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The true story of the 1986 U.S. National Gymnastics champion whose lifelong dream was to compete in the Olympics, until anorexia, injuries, and coaching abuses nearly destroyed her

Fanciful dreams of gold medals and Nadia Comaneci led Jennifer Sey to become a gymnast at the age of six. She was a natural at the sport, and her early success propelled her family to sacrifice everything to help her become, by age eleven, one of America's elite, competing at prestigious events worldwide alongside such future gymnastics' luminaries as Mary Lou Retton.

But as she set her sights higher and higher—the senior national team, the World Championships, the 1988 Olympics—Sey began to change, putting her needs, her health, and her well-being aside in the name of winning. And the adults in her life refused to notice her downward spiral.

In *Chalked Up* Sey reveals the tarnish behind her gold medals. A powerful portrait of intensity and drive, eating disorders and stage parents, abusive coaches and manipulative businessmen, denial and the seduction of success, it is the story of a young girl whose dreams would become eclipsed by the adults around her. As she recounts her experiences, Sey sheds light on the destructiveness of our winning-is-everything culture where underage and underweight girls are celebrated and on the need for balance in children's lives.

Chalked Up: Inside Elite Gymnastics' Merciless Coaching, Overzealous Parents, Eating Disorders, and Elusive Olympic Dreams Details

Date : Published April 22nd 2008 by William Morrow

ISBN : 9780061351464

Author : Jennifer Sey

Format : Hardcover 292 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Sports and Games, Sports, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography



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Amanda says

This started out a promising book - a behind the scenes look at elite gymnastics. What it turned into was some of that and then the author saying repeatedly, my family sacrificed everything for me and that was perfectly normal followed by my family wouldn't let me quit when I wanted to so I cut them out of my life. She just came across as petulant. She kept talking about how much stress she was under, how driven she was to succeed without her parents pushing her and how she abused her body to make it to the top. But then she never seemed to take real responsibility for her destruction other than to say I wanted to hurt myself on purpose to get out of it but when I did that I only performed better and better! Her refusal to eat became less about her need to control and more about her mother not paying attention to her signals and not saving her and then competing with her. I suppose I wanted to hear her feel accountable for her life and her drive. I suppose I hoped as an adult she would be more aware and that became disappointing for me as the book wore on.

Lucy says

Well, that was horrifying. I don't think I'll ever be able to watch a gymnastics routine without feeling a little sick to my stomach. I've never thought much about the sport, except watching the Olympic competitions every four years with mild interest -- and probably only if nothing else was on television at that. I never thought about how young the female competitors are or what happens to the ones past their prime, at the ripe old age of nineteen or twenty. Many athletic careers just begin to pick up steam at nineteen or twenty, but for a female gymnast it's all over. Maybe it was naive for me not to think about the girls and how old they are or where they end up after. While reading the end I certainly felt like the little kid who gets told Fido is living on a farm upstate and is horrified to realize as an adult this story probably wasn't true.

Jennifer Sey tells a very honest story about her gymnastics career. She holds nothing back when she speaks about former coaches. I have no doubt that she was truthful in her descriptions because there were long moments where I didn't like Jennifer herself. It never read like she was demonizing other people to make herself look better, just to say how it was and why it was. The only person I felt any consistent sympathy for in the book was Jennifer's brother, Chris, who was dragged along like luggage for most of her career.

As a child, Jennifer showed personality traits (cough*issues*cough) that laid most of the ground work for her gymnastics career. She was a perfectionist from a young age, ambitious, focused, intelligent, and extremely obsessive. All of this could have been channeled in healthier ways, but she set herself on the gymnastics route and no one ever stopped to consider all the better things she could've done with that personality mix. I do mean **better**. Gymnastics is a brutal path with a short career and it requires the sacrificing of almost every important rite of passage from childhood to young adulthood.

Her career started out innocently enough, with the equivalent of training at a local place mostly meant to go as far as state competitions and no further. The more promise Jennifer showed the more willing her parents became in investing in her career, including long commutes and moving multiple times. It's easy for the

reader to see where her parents thought they were doing the right thing -- they were often horrified by the things other parent allowed their coaches to do to children, but it was their job to redirect her focus and make sure she lived a more balanced life.

