The Impact of Nadia Comaneci on the Sport of Women's Artistic Gymnastics

Roslyn Kerr is currently completing her PhD in sociology at Canterbury University where she is examining elite gymnastics in New Zealand. Her research interests include technology in sport, talent identification and the philosophy of sport. Roslyn has held numerous roles in gymnastics in New Zealand and currently works as a coach and administrator.

IN 1976, EXACTLY 30 years ago, gymnast Nadia Comaneci burst onto the stage at the Montreal Olympic Games and changed the sport of women's artistic gymnastics forever. It is indisputable that Comaneci's performance at the 1976 Olympic Games was highly significant in influencing the sport of women's artistic gymnastics. Authors have agreed that Comaneci 'changed the judging standards', 'introduced fundamental changes', 'did things in gymnastics that had never been done before', and generally 'changed everything about the sport'. This article discusses exactly what constituted the changes Comaneci introduced in the sport both technically and stylistically and how these affected the sport in years to come. This article also argues that Comaneci was the most prominent 'advertisement' for a nascent trend towards younger, pre-pubescent gymnasts which had begun in the late 1960s, though not the sole reason for this change as is often believed.

This article is part of a larger research project about the history of women's gymnastics since 1952. It utilises not only archival research, but an analysis of the gold medal routines at each Olympic Games since 1952 obtained through video footage, an examination of the rule book, the Code of Points, and interviews with 20 gymnastics experts from around the world. The interviews were semi structured and interviewees were chosen due to their knowledge and experience of particular aspects and time periods of gymnastics.

At the 1972 Olympic Games, the famous Russian gymnast Olga Korbut began to shift the main gymnastic style away from the feminine, balletic style that had dominated until that time. Korbut, along with several other gymnasts, judges and coaches and a more detailed rule book, set the stage for women's gymnastics to be reinvented in 1976. Two gymnasts were primarily responsible for the transformation: Nadia Comaneci of Romania, led by her

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coaches Bela and Marta Karolyi, and, to a lesser, extent, Nelli Kim from the Soviet Union. These gymnasts altered the sport both by raising the difficulty level and the scores, and in Comaneci’s case, through exhibiting a new, consistent style of training, a less expressive style of movement and a younger androgynous body type. As a result, the period following the Olympics, from 1977 to 1983 was characterised by an acrobatic emphasis and dominated by tiny girls with immense technical ability who lacked artistic skill, coached by male coaches trained in men's gymnastics. The sport experienced a tightening up of judging laws and rules during this period, as concerns with judging bias were voiced openly.

As a result of Korbut's popularity in 1972, the women's gymnastics competition at the 1976 Olympic Games was an eagerly awaited event. Korbut was competing again, attracting a large audience, however a new star appeared who completely eclipsed her and took over as the new idol in gymnastics: Nadia Comaneci. Frank Deford, of *Sports Illustrated*, described the 1976 Olympic Games as personalised into a soap-opera style drama by the media. Comaneci was cast as the star, Korbut as her ageing rival, and Romanian team member Teodora Ungureanu as her 'Hollywood sidekick'. Korbut's reaction was shown after each of Comaneci's performances, with the press searching for evidence of her disappointment.

However, in terms of the evolution of gymnastics, there was far more occurring than a personal battle and a high level of media attention. Firstly, the 1976 Olympic Games showed the difficulty level to have risen dramatically, primarily due to Nadia Comaneci and Nelli Kim. These two gymnasts shared the five individual gold medals on offer at these games, with Kim taking the vault and floor golds while Comaneci was victorious on uneven bars, beam and in the all-around.

Comaneci's beam routine is a clear example of how the sport had become far more difficult than it was just four years earlier. Comaneci's routine included six flight elements, five more than Korbut's winning 1972 routine, indicating a large increase in acrobatic work. Whilst Korbut's routine had included numerous walkovers as her dominant acrobatic element, Comaneci included flic flacs and aerials, elements which included flight and therefore a far greater level of risk and skill.

