

SPORT / IN DEPTH

Biles and crowd at full noise for gymnastics superstar's Olympic return

1:51 pm on 29 July 2024



Dana Johannsen, in Paris



Simone Biles competes in the balance beam event of the artistic gymnastics women's qualification during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games at the Bercy Arena. Photo: AFP

Analysis - In an empty arena at the Tokyo Olympics - that eerie, spectator-less spectacle of three years ago - US gymnastics great Simone Biles had a very public mental health crisis.

The world watched as Biles, the world's most decorated gymnast, faltered in her opening vault in the teams all-around final. She still managed to land on two feet, but her face betrayed open fear.

Minutes later, she withdrew herself from the team competition in a decision that would stun the world. It would later emerge that vault was as result of the "twisties" - a term gymnasts used to describe the loss of spatial awareness while in the air. The condition, she later explained, was the manifestation of years of unresolved trauma and the crushing weight of not just her own drive for excellence, but the expectations of the entire world.

"She could not sync her body and mind together. Something broke," her coach Laurent Landi explains in the new Netflix documentary *Simone Biles: Rising*.

On Sunday, Biles returned to the Olympic arena rebuilt, renewed, resplendent.



Simone Biles competes in the uneven bars event. Photo: AFP

The 27 year-old megastar dazzled the crowd with her technical brilliance and daring skills, to lead the individual all-around qualifying and help her US team to the number one spot in the teams qualifying event.

Such was the impact of Biles' performance, US journalists in the press tribune working for the same outlet held a mini-conference to figure out the most appropriate adjective to describe it.

From the moment she strode into Bercy Arena, which boasted several A-listers among the sold-out crowd, including Tom Cruise, Lady Gaga, John Legend, Ariana Grande and Anna Wintour, Biles looked ready to meet the moment.

She set the tone with a brilliant opening performance on the beam, exhaling and looking to the heavens after nailing her dismount.

The cameras remained trained on her throughout. When Team USA rotated apparatus, so too did the 50-strong pack of photographers.



Biles performs in the artistic gymnastics women's event. Photo: Kaname Muto / Yomiuri / The Yomiuri Shimbun via AFP

When Biles sat on the floor after apparently tweaking her calf in the warm-up to the vault - the same apparatus that all but ended her Tokyo campaign - the television cameras swooped on her like ravens in official Paris 2024 vests.

Despite the concern over her calf, which her coach insists is nothing serious, Biles looked like she was having fun, which is chief among her goals in Paris.

She waved and smiled for the crowd as she moved between stations, earning a boisterous response from the fans each time.

After her final performance - a gravity-defying uneven bars routine - Biles immediately ran to the edge of the mat, waving and blowing kisses to the crowd. She then left the competition area, and danced with teammate and good friend Jordan Chiles.

Her desire to soak up the atmosphere is perhaps because Biles never expected to be here, competing in the Paris Olympics. Ahead of the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, she had in her mind that those Games would be her swansong, bowing to conventional wisdom that gymnasts "age out" after 25.



Photo: Kaname Muto / Yomiuri / The Yomiuri Shimbun via AFP


But she had a lot of other things on her mind at that point in time that would conspire to disrupt her plans. A month after Tokyo, she appeared in front of the US's senate judiciary committee to give evidence against convicted sexual abuser Larry Nassar.

It was two years before she would return to competition. Her new documentary, timed for release in the weeks leading up to Paris, gives insight into Biles' efforts to regain her form and confidence in the gym, and tackle the mental blocks.

In it, she revisits the moment in Tokyo when she knew her Olympic Games was done, describing that in that moment "the sound went out". On Sunday at Bercy Arena there was no doubting Simone Biles was once again at full noise.