For awhile her parents manage to keep it in a sort of gray area. Sure, Jennifer only got at best half a high school experience, but they found a gym that was more supportive than most. Yeah, she never went to high school dances or had friends outside the circuit, but for awhile she had a coach who didn't believe in daily weigh ins and thought the focus should be on the child as a whole and not just a short lived gymnastics career. They might have succeeded in giving Jennifer some sort of balanced life if the girl hadn't pushed herself and everyone else so hard -- and if they had ever managed to tell her no.

Determined to win, Jennifer deliberately entered hell where she was forced to weigh in twice a day, where the coaches yell and curse and occasionally hit girls, where the aches and pains of her battered body must be ignored so she can push, push, push. She becomes a Packette where she witnesses a coach throw a chair at a girl, another coach announce a child will end up just like her heavy mother for a two pound weight gain (announces it over the LOUDSPEAKER), and adult male coaches spend a little too much alone time in hotel rooms with underage girls.

Every bite Jennifer ate as a Packette was scrutinized by the people around her, other girls and the coach she temporarily boarded with. She was a little bit too big at 90 pounds and positively fat at 107 pounds. (She was five foot three inches tall.) Her body fought her to gain weight, to mature and grow, and she starved herself into a size that could fly through the air. No one said anything about long term health effects. Dieticians simply recommended the girls stop eating altogether at times.

It was a terrible story to read and there's no real happy ending with her career. Jennifer wins one big award and places amongst the seven girls to try for it again the next year, but by then her body is too bruised and battered to carry on. Her career ends not in a bang but a whimper as she lies on a floor mat realizing she'll never make the triumphant come back her mother wants her to make. She goes to college with the air of heading to a retirement home and after a few months there finally gains enough weight to menstruate for the first time in her life. She's nineteen years old and has no idea how to use a tampon. Another ex-gymnast has to walk her through the process.

Jennifer's happy ending comes in her marriage. Her career isn't satisfying because she can never view any promotion or accomplishment as enough, even for a little while. Her marriage, however, is a happy one and her children have never taken a gymnastics class. She says they're too tall to be gymnasts with almost palpable relief. It was a brutal, difficult read that I'm sure will stay with me for a long time.

Chris says

The book is not well-written, but the subject matter was very interesting and illuminates much of what is bad in this sport.

Jennifer Sey had issues from an early age and moving into the sport of gymnastics only exacerbated her own self-loathing, sense of inferiority and drive for praise. She became the U.S. women's national champion in 1986. The abusive coaching techniques seem rampant amongst the highest rated gyms and am afraid are still the norm, sad to say. I was most horrified by the absolute disregard for the health and well-being of the gymnasts; encouraging them to practice & compete with serious injuries, finding physicians who were in collusion with the coaches to cut corners in their treatment and time to recovery. It made me think about

what we all say was the courageous vaulting of Kerri Strug at the 1996 Olympics, having her compete with her injury. In retrospect and with insight from this book, was it because she was too afraid of her coach to say "no" I can't do it. Was she convinced by medical staff that it was OK to continue. Did staff prey on her sense of obligation to the team, etc etc.

As in many elite sports the sacrifices of the family for the athlete takes a financial & emotional toll. Jennifer's story is one more that falls in that category.

I LOVE women's (girls) gymnastics but this and other books, plus what has come out in the Larry Nassar molestation case really casts a terrible shadow on the sport. At what cost do we project onto the athletes that winning is everything?

Lance says

Jennifer Sey was the 1986 U.S. Women's Gymnastics champion and the road that she took that eventually led her to this championship was filled with drama, heartbreak, injury and eventually triumph. Everything that she and her family went through to get to that pinnacle is chronicled in her memoir "Chalked Up." It is an honest look at the life of elite gymnastics, a sport in which many participants retire from the sport before obtaining a high school diploma.

