

Eternal Youth. Gymnasts, Ageing and Body Narratives across Sport, Media and Post– Career Trajectories *

Ylenia Caputo**
University of Bologna

Gymnastics is a discipline that offers the possibility to explore the complex relationship between body, ageing and gender. Professional gymnasts, who reach the peak of their physical performance during adolescence, appear to undergo an anomalous alteration of the ageing process, shaped by both extrinsic elements (intense physical effort, strict dietary regimes, the use of pharmacological substances) and intrinsic ones (the natural biological metamorphosis). As is well known, the developmental phase, with the changes it entails – first and foremost the onset of menstruation – affects the athletes' physical performance. Their young bodies are thus prematurely perceived, experienced and managed as if they were "old bodies", generating a paradox that translates into concrete attempts to delay such ageing, through practices that, in fact, reverse the process and confine gymnasts within a sort of "perpetual youth", with all the associated physical, biological, psychological, and even social implications. In exploring this phenomenon, reference will be made to the representations and narratives of gymnasts in the media, with a specific focus on the docu-series *Ginnaste – Vite Parallele* (MTV, 2011–2016) and the fiction *The Gymnasts (Corpo libero, Rai 2, 2023)*. Furthermore, exemplary figures in the discipline will be taken into account, such as Carlotta Ferlito for Italy and Simone Biles for the United States, who, as public and cross-media personalities, contribute to the redefinition of the female body, ageing and heroism, in the sporting context and beyond.

Keywords: Ageing, Gymnasts, Agency, Post-career, Sport Heroines

* Article submitted on 13/04/2025. Article accepted on 15/06/2025. This article is part of the research activities of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project "CELEBR-ETÀ – Ageing celebrity in contemporary media and sport contexts: a model of social and cultural well-being" (project code P2022XS937, CUP D53D23019930001), funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

** ylenia.caputo2@unibo.it

Introduction

Artistic gymnastics constitutes a privileged site for interrogating the tensions that traverse the female body within contemporary sport, particularly in relation to the concept of ageing, understood not solely as a biological process, but as a cultural and media construct. More than other disciplines, gymnastics invites critical reflection on the nexus between performance, visibility, and the representation of youthful corporeality, revealing how the imperatives of athletic excellence intersect with those of entertainment and celebrity.

Over the past two decades, elite gymnasts – especially those belonging to the Millennial and Gen Z cohorts – have emerged not only for their competitive accomplishments, but also as highly visible media figures operating within a cross-media ecosystem that spans television and digital platforms. Their public exposure has brought into sharp relief a central paradox: the young athletic body, celebrated for its efficiency and virtuosity, is simultaneously subjected to control regimes aimed at suspending time – delaying or even denying the visible signs of biological maturation. In this sense, artistic gymnastics functions as a particularly revealing lens that helps us see more clearly the contradictions of sporting ageing and the normative models of femininity that this sport reinforces or subverts.

This essay focuses specifically on a selected group of Italian and American gymnasts – such as Carlotta Ferlito and Simone Biles – who have distinguished themselves not only through their sporting achievements, but also through the intense and often contradictory media attention surrounding their biographical trajectories. These athletes, through multifaceted and sometimes contested public narratives, have contributed to reconfiguring the boundaries of female sporting subjectivity, embodying emergent models of celebrity, agency, and cultural resistance. The Italian context – which remains underexplored in academic literature – constitutes, in this sense, a particularly salient case study, not only due to the technical calibre of the athletes involved, but also in light of their visibility within the national media landscape.

The analysis adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on cultural studies, the sociology of sport, and media studies. Specifically, it is grounded in the examination of media content related to gymnasts active from the 2010s to the present, with particular attention to audiovisual materials (including docu-series and television fiction), cross-media narratives, and digital communication practices. A central corpus of the study is composed of the Italian productions *Ginnaste – Vite parallele* (MTV, 2011–2016) and *The Gymnasts (Corpo Libero)* (Rai 2, 2023), analysed as representative of broader transformations in the representation of athletes and the female sporting body.

These texts are further complemented by an analysis of self-branding strategies and digital storytelling performed by the athletes on social media platforms – particularly Instagram and TikTok – accompanying moments of biographical rupture or transition. Additionally, the article draws on interviews released by the athletes in newspapers, weekly magazines, and national and international periodicals, with the aim of capturing the complexity of the discursive construction surrounding the figure of the contemporary

gymnast. The corpus includes testimonies relating to competitive experience, training conditions, bodily regulation, and media exposure, thus enabling a multidimensional inquiry into the symbolic and cultural production that accompanies – and often reshapes – not only the athletes' careers but, crucially, their post-career trajectories.

A Young Old Body: The Paradox of Ageing in Artistic Gymnastics

The analysis of ageing within the context of artistic gymnastics offers a particularly productive lens through which we can question the categories traditionally employed to define and interpret the ageing process – foregrounding its construction as a socio-cultural, rather than merely biological, phenomenon. In dominant cultural imaginaries, ageing is typically associated with chronological progression, biological decline, and the visible markers of physical maturation. This conception also permeates sporting narratives, where the conclusion of an athlete's career is conventionally aligned with the onset of adulthood or the deterioration of physical performance.

