

Lessons from Olympic Gymnastics: What Makes a “Team” a Team?



U.S. Olympic gymnast Kyla Ross. Photo by Scott and Emer Hults Photography. CC BY-SA 3.0.

Last night, the U.S. women [won their second ever gymnastics team gold medal](#) at the summer Olympics in London. After the win, the team’s coach, Marta Karolyi, and her former coach husband, Bela, said something interesting about this team:

Whether these 2012 gold medalists are the best group of American Olympic gymnasts can be debated – though U.S. coach Marta Karolyi says they are – but they are almost certainly the best team.

“That [1996 gold-medal squad] was a beautiful team made up from great individual athletes,” Bela Karolyi said when asked

to compare the two gold-medal teams. “Dominique Dawes, Shannon Miller, Amy Chow – all these great kids; but they trained in different ways. When we got them together, it was a beautiful bouquet of individual athletes rather than a team. And that made a big difference tonight.”

I love drawing lessons from [sports](#) when thinking about collaboration, but this claim made me curious. In a sport that is ultimately the aggregation of a set of individual scores, what made this 2012 squad more of a team than the 1996 squad?

I know nothing about gymnastics, but I know about teams, so I could speculate. Judging from what Karolyi said, my best guess is that they were referring to how this group prepared and practiced together. This is where high-performance skills are honed, and that’s where these women had the best opportunities to support each other.

What do you think? What makes a group of athletes who are judged by the sum of their individual performances a team? Were there indicators that showed that this 2012 squad was more of a team than the 1996 squad? I’d love to hear your thoughts in the comments below.

Update (August 3, 2012)

Bill Simmon’s recent post [comparing the experience of watching gymnastics versus swimming live](#) offers more clues as to how team gymnastics might feel more like a team sport than swimming relays. I particularly liked what he said about flow plus meaning. Scroll down to the final two sections of his post for the relevant sections.