

## ***Journal of Issues in* Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **Abused: Surviving Sexual Assault and a Toxic Gymnastics Culture**

By Rachel Haines. Published 2019 by Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD. (144 pages).

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The more we learn about the sexual assaults perpetrated by Larry Nassar on young women, and the toxic culture of gymnastics that allowed those assaults to happen, the more apparent it becomes that numerous failures existed at the collegiate and international levels of elite gymnastics. Many young lives were affected because of a system built on protecting itself rather than the women it claimed to serve. Since details of the Nassar story were released nationally in September of 2016, more than 300 women have come forward to share their stories of abuse at the hands of the team doctor to the U.S. Olympic team. In 2018, Nassar was sentenced to a life in prison for his assault of athletes and possession of child pornography.

As each victim's story has been added to the scandal's narrative, the dirty layers of high performance gymnastics have been peeled back and we have started to learn of the many cracks in the system and systemic failures of USA Gymnastics, Michigan State University, and the elite amateur club gymnastics. Rachel Haines was one of Nassar's victims, identified in his trial as Survivor 195, and her memoir offers a personal account of her experience with Nassar and the entire structure of elite level gymnastics.

Haines was a two-time national champion amateur gymnast, twice a member of the United States Women's Gymnastics team, and a member of the gymnastics team at the University of Minnesota, where she competed in the 2016 NCAA Championships on vault and beam. She earned her undergraduate degree in child psychology while participating as a student-athlete at Minnesota, and earned a master's degree in family social science while she was a Graduate Student Assistant coach with the Gophers.

The book is an extension of Haines' introspective journaling in the immediate aftermath of the Nassar scandal. She describes her history in gymnastics, her experiences as an elite gymnast competing at the highest levels of amateur sport, and most seriously the injuries that she suffered as a consequence of her extreme training and the competition at the highest levels of the sport. As much a memoir of personal healing and forgiveness towards the sport of gymnastics as it is her account of the abuse she suffered at the hands of Nassar and others, the book melds objectivity and emotion to paint a moving picture of how sports influence young lives. In italicized reflections throughout the book, Haines uses her psychology training to reflect on

issues such as body image, her injuries, her family's challenges reconciling their role in allowing Nassar's abuse, her own personality and self-image, and other challenging post-gymnastics issues with which she continues to struggle.

The specifics of Haines' story frequently do not neatly fit into the broad public narrative of the Nassar case, but her unique account of the scandal challenges readers to see each of Nassar's victims as individuals with their own particular experiences in the sport. At times throughout the book it seems as though Haines acts as an apologist for John Geddert, the former owner of the Twistars USA Gymnastics Club, which clashes with the discourse of the coach's role in the scandal as an enabler for Nassar. While she never completely absolves him of all of his responsibility for her issues, she distances his role at the Twistars club from Nassar's abuse, and never directly accuses Geddert of knowing what was taking place or being complicit in the sexual abuse itself.

In the ninth chapter of the book, the author focuses specifically on the role that athletic trainers and team doctors at the University of Minnesota played in allowing her gymnastics career to continue at the collegiate level. Haines describes how, despite the severity of her back injuries – and the fact that teammates with ankle injuries were required to miss practice, she was cleared to practice and compete after telling the Minnesota doctors to call Larry Nassar to vouch for her athletic stability. Nassar's endorsement of Haines' stability was enough to convince Minnesota administrators to ignore the MRI scans and their initial reaction to her injuries, of which one doctor encouraged her to quit the sport completely. Instead, as Haines described, “(The University of Minnesota doctors) knew Larry Nassar's name before I told them he was my trainer. They trusted him like I had. He was so well known, his opinion trumped their education” (Haines, 2015, p. 65). The author writes that it was Larry Nassar, and not the medical staff at the University of Minnesota, who made the decision to clear her to continue competing at the collegiate level, and it was only after Nassar told her, prior to her Junior season, that it was time to quit, that she recognized the reality of her injuries and considered quitting the sport.

There is a catharsis present in Haines' memoir. She forgives herself for her own role in becoming a victim of the sport of gymnastics and a victim of Larry Nassar. She apologizes to the younger version of herself for robbing herself of a childhood, and to her adult self for inflicting so much physical punishment on her body. The layers of emotional complexity that pour out of her writing are a peek inside the shell of one of Nassar's victims and offers up a portrait of the humanity present in those that were abused by an evil person taking advantage of a broken system.

Haines' book is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding women's experiences in sports, feminism in sports, sexual assault in sports, or current issues and trends in sports. It should definitely be seen as part of the broader conversation relating to the sexual assault culture that has emerged in USA Gymnastics and the Larry Nassar Scandal. This particular volume goes hand-in-hand with many of the other books and documentaries that are being produced right now and is a perfect lead-in for additional resources including Rachel Denhollander's (2019) book “What is a Girl Worth” and the 2019 HBO documentary “At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal.”

Collegiate athletic administrators can learn from Haines' experiences at the University of Minnesota, recognizing the influence of medical professionals from outside agencies (in this case USA gymnastics) can sometimes seep into the decision making of their own trained professionals. Institutional policies should be crafted to limit the outside influence of individuals like Larry Nassar or others whose incentives are not aligned with the wellbeing of student-athletes.