July 31, 2024 / What will save men’s gymnastics?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (HOST, Today, Explained): On Today, Explained. The USA women’s gymnastics team won gold in the all-around yesterday - but this show isn’t about them.

NOEL: The American MEN won a BRONZE medal in the team final earlier this week. Men’s gymnastics isn’t as popular - or as well-resourced as women’s. That puts the sport’s survival at real risk. But this summer / the American men … kinda hit

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@nataliebodesports/video/7397229879223373102?q=pommel%20horse%20guy&t=1722437798266)*> tiktok: The US has this guy who sits here for two hours waiting to do the pommel horse because his specialty is the pommel horse, and he is our best shot to win gold FADE*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@tcwilli34/video/7397106214993218859?q=fred%20richard%20&t=1722438034406)*> tiktok: Come on, baby! Whoo. Fly like an eagle! Scare the heck out of me why don’t you!?*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@ellynwithay/video/7397263900959395103?q=paul%20juda%20olympics&t=1722438533075)*> Juda Judaaaa-aah Juda Judaa-ahhh.* Laughs.

NOEL: pommel horse guy, Brody Malone’s comeback, Fred Richard throwing tricks on TikTok with Simone and suddenly everyone - including us - was asking: did the 2024 team SAVE men’s gymnastics? Coming up.

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. To be an Olympian - if you’re a male gymnast - you usually come up through a collegiate program. But today, there are only 12 Division 1 programs left in the NC-double-A. Later in the show, we’ll hear WHY from a COACH and former OLYMPIAN / but first this year’s team really broke out and watching them along the way was Lauren Hopkins.

LAUREN HOPKINS (Founder, GymTernet Blog): I run a website called The GymTernet that follows international gymnastics. Throughout every year, not just the Olympics, but when obviously we get to the Olympics. It's very exciting because it's all of those years in between the Olympics kind of coming together. And, yeah, we love talking about all the gymnastics.

NOEL: What happened with US men's gymnastics on Monday.

LAUREN: So the US men, they won the bronze medal in the team competition

*<CLIP> NBC: And those smiles are going to be on those faces for a long time as those bronze medals are around their neck. They ended the 16 year drought.*

LAUREN: An amazing feat for them. It's their first medal since 2008 when they also won bronze. They've come fifth every Olympic Games since then, but they won a medal at World Championships last year. And, it seemed like this really was their year and their Olympics to come back onto the podium. So really just so exciting that they made it happen, especially after not having the best qualification round. Brody Malone especially, during qualifications, he had one of, I would say, the worst performances I've ever seen from him. He just seemed like he was so in his head.

*<CLIP> NBC: Not only did he take a big step, but he also was off to the side…*

And it was like something completely switched in between

SCORING IN <Electronic Warriors\_APM>

*<CLIP> NBC: They are in really good shape if the real Brody Malone comes to play today.*

He competed five events in the team final and was just -from start to finish - -everything he did was exactly what you would expect from him on a normal day.

*<CLIP> BRODY MALONE: We just had to stay in our bubble, go one event at a time, and not look at what anyone else was doing. That was our plan going into it, and we executed it flawlessly.*

Lots of it looks like some happy tears, maybe from Paul Juda after he finished his pommel horse routine, which was his last

*<CLIP> PAUL JUDA: I can't help but think, my parents are coming up to me now, and they're going, you know, we talk about the American Dream, but we're living the American Dream.*

Fred Richard brought so much power, so much excitement to his gymnastics and had a great day.

*<CLIP> NBC: <cheers> Next one let’s see what we got <cheers> the competition, that’s a step in your career Fred Richard.*

Asher Hong two massive vault, big tumbling, floor, great rings routine.

*<CLIP> ASHER HONG: We were like, you know, the dog's gonna come out the kennel (laugh) we're gonna go full snd and full energy.*

And then Steven Nedoroscik

*<CLIP> NBC: The internet has had so much fun with you and social media with the whole superman deal, the whole Clark Kent Deal…*

*<CLIP> TIKTOK @*[*RODGERSHERMAN*](https://www.tiktok.com/@rodgersherman?lang=en)*: The best thing I saw on day three of the Olympics. This was easy. It was Pommel horse guy. Pommel horse guy. We all love pommel horse guy.*

LAUREN: Closing out the whole competition on pommel horse. His one routine of the day.