However, it was on uneven bars that Comaneci's influence was most significant. Comaneci performed the first true 'release' move; where the bar is released and re-caught by the hands with a somersaulting move performed in between. Although a somersault had been attempted several years earlier between the bars, this was the first time a gymnast attempted to release and re-catch the same bar. Comaneci cast off the high bar, performed a forward somersault in straddle before recatching the bar, a skill still performed by top gymnasts today and still considered highly difficult. Further, bar routines
throughout the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by release elements with
the same form, where gymnasts release the high bar, perform some sort of
somersault and re-catch the same bar.

The other area that Comaneci contributed to on uneven bars was the
dismount. Here, Comaneci cast to handstand, piked to place her feet on the
bar, swung under the bar to release at the peak of the swing, and performed
a half turn into a back somersault. For the next three Olympics, the gold
medallist on bars performed a similar style of dismount. These two moves
changed the complexion of uneven bars towards it becoming an acrobatic
style apparatus. They became commonplace in years to come.

Perhaps the greatest revolution to occur at these Olympics was the
awarding of a perfect ten. This was the first time a ten was awarded at a World
or Olympic competition. Comaneci was awarded seven of them during the
competition, and the Russian champion, Nelli Kim, two. Understandably,
these caused much discussion within the sport. Head Soviet coach Larissa
Latynina argued that they were not deserved, as nobody is perfect. However,
others explained that the judges had put themselves in a position where they
were forced to award a ten. They had given other gymnasts very high, near
perfect scores, so when Comaneci performed and was far superior, they had
no choice but to award her a ten. Whether deserved or not, the score stood
for 100 per cent, for perfection, something the technicians in charge of
the scoreboards had not thought possible, and therefore showed the figure
'1.0'.

Not surprisingly, the awarding of a perfect ten set a precedent for ideal
gymnastics. In awarding the ten, the judges were indicating that Comaneci
and Kim could not improve their work; it was exactly what was required.
Predictably, this caused many other competitors to copy aspects of Comaneci
and Kim's gymnastics. Both gymnasts' work was copied a great deal in the
following years, as the prevalence of the Comaneci dismount on uneven bars
over the next decade demonstrated.

While Nelli Kim was also awarded a perfect ten and also demonstrated
a high level of difficulty, her influence was not as great at Comaneci's. Kim
was a highly popular gymnast within the Soviet Union, as a result of her
dedicated work ethic and Olympic success. However, it was Comaneci who
gained the global attention previously devoted to Olga Korbut. Her world-
wide popularity and her amazing record of seven perfect tens undoubtedly
added to the prevalence of copying of her work.

Part of Comaneci's appeal was her country of origin. Korbut had been
popularised partially due to curiosity about her Russian background and
fans proved equally interested in Romania. Romania was a little known,
mysterious country to the West, therefore there was great interest in
Comaneci's background. Equally within the gymnastics community,
Romania began to take an equal place with Russia as a centre of gymnastic inspiration and ideas. Comaneci's appeal was also enhanced by her appearance, in particular by her hairstyle. One biographer of Comaneci's recorded that traditionally all young Romanian girls wore white ribbons in their hair as a sign of purity, just as Comaneci and the entire Romanian team did in 1976. However, knowing her coaches' ability to create the correct appearance for the moment, and the fact that Korbut was the first to wear ribbons tied in bows in her hair, it seems more likely that ribbons would have been chosen deliberately by her coaches in order to give the gymnasts a more endearing appearance. Either way, the wearing of ribbons appears to have definitely been representative of the move towards younger gymnasts. Older gymnasts from the 1960s did not wear ribbons, instead sporting the popular hairstyles of grown women during the period. The champion from that era, Vera Caslavská, frequently sported a style similar to the 'beehive' in competition. However following 1976, ribbons appeared as a popular hairstyle amongst gymnasts.