This paradigm is especially evident in numerous disciplines – such as soccer – where peak performance is generally situated between the ages of twenty and thirty, followed by a physiological downturn. Similar trajectories are observed in tennis, athletics, and swimming, where athletes tend to reach their competitive apex before the age of thirty, after which performance declines due to cumulative physical strain and a diminished capacity for recovery. Even in endurance-based disciplines like cycling or marathon running, where the decline is comparatively gradual, the effects of time manifest through a reduction in muscular strength and aerobic efficiency. Conversely, certain sports – such as golf or selected motorsport categories – are marked by greater athletic longevity, as technical skill, strategic acumen, and accumulated experience can partially offset the impact of physical ageing and extend the athlete's professional lifespan.

Irrespective of the discipline, the athletic decline and eventual retirement typically coincide with a stage of biological maturity – when the body has completed its developmental trajectory and begins a slow, gradual process of physiological ageing. In the case of artistic gymnastics, however, this chronological and corporeal equation appears fundamentally inverted. Athletes in both artistic and rhythmic gymnastics commence their competitive careers at a remarkably early age and tend to reach their peak performance well before the completion of full biological maturation – most often in late adolescence. Their careers unfold, culminate, and frequently conclude prior to the attainment of physiological adulthood. In this respect, gymnasts elude the conventional understanding of ageing as a linear progression toward decline. And yet, their sporting experience positions them within a condition of premature ageing, imposed by the structural logics of the discipline and by the aesthetic and performative expectations projected onto their bodies. Here, ageing assumes a symbolic function, detached from biological deterioration and anchored instead in cultural scripts of obsolescence and value.

To fully grasp the implications of this dynamic, it is essential to situate it within the broader context from which these athletes emerge. According to Sundgot-Borgen's classification (1994), artistic gymnastics belongs to the category of so-called "aesthetic sports" – disciplines in which physical appearance is closely intertwined with performance assessment. These aesthetic sports are further embedded within the broader group of "leanness sports," where the maintenance of a low body mass index is considered a prerequisite for competitive success. Within this category, a distinction may be drawn between "judged" and "non-judged" disciplines. In the latter – such as athletics – thinness may enhance performance capacities (e.g., speed, endurance), yet the athlete's body is not directly subjected to aesthetic evaluation. In contrast, judged disciplines conceive the body both as a vehicle of technical execution and as an aesthetic object, subject to visual scrutiny and formalised assessment.

Gymnastics falls within the former category, characterised by a high degree of subjectivity in technical evaluation, wherein the athlete's physical appearance becomes an integral component of the assessment process. As a result, aesthetic pressure and the imperative to conform to specific corporeal standards occupy a central position in the life experience of gymnasts, often contributing to distorted perceptions of both the body and the ageing process (Parsons & Betz, 2001). Within this framework, it is not ageing per se but growth that emerges as a particularly critical and destabilising factor. The onset of menstruation, in particular, represents a physiological threshold that disrupts the bodily equilibrium upon which gymnastic performance is predicated, as it is frequently accompanied by increases in body mass and changes in physical composition (Claessens, Lefevre, Beunen & Malina, 2006).

Menarche may thus be experienced as a traumatic rupture – marking the transition from childhood to adolescence – and prematurely confronting athletes with dynamics more commonly associated with ageing, such as the loss of an idealised bodily "purity" and the emergence of physical changes perceived as impediments to performance. In this context, the body is not simply a site of development, but one of discipline and resistance, where biological transitions are problematised rather than naturalised.

The response to these biological changes frequently manifests in strategies of bodily and weight control (Smolak, Murnen & Ruble, 2000; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001), which may include the use of slimming agents, restrictive dietary regimes, and other dysfunctional behaviours (Dipla, Kraemer, Constantini & Hackney, 2021). These practices are aimed not only at maintaining the thinness demanded by the aesthetic norms of the discipline (Parsons & Betz, 2001), but could also be interpreted as contributing to the postponement of biological maturation – potentially resulting in a condition of "perpetual youth" that, paradoxically, reflects a form of premature ageing and embedded ageism. While these athletes' bodies remain chronologically and biologically young, they are nonetheless experienced, regulated, and disciplined as if they were already ageing – subjected to continuous efforts of preservation in resistance to the natural course of physiological development.

Empirical studies confirm that the average age of menarche among gymnasts is significantly delayed compared to non-athletic peers (Brasili, Massidda & Toselli, 2008;

Georgopoulos et al., 2002; Malina, 1999). This paradox assumes substantial cultural and media significance, particularly when considered in relation to sports and audiovisual narratives centred on gymnastics – narratives that are seemingly oriented towards a predominantly young female audience. The representation of gymnasts as eternally adolescent bodies, suspended in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, not only reproduces unattainable ideals of femininity and corporeality, but also reinforces the imperative to resist and control ageing as an inevitable – and therefore threatening – process of bodily transformation.

