

'It is OK not to be OK'

Mental health among athletes spotlighted in tumultuous 2021

WASHINGTON, Dec 25, (AP): Simone Biles understands now that she was struggling long before she arrived at the Tokyo Olympics, where the unofficial face of the Games and one of the greatest gymnasts of all time was unable to force a smile and push her way through on the world's biggest stage.

Biles had persevered through the widespread sexual and emotional abuse scandal that rocked the gymnastics community. She continued her intense training and preparation for the Olympics through its yearlong pandemic delay.

She was fine, she convinced herself. But when the seven-time Olympic medalist stepped onto the floor in July for the women's team final, she was not fine. Biles was suffering from "the twisties," a phenomenon in which she'd lost her sense of air because her mind and body could not sync, and she walked off the floor.

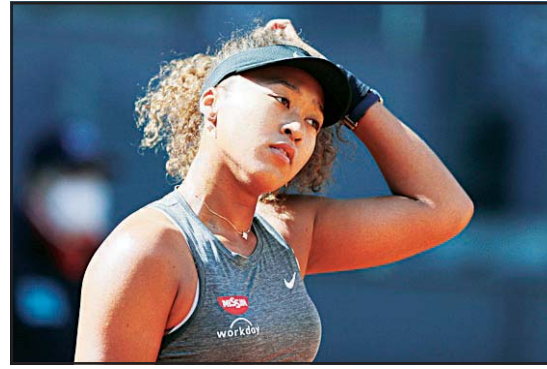
"I think it's definitely pent up emotions, aggressions for the past couple of years, trauma that led to that moment of once I got on the global scene, it just cracked," Biles said.

Recognizing that she was not in the right head space to compete safely, Biles ultimately pulled out of four events. She returned to win a bronze medal on the beam, but that shiny piece of hardware represented a much larger victory for Biles. Her very public admission that she was struggling, which



In this July 27, 2021 file photo, Simone Biles of the United States watches gymnasts perform at the 2020 Summer Olympics, in Tokyo. (AP)

followed a decision months earlier by tennis player Naomi Osaka to withdraw from the French Open and not play Wimbledon, redefined the mental health discussion that's been



In this May 2, 2021 file photo, Naomi Osaka of Japan reacts during her match against Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic at Madrid Open tennis tournament in Madrid, Spain. (AP)

coursing through sports. "I gave so many opportunities to a lot of the athletes there," Biles said of the impact her decision made on others.

Michael Phelps, retired swimmer and winner of a record 23 gold medals, said the day after Biles walked off the floor in Tokyo that the gymnast had shown "it is OK not to be OK." Phelps has long been public about his own mental health struggles — including acknowledging he contemplated suicide after the 2012 Olympics — but Biles blew the discussion wide open.

Athletes over the last few years had started to publicly address anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts they experienced. But heightened by the strains of the pandemic and the support shown to both Biles and Osaka, the toughest of the tough are no longer "shaking it off," or any of the cliché things athletes are supposed to do.

In the last three months: Atlanta Falcons receiver Calvin Ridley stepped away from the game in October to "focus on my mental wellbeing," he wrote on social media. "This will help me be the best version of myself now and in the future."

Tennessee Titans receiver A.J. Brown shared a video on the one-year anniversary of the day he considered suicide to deal with depression he was battling during a breakout 2020 Pro Bowl season. "I just wanted to put out a positive message that I'm still here. I'm still growing. I'm still learning."

Philadelphia Eagles left tackle Lane Johnson missed three games to address depression and anxiety. "I was living in hell for a long time. Don't bottle it up. And it's easy to do that. It's easy to avoid the situations that you don't want to go through."

Bianca Andreescu, the 2019 U.S. Open champion, said she would take a mental break from tennis and sit out the start of next season to "re-set, recover, and grow" after a challenging two years that included contracting COVID-19. "I could not detach myself from everything that was going on off the court; was feeling the collective sadness and turmoil around and it took its toll on me," the 21-year-old Canadian wrote on social media.

Formula One driver Valtteri Bottas broke from his normal private nature on a podcast to discuss mental health struggles that nearly caused him to quit racing. Bottas called the podcast "therapeutic" and said he did it for fans in his native Finland because "normally I haven't shared much underneath the skin ... I think they have a right to know me a bit better as a human being."

Greg Miller, a licensed professional counselor for ThriveWorks in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, noted the focus on mental health is not entirely new and previously was championed by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. He also pointed to Royce White, who talked openly of his struggles while playing basketball at Iowa State but as an NBA rookie in 2012 refused to play because the league lacked a comprehensive mental health program. Royce was, according to Miller, a "canary in the coal mine" nearly a decade ahead of his time.

While Biles and Osaka helped blow the conversation open, Miller believes stigmas surrounding mental health won't go away. Athletes, particularly male ones from traditional sports championed in the fabric of America, will still struggle to seek help when needed.

"We're taught as men to be individuals who take care of things with grit and resilience, not community and vulnerability," Miller said. "There are pockets of people in the country who see individuals talking about their feelings as weak or lacking masculinity in general. What you're seeing playing out among male athletes now is nothing new to any man who has ever dealt with mental health issues; it has been happening to men across the country for generations."