Comaneci's other contributions to the sport cannot be discussed without reference to her coaches, Bela and Marta Karolyi. Experts in gymnastics regard this couple as two of the most influential figures in the history of gymnastics. Their main contribution was their development of a highly successful training system. In Romania and later in the United States, the Karolyis took very young, talented girls and worked them unusually hard in order to create champions. The Karolyis trained their gymnasts for a large number of hours per week, sometimes up to six hours per day. In some ways, their system was similar to the Soviet and East German systems that had worked so effectively for many years. All three countries developed programs where talented girls were selected to train at special sports schools, where all the top facilities, coaches and equipment were provided for them and, as Guttmann described, the study of sport was rationalized extensively. Boarding schools provided an ideal environment where talented children could be brought together and given the top coaches and opportunities. Intense pressure to work hard and achieve was placed on all these children.

Yet the Karolyis were further unusual in their depth of understanding of gymnastics. Their awareness of the factors that contributed to the creation of a winning gymnast, from training to psychology to politics, is unparalleled. Indeed, the Karolyis are excellent examples of many modern sport coaches who display an obsessive interest in maximizing human sporting potential. They were excellent at innovation, inventing new elements and creating routines which suited the characteristics of their gymnasts. Interestingly, it was the political forces that Bela Karolyi chose to focus on in his own autobiography, suggesting that this aspect of the sport was of far greater
importance than the majority of coaches suppose. His description of the events at the 1976 Olympic Games provides an insight into how great a part audience opinion could play in the creation of a champion.

In 1976, the strength of the Romanian team came as a surprise to much of the audience, who were used to the Soviet Union and East Germany dominating the gymnastics competition. Although Comaneci had competed successfully at several international competitions in the previous years, these had mostly been at the junior level and the Romanian team was still relatively unknown. Karolyi was very aware that despite his team's excellence, this 'unknown' factor could result in Romania being awarded lower scores than they deserved. Therefore, Karolyi deliberately manipulated the crowd to draw attention to his own team. On the day before the competition started the Romanian team trained in the competition gymnasium with an audience watching. He described this audience as a gymnastically educated audience that often included many of the judges who would be judging at the competition. When the Romanian team was called to march on to the floor for warm-up, Karolyi did not let the girls march out, claiming he did not understand the English the announcer was using. He waited until the girls had been called three times before he 'understood' that the team needed to march onto the floor. In waiting so long, the audience had become curious, and all eyes were fixed on the team when they marched into the arena. Karolyi had dressed them identically, with the characteristic white ribbons in their hair and red leotards. They were far smaller than any of the other teams, therefore their identical appearance and small stature made them interesting to the audience from the very beginning. Karolyi also had them perform like robots. They did not speak to each other, just sat in a line and performed perfect routines one after another and sat down again. The effect on the audience was electrifying. Karolyi wrote that after warm-up, nobody was watching the Russians, all eyes were fixed on the Romanian team. The stage was set for Comaneci's unprecedented victory.

Possibly the Karolyis' influence was the greatest on the stylistic side of the sport, where they added a number of new dimensions to gymnastics. Firstly, the Romanian team in 1976 exhibited a 'sameness' that is now considered to characterise Romanian gymnastics. It appears that while the Russian system provided the resources for each girl to be developed individually, the Romanian program involved working all their gymnasts together. Therefore it was common for the entire Romanian team to perform almost identical routines in the same style. This caused the Romanians to lack individual expression, an aspect of the sport that was de-emphasised following 1976. One gymnast who competed in the 1970s recalls: 'the only way you could tell them [the Romanian gymnasts] apart was by the numbers on their backs'. Another gymnastics expert claimed that it would be possible for anybody...
to train the Romanian gymnastics team because all the gymnasts learn the same skills in the same style with no individuality.\textsuperscript{22}