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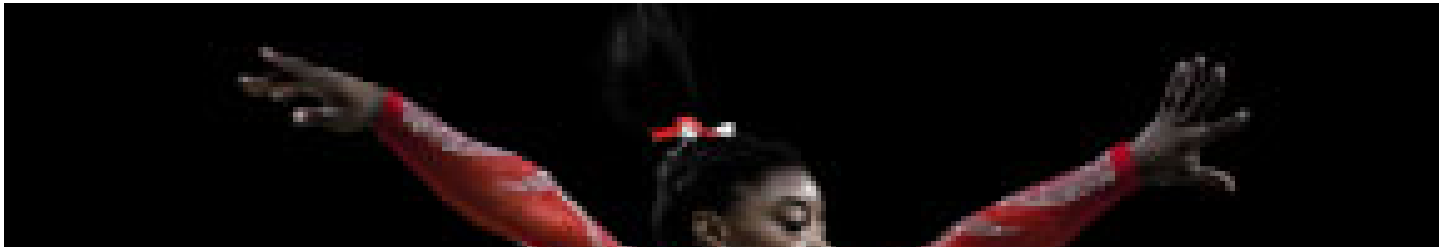
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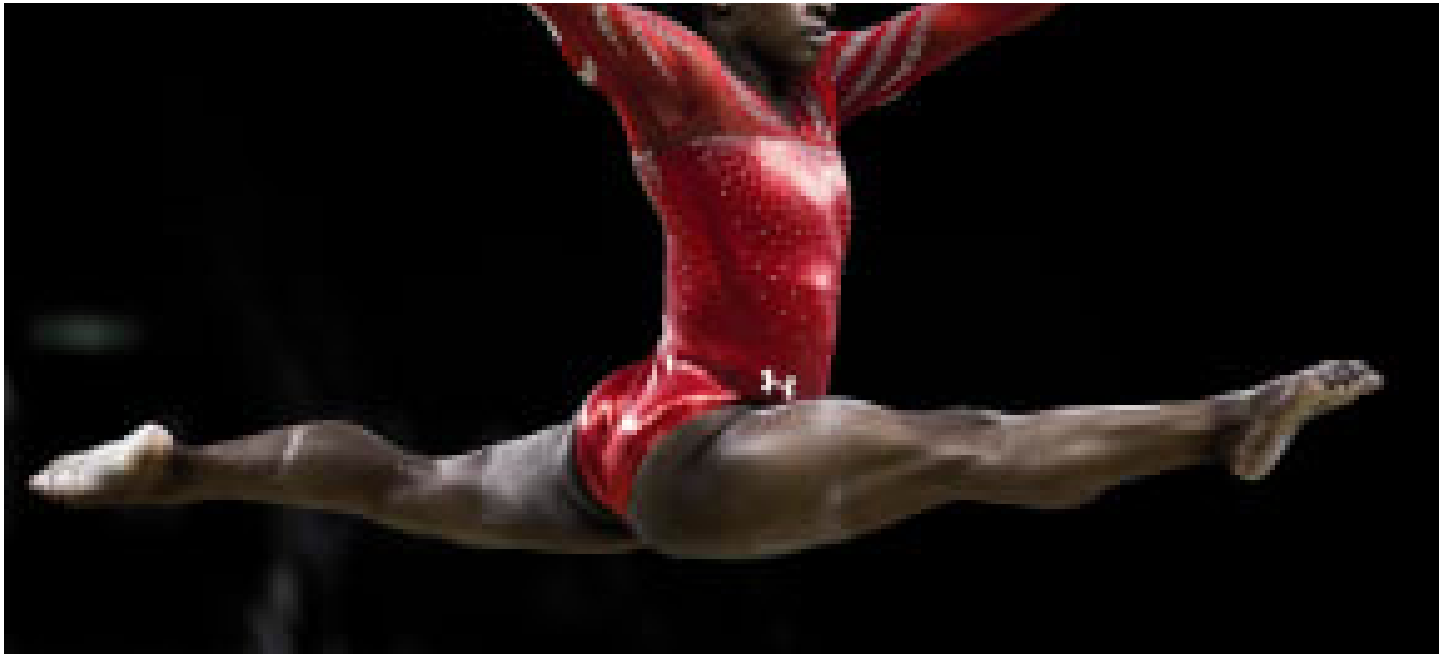


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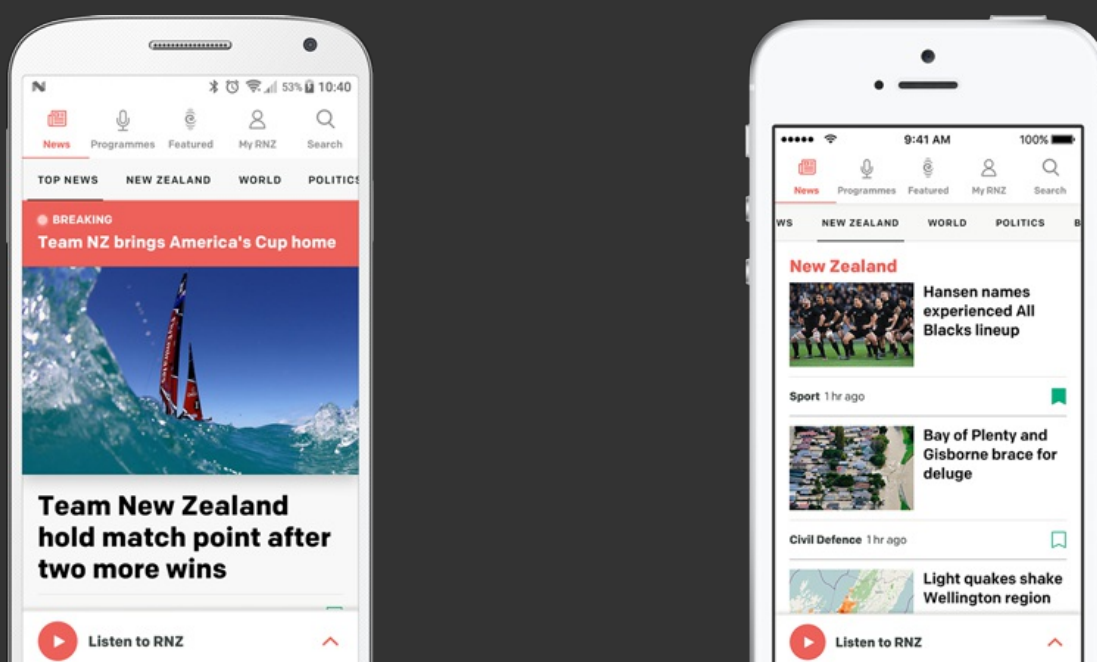


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