Sey covers a lot of topics in the book as the title implies. While this was a book that I found as a bargain book a few years ago, I was intrigued to finally read this when the actions of a gymnastics coach toward his gymnasts made recent news. The book read as I expected considering the nature of the topics and the fact that it was a memoir by an athlete that has long retired from her sport.

The Parkettes are an elite gymnastics team that trains in Allentown, Pennsylvania. That is a two hour commute from the Sey's home in New Jersey, but between Sey's obsession to be the best gymnast and her mother's willingness to do anything to help her daughter obtain that dream, that didn't stop them from getting Jennifer a spot on this team. It is there that her experiences with debilitating injuries, abusive coaches and eating disorders begin. She talks about the way coaches demean the gymnasts while the owner constantly reminds them of how "fat" they are.

How Sey continues to thrive in this environment is something she explains through the emotions she felt and her constant fear of failure. More than her competitive drive or her skills, I was taken aback by how freely she was able to write about her emotions, especially her fears. This passage from a practice session on the balance beam while a Parkette was one of the most powerful expressions of this fear: "The fear never abates. It is constant, relieved only in the instant I have landed on my feet. It surges again and again and again. Agitation and fright is my perpetual state of existence. But I ignore it as I climb back up onto the beam and begin rocking."

This book received much scrutiny when it was published, including pushback from some of Sey's Parkettes teammates. While I read these reviews and comments, I felt the book was simply an honest assessment by her of her life as a gymnast, both the good and the bad. It wasn't the best written or most powerful memoir I read, but it was a revealing look at the world of gymnastics that paints a different picture than that shown every four years during the Olympics telecasts, which is usually the only time many sports fans watch the sport. It is a book that is recommended for any reader who wants to learn more about the world these young girls live in in order to entertain the television viewers around the world.

Monica Zeringue says

As a former nationally competitive gymnast I found this book interesting to read. I could relate to the author and even empathize on a more personal level especially with regard to the favoritism and biased behavior of coaches/judges etc. Her experience in the sport did not seem to be a very happy one, and perhaps this book could serve as a warning to anyone with a thought of driving their children to highly competitive levels in anything (especially a sport such as gymnastics which has so much subjective judgment regarding perfection).

However, I did not appreciate her overwhelmingly negative attitude regarding the sport, as is too often the case with so many former gymnasts. I am not exempt from this myself, as I have had my fair share of regrets... though I am determined to value the good I have gained from it: perseverance amongst extreme difficulties, intense ability to focus, determination, etc.

Even when Ms. Sey spoke of her life after gymnastics, she spoke as though gymnastics were to blame for her OCD problems and former health issues... I've met a million and a half people like her in the sport of gymnastics and outside of it, and while I will agree that gymnastics (and a number of other sports such as ballet etc) do not help people who have weight issues, I do not believe that they cause weight problems or that they MAKE people behave any certain way. I can speak from this personally as I spent 12 years in the sport and never had any health issues aside from the physical injuries I incurred from the skills I performed. People who tend toward OCD and weight struggles have those struggles regardless of what they do in life. She would've had the same or similar issues if she were in beach volleyball. Gymnastics draws perfectionists in like a magnet, though. Perhaps this explains the number of former bitter pre-maddonna gymnasts justifying to themselves and everyone else why they didn't win the gold.

That said, I thought Jennifer Sey's conclusion was bitter and that she was definitely still nursing grievances. While the sport of gymnastics does have its problems, I believe that the problems she (and most individuals have in the sport) are more telling of an attitude and personality problem.

Allison says

I picked this up on a whim from the library. Probably not the best choice, considering that my younger son just got invited to join the competitive team at his gym, but I like to torture myself sometimes.

I learned that women's gymnastics should really be called girls' gymnastics. And this girl was particularly driven from a very young age, and was aided and abetted by all of the adults who surrounded her. She blames them a bit for this. It reads like a "why didn't you protect me from myself" story.

All I can say is that it's hard to be a parent, and impossible to be a perfect one.