The only thing he was here in Paris for. And he did exactly what he was supposed to do, had a big hit for the team and secured them the medal.

*<CLIP>* STEVEN NEDOROSCIK: *Like we said when we started the meet, we do our routines for each other. These guys trust me and I trusted them. And they hit every single routine leading up to me. And I have this statistic. When everyone hits before me on horse, I hit.*

*ANCHOR: What's it like being thrown up in the air by your teammates?*

*NEDOROSCIK: Awesome!*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: What sets them apart, what makes them different from past USA men's teams?

LAUREN: I don't know, they just tend to like vibe a bit better. Maybe overall

*<CLIP> NBC: Let’s go, Let’s go, Let’s go*

and high energy rooting for each other, screaming for each other.

*<CLIP> NBC: (More guys screaming)*

LAUREN: But I think this team is just a little bit more like maybe not in their heads as much, maybe a little bit more fun and low key and just kind of like trying to bring a sense of excitement to the sport that we don't generally see for men's gymnastics. And, like Fred Richard has this whole TikTok side hustle thing going on:

*<CLIP> TIKTOK @FREDERICKFLIPS: Man, I wish I could train till I faint every day. But I'm not stupid, that's not how it works. It's day 82 till the Olympics.*

LAUREN: You know, he's not showing his routines all the time. He's showing. Here's me, you know, jumping over ten guys that are laying on the floor or something like ridiculous just to like kind of show feats of athleticism…

*<CLIP> TIKTOK @FREDERICKFLIPS: People can do pushups, they do backflips, but what happens if you do pushup backflip?*

LAUREN: Things that he's picked up doing gymnastics. But there aren't actual gymnastics. And I think that's brought a lot of like, more casual fans in to cheer for him and to watch him. and um… he came around, I think started showing as maybe 17 that he was going to be a big deal as a senior. I think even in 2022, he competed and kind of like ran away with the competition at a junior meet.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnNTNxxmCMk)*> NBC: I'll tell you what, as a younger athlete, he is just so composed, nothing seems to rattle him. But Steve, even better than that is when the moment is bigger, this guy shines brighter as you see those air flares. Right there.*

LAUREN: But then 2023, it was like, okay, now he's officially a senior. He's officially going to start representing the team in the best way possible. And of course, he went to worlds and was so successful, last year and such an integral part to the team's medal at worlds last year. And I think like, yes, he's amazing at gymnastics, he has massive difficulty.

*<CLIP> NBC: Phenomenal. So difficult. Stuck this night one. Let's see what we got.*

Such good skill level likeability. Everything is just going for him. But he's also just like it's all about fun for him.

*<CLIP> Frederick Richard on Good Morning America: You know, we're in a sport where there's not as many viewers. You know, it's a much smaller sport, especially on the men's side. You know, I had a dream. I want the world to know what I'm doing. And so I just started telling my story and people love it.*

He's really, really good at that.

NOEL: How does the popularity of an athlete like Fred Richard play into the success of the sport? Like, will we get him on a Wheaties box and all of a sudden, you know, my brother's 14 year old son is is telling him I want to do gymnastics. Like, how do we see this playing out in real life?

LAUREN: Yeah. I think, you know, with women's gymnastics, it came after they won, I think in 96 was when it really blew up for the women, and they won team gold in Atlanta, and suddenly they were I remember I was a kid that and they were in Sports Illustrated for kids magazine, and I wanted to know everything about them.

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL COMMERCIAL: Announcing Atlanta's Magnificent Seven. The official Olympic gymnastics video from NBC Sports. Call 1 800 664 8888.*

And they were getting all of this press. They were doing Reese's commercials.