Sydney to Hobart race set to sail

Super maxi LawConnect favorite for line honors

SYDNEY, Dec 25, (AP): Super maxi LawConnect is the favorite for line honors in the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race beginning Sunday, with the forecast for strong southerly winds on the first night potentially giving it the edge over the other two 100-foot boats.

Australia's Bureau of Meteorology predicts gusting winds on Sunday afternoon during the start in Sydney Harbor, with the possibility of some thunderstorm activity offshore.

"We love a hard southerly to start with because that's our best conditions, perhaps gives us an ability to get out a little bit," LawConnect skipper and owner Christian Beck said.

Last year's race was canceled the week before it was due to start because of coronavirus-related quarantine issues, but the 2021 edition is proceeding with mass virus-testing protocols in place for the 900-plus crew on the 91 boats. There were two late

withdrawals related to the testing.

The 628 nautical-mile race (1,170 kilometers, or about 720 miles) sails from Sydney down the south coast of New South Wales state and across Bass Strait to Hobart, the capital of the island state of Tasmania.

In 2017, Comanche set the race record after finishing in 1 day, 9 hours, 15 minutes and 24 seconds, beating Perpetual Loyal's record of 1 day, 13 hours, 31 minutes and 20 seconds, set the previous year.

Wild Oats XI has won line honors nine times, the last time in 2018, and is the first boat to have claimed the treble — race record, line honors and overall winner. Comanche won the race again in 2019.

Another super maxi in this year's edition, Black Jack, will have to overcome a poor preparation.

The boat didn't get the chance to race against super maxi rivals LawConnect and SHK Scallywag 100 in the inaugural Aus-

tralian maxi championship earlier in December after a crew member tested positive for COVID-19. The boat also sustained a broken mast in the Brisbane-Gladstone race in Queensland state in April.

Black Jack, representing the Yacht Club de Monaco in this year's race, has sailed just five times with her new mast after its delivery from New Zealand was delayed due to coronavirus-related lockdowns in that country.

With no recent racing form she is something of an unknown quantity, though the

SAILING

boat took line honors in 2009 when named Alfa Romeo and finished third, second and fifth from 2017 to 2019 respectively.

One thing working in her favor is the experience of her crew, with 13 having sailed the race at least nine times.

"Our crew on paper is a standout crew in my opinion and that makes a big difference in protecting the asset and getting through heavy conditions," skipper Mark Bradford said. "There's a couple of ways to run a sporting team, one is with youth and one is with experience."

Ayada finishes 1st in 'speedboat' tourney

KUWAIT CITY, Dec 25, (KUNA): Kuwait speedboat championship, organized by Kuwait Sea Sport Club, came to a close with Khaled Ayada and his teammate Yusuf Ayada leading the Pro-Class 28 ft. race.

Mohammad Turki and his assistant Ahmad Al-Nabhan finished second, followed by Adnan al-Qalaf and his assistant Issa Al-Qalaf.

Ahmad Al-Fasam and his assistant Mashari Al-Murri ranked first in the 'Nozha 23 feet' contest, followed by Moustafa Dashti and his assistant Mohammad al-Qahani, and Khaled Karam and his assistant Hussein Bushehri.

Bradford expects LawConnect to head the fleet early and hopes his boat can make up ground in more favorable light air conditions forecast for later in the race.



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Hanyu 'amazing' at Japanese nationals

TOKYO, Dec 25, (AP): Two-time and reigning Olympic champion Yuzuru Hanyu returned from a long injury layoff to land two quadruple jumps and score a world-leading 111.31 points in his short program at the Japanese championships.

The 27-year-old Hanyu, who has been out for eight months with an ankle injury, punched the air with his fist after finishing his clean program in Saitama, Japan. He landed a quad salchow, a quad toe-triple toe combination and a triple axel to post a score nearly five points ahead of American Nathan Chen's score at Skate Canada.

Hanyu and Chen are expected to go toe-to-toe for Olympic gold at the Beijing Games in February.

"Everything went exactly as I'd planned it over six days of practice," Hanyu told Kyodo News.

The Japanese championships and Russian championships are running through the weekend, and with the U.S. nationals in early January, they should give figure skating fans a glimpse of who to watch at the Winter Games.



Hanyu

FIGURE SKATING

Hanyu, who intends to try to land the first quad axel in competition in his free skate Sunday, leads reigning Olympic silver medalist Shoma Uno by nearly 10 points. Uno, the winner at the NHK Trophy, landed a quad flip and quad toe-double toe combo along with a triple axel during his short program Friday.

Yuma Kagiyama is expected to join Hanyu and Uno on Japan's team for Beijing. He was in third after his short program. If the Japanese championships are showcasing Olympic favorites in the men's competition, the championships in Russia are doing the same for the women, who could become the first nation to sweep the podium.

Kamila Valieva, the heavy favorite to win gold, landed four triple jumps during her packed short program to score 90.38 points. Along with a triple axel and triple flip, Valieva landed a triple lutz-triple toe combination to top her own world-leading short program score of 87.42 set during her record-setting Rostelecom Cup victory.

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