is phrased, 50-80% [of the

Japanese population] oppose the games opening.” One of Japan’s largest newspapers, *Asahi Shimbun*, in an editorial, “demanded” that Prime Minister Suga “evaluate the situation calmly and objectively, and decide against holding the Olympics and Paralympics this summer.”

(Reuters reported that Tokyo registered a record 3,177 new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, according to the authorities, “as rising infections put pressure on hospitals.”)

So why, asked the Associated Press a month ago, were the games “barreling ahead,” with the dangerous impending influx of 11,000 athletes and tens of thousands of coaches, officials, journalists, technicians, etc.? The news service answered its own question: “Start with billions of dollars at stake, a contract that overwhelmingly favors the IOC, and a decision by the Japanese government to stay the course,” which might help Suga “keep his job.”

“Japan has officially spent \$15.4 billion on the Olympics,” the AP report went on, “but several government audits suggest it’s much more. All but \$6.7 billion is public money. Geopolitical rival China is to hold the 2022 Winter Olympics just six months after Tokyo ends, and could claim centerstage should Tokyo fail.”

Although the IOC “portrays itself as a sporting league of nations,” according to the AP, it is, in reality, “a multi-billion dollar sports business.” At this point in history, concretely, the IOC is something of a “partly owned” subsidiary of media conglomerate NBCUniversal. The sports organization, pointed out the *Hollywood Reporter*, “generates almost 75 percent of its income from selling broadcast rights, and NBCUniversal, the U.S. rights holder, is the single largest source of that revenue, representing about 40 percent of the total.”

The *Hollywood Reporter* further explained that NBC paid the IOC \$4.4 billion “for the four Olympics spanning 2014 to 2020 and another \$7.75 billion for the next six games running 2022 through 2032. Discovery Inc., which holds the European rights, is another major benefactor. Both companies have been banking on leveraging the games to boost their streaming platforms, Peacock and Discovery+.”

Had the Tokyo games been canceled, the IOC stood to lose “about \$3.5 billion-\$4 billion in broadcast revenue,” calculated Andrew Zimbalist, an economist at Smith College in Massachusetts.

So the games had to go on!

How can one separate this corrupt atmosphere, with the threat of disease and death hanging over the games, from the mental state of Biles and other athletes? The gymnast has made reference to the difficulties produced by the games’ year-long postponement, as well as the added mental pressure of the athletes’ isolation in Tokyo. “Usually you hang out in the village, all that stuff,” she explained. “It does suck when you feel the weight of the world. There are no outlets with the amount of training that we do.” Along with many others, Biles also lives with the burden of the sexual abuse inflicted by team doctor Larry Nassar and covered up by her own sport’s officialdom.

The *Wall Street Journal*, in “Strains of Tokyo’s Pandemic Olympics,”

noted that Biles's exit "followed a stunning defeat for Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka in the third round of the women's singles tournament. Osaka ... has also cited the mental toll of her profession." The column called the Tokyo event "the strangest Games in modern history. A combination of the restrictive conditions, absent fans, sweltering heat, and a one-year delay that threw off finely-tuned training cycles has dimmed the star power, in Japan and the U.S., of an Olympics already struggling for global appeal." It has turned the games "into a very public exhibition of the intertwined strains of high-pressure sports, global celebrity and a stifling pandemic." The article attributed the problems encountered by Biles, Osaka and others to "the physical and psychological tolls of a year spent training in isolation with no guarantee of a stage to perform on."

Of course, money was not the only motive driving the organizers to hold the games. While the IOC officially proclaims its mission to be the building of "a peaceful and better world in the *Olympic Spirit* which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play," the quadrennial event is dominated by bitter nationalist rivalries, with militarist connotations, and each country's establishment takes the opportunity of the games to incite chauvinism and xenophobia.

The CBC in Canada, BBC in Britain and other national media outlets are all culpable in this regard, but it is hard to imagine any broadcaster outdoing NBC in the US in the flag-waving department. The network shamefully concentrates its coverage and commentary on the exploits of "Team USA." Viewers are inundated with images of and stories about American athletes, to the exclusion of nearly everyone else, and then pollsters discover, surprise, that 82 percent of respondents will be "rooting for athletes from the US."