Artistic Gymnastics in Audiovisual Media: Between Celebration and Disempowerment of the Body

Within the context of audiovisual representations of artistic gymnastics, it is crucial to examine how the media have contributed to constructing not only the image of the discipline itself, but also that of its athletes – foregrounding their sporting achievements alongside their personal lives and the psychological and physical toll of high-level competition. A paradigmatic example of this dynamic is the teen-oriented miniseries *The Gymnasts*, produced by Rai Fiction for Rai 2, which centres on a group of adolescent gymnasts entangled in the investigation of a mysterious murder. The series is situated within a broader socio-cultural context marked by a series of scandals – both national and international – concerning artistic and rhythmic gymnastics, and clearly reflects a growing public sensitivity regarding the safeguarding and well-being of female athletes.

Over the past decade, numerous cases of physical and psychological abuse involving young gymnasts have come to light, most notably the case of Larry Nassar, osteopath for the U.S. national gymnastics team from 1996 to 2017. His trial and subsequent conviction triggered an unprecedented public reckoning with the structural conditions endured by female athletes. Similar dynamics have emerged in Italy, particularly within the sphere of rhythmic gymnastics, where the national team – commonly known as the “Farfalle” (“Butterflies”) – became the centre of media attention following public accusations made in November 2022. Two former athletes, Nina Corradini and Anna Basta, aged 19 and 22 respectively, broke their silence and denounced the mistreatment, humiliation, and psychological abuse they experienced within the Italian Gymnastics Federation. According to their testimonies, the athletes were subjected to sustained psychological pressure by their coach at the federal training centre, who enforced rigid standards concerning physical appearance and weight control. These pressures, they reported, rapidly developed into forms of body obsession and distorted self-perception, resulting in significant psychological distress.

In this light, the decision by Rai Fiction to produce a teen crime drama appears far from incidental: it reflects not only a strategic attempt to engage a youth audience through a popular subgenre (Caputo, 2024), but also operates as a vehicle of social critique –

shedding light on the mechanisms of bodily control and exploitation to which gymnasts are subjected. These mechanisms are often geared toward preserving a state of youthfulness and immaturity, in service of maintaining an “ideal” physique for competition – frequently at the expense of the athletes’ physical and psychological health.

Furthermore, *The Gymnasts* draws critical attention to the construction of a feminine ideal grounded in parameters that continue to shape the media representation of female athletes. The gymnast’s body, in its stylised perfection, becomes not only a symbol of eternal youth, but also a site of extreme vulnerability – perpetually under pressure to conform to an idealised and disciplined aesthetic. This regime of image production closely aligns with the theories advanced by Gill Lines, who argues that femininity in sport is persistently mediated by normative expectations of youthfulness, conventional femininity, and heterosexual appeal: “Female sport stars are often compared to the feminine ideal (...) they are marginalized, trivialized and objectified.” (Lines, 2001, pp. 286–287). Within this framework, the athlete emerges not merely as a performer, but as a public body – one that is at once consumable and, in certain respects, sacrificial.

These dynamics, however, are not confined to the institutional context of sport; they are also reflected – and frequently initiated – by the media. A retrospective examination of the 2010s reveals both continuities and shifts in the ways gymnasts have been represented across media platforms. A significant case in point is the docu-series *Ginnaste – Vite parallele*, broadcast on MTV from 2011 to 2016. The programme followed a group of young athletes training at the *Guglielmetti Federal Technical Centre* in Milan, documenting not only their athletic preparation and competitive journeys, but also the more intimate dimensions of their lives – friendships, family relations, and academic challenges. Despite its commercial success, the series attracted criticism for its portrayal of the athletes as “heroines” to be admired primarily for their perseverance, a narrative that often obscured the psychological and physical burdens associated with the demands of high-level competition.

Moreover, the popularity of the series fuelled a representational dynamic that, while increasing the athletes’ visibility and promoting the values of sport and competition, simultaneously magnified their private lives in ways that were at times ambivalent. On the one hand, the programme offered viewers access to the world of elite gymnastics; on the other, it reinforced the notion that the athletes’ lives were always-already oriented toward spectacle. The personalisation of their daily struggles – though effective in humanising their experience – ultimately contributed to their transformation into fully-fledged media celebrities, amplifying their public exposure and embedding their subjectivities within logics of affective consumption.

After all, “*Ginnaste*” is a docu-soap, part of those “reality narratives” in which, as Manzato argues,

the reality represented is affected by scripting interventions that shape the discourse: even in a genre that claims to be grounded in real life, one can observe clear authorial structuring (...) this is ‘real life’ rendered through a heavily edited montage – often far from realistic – which follows multiple narrative threads. Its structure still follows the open – ended serial format, marked by specific cues. (2016, p. 33)

This dynamic is exemplified by the notable absence of Olympic champion Vanessa Ferrari and national coach Enrico Casella from the programme, as neither authorised the use of their image. Casella, in particular, expressed concern regarding the overexposure of young athletes, drawing attention to the disproportionate focus placed on appearance and aesthetic expectations – dimensions that extend well beyond athletic performance – and implicitly revealing the presence of a stratified system of bodily control. The gymnast thus occupies the central position within a complex matryoshka of influence, shaped simultaneously by coaches, media apparatuses, and broader socio-cultural forces, all of which contribute to determining the conditions under which the athlete becomes visible, recognisable, and culturally legible as “successful.”

