

Simone Biles was abandoned by American Olympic officials, and the torment hasn't stopped



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The trouble with the phrase “mental health” is that it’s an abstraction that allows you to sail right straight over what happened to [Simone Biles](#) and, in a way, what is still happening to her. To this day, American Olympic officials continue to betray her. They deny that they had a legal duty to protect her and others from rapist-child pornographer Larry Nassar, and they continue to evade accountability in judicial maneuvering. Abuse is a current event for her.

It’s a perilous endeavor to project what Biles, the most uniquely superior gymnast in the world, is feeling or thinking at this juncture. But she has been frank about these things: her profound lingering [distrust of USA Gymnastics and the USOPC](#) and her conviction [they will not do right by her and other athletes of their own accord](#). Remember, if it wasn’t for Biles bringing her clout to the issue, these users would still be making women train in the buggy squalor of the Karolyi Ranch, the USOPC-sanctioned hellhole where they were molested.

As Biles told NBC’s Hoda Kotb in a recent interview, one of the main reasons she came back for another Olympics at age 24 was to try to ensure some accountability. “If there weren’t a remaining survivor in the sport, they would’ve just brushed it to the side,” she said.

It was only two weeks ago that the Justice Department’s inspector general released a report on the [Nassar case](#), in which Biles learned in new infuriating detail how corrupt officials hushed up evidence that the [gymnastics doctor](#) was a serial sex assaulter and how then-USAG chief Steve Penny traded favors with local FBI agent Jay Abbott to bottom-drawer it.

Documents produced in a long-stalled civil suit against USOPC and USAG have brought other aggravating recent revelations. One in particular is worth looking at, in light of what happened to Biles on the vaulting floor in Tokyo on July 27, 2021. That’s the day Biles became so disoriented on her vault that [she couldn’t risk competing in the team finals](#).

As chance would have it, that's the same date that, six years earlier, Steve Penny threw her to the wolf.

On July 27, 2015, Biles was an 18-year-old world champion who arrived at USAG headquarters in Indianapolis for a series of appearances to promote one of their events. For two days, Biles signed autographs and did other favors to please USAG officials. Penny personally drove Biles and her mother to some of the functions and had extended conversations with her, according to John Manly, an attorney for Biles and other victims. Biles even appeared at a birthday party for Penny's daughter.

You know what Penny failed to mention over those two days? In fact, failed to breathe so much as a word of, much less warn her of? The fact that he had credible evidence Nassar was a molester.

On July 25, shortly before Biles arrived in Indianapolis, Penny had learned of an "unambiguous claim of sexual abuse" by Nassar against a gymnast from a private investigator, who told him he was obliged to go straight to law enforcement. Instead Penny went straight to the USOPC, calling CEO Scott Blackmun for advice. On July 27, even as Biles was in Indianapolis smiling for the cameras and signing autographs, Penny scheduled a meeting with the local FBI. And on July 28, he met with the FBI's Abbott, who subsequently smothered the investigation for months while Penny explored getting him a job at the USOPC.

And he never said a word to Biles.

If you think conduct like this is past tense for these organizations, think again. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the USOPC and USAG have perpetuated their coverup with civil court motions. They have hidden from accountability with bankruptcy proceedings. They have demanded that in exchange for any civil settlement, Biles and others who suffered Nassar's assaults issue blanket liability releases that would protect a rogue's gallery of well-known abusers, as well as Penny. And they have fought to keep the depositions of Penny, Blackmun and former chairman Larry Probst under seal.

Under seal.

Does that sound like these organizations have turned over a new leaf and become more "athlete-centered?" They had the nerve to feign support for Biles this week. They are not her supporters. They are her tormentors.

The price for winning all those gold medals is that Biles now gets to be analyzed by every armchair psychologist in the world. Here's a bulletin. She's not doing so well. And exactly how well should she be doing under these circumstances? "It's like fighting all those demons coming in here," she said after the team competition.

It is unfair and potentially even deceptive to try to peer into her head and delineate the exact shape of those demons as she tries to decide whether to compete again in Tokyo. But it was always equally unfair to expect her to vault lightly past the Nassar case and back on to the medal podium.

One of the things the women who were preyed upon by Nassar need is real accountability. There has been very little. The FBI's report describes outright lies to the internal investigator by Abbott, yet the Department of Justice declined to charge him, and he is enjoying retirement with impunity. Why? Blackmun appears to have lied outright to Congress, and he and Penny ignored mandatory child abuse reporting laws, also with impunity.

Why? Even Nassar, in prison, has evaded full accountability, ducking financial penalties of his verdict. Why? And by the way, why hasn't there been a full-fledged law enforcement investigation into crimes against children at the Karolyi Ranch? Why? Because, girls.

Here's another bulletin: The Olympics is no happy anniversary for Nassar's victims. "It is a huge trigger," says Rachael Denhollander, whose police report against Nassar in August 2016 finally triggered the Michigan law enforcement investigation — led by women — that took him down.

"This time of year is awful because it brings back what it was like," she says. "It brings back how hard it was to speak up, to verbalize it all for the first time. This is when it all came out. And the body does keep score. It remembers those times of year and those anniversaries. I can't even imagine trying to function."

The body keeps score.

To perform the aerals that Biles does requires a wholesale commitment of mind and body. When you are suspended 10 feet in the air, upside down and twisting at the rate of a motorized rotor, "You have to be there 100 percent or 120 percent because, if you're not the slightest bit, you can get hurt," she said the other day. "I didn't want to go out there and do something dumb and get hurt and be negligent. . . . Not worth it. At the end of the day, it's like, we want to walk out of here. Not be dragged out of here on a stretcher or anything."

To perform at that height and that hazard required trust. Right now, Simone Biles has none. And why should she?

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More about the Tokyo Olympics

The Tokyo Olympics run from July 23 to August 8. Find the latest news and updates from the Tokyo Olympics here, and join us as we track the Olympic medal count, sport by sport. Here's the full schedule and TV guide.

- Sunisa Lee won gold medal for United States in women's gymnastics all-around competition. She stepped into the spotlight after Simone Biles withdrew. Biles said she's got the "twisties," a gymnast's worst nightmare. The decision by Biles has led to an outpouring of support but also condemnation from some.
- Katie Ledecky swam the anchor leg as the U.S. women's 4x200-meter freestyle relay team rallied to earn a dramatic silver medal. Americans Caeleb Dressel (100-meter freestyle) and Bobby Finke (800-meter freestyle) each won golds.
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