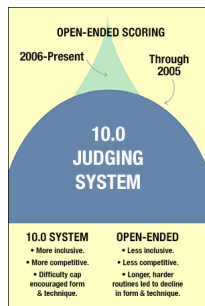


Written by dwight normile

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2016 marks the 10th year under the current Code of Points, which tried to repair an ineffective judging system from 2004 by creating — and adding — two separate scores: “Difficulty” and “Execution.” Like separating an egg white from its yolk, it can be messy if handled improperly. It is debatable whether this rather one-dimensional Code, which continues to get tweaked as problems arise, has actually *improved* the sport *or* its evaluation.

Since the 2006 World Championships in Aarhus, Denmark, gymnasts, by no choice of their own, have served as guinea pigs. The Code was unveiled at that competition without thorough testing, and its warts arose immediately. Fans complained that **Vanessa Ferrari** won the all-around with a fall from beam, which at the time cost her 0.8. (A fall is 1.0 now.) She defeated American Jana Bieger by .275. A more valid complaint would have asked why Ferrari received credit for the full-twisting back that she fell on.

The real problem with this Code is more central to its structure, however. The frivolity of counting a gymnast’s 10 hardest skills remains troubling on various levels. First, it caused routines to mushroom into marathons. Second, it wrongly assumed that fans disliked the sheer beauty of basic skills in favor of routines full of risk. And third, the new scores above 10.0 effectively eliminated any spontaneous, corporate crowd response, since nobody really knew whether a 14.525, for example, was worthy of applause or boos. In effect, reactive audience participation has been minimized.

After the 2008 Olympics the women’s technical committee wisely lowered the requirement to eight skills, but the men retained the 10. Now we watch seven-pass floor routines that move in fast motion. (Why men’s floor exercise is the only event with a 70-second time limit remains a mystery.) A routine that once included dynamic passes and original corner transitions is now a tumbling race, and one that often increases in speed near the end. Routines on the other events seem endless at times, too, leaving vault as perhaps the most exciting apparatus. At least fans can immediately recall what a vaulter did, which is no longer the case on the other events. Maybe less really is more.

By design — and by accident — this Code of Points has accelerated the natural evolution of the sport at the expense of form, technique and overall health of the gymnasts. The fallout of this failed experiment has created a severe decline in the depth and competitiveness of women's gymnastics compared with the men. Consider these figures from the 2015 Glasgow World Championships. In the women's team final, which is the sum of only 12 scores, the difference between first (U.S.) and eighth (Netherlands) was 18.608. In the men's final, which counted 18 scores, the difference between first-place Japan and eighth-place Korea was only 11.141. With the men competing two more events than the women, one would think the spread would be greater, not smaller.

The individual qualifications revealed the same trend. **Simone Biles'** top-ranked 61.598 was 5.232 higher than 10th-place

Mai Murakami

. The leading total of 90.564 for

Kohei Uchimura

, on the other hand, was only 2.199 higher than 10th-ranked

Nile Wilson

. Again, with the men competing 50 percent more routines than the women, these differences are telling.

Male gymnasts, who physically mature in their mid-20s, are able to cope with the demands of this Code better than women, who mature in their mid- to late-teens. But both sexes favor relatively short, compact all-around gymnasts, such as Uchimura and Biles. That he has won six straight world titles, and she three, is indeed a testament to their talent, but also facilitated by an FIG schedule which holds three world championships per quadrennium. **Larisa Latynina** won two Olympics (1956, '60) and two worlds (1958, '62) when both events were held once every four years. Imagine the streak she might have put together under the current schedule.

The sport has always been about difficulty, but even more so since 2006. The Amanar vault (6.3 value), for example, is still a huge advantage for a female all-arounder, and Biles was the only gymnast in the Glasgow field of 24 to perform one. Even more indicative of the dwindling women's depth is that **Shang Chunsong** of China, who finished a respectable fourth, performed a last-century Yurchenko-full (5.0). In fact, nine of the women's all-around finalists used a 5.0 vault.

In an attempt to pack each routine with as much difficulty as possible, certain elements have

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become extinct. Stalders are being replaced by inside-Stalders on uneven bars, for instance, and most of them are rather ugly — phantom sole circles with feet flexed just beneath the bar. And the various jumps on women's floor, separately or following a tumbling landing, add nothing to the artistic impression of the exercise. These elements rack up points, however, thanks to the immunity that Difficulty enjoys under this Code.

Even with the problems that arose at the 2004 Olympics, such as the crowd booing the high bar scores, the drastic overhaul of the Code of Points afterward was completely unnecessary. It needed only a band-aid, not a body cast. Scores in the low- to mid-teens suck the drama out of competitions since they are relatively meaningless in terms of performance quality. Fans must wait until each rotation ends to understand who is winning. A better solution would have been to keep the 10.0 as the top mark, flawed as any capped system is, and adopt the current execution deduction tables. Aside from vault, a score of 9.0 for execution is a rarity now, but at least the audience will understand its value compared with a 10.0.

And let's not limit judges to taking only Small (0.10), Medium (0.30) and Large (0.50) execution deductions. A complex sport like gymnastics includes a spectrum of errors that should not be constrained to T-shirt sizes. Do all steps after a vault landing really fit neatly into the 0.10-0.30-0.50 range? Of course not. Is a two-tenth step seen as "Small" for Uchimura but "Medium" for an unknown from Slovakia? You can imagine the temptation of many a judge.

Another positive change would be to slice all difficulty values in half — an A-skill drops from 0.10 to 0.05, etc. — and require skills of all difficulty value. That will leave room for event requirements and execution deductions. Remember the old "two C's, four B's, six A's" difficulty formula? How did we get to "10 hardest skills"? No wonder artistry has declined. Routines are so hard that performance mastery has given way to survival.

All routines, for men and women, need no more than three or four elements to showcase a gymnast's strengths. The remainder could be skills that show actual virtuosity and amplitude. That's what made compulsories so special. It was the one chance to see basic elements taken to the max. Why can't that also be part of today's optional routines?

The Code should also consider a stricter approach to repetition. If floor phenom **Kenzo Shirai** can tumble a triple-twisting double layout, a quadruple-twisting back and a triple-twisting front, the lesser versions of each become relative filler in his routine. His hardest skills are what people will rave about after the meet, and rightly so.

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Gymnasts should still be compared with their peers based on their most difficult elements, as long as they are performed with some degree of expertise. Shirai actually bounced out of bounds when he debuted his layout triple-double at the Toyota International in December. That would have been considered a huge mistake under the 10.0 judging system. But in this new era of excess, few fans seem to care, as long as he made the skill.

Are longer, harder routines an improvement on the past? Should gymnastics, which requires an array of abilities (power, grace, technique, style, form, rhythm), be a test of endurance, too? Is Uchimura's seven-year winning streak healthy for the sport, or is it exposing the fact that fewer and fewer gymnasts can master six events under such stringent requirements?

Fans once described routines as "gorgeous" or "beautiful." Now we hear "insane" and "crazy." Before it's too late, the FIG needs to make some responsible decisions on how to govern the sport. It needs to simultaneously consider the welfare of the gymnasts and the enjoyment of fans. Evaluating only a gymnast's hardest skills was never the solution to the problems in 2004.

The beautiful sport of gymnastics encompasses much more than pushing the levels of difficulty from start to finish. Routines should be performances. Now, more than ever, is the time to incorporate some of the past into the future.