But is the message conveyed truly positive? What remains with us after witnessing certain situations brought to light? One thing is certain: proper preparation for competitions takes place away from the cameras, and the true stage for gymnasts is the arena, where it is not television ratings that matter, but the final scores achieved. (Casella, 2011)

The audiovisual representation of gymnasts does not merely portray them as athletes, but rather recasts them as emblems of a broader corporeal and socio-cultural ideal that exceeds the boundaries of sport. Through their media image, wider cultural discourses related to gender, bodily discipline, and regimes of visibility intersect and converge. Television productions and docu-realities, in particular, do not simply document the athletes’ sporting trajectories; they actively participate in the construction of their media identities, shaping the collective imaginary that surrounds them. This process, however, is far from neutral: the intense media exposure and the spectacularization of their discipline significantly influence how these athletes are perceived and treated – both within the sporting domain and in society more broadly – with substantial implications for their psychological and physical well-being.

These representational dynamics intersect with the specific characteristics of Italian sports journalism, which has long exhibited a tendency toward the “worldly” dimension of storytelling, favouring narratives that extend beyond the strictly athletic sphere. As Spalletta and Ugolini (2013) observe, Italian sports journalism has always retained a hybrid character, yet in recent decades, this hybridity has become both central and structurally embedded. Sport is no longer narrated exclusively through the lens of competition, but is increasingly intertwined with other domains – politics, economics, current affairs, and entertainment. This shift reflects a broader trend within journalism towards the relentless pursuit of newsworthiness, even within the ostensibly apolitical sphere of sport. At the same time, athletes and sports institutions are not passive in this transformation; on the contrary, they actively engage with media logic, recognising the strategic value of visibility and adapting to the flows of contemporary information ecosystems, which are now inextricably linked to social media practices.

This reflection leads to the consideration of a further dimension intimately connected to the notion of ageing: the post-career. What happens when a gymnast’s athletic trajectory

concludes at a young age – often before reaching full physical or personal maturity? How is her public image renegotiated once the body – and, more importantly, the subject – ceases to conform to the parameters of competitive performance?

Carlotta Ferlito and the Post-Career: Celebrity Capital, Social Media, and Self-Branding

The reflection on ageing in the context of professional gymnastics cannot exclude an analysis of the post-career phase – a dimension that is pivotal not only from an identity standpoint, but also in terms of its broader symbolic resonance. A paradigmatic example in this regard is Carlotta Ferlito, born in 1995, a key figure in the contemporary landscape of Italian artistic gymnastics. Ferlito emerged during a renewed period of public and media attention to the discipline, following the widespread acclaim of athletes such as Jury Chechi and, most notably, Vanessa Ferrari – her teammate (Ugolini, 2014). Over the course of her career, Ferlito secured significant results both at a national and international level, including three gold medals at the Italian Championships and participation in the 2012 London Olympics, where she reached the individual all-around final.

What renders Ferlito a particularly compelling case study, however, is not her athletic trajectory per se, but rather the transformation of her public and media persona. Her case illustrates how the gymnast's visibility extends beyond the temporal confines of competitive performance, evolving into a broader cultural phenomenon that continues to operate even after the conclusion – or suspension – of her professional career.

At the age of just sixteen, Ferlito became one of the protagonists of *Ginnaste – Vite parallele*, which projected her beyond the niche world of competitive gymnastics, transforming her into a popular figure even among non-specialist audiences. As Ugolini (2014) observes, the media narrative constructed around Ferlito unfolds along a dual axis: on one side, the recognition of her athletic achievements; on the other, her progressive transformation into a celebrity, with a cross-media identity that spans television, press, and social media. In this sense, Ferlito's case perfectly embodies the transition from athlete to pop culture figure, aligning with a broader trend in which sport increasingly intersects with the codes of entertainment and visual culture.

This dimension becomes even more significant in light of the interruption of her athletic career. Following her public denunciations, Ferlito was removed from the Federation and, de facto, excluded from what would have been her third – and final – Olympic Games. The context of her statements aligns with the wave of scandals that erupted in November 2022, initially tied to rhythmic gymnastics, but with repercussions across the broader field. In particular, her exclusive interview with *Le Iene*¹ and her subsequent social media posts brought to light the toxic dynamics within the sport, while also offering a critical reflection on the role of the media: as part of her broader critique, Ferlito denounced the excessive

presence of cameras during the filming of the docu-series, an exposure that the athletes reportedly endured without the opportunity for negotiation or informed consent.

It is precisely this paradox – between imposed visibility and strategically managed visibility – that makes Ferlito's case exemplary for interrogating the ambivalent nature of celebrity capital, understood as “accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations” (Driessens, 2013, p. 17). On one hand, media overexposure subjected the athlete to overwhelming and potentially harmful scrutiny; on the other, it allowed Ferlito to consolidate a public image that extended well beyond her sporting achievements, enabling her to reconvert this symbolic capital into alternative forms of recognition, particularly within the social media environment. This process activates a dynamic increasingly common among athletes of her generation: self-branding. By leveraging the follower base built during her competitive years and her prior media exposure, Ferlito constructed a second career as a content creator, influencer, and digital activist.