Secondly, in perhaps the largest and most concerning change, the Romanian team, in particular Nadia Comaneci, confirmed that women's gymnastics would now be a sport for girls, not women. Although Olga Korbut, the seventeen year old sensation of the 1972 Olympic Games, and Comaneci are routinely 'blamed' for the transition in the sport towards younger, pre-pubescent competitors, younger gymnasts were already proving successful years before their appearance. The 1965 Soviet National Championships were won unexpectedly by fifteen year old Larissa Petrick. With champions during this period usually being in their 20s or even 30s, Petrick's victory was a surprise. It appears the revolution towards younger gymnasts that hit its peak in the late 1970s in fact begun during the mid 1960s, as confirmed by Petrick's success and by sixteen year old Kuchinskaya taking gold on bars and beam at the 1966 World Championships.\textsuperscript{23} Most likely, it was the hyped-up television coverage of Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci that created the belief that these gymnasts were solely responsible for this trend. However, that an age limit for World and Olympic competitions of fourteen was set as early as 1970 confirms the theory that the trend begun prior to their appearances.\textsuperscript{24}

Nonetheless, although the age of gymnasts had been declining slowly since the mid-1960s, Comaneci was not only younger than any other champion, but possessed a body that was distinctly unwomanly. Prior to 1976, younger gymnasts such as Petrick, Kuchinskaya and Korbut did exist, but were not the norm. Instead, the champion gymnasts tended to be adult women in their 20s or 30s. Afterward, the majority of gymnasts were in the teens. Comaneci was only fourteen years old when she became Olympic champion in 1976, standing 152 cm tall and weighing only 39 kg.\textsuperscript{25} Her small size and pre-pubertal physique was part of the reason for her success. Whilst the slow, elegant movements performed by gymnasts in the 1950s and 60s could be performed more successfully by a taller, larger body, the acrobatics now coming into fashion were more suited to a smaller figure. A smaller, lighter body is able to perform twists and turns in the air far more easily than a large one. These two developments, introduced by Comaneci, were connected to one another. Since the amount of acrobatic work required was easier with a smaller body, gymnasts with smaller physiques were able to perform a far greater level of acrobatic work, and the two aspects worked together to change gymnastics. From 1976 onward, smaller, pre-pubertal bodies became a common sight in the gymnastics arena as larger breasts and hips slow down movements and lower the height of acrobatics, jumps and leaps.\textsuperscript{26}

However, this development led to concerns for the welfare of children
in gymnastics. The training system used with such success by the Karolyis involved putting great pressure on very young girls. In the 1990s the Karolyis attracted immense criticism for their training methods. Comaneci, along with a number of other gymnasts, agreed with the concept of an older age limit on the grounds that she felt she was a far better gymnast once a little older, as she was able to express herself more and perform with a greater maturity. This transition to the sport being dominated by young girls was ironic in terms of the increase in the strength of the feminist movement that was occurring in wider society at the same time. Within the Western world, feminists during the 1970s were demanding access to power in society, challenging the status quo that existed in business, politics and sport. Yet, at this point, the Western and primarily female public became fascinated with gymnastic heroines who were in reality little girls, noted for their 'tiny bodies, cute looks and coquettish demeanours'. Possibly they were comforting figures to women who felt threatened by the changes that feminism was bringing. Comaneci's small stature was especially appealing when compared to the large muscular physiques of the East German swimmers who were criticised by the American media during the 1976 Olympic Games. The final change brought by the Romanian team was a consistency in the perfection of their performances which was new to the sport. They were able to perform their routines repeatedly without errors. Gymnasts coached by the Karolyis have commented that this was due to the immense number of repetitions they were required to perform whilst training. Comaneci's consistently perfect performances were part of what she is remembered for, and her collection of seven perfect tens is proof of this. This was particularly obvious in her beam work, where Comaneci routinely performed without a wobble. At Olympic level, most gymnasts wobble or fall on some occasion due to nerves, however Comaneci always appeared under control. Indeed, Bela Karolyi has described Comaneci as the best beam worker he has ever known. Comaneci herself described Marta Karolyi, her beam coach, as highly demanding, and believing that it was not enough to perform a skill, but that it must be performed correctly or it was a waste of time. Part of this consistency involved a new style of gymnastics that focused on pure technical perfection rather than artistry and expression. Bill Sands, long time expert in gymnastics, believed Comaneci was influential in treating gymnastics as a way to excel and perfect, rather than perform. He described her as 'machine-like' in her performance. It was agreed that Comaneci lacked Korbut's charm, but her technical skill made her unstoppable. Sands theorised that the Romanian team wanted consistent performance so they would have fewer errors, but sacrificed the aspect of artistry to do so.
impressed by emotional, artistic performances. Sands argued:

