

Written by Dwight Normile
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Ever since the FIG held the first apparatus-only world championships in 1992, more and more international events have followed suit and eliminated the all-around competition. The ripple effect has meant fewer opportunities for all-around gymnasts, whose numbers continue to drop internationally. As a tribute to the all-around gymnast, once the backbone of the sport, we hereby offer the following column, which first appeared in IG in 1998.

**Stretching
OUT**
IG Editor
Dwight Normile



Hey, remember me? Haven't been around much lately. Been twiddling my thumbs watching them try to throw a party without me. It won't work, though. I've always been the main course, you see, and you can't have a banquet with only salads and desserts. You need something to sink your teeth into, to relish, to talk about later.

Oh, sorry. It has been awhile. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm the once-coveted Individual All-Around Competition. I didn't realize people forgot so soon.

Seems I've been given early retirement against my wishes. I knew it was coming, though. Ever since the new-life rule started in 1989, I've been losing my pull. I used to be worthy of only the greatest gymnasts in the world. To win me, it took a nerve-racking set of compulsories and two more nights of risky optionals, not to mention a week of sleepless nights. And every score counted.

Then the powers that be decided to give everybody a break. They figured the judging games in preliminaries were affecting the individual medals later. So they decided to start everyone from zero in the race to claim me. Heck, they even allowed replacements on the big night. The Olympic all-around is often a tag-team event now!

But I adjusted and accepted my new role, however diminished it had become. Then they trimmed me even further when compulsories disappeared in 1997. Geez, cut off an arm, why

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don't ya! I LOVED to weed out the impostors during compulsories. Sometimes it was hard to keep a straight face!

Somehow I managed, even though in the world arena I had been reduced to little more than a Chunichi Cup title. All of a sudden, people were being crowned world and Olympic all-around champs between meals. Preposterous! I figured that was the last straw.

I figured wrong.

Get this (are you sitting?): Apparently the sport has escalated to the point where it is now too strenuous to compete on ALL the events the same day. They've actually been having meets for several years now without inviting me at all! Nobody asks who won anymore, because nobody really does.

I was relieved when the World Cup was revived in 1998, after an eight-year break. I used to enjoy having the top men and women battle it out for yours truly. No tedious team title up for grabs. Me in my finest hour.

Then the unthinkable happened. The World Cup rules makers figured they could succeed without me! Change that. They flat out didn't want me around! In an effort to encourage more participation among the waning international elite, the brains behind this farce thought I would scare away most of the big names. Can you believe it? I welcome everybody. The more the merrier!

I'm laughing now. That ill-fated 1998 World Cup featured separate competitions for each apparatus (yawn), two of which had only six competitors. All warm-up acts, if you ask me, with no main show. Defending world all-around champion Svetlana Khorkina actually competed on all four women's events. She would have won me by default, but somehow failed to win a single gold medal. That's quite an accomplishment, don't you think? But hey, at least she didn't have to do the all-around.

I'm going to take off now. I can tell when I'm not wanted. But if I'm not shown a little more

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respect soon, I may not come back. And if I don't, just remember this: Nobody keeps winning.