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL COMMERCIAL: How U.S.gymnast Vanessa Attler eats a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.*

LAUREN: And I still can visualize like a gymnast on a balance beam, me catching a Reese's in her mouth. And so it's stuff like that where it's like, yeah,

NOEL: Same

LAUREN: You just get these pictures and you're seeing it constantly. You want to be like them. And I think if the men are coming off of such high levels of success at the Olympic Games once again and winning medals, and I think there's a way to kind of match their, you know, TikTok popularity with now their Olympics success and kind of they need someone to turn that into a brand. And the way the women were able to do that after ‘96. And I think that's going to get kids more excited and more involved.

<CLIP> *FREDERICK RICHARD ON GOOD MORNING AMERICA:* Going to the Olympics is going to be amazing, getting those gold medals is my first goal. But after that, bringing more Black kids like me back into the sport, you know. I grew up with, maybe it'd be me, the only kid in the gym, or two Black kids in the gym. But I want, I want that to change.

ANCHOR: Okay.

LAUREN: I mean, Fred has he's got to have like around a million followers-ish on TikTok. And so I think that hopefully could tie into some sort of campaign. And yeah, hopefully the popularity of these guys can bring more people to the sport.

NOEL: Part of why we're talking today is there is a sense that men's gymnastics is in trouble.

LAUREN: Yeah.

NOEL: What are the problems with the sport?

LAUREN: I think the biggest problem is that there are so few opportunities outside of the Olympics and NCAA scholarships, that it's hard to keep kids in the sport, and it's so hard to train at a level to make like an NCAA team, let alone the Olympics. That's impossible for most people. But like, even if you know, at 16, you're not going to be going to the Olympics anytime soon, you still want to have something to aim for. And for most athletes in any sport, that's NCAA. And if you're a football player, there's thousands of opportunities to go on and play in college, at various levels. Whereas in men's gymnastics there's like a hundred. And so it's it's just such a limited number of opportunities that are available. You can't make money from it. You can maybe get a college scholarship if you're really, really one of the best in the country. So it's it's just very difficult. And I think a lot of kids, once they hit 13, 14, 15 and they realize they're not going to be at the same level as the guys that are getting the scholarships instead of going for, in their minds, probably no reason at this point. And putting in all that extra effort and hours and work, it's easier for them to kind of drop down and do other sports that aren't as demanding. A lot of them will go into like diving or track and field, where there's just more opportunities for college programs to take them in. And so we do see a lot of that.

NOEL: So in 1984, I'm sure you know well, Mary Lou Retton…

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDoIBGFwCNU)> TEAM USA: Mary Lou Retton becomes the first American to win the Women's All Around Gold.

NOEL: She got an entire generation of girls interested in gymnastics.

LAUREN: Yeah.

NOEL: And some people say that's the reason that the US is still a powerhouse today. That interest was so, so, so big that it has it has kind of maintained through the generations. Is the success of the men's team this week, is their charm on social media, is there, are their personal stories, is all of this enough to overcome these really, really big existing challenges that you've laid out?

LAUREN: Enough to overcome? I'm not sure? Enough to start, maybe. I think like in 2008, the guys won bronze, but there was really no social media then. There weren't, you know, influencers and ways to follow them. It was kind of like occasionally you would see them pop up somewhere else down the line, years down the line, but it wasn't like an immediate sort of like satisfaction of finding them and learning about their lives and, watching them do cool things in the gym. Now, I think that we have that ability to promote them outside of just being on TV when they're competing. I think that could potentially help. And I think, like we've said, like Fred's already started that with his TikTok following and. The other guys all kind of are doing things on social media as well. And so I'm hopeful that the combination of the two can change things. And maybe this will be the start of a turnaround for the men's gymnastics in the US. But I do think if anything, it would be starting that interest in, you know, getting kids interested at a young age and then seeing how many can find the sport, join the sport, whether those big numbers at a young age can actually transition into having higher levels of depth once they hit 18. That's really the challenge. And I think there's just got to be a way to keep them invested until they reach that level.

SCORING IN <Here’s the Plan\_BMC>

NOEL: Lauren Hopkins of The GymTernet. Up next! A coach and former medalist on why men’s gymnastics has struggled so much.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. Justin Spring is a commentator on NBC for this year’s games. Justin is an assistant coach for the Alabama women’s gymnastics team. Before then he worked for 13 years as the men’s head coach at the University of Illinois.