The Romanians provided the public with real beauty, but it is a beauty of fine engineering rather than that of the more esoteric forms of art such as dance, ability to emote and ability to communicate a message.  

Sands, perhaps unknowingly, made a highly significant observation with this comment. What he described is really a change in the style of aesthetics displayed by the gymnast.

Until this point, two types of aesthetic movement had dominated gymnastics: the expression of emotion through movement, which was demonstrated in the floor routines of the 1950s and 60s, and the demonstration of the spectacular, present on vault since the sport's inception and introduced to uneven bars and balance beam by Korbut. By contrast, Comaneci introduced a new type of aesthetic. She displayed such technical skill, expertise and excellence that beauty through perfection was created. In reality, this style of aesthetic had always been present in gymnastics, as the judging system was created with the aim of gymnasts striving for perfection in their work, a goal which is symbolised by the perfect ten. However, until Comaneci demonstrated this style of movement and was accordingly awarded a ten, it was not considered as important as the other types of movement.

Several critics of this period expressed concerns about the aesthetic changes in the sport. The prevailing criticism was that difficulty and technical complexity had come to matter more than artistic expression, or in other words, that the traditional style of expressing emotion through movement was no longer considered important. Comaneci herself described the sport as having degenerated into a 'showbiz spectacle' and argued that the 'new generation' of gymnasts performing during the early 1980s displayed great virtuosity but a lack of soul. She also admitted that she felt some responsibility for the change. Goodbody agreed with Comaneci, adding that gymnasts from the late 1970s and early 1980s were performing like 'puppets'. The Russian Federation's opinion of this era was demonstrated through their treatment of their own gymnasts. The tiny Russian favourite, Maria Filatova, was accused by the Soviet Union of lacking a balletic Russian style, and being all stunts and no artistry, although in reality she was merely an example of the successful style of gymnast from this era. Soviet national coach Larissa Latynina left the sport after Comaneci's victory, as the Soviets recognised the change that the Romanians had brought to the sport. Latynina, the great champion of the 1950s who emphasised femininity, grace, artistry and expression as opposed to acrobatics and difficulty, was seen as out of date.

The above criticisms are all directed at the perfect style of aesthetics in
gymnastics as exhibited most effectively by Comaneci. However, a second group of critics argued not against this type of aesthetic, but argued that there is no type of aesthetic present at all, which Comaneci's demonstration of increased acrobatics and difficulty had initiated. Grossfeld, in her article in *International Gymnast*, rather than arguing that technical perfection had replaced artistry, argued that the emphasis on difficulty had replaced both these aspects of aesthetics. She observed that in the late 1970s and early 80s, while the level of difficulty was becoming very high, few gymnasts performed with perfect form as Comaneci did, causing gymnastics to become very unattractive. She argued that neither mastery nor art were present in gymnastics during this period, instead there was merely a high level of difficulty.

However, others saw the changes as positive for women's gymnastics and interpreted 'difficulty' differently. Golubev argued that the increase in difficulty was a positive step because it created a style of gymnastics that jolted and amazed the spectator. He then, interpreted 'difficulty' as a part of the aesthetic of the spectacular. The emphasis on this aspect of aesthetics caused coaches to constantly search for exciting innovations that would cause their gymnasts to stand out from the crowd. Smither suggested that prior to Korbut and Comaneci, gymnastics had started to stagnate with the dominance of the same champions for several years, and these new styles were bringing new life into the sport.

