

USA gymnastics went by the numbers to select its Tokyo Olympic team, and that makes sense

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4–5 minutes

So it was, too, for the men: Brody Malone, Yul Moldauer, Shane Wiskus, and Sam Mikulak, in that order, with Malone and Moldauer automatic.

Not only did the by-the-numbers approach preserve what Forster called “the integrity of competition,” it also gave the Americans a buffer should someone test positive for COVID at next month’s Games and have to withdraw. Since the team final where the medals are determined is “three up, three count,” there’s no margin for error. So following the results was not only simple, it was

smart.

The only question on the women's side was whether the team score would be higher with MyKayla Skinner, who has a superior vault, than with McCallum. But McCallum had better trials scores than Skinner's on the other three events. And given how far ahead of the rest of the world the Americans are, the fourth person on the team won't matter.

"We're so fortunate that our athletes are so strong that I don't think it's going to come down to tenths of a point in Tokyo," Forster said.

The US women, who romped at the Rio Olympics in 2016, won the last world title by nearly 6 points over the Russians, and they're better now with Chiles, who has been rock-solid this year (24 of 24 routines hit) and will be an ideal table-setter for Lee and Biles.

Skinner, who was named an individual gymnast under the 4+2 system that allows for up to two extras, is a medal contender in vault. So is Jade Carey, who'd already locked up a specialist's spot.

So the Americans, who won nine medals in Rio, could collect nearly as many this time.

The only Sunday surprise was Biles's bumpy night, which included a shocking spill on balance beam, a significant hitch on uneven bars, and two step-outs on floor exercise. Not that it kept her from a comfortable victory; Biles still beat Lee by more than 2 points. But her missteps clearly rattled her, and they left her in tears.

"I kind of got in my head tonight and started doubting myself," said Biles, who hadn't lost a night's competition in eight years. "And you could see that in the gymnastics."

As intriguing as the "Simone vs. Herself" theme has been, it's misleading. Biles, who won the 2019 world all-around crown by more than 2 points, only has to beat everybody else at Olympus. She doesn't have to beat the Simone from Rio, who was five years younger and decidedly less achy.

"I'm just old," said Biles, who's 24. "I'm always in pain. Something always hurts."

Mikulak, who'll be competing in his third Games at 28, can empathize. He had to sweat out this one after coming off pommel horse on his final routine.

“Was that the one moment that blew it for me?”

wondered Mikulak, who finished a fraction ahead of Brandon Briones.

But Mikulak, the only holdover from the 2016 team, had the goods elsewhere; he was tops on floor and second on high bar. He's also a dream teammate and supportive leader on a squad that has been close to the podium in recent years but hasn't won a team medal at Olympus since 2008.

This men's group should be stronger than the last one. Malone, the new US champion who benefited from the year's postponement of the Games, is steady on four events. So is Moldauer, who competed in the 2019 world all-around. Wiskus was a contributor on that team, too.

There was no reason for the selectors to deviate from the rank order at trials. The only question was who would be the event specialist. It came down to Alec Yoder on pommel horse or Alex Diab on still

rings and Yoder's start value (i.e. difficulty) was higher.

Besides confusing everybody inside and outside the sport, the 4+2 format didn't narrow the gap. The extra spots went to the power countries such as the US, Russia, China, and Japan, who likely won't need the additional help since most of their top four already are contenders in one or more events.

So the international federation already has announced that it will be going back to five-member teams for 2024 in Paris. That will make the selection process more complex but will provide more flexibility in team assembly, which customarily is a jigsaw puzzle. This year, going by the numbers seems a winning calculation.