JUSTIN: I was a four time NCAA national champion.

NOEL: AND…

JUSTIN: National USA National champion a couple times Pan American gold medalist…

NOEL: AND… And he was on the LAST American team to medal…

JUSTIN: 2008 Olympic. Bronze medalist

*<CLIP>: While on the mat, the American men without two of their biggest stars surprised. The world, taking home the Bronze… Celebrations*… <cheers>

JUSTIN: Gymnastics was the safe place for me to test the boundaries of what my body could do. Flips and twists and everything else. So just fell in love with it.

NOEL: OK, so it took sixteen years between 20-8 when Justin’s team medaled and this year, 2024. I asked him: how difficult is it int he US for young men to develop the skills they need to compete in the Olympics?

JUSTIN: Yeah. Fewer and fewer are athletes are getting involved and investing in gymnastics at a competitive track that they were in the past, in my opinion.

FADE UP SCORING <The Other Side\_APM>

JUSTIN: Because it just it's really hard. And it takes a long time to get really good. In your first year, if you were, you know, a young teen or whatever, ten, 11, 12 you may be able to acquire some skills that were somewhat near to what the Olympic athletes were doing.

SCORING BUMP

JUSTIN: Now, as I sit and look at the posters for gymnastics, I see Simone Biles doing gymnastic skills that were unheard of for women's gymnastics.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hhzVU2HoHY)*> NBC: Well check out this triple twisting double back on floor. This is one of four skills that's now named after Biles. She rounds off …*

JUSTIN: But I also just watched men's podium training at the Olympic Games. I threw some of the hardest, biggest tricks. It's the reason I got so many surgeries throughout my career. I have ten, I can't fathom doing what the sport is asking the athletes to do nowadays. It is a sport that every four years the code of points, how you regularly judge the sport changes and it gets harder every year. And I just think that's again another barrier to entry. So losing popularity, it's losing its cool factor. It's only getting harder and [the] costs to insure gyms, there used to be a gymnastics segment as a part of P.E., and every elementary school. Like I used, that was my favorite week, because the PE teacher would always pick me to demonstrate all the skills. I was like, yes, my time to shine, you know? And that went away. Your ability to be introduced to the sport, to the high school so everyone gets a little segment and then, you know, maybe it was only 2% of those kids goes home and says, mom, I want to try gymnastics. That's a lot of kids….

SCORING OUT

JUSTIN: My senior year in high school was the last year Northern Virginia sponsored the high school gymnastics team, and we won the nationals that year. So a little bit of a of a sucker punch. Congrats. It's so fitting is the last year we're going to sponsor the sport. You guys won the national championship. Congrats. But we're canceling the program. And I just feel like I've been a part of seeing that happen so often over the 25 years plus in the sport. And it's just it it's heartbreaking. It hurts because it is just so much of who I was.

NOEL: All right so Justin, you did very well in high school. You're on a championship winning team. That program then gets cut. But you were able to go on and compete at the college level. If a male gymnast doesn't go to college, does he have any hope of making it to the Olympics?

JUSTIN: Almost every collegiate institution is a mini national training center. They you just cannot supplement, provide support, Olympic athletes better than a collegiate program does. You have nutritionists. You have sports psychologist, you have multiple coaches. You get to pick the best fit for you. Whereas if you're just a club athlete in high school, you just go to the club that's geographically close to you. And the coach may or may not be good and they may be great, but you and him hate each other or you and you know what I mean. The relationship is really important. And so you get you get to look at all these opportunities and pick the best place for you to go. And that place has everything you could possibly need to help you develop to become America's greatest gymnast. And so when you look at scraping the cream off the top, i.e. picking the Olympic team, it's no surprise that they almost all come from collegiate programs. And so you do the numbers. If that collapses, where do those hundreds and hundreds of athletes go that has that type of offering scholarship, coaching, support and investment in your career and development? It's all gone. And that would be absolutely devastating for the men's gymnastics Olympic movement in our country.