As indicated by the above comments, the period following the 1976 Olympic Games is remembered for its high emphasis on acrobatics and difficulty. Women's gymnastics, which in the 1950s and 1960s was about grace, poses and the ability to dance, was now about twists and turns in the air. The example that illustrates this most effectively is Natalya Shaposnikova's floor routine score at the 1979 European Championships. Shaposnikova was coached by Rastorotsky, a coach who believed in the continued importance of artistry despite the emphasis on acrobatics that was going through gymnastics at the time. Accordingly, Shaposnikova was awarded a surprisingly low score on the grounds that her routine was too artistic and not sufficiently acrobatic in the eyes of the judges.

Part of the concern with an emphasis on difficulty and acrobatics was the risk of injury. The degree of risk was becoming very high. Many elements required perfect timing and precision, allowing a minimal margin for error. Although Comaneci was able to perform them in 1976 without errors, few gymnasts had the outstanding technique that she had due to her rigorous coaching regime and consequently could not perform with her precision. The 1979 World Championships were a spectacular demonstration of this. The lack of technique displayed meant there were a large number of falls and injuries, even by the leading gymnasts in the competition.
Criley indicated how strong the media's influence had become in gymnastics in his article on the 1979 World Championships. Whilst raising concerns about the high injury level, he suggested that a large number of falls could affect the television coverage of the sport. He suggested that television could choose to focus on the mishaps in the sport rather than on excellence, which would create a negative image for the sport. His emphasis on the televised perception of the sport as opposed to the health of the athletes indicates the strength of the media during this period.

The strong relationship between women's gymnastics and the media is confirmed by the large amount of media attention Comaneci attracted at the 1979 championships. Great confusion arose surrounding her appearance. The only agreed upon fact was that Comaneci appeared thinner than anticipated at this competition. Yet the reason for her size is impossible to confirm with any degree of certainty. Comaneci herself, in her autobiography, explained that she was recovering from a virus and was therefore underweight. In opposition to this was the prevailing opinion of the press, which was also adopted by a number of sports writers, who claimed that she was clearly suffering from anorexia. In one text, this was reported as fact:

Comaneci took the logical step of trying to prevent the physical changes that would spell the end of her career; she stopped eating, developing a severe anorexic condition. This phenomenon grew so common among competitive gymnasts that insiders called it the Nadia syndrome.

This theory could well have some validity, however, whether Comaneci was such a case has never been established. Smither suggested yet another theory that indicates the suspicion that has constantly dogged gymnastics training methods. He suggested that her body had been 'tampered' with to control its growth through the use of drugs or other undescribed methods.

Gymnasts have often exhibited a relationship to the prevailing fashionable female figure. In the late 1970s slenderness was still considered fashionable, therefore gymnasts, with their tiny figures necessary for the skills they performed, conformed to this fashion. Studies have shown that eating disorders became common in the wider community during this period, suggesting that their appearance in gymnastics possibly reflected a wider societal trend. This is a very difficult area to investigate, owing to the secrecy about training methods that existed during this period. It is possible that Comaneci's success with a smaller, thinner body type may have influenced gymnastics coaches to use strict weight loss methods with their own gymnasts. Certainly, allegations of this nature have appeared over the years, however they have almost always been impossible to confirm. Most likely the appearance
of eating disorders in gymnastics would have been due to a combination of factors. Not only were prominent female models such as Janice Dickinson and Christie Brinkley following the example of fashion icon Twiggy in exhibiting thinner physiques, but also within gymnastics the physical skills required that the body be smaller and thinner in order to succeed. However, the theory that it was Comaneci and the Karolyis who introduced weight control into gymnastics training is contested by the two following examples. Firstly, Drury and Schmid's text on gymnastics was written in 1973, before Comaneci appeared on the world stage, yet it dictates how a gymnast cannot afford excess weight and therefore must follow a strict diet including a weight check daily. Further, Cathy Rigby, who competed around 1970, has described how she battled with anorexia during her years as a gymnast. These two examples indicate that coaches were aware of the advantages a thinner body had in gymnastics prior to Comaneci's performance in 1976, and that pressure to be thin was already being applied to gymnasts.