In fact, there is no "natural" or innate reason why American viewers should be any less interested in performances by Korean, Brazilian, Iranian, German, Russian or Chinese athletes, except that they are largely prevented from developing that interest.

The hypocrisy, tied to warmongering, of the *New York Times* knows no bounds. On July 29, the *Times* posted an article, "The Chinese Sports Machine's Single Goal: The Most Golds, at Any Cost," arguing that China's "sports assembly line is designed for one purpose: churning out gold medals for the glory of the nation." This in a country where thuggish cries of "USA! USA! USA!" began ringing out in the 1980s and have never stopped. Billions and billions are spent on sports and sports promotion in the US and the principle of "bread and circuses," the use of spectacle to divert popular attention from the pressing social problems, is more alive here than in any other nation. As Katarina Witt, the German Olympic figure skating champion at the time, commented years ago, "There is in America a fascination about athletes that is greater than anywhere else in the world." She might have more accurately said, "a manipulated fascination."

One of the extraordinary facts about the present games is that Biles's entirely legitimate action is so much the exception. Again, her ability to walk away relatively unscathed has to do in part with her celebrity. The "weight of the world" presses on so many.

American Nyjah Huston, the *Times* reported this week, "the biggest name in contest skateboarding, was also a gold medal favorite." But Huston came in seventh in street competition on July 25, "later saying in an Instagram post that he had 'never felt so much pressure.' He added: 'I'm sorry. I know I definitely let some people down. I have no problem admitting that, but I'm human.'"

The capacity of so many of the athletes to keep their composure and turn in superb performances is a tribute to their skills and training, their powers of concentration and, to a certain extent, their related aptitude for tuning out much of the rest of the world.

The list of such performances (and not simply by those who came in first, second or third) is lengthy. One thinks of Flora Duffy of Bermuda, cool, calm and collected, who took the gold medal in the women's

triathlon, made up of a brutal combination of a 1.5-kilometer swim, 40-kilometer bike ride and 10-kilometer run. To some extent, the performance by the second-place finisher, Georgia Taylor-Brown, was even more remarkable. One of Taylor-Brown's bicycle tires went flat with two kilometers left. She fell badly behind the leaders on her damaged tire, but despite initial "panic," kept her wits about her and somehow managed to pass every other competitor in the run except Duffy.

Chinese divers Chen Yuxi, 15, and Zhang Jiaqi, 17, astonished observers with their winning performances in the women's 10-meter synchronized platform event. Zhang told the media, "We do have an advantage in our age. We are short and light, and this means that our (water) entry is better than the others." Her partner commented, "Of course, we can feel the pressure because we are young, (but) we have nothing to lose. We are brave to face any challenges."

There was the astonishing upset victory by 18-year-old swimmer Ahmed Hafnaoui from Tunisia in the 400-meter freestyle, the Korean archers who kept placing their arrows in the center of the target one after the other, the speed and brilliance of the various male and female table tennis and badminton players from China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan in particular, the victory of 41-year-old Iranian sport shooter Javad Foroughi in the 10 meter air pistol competition, the battle between 13-year-olds Momiji Nishiya of Japan and Rayssa Leal of Brazil in the women's street skateboarding competition, eventually won by the beaming Nishiya, who became one of the youngest gold medal winners in history.

The ability of human beings who look very much like the rest of us to accomplish astonishing feats, in the face of conditions imposed on them by a social order indifferent to everything but the accumulation of personal wealth, has to be inspiring. This is by no means a consolation. One only derives a small glimpse on such occasions of what could be if the profit system were done away with.

In an article written in 1915, during World War I, after Europe had been "immersed in blood and flames" for over a year, Leon Trotsky noted that "it would be hopelessly blind not to see that the mainsprings of the new epoch—machines, electricity, automobiles, newspapers, the City—have imbued in humanity unprecedented energy and incredible stamina!"

"Undoubtedly," the article continued, "mankind entered this war stronger, more intrepid, more healthy than ever before. But if it came into the war like this, how will it leave it?" After a year and a half of the pandemic, with the reality of the Olympic games in front of us, it seems reasonable to ask, as Trotsky did about the war, what changes will the pandemic "make in the consciousness of our generation and what will grow imperceptibly to take its place?"



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