NOEL: Why are men's college gymnastics programs being cut?

JUSTIN: The problem was, is that colleges money is always short. And so as you increased, started brand new teams from the ground up, it takes a coach, a training facility, equipment, scholarships, apparel right? The women's gymnastics team at the University of Illinois probably costs about $1.5 million a year, um, whereas the men's operated around 1 million. And so as you start introducing creating these women's teams, colleges are going, oh, you just don't have that money lying around. But we have to get in compliance with Title IX.

*<CLIP> PBS: Landmark civil rights law prohibiting sex based discrimination at federally funded schools, including in athletic programs…*

*<CLIP> CBS 60 MINUTES: To get to that balance. Schools often choose to cut men. Take one look at further than creating new ones for women.*

JUSTIN:" And so you take one look at football that does not have a female counterpart, you've got 85 scholarships and generally a roster that's about 100, 110 people on. And so where do they find the money? They cut men's opportunities, the lesser visible and maybe just less popular sports.

*<CLIP> CBS 60 MINUTES: Back in the 1970s, more than 150 universities had men's gymnastics programs by the beginning of 2020. That number was down to 15. Now with Iowa and Minnesota axing their teams. It's down to 13.*

JUSTIN: Just a decimation of men's Olympic sports across the country. And I understand the business model that is college athletics nowadays. And the brand that your athletic program pushes out globally is a huge deal and brings in a desire to apply to the college as well as people from all over the country regionally to come watch your football games, your basketball games. And so viewership matters. Ticket sales matter. Television contracts without question, matter.

NOEL: You you went into coaching after competing first for the men's team at the University of Illinois. You've said there's some real troubling trends in men's college gymnastics. What did you experience there as a coach?

JUSTIN: Well, I just think this, you know, when I took over head coaching, there was somewhere 23, 24, maybe 25 programs left back in 2009, and we lost about one a year. And so, you know, as I looked over my shoulder at the industry and where we were headed, it's, if you if you follow that trend line. My job security didn't look too good. You know, and so I left two years ago after Covid was the scapegoat, and I'll call it that, for Iowa and Minnesota to cut their programs. I just said, this is going in a real bad direction, faster than I thought. And it was time to get out. So I, I'm very scared so much that I uprooted my life. I was at Illinois for 20 years. I literally have an Illinois tattoo. It was everything to me. It gave me the opportunity of a scholarship to become a national champion. It gave me a career that I loved dearly. Everlasting friendships, two degrees. An Olympic journey with a medal. Because of what Illinois provided me from the opportunity opportunities they gave me there. And I left all that because I have a family. And I was very worried about the future of coaching men's gymnastics in college. So I went to the women's side.

NOEL: There were moments in this country where we didn't give a whit about women's gymnastics, and then a handful of stars kind of astonished us. The Magnificent 7 in 1996, I was 15. I loved those girls, right? And I do wonder, is it possible that we have a breakthrough? On the men's side, is it possible that there's a young man who's inspiring in that same way? Who who gives us a perfect ten or…

JUSTIN: In 08, it was part of the conversation the next morning, just talking about how rare and unique it was to win a medal. But just like that keeps the that keeps the the energy going for men's gymnastics in our country. We believe that absolutely stimulated an interest in men's gymnastics.

SCORING IN <An Upward Stomp\_BMC>

JUSTIN: I think there's a bright spot for men's gymnastics in the United States. We have to become more relevant and in the collegiate landscape, which means we have to put butts in seats. We have to make a TV package that is friendly, and it's got to do that. It's got to be cool.

SCORING BUMP

JUSTIN: It's a niche sport. It's hard. you know, I have this conversation with so many of my colleagues all the time. What came first, the chicken or the egg, you know? it, because the limited opportunity, is that why it's a struggle? if you don't cover it andthe opportunity goes away more and more. Well, of course, less and less boys are getting involved in men's gymnastics.

NOEL: Justin Spring - commentator for NBC at this year’s Olympics and Olympic medalist. Denise Guerra produced today’s show. Amina al-Sadi edited. Matthew Collette fact-checked. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir engineered. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]