Her current public role is not limited to product promotion or the cultivation of a personal aesthetic, but also includes a discursive effort of denunciation and awareness-raising, particularly around issues such as eating disorders, mental health, and the pressures exerted on young women in sport. Celebrity capital, therefore, is not merely spent to sustain personal visibility outside the competitive sphere, but is also reconverted into a tool of agency and cultural intervention. Her presence on digital platforms, particularly Instagram (@carlyferry, 837k followers) and TikTok (@carlottaferlito, 362k followers), enables her to reach an intergenerational audience: on one hand, peers who followed her since the days of the docu-series; on the other, a new generation of users who first encounter her as an influencer and only later – if at all – as a former athlete.

This phenomenon can be read in light of Bifulco and Tirino's reflections, according to which “in the age of convergence (...) the tribalization of the relationship between community and hero manifests itself in the surplus, creative, and imaginative practices of the Internet,” (2018, p. 21) where the bond between fans and sports celebrities is expressed through fluctuating affective modes, ranging from mythologization to mockery. The digital visibility of former athletes, therefore, is not confined to a promotional space, but becomes an affective and political arena in which storytelling, identification, and the renegotiation of public image unfold in participatory, fluid, and at times contradictory ways.

In this sense, social media today represent the privileged site of post-career continuity: a space in which the public figure can evolve, adapt, and transform, negotiating in real time their identity and symbolic value. For Ferlito – and many other Generation Z athletes – the end of the sporting career does not mark an exit from the scene, but rather a metamorphosis: a shift from athlete to digital sports celebrity, capable of surviving – and at times being reborn – within the multiplicity of languages and formats of contemporary communication.

In parallel, generalist newspapers and mainstream periodicals have also contributed to shaping the post-career storytelling around Ferlito, with a particular focus on her affective, relational, and emotional dimensions. *Vanity Fair*, which has followed the evolution of her public image over time, presents a narrative arc that ranges from the celebration of her career peak (Oggiano, 2016; Pizzimienti, 2019), to the gradual emergence of critical

reflections on the world of gymnastics, as seen in 2020 (Colosimo), when Ferlito already spoke openly about eating disorders and the pressures she had endured, albeit without directly clashing with sports institutions. In more recent articles (Amorosini, 2024; Nicolini, 2024), the emphasis shifts to a narrative centred on personal suffering, family ties, and her mother's illness, but also on the courage needed to speak out publicly. Likewise, in her 2024 interview on the Mediaset talk show *Verissimo*, the media construction relies heavily on a confessional and empathetic tone, portraying Ferlito as a resilient figure – emotionally close to the public – who transforms trauma into a tool of awareness. This mode of storytelling, which alternates between vulnerability and empowerment, aligns closely with the logic of celebrity capital and post-career self-branding, in which public identity is structured through emotional and relational narratives (Rojek, 2016), both on social media and in mainstream media outlets.

Vulnerability, Agency, and Post-Heroic Narratives

A further critical issue concerns the concept of sporting heroism, particularly in its gendered declinations. As highlighted earlier, the cross-media storytelling of the discipline – and, with it, of the athletes' celebrity – has become a key sounding board for the denunciation of abuse and for raising awareness on themes historically marginalized in sports discourse: mental health, trauma, and the body's refusal to submit to the logics of performance and perfection.

In this scenario, the case of Simone Biles has taken on a paradigmatic value. In 2021, during the Tokyo Olympics, Biles withdrew from both the individual and team finals, citing the need to protect her mental health. Her gesture, made at the height of her career, disrupted the traditional narrative of the invincible athlete and inaugurated a new grammar of success – one that recognizes vulnerability not as a sign of weakness, but as an act of resistance. Her return to competition two years later at the US Classic, culminating in a new victory, only reinforced the symbolic power of that initial gesture. The viral media coverage of her breakdown, withdrawal, and subsequent comeback transformed Biles into an emblematic figure of transgenerational resilience, capable of embodying and promoting new shared values, particularly among younger generations.

Other athletes have made similar choices, restoring complexity to the traditional sports narrative. This is the case, for instance, of Katelyn Ohashi, a former rising star of American gymnastics, who left elite competition at the age of 21, after experiencing repeated episodes of body shaming, based on a physique deemed "inadequate" by prevailing standards. Following spinal surgery, Ohashi returned to gymnastics as a collegiate athlete, competing for UCLA from 2016 and contributing to a reimagining of sporting performance as a collective, expressive, and political experience. Her routines, marked by energy and freedom, went viral on social media, helping to construct an alternative image of the athlete – not as a body to be disciplined, but as an agentic subject.

Social media, through their mechanisms of circulation and amplification, have played a pivotal role in the viralization of these gymnasts and, in particular, in reinforcing the public resonance of their return. Performance videos, interviews, public statements, as well as moments of collapse, crisis, and rebirth, have been shared, recirculated, and reinterpreted within a cross-media ecosystem that has transformed individual episodes into collective narratives. In the cases of Simone Biles and Katelyn Ohashi, digital resonance has helped to build an imaginary grounded in the body's rebellion against oppressive expectations, in empowerment, and in a redefinition of strength through vulnerability. The viral spread of these stories has not only extended their reach, but also fostered affective and interpretive communities that align with emerging values such as authenticity, dignity, and self-determination – thus fostering new models of female heroism.

