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How To Build The Best Gymnastics Team Around Simone Biles

Along with Simone Biles, which athletes give the U.S. the biggest chance to win the most Olympic medals?

By Dvora Meyers

Filed under Tokyo Olympics



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This article is part of our Tokyo Olympics series.

UPDATE (June 27, 2021, 11:45 p.m.): After the Trials, the [U.S. women's team](#)

was [announced](#) on Sunday as Simone Biles, Sunisa Lee, Jordan Chiles and Grace McCallum, with individual spots going to MyKayla Skinner and Jade Carey.

Selecting the Olympic gymnastics team is a bit like a Swarovski crystal-strewn game of “choose your own adventure.” Is your priority the highest possible team placement or team score? Then go for door one. Are you most concerned with bringing home the most medals? Then door two might be the one for you. Or is the integrity and transparency of the selection process itself paramount, regardless of strategy or potential Olympic outcomes? Then pick door three. Oftentimes the team with the highest potential score is also the team that will yield the most individual medals. And sometimes all your most promising gymnasts perform exactly as you hoped they would during qualification competitions so you don’t have to explain why a gymnast who hit was excluded but one who didn’t was named to the team. But sometimes things go sideways.

If you watch the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics Team Trials starting on Thursday,^{[1](#)} you’ll hear the commentators talk about the ways Tom Forster, the high-performance director for the women’s program, could put together his four-person team and select for the additional non-team spot that the U.S. women have earned for themselves. This is Forster’s first time choosing an Olympic team since he was hired in 2018, and he has one card to play that makes his job essentially foolproof: Simone Biles. There’s no possible team he could send to Tokyo that isn’t in line for the gold medal if it includes Biles, which of course it will, barring anything unforeseen. (Even thinking about the possibility of Biles not competing in Tokyo makes me want to knock on wood or throw salt over my shoulder.)

But one possible weakness in Forster’s team selection strategy is his preference for taking all-arounders based on how they finish at the Trials. That’s what he did in [2019](#) for the world championships, and that’s what he might do here. While at first glance, this might seem like a good idea — and one that is seemingly transparent — it doesn’t always yield the best results if you’re concerned about getting the highest possible team score or maximizing medal-earning opportunities.

A fourth-place gymnast could be good across four events but not a standout performer on any one piece. Do you take her in case you need another all-around athlete? Or would you take a gymnast who placed a little lower in the all-around but is potentially

a top three finisher on an apparatus or two that may be a weakness for other team members? A specialist might have a good chance at making apparatus finals on her best pieces, therefore boosting not only the team score but also the medal tally. But a balanced all-around gymnast could provide you with a safety net in case disaster strikes.

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How the team is chosen will depend on the priorities of Forster and the rest of the selection committee. And with Biles on the team, the selection committee can appear way more strategic than they actually are.

So who might join Biles in Tokyo? Two other gymnasts seem almost assured team berths if they compete at Trials the same way they did at nationals: Sunisa Lee and Jordan Chiles.

Lee, who at age 18 would be the first Hmong American to make an Olympic gymnastics team, placed second to Biles at the recent national championships and also in 2019. At the last world championships, she earned the bronze on the uneven bars and the silver on the floor exercise. Chiles, on the other hand, didn't compete at

the last world championships or any worlds in this cycle. Though she was a much-heralded junior, her senior career hasn't gone as many had hoped — until this year. Since the start of this very abbreviated 2021 season, the 20-year-old has been a hitting machine. She won the Biles-less Winter Cup and then placed second behind her training partner at the U.S. Classic. At nationals, she placed third after going 8-for-8. Based on performance and scores, it's clear that Biles, Lee and Chiles are ahead of the rest of the field.

Presuming these three gymnasts make the Olympic team, their strengths and individual medal-earning potential should be taken into account when considering who should be named to the fourth team berth and the additional individual spot. It's assumed that Biles will qualify for the all-around, vault, beam and floor finals.² Because of the two-per-country rule, this means that only one additional American can participate in those finals with her. Depending on the kind of day each has in team qualifications, either Lee or Chiles might join Biles in the all-around final.

But the skills of one other specific athlete also matter in how the team is constructed, and this is where things could get dicey.

Jade Carey, 21, has already earned an Olympic berth via the Apparatus World Cup qualifying route. She won't compete as a member of the four-person U.S. team, but her event final berths will still count toward the country's allowable maximum. And even though she qualified to the Olympics as a vault specialist, she is still permitted to compete on all four events in qualifications.

Carey's best events are floor and vault. She is a two-time world silver medalist on vault and won a silver on floor in 2017. So when Forster looks to fill in the fourth team slot and the individual spot, it might not be wise to take another floor/vault specialist. Between Biles and Carey — and even Chiles, who's particularly good at floor — the possible American event final berths for those apparatuses will already be maxed out.



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Balance beam and uneven bars are a slightly different story. With beam, at least one

finals berth will be claimed by Biles, who is the defending world champion there. That leaves one other beam berth for another U.S. gymnast and potentially two bars berths.

Lee is probably good for one of those bars berths. She's doing one of the most difficult bar routines in the world, so a hit in qualifications should mean an appearance for her in the event final. For the other potential finalist, the U.S. might look to a specialist, a move Forster [recently signaled](#) he might make for the extra non-team spot. And top of the list is 20-year-old Riley McCusker, who competed solely on bars at nationals due to a recent foot injury. She made the most of that one event, placing second behind Lee and ahead of Biles, who placed third on the only event that she didn't win.

