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The Story Behind Netflix's *Athlete A*, a New Documentary About the USA Gymnastics Sex Abuse Scandal

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The case of Larry Nassar, the former USA Gymnastics team doctor who was accused of sexually abusing at least 250 girls over his decades-long career, exposed one of the largest sexual abuse scandals in U.S. sports history. Now, the story of the massive efforts it took to bring Nassar to justice gets the spotlight in *Athlete A*, a documentary from Netflix out June 24.

Through interviews with survivors of Nassar's abuse and shadowing a team of investigative journalists at the Indianapolis *Star* who brought the scandal to light, filmmakers Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk reveal how USA Gymnastics fostered an abusive environment for athletes.

The film's title, *Athlete A*, refers to Maggie Nichols, the gymnast believed to be the first woman who reported Nassar's abuse to USA Gymnastics in 2015. As *Athlete A* shows, USA Gymnastics did not immediately act on Nichols' report, leaving Nassar free to continue his abuse as he held his job as an osteopathic physician at [Michigan State University](#) until he was arrested in 2016. Nichols retired from elite gymnastics after she was not chosen for the U.S. Olympic team following the 2016 Olympic trials. (Her parents believe she was not chosen because she came forward about Nassar.)

An environment that valued winning at any cost

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In crafting the film, Cohen and Shenk wanted to bring to light how systemic abuse was endemic to USA Gymnastics, which prepares athletes to compete in the Olympics. **A New HBO Documentary Tells the Story of a Young Black Man Killed in Brooklyn 31 Years Ago. Activists Lament How Little Has Changed Since Then**

“We realized we could tell an almost procedural crime investigation within the context of this corrupt world where abuse was not only tolerated but permitted for decades, and that would allow Americans to look at the Olympics in a different way,” Shenk tells TIME. “Nassar was a tip of the iceberg.”

Athlete A breaks down the different factors that allowed Nassar to operate as he did for so long. The world of U.S. gymnastics became a highly competitive, controlled environment in the 1980s, after coaches Béla and Márta Károlyi defected to the U.S. from Romania and brought over their strict methods to train American Olympians. They fostered a culture focused on winning at any cost, and, as the documentary reveals, did not allow parents to contact their children at their Olympic training center at the Karolyi Ranch in Texas. Nassar, who treated and abused many gymnasts at the training center, became a kindly figure for the athletes, many of whom said he was “quirky” and “nice” to them—a rarity in the gymnastics world, in which there was a tacit belief that staying silent in the face of wrongdoing was worth it to win Olympic medals.

Cohen and Shenk build the film on the stories of survivors, including Nichols and both her parents, and the gymnasts Rachael Denhollander—the first woman to speak publicly about Nassar’s abuse—and Jamie Dantzscher. The women share in the movie how Nassar would touch them inappropriately under the guise of performing medical treatments. More than 150 women eventually gave victim impact statements on Nassar’s abuse during his **sentencing hearing**, where he was given a maximum prison term of 175 years in 2018.

‘A story we might not be talking about’

Athlete A also follows a team of investigative journalists at the Indianapolis

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allegations of abuse to law enforcement. **SUBSCRIBE NOW** the report came out,



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lander approached the investigative team to share her story, sparking the attention of Cohen and Shenk, who closely tracked the *Star's* work in exposing the case. The co-directors wanted to give attention to the journalists for “unearthing a story that we might not be talking about.”

“These guys in a small newsroom, they changed the lives of hundreds of women,” Shenk says. “We wanted to show people who are in the trenches of reading 500-page depositions and remind of the rigor they go through with fact-checking and the pressure of deadlines.”

Cohen says much of the film’s focus was on the people who first spoke out against Nassar and the collective effort it took to get people to take their accusations seriously. She credits the women who came forward, the journalists who took the time to investigate the story, the attorneys who represented the survivors and the detectives and prosecutors who were eventually responsible for arresting and investigating Nassar.

“We were positioned to tell this story of how things can go right if you create a situation in which justice can be served,” she says. As they compiled years of evidence against Nassar, the filmmakers were able to see how many of the people who should have taken responsibility for protecting the gymnasts fell short—whether by failing to report his abuse to authorities or by “handing the baton” to someone else to handle the situation. “We had the goods to tell this in-depth story of not only how he was brought down, but also an investigation into how he was allowed to succeed.”

USA Gymnastics has made some steps toward taking accountability in the years since Nassar’s sentencing, though the organization continues to face criticism over the way it handled the case. The Károlyi Ranch has since been shut down and Steve Penny, the former president and CEO of USA Gymnastics, was indicted on a felony count for tampering with evidence related to the Nassar investigation. Victims of abuse, including top gymnasts **Simone Biles** and **Aly**

Raisman, have said USA Gymnastics' multi-million-dollar settlement offer is not

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away with molesting so many girls for

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Years Ago. Activists Lament How Little Has Changed Since Then

rather than offer answers about what USA Gymnastics should do going

forward, *Athlete A* closes on a hopeful note of what gymnastics itself can look like when athletes are removed from an abusive environment. Nichols, who became a top gymnast for the University of Oklahoma, shares in the film that she has found a reinvigorated love for the sport, especially after leading the team to a national championship in 2017.

“In 2017, I was the last person to go. So I did probably the best vault that I did the whole season,” she says in the film. “I’ve never experienced anything like that before and that’s probably one of the best moments of my life.”

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