This narrative shift has also resonated widely across mainstream media, which have helped to institutionalize the idea of a female heroism rooted in vulnerability and rebirth. Headlines such as “Vulnerability is not Weakness” (*La fragilità non è debolezza*, Murgia, 2021), referring to Biles' temporary withdrawal from the Tokyo Olympics, or *The Simone Biles Revolution* (O'Rourke, 2023), in the wake of her triumphant return, reflect a redefinition of excellence that increasingly privileges emotional authenticity and agency. Similarly, titles like “The Dramatic Stories of the Rebellious Gymnasts” (*Le drammatiche storie delle ginnaste ribelli*, Cazzullo, 2022) and “‘You Look Like a Pig’: Gymnast Katelyn Ohashi Speaks Out Again and Fights Against Body Shaming” (*‘Sembri un maiale’. La ginnasta Katelyn Ohashi torna a denunciare e a battersi per il body shaming*, Monnis, 2019) explore the rupture between the performative and the lived body, underscoring a shift from conformity to self-assertion. Local press like *La Nazione* (2023) have described these stories in terms of “rebirth” and “rediscovered love for sport”, portraying athletes no longer as performing bodies, but as resilient individuals reconciled with themselves. Across all these examples, trauma is neither silenced nor erased, but rather articulated and made shareable through narrative; crisis is thus transformed into story, and story into a symbolic resource through which the athlete's role within the public sphere is redefined.

A pivotal component of this narrative reconfiguration is the transition from the “rise and fall” to the “fall and rise” biographical model. While both structures maintain a cyclical framework, the crucial – albeit nuanced – distinction lies in the narrative's point of departure and in the transformative value ascribed to failure. The “rise and fall” biography, which remains particularly dominant in representations of male athleticism, is anchored in the primacy of success: the fall, when it occurs, functions as an epilogue – a moment of crisis that enhances dramatic intensity without destabilizing the underlying heroic paradigm. As Bifulco and Tirino note, this narrative includes “the moment – inexorable for an athlete – of physical decadence,” which may give way to a “different kind of beginning” (2020, p. 13). Yet, from the present author's perspective, this model continues to operate within an ascending narrative trajectory, wherein transformation is relegated to a post-peak phase and fails to constitute the foundational axis of the athlete's journey.

In contrast, the “fall and rise” biography – progressively emblematic of contemporary representations of female athletes – locates its narrative fulcrum in the fall itself. It is

precisely within the moment of fracture, disruption, and suspension that the trajectory toward success is set in motion. This is not simply a process of identity re-elaboration, but rather a reconfiguration of vulnerability as the foundational condition of heroism. The crisis is no longer conceived as an obstacle to be overcome in order to restore a prior self; instead, it emerges as the prerequisite for becoming what one is destined to be. In this framework, the fall does not merely precede success – it generates it.

Notably, this narrative configuration intersects with the theme of ageing, particularly in the case of gymnasts, whose careers begin – and often conclude – at a remarkably young age. Here, the fall is not associated with physical decline or biological senescence, as is commonly the case in other sports, but rather functions as a symbolic rupture that enables the gymnast to renegotiate her public persona and reassert herself within a space of agency. Athletes who return to the spotlight after a hiatus, a traumatic experience, or retirement, effectively rearticulate the temporalities and modalities of sporting ageing, decoupling it from biological chronology and embedding it within a narrative logic of resistance, transformation, and self-reinvention.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon intersects with the broader reflection on the gendered construction of sporting heroism. As is well known, the heroic imagination in sport has historically been shaped by a masculine paradigm: the athlete-hero embodies strength, virility, tenacity, and dominance, retaining legitimacy even in defeat. The fallen male athlete is still celebrated as a symbol of resilience, often inscribed in an epic and linear narrative. Conversely, as Gill Lines (2001) observes, female sporting heroism tends to be confined to stereotypical and archetypal figures. Lines identifies two dominant archetypes: the sex goddess, hyper-feminine, and sexualized, and the girl next door, youthful, accessible, reassuring. Both images reinforce a vision of the female athlete as an object of the male gaze – be it desiring or paternalistic – that ultimately limits her agency.

These representations reduce the complexity of female subjectivities in sport, denying women the possibility of occupying narrative spaces that are autonomous, contradictory, and layered. Nonetheless, there are figures who, while operating within complex media logics, have managed to carve out relatively autonomous symbolic spaces. Such is the case, among others, of Serena Williams, Federica Pellegrini, Cathy Freeman, and Megan Rapinoe. Through diverse communication strategies – ranging from the assertion of ethnic or sexual identity to assertive management of media visibility – these athletes have partially renegotiated the roles assigned to women in sport, emerging as symbols of strength, agency, and discontinuity in relation to dominant models. Though they remain exceptional figures, their presence helps illuminate the still-limited opportunities for constructing female narratives that are not entirely subjected to patriarchal or aestheticizing gazes.