In a number of ways, the changes in the sport can be described as a direct transition from the feminine to androgyny, initiated by Comaneci. Traits traditionally considered feminine, such as expression, grace and elegance, were no longer part of the 1977-1983 gymnasts' repertoire. Instead, the female gymnast needed to exhibit some traits that had originally been confined to the arena of the male gymnast, such as a high level of difficulty, acrobatics and risk. Further, in terms of appearance, female gymnasts now exhibited a highly androgynous body type. This is confirmed by the aesthetic changes in the sport. The expression of emotion was traditionally a feminine style of aesthetic, while the performance of the spectacular was part of the masculine repertoire.

The transition towards a more 'masculine' style first brought about by Comaneci was furthered by some practical changes. During this period, large numbers of male coaches, trained in men's gymnastics, began shifting to coaching women. In one study, it was found that during the early 1970s the majority of coaches involved in women's gymnastics were female, however by 1980 the number of male coaches had increased significantly. Several theories have been suggested as to why this occurred. First, with the increased popularity of women's gymnastics during this era, gymnastics coaches could attract higher paid positions in women's gymnastics than men's. Second, as gymnasts like Comaneci attracted fame and financial gain, working in women's gymnastics had become a highly attractive prospect. Finally, once Comaneci had demonstrated her 'masculine' style that included a number of highly technical moves, there was a shortage of women's gymnastics coaches who could coach in this style.

A new rule book, released in 1979, irrevocably demonstrates how the elements Comaneci had introduced into the sport were no longer novel, but
required. The 1979 rules introduced highly specific special requirements that the gymnast was required to fill on each apparatus. This indicates that the International Gymnastics Federation was beginning to take a more thorough interest in the regulation of the sport. Whilst the previous rules had been relatively vague, the International Gymnastics Federation now demanded more specifics. As a reflection of the new risky acrobatics that Comaneci had demonstrated, the 1979 rules included a bonus for the performance of risky elements. Also, perhaps in a reaction to the way that many gymnasts in the 1970s such as Comaneci were creating new elements, a bonus was included for the performance of original elements. This suggests then, that in this stage of the sport's development, it was the gymnasts such as Comaneci, led by their coaches, who were directing the style of gymnastics performed. The rules were then written in order to re-evaluate and categorise the changes that the gymnasts had introduced to the sport.

At the 1980 Olympic Games, Comaneci remained an influential gymnast. Again, she took gold on beam, indicating how great her supremacy was on this apparatus during this time. Through taking the overall silver and gold on floor as well, it is apparent that Comaneci really dominated gymnastics as the star performer throughout her entire career as a gymnast. Also, she needed to alter her 1976 beam routine only slightly in order to take gold, indicating that the requirements in the 1979 rules were only 'catching up' to what she had already performed in 1976. This confirms the theory that at this point in the history of the sport, it was the gymnasts, led by their coaches, who were directing the sport, with the rules only regulating developments after they occurred.

The early 1980s show another influential aspect of Comaneci's 1976 performance. Following the awarding of the first ten in 1976, scores in general had risen. This development took place in a very short time. Before 1976, a ten was inconceivable; by 1983 the opposite was true, where there were too many tens being awarded, often when they were not truly deserved. Fenwick speculated that this occurred because the rules and regulations did not keep up with the standard of the gymnasts. If the judging laws had been regulated more thoroughly, then gymnasts who were scoring 9.7 or 9.8 would have been awarded 9.2 or 9.3, allowing a spread of scores. However by awarding average gymnasts 9.7s, the judges were forced to award tens to all the superior gymnasts. This problem was not in fact completely resolved until the creation of the 1993 rules ten years later.