It's a story that makes you look a little more closely at your children, wondering "are you REALLY happy? Is this what you REALLY want?" Apparently she did want it, and I can't begin to imagine what her parents would have had to deal with in terms of her behavior had they denied her the chances she pursued.

Kela says

I'll start by saying I've read pretty much every gymnastics book out there...the good, the bad, and the ugly. I knew exactly what to expect when I picked up this book: The world of elite gymnastics is not all sunshine and roses. Sey was one of my favorite gymnasts in the years after Mary Lou. Not so much the case anymore now that I've read her book. I got the feeling very early on that her main reason for writing was to get back at ANYONE who had every wronged her during her gymnastics career. She manages to blame everyone but herself for her inability to reach her ultimate goal of making an Olympic team. Sey admits to having a maniacal need for attention and praise at a very early age. Gymnastics is what earned her the attention she craved so she stuck with it. I'm not sure if she ever actually liked the sport for any other reason. Her constant drive for perfection and attention would have caused her to self-destruct whether she chose gymnastics, swimming, or ping pong. I found her story to be full of contradictions. She describes the excessive lengths she would go through to hide her destructive tendencies from her parents, then in the next paragraph blames them for not getting her out of the sport. One minute she acts like they could care less about her career and the next they (mainly her mother) were threatening to disown her if she quit the sport. She went to great lengths early on to describe how abusive the Strausses were to their gymnasts, but did not give her sweet grandmotherly coach (who was more interested in building confident, well-rounded young women than Olympic champions) a second thought when the opportunity to train with the Strausses arose. Sey makes allegations of emotional, physical, and even sexual abuse against many of the big name gymnastics coaches of the era without ever actually backing them up with hard facts, and she has no qualms about naming former teammates and describing them as trashy, fat, lazy... I'm surprised she wasn't sued after the book came out. I enjoyed the book because it was a behind the scenes look at elite gymnastics, but Sey comes across as a bitter and whiny has-been in my opinion.

Deidre says

The title of this book is somewhat misleading. When it says "Inside Elite Gymnastics' Merciless Coaching, Overzealous Parents, Eating Disorder, and Elusive Olympic Dreams", one might assume that it was written to include multiple experiences, exposing the sport as a whole through different facets. In reality, this is a memoir, told by Jennifer Sey, of her personal journey through elite gymnastics in the mid to late eighties, and doesn't include other perspectives. So it really should be "Chalked Up: A Memoir of Elite Gymnastics" or something similar, because it's merely that, and not an exposure of the sport as a whole.

Anyway, on to the book itself.

This is a bitter read. Very bitter. While in interviews, Sey reads like someone who has been able to rationalize a lot of actions, and is merely sharing her story as a way to show the world what can happen when things don't go according to plan, her book reads like a little girl who is mad at the world for doing her wrong. There are moments when she concedes that a lot of the actions are her own doing, but everything else is the fault of her parents, her coaches, the media, the sport, the other athletes, and everything/everyone else in between. While there is a lot of pressure with the sport from outside sources, it doesn't go wrong unless the individuals themselves allow it, and although Jennifer does hint at that fact, it is not the major point in her book, because her voice is so bitter throughout the writing.

I think, in retrospect, that a lot of that bitterness comes from her own inability to reconcile her own inadequacies and the arduous journey with her unachieved goals. There are plenty of other girls in the sport who went through everything she did, and possibly more, but in the end, felt that those ends justified the means. She never got to an end that she was satisfied with; she actually gave up shortly after her win at Nationals in 1986. So the methods she employed never justified the end product, leaving her very bitter in the process with her own apparent "failure". And when reading her book, it seems that that sense of failure didn't come from just her coaches, parents, or other people, as she presents it; while they may have contributed to it through some actions, it was ultimately her own overzealous personality that led to her own failure, and her own psyche that won't let it go. So the book itself comes off as very raw and rough, because Sey hasn't lost that edge to her anger, and seems unable to personally take that responsibility and let it all go.