In a similar way, contemporary gymnasts also seem to challenge this logic. Through narratives of vulnerability, trauma, rupture, and return, they propose an alternative model of heroism – one rooted not in invulnerability, but in the conscious exposure of fragility. In this sense, female anti-heroism is not a negation of heroism, but a rewriting of it. These athletes do not reject strength, they redefine it: strength as the ability to ask for help, to stop, and to change the rules of the game.

This shift is also enabled by the evolving configuration of media platforms. Within a communicative ecosystem that privileges experiential narratives, affective engagement, and practices of sharing, gymnasts are no longer positioned as passive objects of external storytelling, but emerge as active agents and authors of their own narratives. In asserting narrative control, they contribute to a redefinition not only of the cultural imaginary of sport, but also of femininity and power itself.

Nonetheless, it remains essential to adopt a critical lens toward the dynamics underpinning these emergent narrative forms. As Lines (2001) observes, female athletes achieve media visibility predominantly when they conform to specific gendered expectations, with their vulnerability frequently articulated through tropes of redemptive emotionality and normative morality. In this light, even the “fall and rise” biographical model – despite its apparent transformative potential – risks being co-opted by the very cultural logics it purports to challenge, rendering acts of resistance into ritualized and commodified performances. The athlete’s return following a moment of crisis may be framed as an assertion of agency, yet often in a mediated and illusory form, circumscribed by imperatives to elicit empathy, garner approval, and accrue market value. What emerges, therefore, is an ambivalent dynamic – less a marker of emancipation than a manifestation of the unresolved tension between autonomy and conformity, transgression and cultural legitimation.

Conclusions

Contemporary gymnasts, positioned at the intersection of hyper-performative athletic practices and normative aesthetic regimes, are actively reshaping their public identities through a nuanced reconfiguration of the codes of visibility, vulnerability, and power. The analysis presented in this essay has sought to illustrate how the female gymnastic body – traditionally constructed as fragile, youthful, and subject to control – has evolved into a site of complex symbolic negotiation, wherein biological, cultural, media, and political dimensions intersect and are contested.

Artistic gymnastics constitutes a particularly illuminating case for examining the contradictions embedded in the social construction of ageing – wherein biological and cultural temporalities collide, producing tensions between growth and preservation, evolution and stasis, maturation and resistance. Athletes within this discipline exemplify an intensified regime of bodily regulation, in which ageing is not merely a physiological process, but a socially constructed phenomenon, deeply influenced by the logics of spectacle, performance, and success. Rather than representing a marginal deviation from the dominant model of masculine sporting heroism, the narratives surrounding adolescent and post-adolescent gymnasts outline an alternative semantic field – one in which ageing is rearticulated not as a signifier of decline, but as a transformative threshold, and in which success emerges from crisis, rupture, and temporal suspension. Vulnerability, in this context, is not only acknowledged, but deliberately performed and publicly circulated,

acquiring the status of cultural and affective capital capable of reshaping the expectations and imaginaries of an entire generation of spectators.

Within this framework, a rearticulated configuration of the female sporting subject emerges – one that may be interpreted, through the lens of postfeminist theory, as an ambivalent discursive formation (Gill, 2007): a form of femininity no longer constructed solely in opposition to masculinity, but one that hybridizes strength and vulnerability, autonomy and spectacularization, agency and representational constraint. As Gill notes, postfeminist sensibility is characterised by the entanglement of empowerment and surveillance, choice and coercion, discipline and desire. The gymnasts under examination – such as Carlotta Ferlito, Simone Biles, and numerous other lesser-known yet digitally prominent athletes – appear to embody this postfeminist ambivalence, wherein the capacity for strategic self-exposure coincides with the potential to expand the discursive boundaries of what may be articulated, rendered visible, and politically claimed.

The symbolic significance of these figures extends well beyond the sporting domain, calling into question the very categories through which ageing, celebrity, self-care, and bodily construction are conceptualised in contemporary culture. In this regard, gymnasts are not merely athletic subjects, but cultural agents who question and destabilise the discursive foundations of sport and success from within, opening up new spaces of meaning for female self-representation and fostering a renewed critical reflection on subjectivity within the public sphere.

Biographical note

Ylenia Caputo, PhD, is Research Fellow at the Department of the Arts, University of Bologna, within the PRIN PNRR 2022 project *CELEBR-AGE*. Her research focuses on media theory, celebrity culture, and intergenerational studies. She is a teaching tutor for the Joint Master's Degree Programme in *Scienze dello Spettacolo e della Produzione Audiovisiva*. (University of Bologna/University of Salento). She serves as Journal Manager for *ZoneModa Journal* and as Editorial Assistant for *Cinergie – Il Cinema e le altre Arti*. She is the author of the monograph *Italian Gen Z Celebrity. L'analisi delle celebrità teen nella produzione audiovisiva italiana contemporanea* (Mimesis/Cinergie, Milano-Udine 2024).

Bibliography

- Amorosini, A. (2024). Carlotta Ferlito: «Non vedo l'ora che il dolore di mamma possa smettere di esistere». *Vanity Fair*. Preso da: www.vanityfair.it.
- Bifulco, L., Tirino, M. (2018). The Sports Hero in the Social Imaginary. Identity, Community, Ritual and Myth. *Imago*, 11-VII, 9-25. DOI: 10.7413/22818138110.
- Brasili, P., Massidda, M., Toselli, S. (2008). Aspetti fenotipici della ginnasta d'elite. In *Atti del Convegno Scientifico Nazionale "La Ginnastica Artistica nel XXI secolo"* (pp. 33-47). Roma: Aracne.