Though she could claim the extra spot, McCusker wouldn't make a whole lot of sense for the fourth spot on the team. Unless McCusker is fully recovered from the ankle injury she sustained at U.S. Classics in May, it would be very risky to include her on a four-person team that already includes Lee, who is managing a sore Achilles tendon. With McCusker on the team, Lee might have to do leg events in the "3 up, 3 count" Olympic team final format or vice versa. And if McCusker isn't totally prepared to do floor and vault *and* injury should strike one of the other three gymnasts, then this faulty team construction could prove disastrous.

You want that fourth spot to go to an all-arounder — perhaps not the woman ranked fourth specifically but at least a gymnast who could jump in with reasonably strong routines on events outside of her specialties in case a team member gets injured late in the game. Essentially, you want this person to be a built-in alternate because the U.S. can't replace a gymnast after the competition has started.

There's a whole mess of people who might contend for that fourth spot. If you look at the all-around results from nationals, you might be inclined to go right down to Emma Malabuyo. Once a promising junior, she spent much of this quad injured and didn't make a world championship team, but she's been on an upward trajectory since the U.S. Classic, where she placed a surprise seventh before she placed an even more surprising fourth at nationals. Though Malabuyo does have a huge start value on beam, her inclusion wouldn't lead to the highest possible team score. There is room for her to improve from nationals, but the gymnast who was less than half a point behind her has even more room to improve: Leanne Wong. Wong, who had a two-fall performance at nationals, has higher scoring potential than Malabuyo; she has a gorgeous floor routine, strong bars and beam — when she hits — and a usable vault.



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After Wong, there's Grace McCallum, who was on both the 2018 and 2019 squads and had a respectable showing at nationals, tying for seventh with Skye Blakely. McCallum recently had hand surgery and, while now healthy, is scrambling to make up for lost time. She was especially strong at nationals on the balance beam, an event that could be put to use in an Olympic team final. The inclusion of MyKayla Skinner, 2016 Olympic alternate and 2019 worlds alternate, could result in the highest-scoring team in the final on the strength of her vaulting. (I know I said it might not be wise to bring on another vault specialist, but it's hard to deny that Skinner on the four-person team would yield a very high team score.) Kayla DiCello is another contender for the fourth spot. She had a tough outing at national championships, but if she improves her performance at Trials, she could help round out the team with strong floor and vault and usable routines elsewhere.

As Spencer Barnes of [The Balance Beam Situation](#) demonstrated using the average of scores from nationals, all the choices for the fourth spot lead to team final totals within six-tenths of a point of each other. No one seems to have a decisive advantage. Making this decision more challenging is how few competitions there have been in the past year and a half because of COVID-19. To choose the team, the selection committee will have to extrapolate from just a few events where most of the gymnasts performed inconsistently. This arrangement might end up favoring Forster's preference for going solely off the results of Trials.

Before last week, the wrinkle in all this was Carey. Despite locking up her own berth, she had been holding out hope for a team spot for one simple reason: Being a member of the four-person team is the only way for her to become an Olympic champion. While Carey has a very good shot at medaling in Tokyo on vault and, to a lesser extent, on floor, she has no chance at winning the gold on either since her best events are also Biles's best events. You simply don't beat Simone Biles on her best pieces.

But had Carey qualified into the four-person team, she would have had to give up her individual spot earned in the Apparatus World Cup. Because her spot is nominative —

meaning it belongs to her, not her federation — Team USA would have forfeited its sixth berth, denying another athlete a chance at Tokyo.³ After much speculation, Carey announced last week on Instagram that she planned to accept her nominative spot when it's officially awarded after the final World Apparatus Cup competition.

If Carey had not pursued this path, she could have had an excellent shot at being selected for the four-person team as a complement to Biles, Lee and Chiles. She can contribute big scores on floor and vault, and she's improved substantially on the other two events, so should an injury strike a team member, she could function as a built-in alternate. As it stands, Carey in the nominative spot is a de facto alternate for the four-person team. If a team member suffers an injury right before the start of qualifications, Carey could be substituted. By then it would be too late to bring in one of the actual alternates due to COVID-19 restrictions.

So there you have it — and by “it” I mean a headache trying to make sense of all the possible considerations and team permutations. Which specific door Forster will choose is still up in the air. But in the end, it comes down to one simple principle: All U.S. teams get the gold in the age of Simone Biles.

CLARIFICATION (June 23, 2021, 10:40 a.m.): At press time, Riley McCusker had been slated to compete in all four events at Trials, but she now will compete [in bars and beam only](#).

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Footnotes

1.

The women will compete on Friday and Sunday.

2.

She has qualified in the past on bars, her weakest event, but that's a bit iffier here given the depth of the global uneven bars field.

3.

If Carey had not gone down the individual path, the U.S. could have picked up a non-nominative sixth spot — meaning it would have belonged to the team, not to the gymnast — at the recent Pan American Championships in Brazil, a route the U.S. men took. But the International Gymnastics Federation rules didn't allow that. Since Carey already had the spot mathematically locked up, the U.S. women didn't send a team to compete.