

'PRESSURED TO LOSE WEIGHT'

S'pore gymnasts call for change in sport's culture of body shaming, abuse

Kimberly Kwek

For a long time, gymnastics was a game of numbers for Kathryn Chia.

On the competition floor, scores were an indication of her ability. Off it, the figures on the weighing scale determined the former rhythmic gymnast's self-worth.

At 14, Kathryn's daily diet comprised six grapes for breakfast, 20 baby spinach leaves and three mushrooms for lunch, and half a cup of milk for dinner. Meals with family and friends became a dreaded affair for her because she was afraid that they would ask her to eat more than she wanted to.

Her insecurities about her body were further compounded by coaches who constantly remarked on her body. One was a former coach in the national rhythmic gymnastics set-up – Kathryn spent about six weeks last year at the national training centre – who continually stressed the need to be slim.

Kathryn, now 16, said: "I was feeling particularly self-conscious and we were being pressured to lose weight."

"Not only did it hurt me mentally because I was always comparing myself to others and thinking about what I would eat and coming to training feeling a bit self-conscious, it really took away my passion for the sport."

Wanting to start conversations about this topic in the gymnastics community, Kathryn, who moved to England to study in September, published a post about how she and 15 other local gymnasts struggled with body image issues on her website, ApotheKathryn.

Another Singapore gymnast, who declined to be named, resorted to eating a fruit a day out of fear that she would be punished by her coach in school for not losing weight.

Such punishments included being forced to issue an apology and exercising till the point that she felt faint.

Singapore Gymnastics general manager Karen Norden yesterday emphasised the association does not tolerate body-shaming and said it has been working with the Singapore Sport Institute and the National Youth Sports Institute to come up with programmes to educate parents, athletes and coaches.

She added: "There is still some hesitation for these types of things to be discussed and even brought to our attention."

The governing body has five safeguarding officers, with two assigned to monitor athletes at the national training centre daily. It also plans to hire an athletes' health performance manager to oversee its gymnasts and will conduct surveys with athletes to better understand their concerns.



A young Kathryn Chia competing at the 2014 Singapore Open. During her active rhythmic gymnastics days, she constantly felt the pressure to lose weight and was always conscious about her food intake. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KATHRYN CHIA

ATHLETES FINALLY SPEAK UP

In recent months, gymnasts worldwide have broken their silence on the abuse they endured during their careers. The release of Netflix documentary Athlete A and the #GymnastAlliance movement this year have played a huge role in emboldening athletes globally to come forward. The film details how former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar abused the girls and young women in his care and how the association hid his misdeeds.

In Singapore, former national women's artistic gymnastics head coach Gerrit Beltman admitted to

a Dutch newspaper in July to having previously "mistreated and humiliated young gymnasts to win medals" prior to his appointment at Singapore Gymnastics in August last year.

The Dutchman resigned from his post that same month to return to the Netherlands to be with his family but told The Straits Times that he wants to be accountable and not be the person and coach he once was and that he hoped to contribute to the process of change.

Following the spate of abuse scandals, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) held a conference last month aimed at chang-

ing the practices in the sport and improving athlete safety.

The reports inspired those outside gymnastics too, with former national figure skater Yu Shuran, a 2017 SEA Games gold medallist, coming forward to reveal the horrific practices that were part of her practice regimen while she was training in China.

Athletes in sports that focus heavily on how one looks are at a higher risk of developing body image issues, said sports psychologist Edgar Tham from SportPsych Consulting.

He added: "Unfortunately, that's what the culture of the sport propagates – if you fit in, you'll be able to

NO MORE FUN

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KATHRYN CHIA, former rhythmic gymnast.

ENDING THE SILENCE

There is still some hesitation for these types of things to be discussed and even brought to our attention.



KAREN NORDEN, Singapore Gymnastics general manager.

ALL-ROUNDE EFFORT

It needs to be a culture across the entire national sports association to make sure there is awareness and education.



LIM HEEM WEI, former Singapore gymnast.

SPEAK OUT MORE

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EDGAR THAM, sports psychologist.

stay. If you don't, you either find a way to fit or drop out."

HOW TO APPROACH WEIGHT-RELATED ISSUES

National synchronised swimmer Debbie Soh, who spoke to ST earlier this year about her struggles with body image, understands what it is like to deal with the pressures that Kathryn faced.

"When we join the sport, we don't expect that this is what comes with it," said Soh, 22, and a five-gold SEA Games champion.

"Puberty changes your body a lot and a lot of girls don't know how to

deal with it. Sometimes coaches don't realise that young girls are very insecure about their bodies, especially when it's changing."

Coaches ST spoke to emphasised the need to approach weight-related issues carefully.

Victoria Karpenko, founder and head coach of Karpenko Gymnastics Academy here, described the situation as hugely disappointing.

The two-time Russian rhythmic gymnastics national champion, 33, said: "I have seen it myself when competing and coaching over 30 years in the sport and not enough progress seems to have been made. Some girls are naturally leaner than others and it is heart-breaking to see those who are not so being targeted by coaches."

Cherrie Kwek, Releve Rhythmic Gymnastics Academy head coach and founder, does not pressure any of the gymnasts she coaches to lose weight, but has seen several young gymnasts resort to drastic measures to do so.

Although the reason behind it may not always be linked to the sport, the 29-year-old and former national gymnast believes it is crucial for coaches to intervene quickly in such situations.

Former national artistic gymnast Lim Heem Wei, who is now a coach at Singapore Gymnastics, noted the importance of being tactful when approaching weight-related issues as different athletes may perceive the same remark differently.

In some cases, Lim, the country's first gymnast to compete at the Olympics, said she would talk to the parent instead of raising the matter directly with the athlete. A dietitian or nutritionist and psychologist may also be involved in the process to make sure the athlete's well-being is taken care of.

With weight and body image issues just two of the deep-seated problems that plague the sport worldwide, the 31-year-old believes a paradigm shift is required.

"It needs to be a culture across the entire national sports association to make sure there is awareness and education. It's not a one-off thing – it has to be constant, it has to be very structured so that it becomes the norm," she said.

Tham, who has accompanied the Singapore contingent to major sports events like the Olympics and Asian Games, said that if not dealt with properly, negative body image could lead to athletes developing eating disorders.

"Sometimes it's so subtle that they don't even know," he added.

There could also be adverse effects on the athlete's mental health as they may experience social physique anxiety, which makes them extremely self-conscious around others.

Tham said: "There could be athletes who are suffering in silence without knowing that others are going through the same thing. There's the need to raise awareness to watch out for signs, symptoms or certain mindsets that helps them to put a red flag to things if they see something."

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