Still, it was a good read. It's hard for the average person to know what it's like as a world-class athlete, with all the personal sacrifices and changes that go along with being the best, so the back-story is captivating. That time period in US gymnastics was somewhat ignored, because it was a time when the Europeans completely dominated originality and performance in the sport, and the US aspect was not a force to be reckoned with. Not to mention the Cold War and the athletes that lost out on their Olympic dreams with the boycotting of the Moscow Olympics, and the impact that had on athletes of the time, being uncertain as to the fruition of their dreams in the wake of silly things like politics. Sey's story provides an interesting perspective on that time that isn't discussed much, and I found it interesting.

Overall, a good read, and I commend Jennifer for getting her story out there, even with the rough edges. I'm sure as the future unfolds, she'll find more peace with herself and her decisions.

Sarah says

The title makes it sound as if this is going to be one of those muckraking, voyeuristic looks at the sport in general (which are, you know, awesome), but it's actually essentially a memoir. The merciless coaches, overzealous parents, eating disorders, etcetera, are by and large her own. Unlike most sports memoirs, it appears to actually have been written in its entirety by Ms. Sey, which definitely has an upside as well as a downside. Just to get the down out of the way, she's obviously a gymnast/marketer and not, say, an awesome English major -- there's lots of cliched language, repetition of stock phrases, that kind of thing. But on the other hand, it comes across as pretty meaningful that the awkward, anguished, matter-of-fact voice is her voice, to the point where I started interpreting errors as part of the whole trauma (as in, "She's still too fucked up to even *care* about the difference between *illusive* and *elusive*, for God's sake!") I know, it's crazy! I was being nice about the mistakes! If there was, in fact, a ghostwriter involved (which would be, narratively, kind of bullshit since she wraps up the book by suggesting that writing it is the way she's finally found to escape from her old self), he/she needs to come up with a suitable excuse for all the errors. Child molestation might work. This is also one of the more powerful memoirs I've read, again oddly in part because of the lack of polish. Misplaced modifiers, icky diction, all that stuff ends up fitting in weirdly well into what's going on overall, which is that Sey is still really struggling with all this stuff. She hasn't arranged it, like most "I had a crap childhood" memoirists, into an easy narrative: here's the bad guy, here's the good guy, here's the savior. This still has all the inconsistencies and rough edges of most people's childhood memories. She is alternately angry at and sympathetic to her parents; she is alternately angry at and sympathetic to her younger self.

stephanie says

it was a good look inside the world of gymnastics, and showed both the good and the bad. it's heartbreaking to read about how worried jen was about getting older, knowing that the clock was ticking.

jennifer sey was the 1986 national champion.

the way weight and puberty become so ingrained in you - how you actually want to retard your growth because growing in any way changes the way you can move through the air.

it's a good look inside in the world of young gymnastics. the way it sucks up lives, destroys families, etc. and the coaches . . . i really hope that it isn't that way still. but of course you worry about it - the weight pressure, the smallness, and the repeated injuries, the pounding over and over again.

i kind of feel guilty for still enjoying the sport. i mean, it is a sport, and i don't feel bad watching football, but. these are little kids. weight of the world on eight year old shoulders.

i don't even want to know what it's like in china.

good, insightful, and i like the fact that it was actually someone in the world telling her story. it was also fascinating to see how competitiveness can spiral out of control, how you can get tunnel vision so easily, and how even when you're smart and responsible and "grown up" you fall prey to the same things as so many others.

Heidi says

There are plenty of books written by elite gymnasts (or other elite athletes) who talk about how their training was difficult, but it was ultimately all worthwhile. Jennifer Sey, former U.S. National Gymnastics Champion, has come to the conclusion that it was NOT all worthwhile. Her memoir details her injuries which never had time to heal before coaches were pushing her to compete again, self-abuse with laxatives and anorexia, and a splintered family that gave up all semblance of normal life in order to pursue Jennifer's Olympic dream. And despite giving up her whole childhood to chase the Olympics, she was one of thousands of girls who didn't make it. Twenty years later, her crumbling body reminds her of all she gave up and didn't achieve.