Through examining the developments that occurred from 1976 to 1983, Comaneci's influence is highly apparent. It was a period where changes were initiated directly by the gymnasts performing routines created by their coaches, although increased bureaucratisation in the form of tighter judging rules followed several years later. Due to the rules still being relatively vague
in terms of requirements, gymnasts had a lot of freedom to innovate, and accordingly, many new skills were developed. Although the 1979 rules were more specific than in 1970, they still included clauses which encouraged gymnasts to innovate, therefore setting the tone for gymnasts to dictate the style of gymnastics performed. This meant that the sport was structured in a way that allowed Comaneci and to a lesser extent Kim, as directed by their coaches, to reinvent women's gymnastics in terms of style, the level of difficulty and the level of scoring. Due to their enormous success at the 1976 Olympic Games, several of the skills they introduced became immediately popular and therefore influenced the types of skills that other, later gymnasts chose to include in their routines. In terms of the skills performed, more elements from men's gymnastics were included, unaccompanied by the extensive emphasis on choreography that had previously characterised women's gymnastics. This change was reinforced as men's gymnastics coaches switched to coaching women. This period also encompassed a move to an androgynous body type. A fully developed female body lacked the high strength to weight ratio required for skills such as the double back somersault. The public's interest in the spectacular, high flying skills adapted from men's gymnastics, and the appearance of the tiny gymnasts caused the popularity of the sport to soar. Consequently, the attention of the media was caught, particularly by Nadia Comaneci, whose attraction remained high due to her success at both Olympic Games that occurred in this period. However, with the retirement of Comaneci in 1982 and the paucity of new stars in the sport, by 1983, the interest in gymnastics waned. Yet this situation did not last long, as Comaneci's influential coaches, the Karolyis, defected from Romania and busied themselves creating a new gymnastics centre in the United States. There, the Karolyis introduced the system they perfected in Romania and continue to influence the direction of women's gymnastics up until the present day.  

NOTES


A ‘flight’ element refers to a skill such as a somersault or a flic flac, where the gymnast performs an acrobatic skill that involves briefly flying through the air.


Deford, *Sports Illustrated*.

Guttmann argues that Comaneci was seen as so much more outstanding than Kim because she achieved a new record of seven perfect tens, while Kim only achieved one. Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, Columbia University Press, New York City, 1978, p. 52.


The Karolyis were regarded as the most significant figures in the history of gymnastics by 85% of the experts, with seven going on to describe their training methods in more detail.


Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, p. 44.


Four of the gymnastics experts interviewed commented on this ‘sameness’ without any prompting. Interviewees were not specifically asked their views on any particular national team or person, yet 20% of the interviewees chose to comment at this surprisingly detailed level about the Romanian team.

Interview with an ex-elite gymnast, elite judge and coach, 9 August 2002.

Interview with an elite national coach, 5 July 2002.


29 Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p. 275.
30 Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p. 275.
33 Karolyi and Richardson, *Feel No Fear*, p. 70.
34 Comaneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, p. 25.
44 Grossfeld 'Nadia '81', p. 16.
47 These specific words were mentioned by three of the interviewees, all of whom were high level gymnasts, coaches or judges during this period and felt strongly that this was the case. Other interviewees did not necessarily choose to speak at length on this particular period of gymnastics.
52 Criley 'Crash and Burn', p. 14.
53 Comaneci and Smither, *Nadia*, p. 42; Comaneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, p. 86.

55 Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p. 276.

56 Smither, *Behind The Scenes of Gymnastics*, p. 117.


64 The Karolyis went on to coach 1984 Olympic champion Mary Lou Retton, 1991 World Champion Kim Zmeskal and two members of the United States team who won the team event at the 1996 Olympic Games. In 2006, Marta Karolyi is one of the National coaches of the United States women's gymnastics team. This team was so successful at the 2005 World Championships that they won nine of the ten gold and silver medals on offer at the championships.