- Casella, E. (2011). *Perché prepararsi in un reality tv?* Preso da: https://web.archive.org/web/20131219225520/http://www.brixiagym.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=301:perche-prepararsi-inun-reality-tv&catid=3:il-brixia-pensiero&Itemid=58.
- Cazzulo, A. (2022). La drammatica storia delle ginnaste ribelli. *iO Donna*. Preso da: www.iodonna.it.
- Claessens, A.L., Lefevre, J., Beunen, P., Malina, R. (2006). Maturity-associated variation in the body size and proportions of elite female gymnasts 14-17 years of age. *Eur J Pediatr*, 165, 186-192. DOI: 10.1007/s00431-005-0017-8.
- Colosimo, V. (2020). Carlotta Ferlito: «La ginnastica artistica e i disturbi alimentari». *Vanity Fair*. Preso da: www.vanityfair.it.
- Dipla K., Kraemer, R.R., Constantini, N.W., Hackney, A.C. (2021). Relative energy deficiency in sports (RED-S): elucidation of endocrine changes affecting the health of males and females. *Hormones (Athens)*. Mar;20(1):35-47. DOI: 10.1007/s42000-020-00214-w. Epub 2020 Jun 17.
- Driessens, O. (2013). Celebrity capital: redefining celebrity using field theory. *Theory and Society*, 42, 543-560. DOI: 10.1007/s11186-013-9202-3.
- Georgopoulos, NA., Markou, KB., Theodoropoulou, A., Benardot, D., Leglise, M., Vagenakis, AG (2002). Growth retardation in artistic compared with rhythmic elite female gymnasts. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab*, Jul;87(7), 3169-3173. DOI: 10.1210/jcem.87.7.8640. PMID: 12107219.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166. DOI: 10.1177/1367549407075898
- Lines, G. (2001). Villains, fools or heroes? Sports stars as role models for young people. *Leisure Studies*, 20:4, 285-303. DOI: 10.1080/02614360110094661.
- Malina, RM., Geithner, CA. (2011). Body Composition of Young Athletes. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 5(3), 262-278. DOI: 10.1177/1559827610392493.
- Manzato, A. (2016). Scrivere la realtà. La serialità nel factual. *Mediascapes journal*, 6/2016, 30-40.
- Monnis, M. (2019). “Sembri un maiale”. La ginnasta Katelyn Ohashi torna a denunciare e a battersi per il body shaming. *Elle*. Preso da: www.elle.com/it.
- Murgia, M. (2021). Biles. La fragilità non è debolezza. *la Repubblica*. Preso da: www.larepubblica.it.
- Nicolini, M. (2024). Carlotta Ferlito dice addio alla madre: «Il vuoto che lasci è inesprimibile». *Vanity Fair*. Preso da: www.vanityfair.it.
- O'Rourke, M. (2023). The Simone Biles Revolution. *The Atlantic*. Preso da: www.theatlantic.com/world.
- Oggiano, F. (2016). Carlotta Ferlito: «E adesso, avete ancora il coraggio di chiamarmi Diva?». *Vanity Fair*. Preso da: www.vanityfair.it.
- Parsons, E. M., Betz, N. E. (2001). The relationship of participation in sports and physical activity to body objectification, instrumentality, and locus of control among young

- women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25(3), 209-222. DOI: 10.1111/1471-6402.00022.
- Pizzimienti, C. (2019). Universiadi: l'oro di Carlotta Ferlito, star della ginnastica. *Vanity Fair*. Preso da: www.vanityfair.it.
- Redazione (2023). La rinascita di un'atleta: dall'infortunio alla vita Come Katelyn ha ritrovato l'amore per lo sport. *La Nazione*. Preso da: www.lanazione.it.
- Rojek, C. (2016). *Presumed Intimacy. Para-social Relationship in Media Society & Celebrity Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Smolak, L., Murnen, S. K., Ruble, A. E. (2000). Female athletes and eating problems: A meta-analysis. *International journal of eating disorders*, 27(4), 371-380. DOI: 10.1002/(sici)1098-108x(200005)27:4<371::aid-eat1>3.0.co;2-y
- Spalletta, M., Ugolini, L. (2014). Hybridity in Italian sports journalism: from sportswomen to celebrities. In *Hybridity and the News. Hybrid Forms of Journalism in the 21st Century*, 188-204. Electronic Proceedings.
- Sundgot-Borgen, J. (1994). Eating disorders in female athletes. *Sports medicine*, 17(3), 176-188. DOI: 10.2165/00007256-199417030-00004.
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2001). A test of objectification theory in former dancers and non-dancers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25(1), 57-64. DOI: 10.1111/1471-6402.00000.

Notes

¹ *Le Iene* is an Italian television program focused on investigative reporting and satire, featuring a mix of reports, provocative interviews, and humor. It has been airing on Italia 1 since 1997 and is known for addressing current issues with a sharp and often controversial style.