This is a memoir which detours into muckraking. Sey puts most of the blame for her lost childhood on her parents, who should have protected her from sadistic coaches and questionable medical professionals. She also blames coaches who use their influence to chase medals, rather than nurture young girls.

When I was a kid, I begged my parents to let me take gymnastics. Begged! All to no avail. After reading this book, I'm kind of glad! I certainly never would have gotten to Jennifer's level, but even so, she didn't make gymnastics sound very fun.

Nicola says

“You were a gymnast?”

“Yes.”

“Did you make it to the Olympics?”

“No.”

This is the conversation pattern that haunts Jennifer Sey, who was the 1986 US gymnastics champion, but by the time the next Olympics rolled around, she was too stricken, physically and mentally, to compete for a spot on the Olympic team. Her body’s desire to weigh more than 100 pounds – to *grow up* from a skinny child into an adult woman – and her brain’s unravelling ability to focus so completely on a single goal undid her career, leaving her with the sense that her life was over at the age of 19.

Chalked Up is a harrowing memoir, which charts Sey’s course from precocious 6-year-old, who adoringly watched the great 1970s Eastern-European gymnasts on television, into a bulimic, self-loathing teenager who recklessly prayed for injury as she competed at the same level as those girls ten years later.

It’s not an easy read – Sey’s depression and her limitless, clawing need for affirmation are palpable – but it is a compelling one. Most distressing is Sey’s still-fractured relationship with her family. In contrast to the usual ‘show mom’ stereotype, Sey’s parents were at first easygoing about her gymnastics – urging her to consider quitting after her first major injury. However, the way that Sey’s gymnastics obsession appears to infect her mother, to the point where she threatens to not attend Sey’s high school graduation if Sey, in turn, doesn’t attend an upcoming gymnastics meet, is particularly dark, eluding easy comprehension.

Bookmom says

This is the story of Jennifer Sey, the 1986 US National Gymnastic Champion. The book tells us of her mindset, what drove her to compete and what it took for her to reach that level of competition. It begins at the age of 3 when she learned her first cartwheel, and takes us through to the present. What she went through on a mental and physical level to reach a goal is both inspiring and upsetting, as is what’s next for a person, still so young, who has spent their entire life in training for a small window of opportunity.

We’re told of many things that you wouldn’t normally hear about unless you were involved in, or knew someone in this field. From the mental and verbal abuse by some coaches to manipulate their athlete into the proper mindset. The politics which often don’t reward the person with the best performance. Training and performing through injuries that would have most of us totally side-lined. The issues with weight, eating, sacrifice of the family, etc, etc.

I dare you to NOT think of this book when watching a women’s gymnastic event after reading what the girls go through to reach this point.

The book was written in a way that was easy to read, and I thought gives us a good idea of what takes place beyond what we see on TV. And while we see what we may interpret as the horror of a young life, the author doesn’t blame others for much of what she goes through. It’s her own thoughts, fears and determination that bring her to where she is in life.

Lynn says

This was a good time to read this story with the Olympics starting. It is a look behind the scenes from a perspective on a national champion who struggled with the stress, pressure and demands of the sport of gymnastics. It is an eye-opening look at what lies behind the glamor and the pomp. Teen girls who like Patricia McCormick's Cut will like this one.

Hannah says

I enjoyed Chalked Up very much, and I think that the whole narrative was told in an enjoyable and simple fashion. My only real complaint is Sey's very repetitive language - she will use the same phrase again and again and again, and never deviate from it even when common synonyms are available. However I don't hold this against her as, simply she is not a writer, she is a former gymnast, now mother, and I didn't particularly expect her to have a stand out style.

I'm very aware of the pressures and the 'dark side' of elite and professional gymnastics, and as such Chalked Up wasn't a shocking exposé to me, however for what it was - one woman's journey through the world of gymnastics, it was highly enjoyable, un vindictive, and frank. I was very interested through-out the book to see how Sey's career left her physically and mentally when she retired, and she wrote of her post-gymnastic years honestly and delicately.

Chalked Up was a highly interesting read. Few books I would honestly describe as difficult to put down - this is one of them.
