

Photo by Jeff Wheeler, Star Tribune

SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

MAGGIE NICHOLS

Gymnast ‘did the right thing,’ hoping disclosure fuels change

By Rachel Blount (<http://www.startribune.com/rachel-blount/10644451/>) Star Tribune |

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Maggie Nichols knew how it felt to be under a spotlight, judged by people she didn't know. When it came to drawing back the curtain on her life, though, she wasn't sure she could withstand the same scrutiny she routinely faced as a gymnast.

The Little Canada native had begun thinking in mid-2017 about revealing a shocking truth: that she was “AthleteA,” the source at the core of the USA Gymnastics sexual-abuse scandal. Nichols firmly believed she could help others by going public, but she wrestled with the decision while preparing for her sophomore season at the University of Oklahoma.

“She was definitely afraid of how she would be perceived, what others would think,” said her coach, K.J. Kindler. “She lived with all that turmoil under wraps. Even coming forward to her teammates and opening up was really tough. But she finally threw that notion out

the window and said, 'It doesn't matter. I can help somebody if I do this.'

Nichols had one false start, backing out at the last minute as her lawyers prepared a statement. Then, on Jan. 9 — one week before the season's first meet — she dropped her cloak of anonymity, setting her on a path to one of the finest seasons in college gymnastics history.

No longer burdened by her secret, Nichols won the all-around crown at the NCAA championships with a record-tying score. She shared the national title in floor exercise and uneven bars and was runner-up on balance beam. With eight perfect-10 scores during the season, Nichols became the first college gymnast ever to record two "Gym Slams," earning perfect scores in all four events for the second consecutive year.

She also won awards for her role in exposing abuse by USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar. Nichols' statement revealed that she and her club coach, Sarah Jantzi of Champlin's Twin City Twisters, were the first to report Nassar to USA Gymnastics officials.

For her extraordinary courage and athletic achievement, for inspiring others while healing herself, Nichols is the Star Tribune's Sportsperson of the Year.

"Last year was amazing and difficult at the same time," said Nichols, 21. "But I found out how strong I really am. I know I can overcome any negative thing that comes toward me.

"That was a hard day when I came forward. But I felt like it was the right thing to do. It helped me, and it helped other people. And the support I got from so many people, it still amazes me every single day."

The Nassar scandal has exploded into the largest sex-abuse case in sports history. After Jantzi's report, USA Gymnastics officials did not promptly notify law enforcement, and Nassar continued to molest athletes for another 16 months. In January, he was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison after pleading guilty to abusing seven girls.

Nichols' parents, John and Gina Nichols, said Maggie has paid a steep price for revealing Nassar's abuse in June 2015. Though she was among the favorites to make the 2016 Olympic team, she was not selected following a sixth-place finish in the all-around at the Olympic trials. There is "no question," they said, that speaking up cost Maggie a spot on the team for the Rio Games.

Gina Nichols has wept buckets of tears since finding out her daughter had been molested by Nassar, starting when Maggie was 15. She said Maggie has never cried, never felt sorry for herself, never pouted, even as she waited more than two years for a taste of justice.

"I would have been out there breaking kneecaps," John Nichols said. "But Maggie doesn't let things knock her down. She just keeps going forward. I have no idea how she does it."



AMY PYLE, OKLAHOMA UNIVERSITY

aggie Nichols scored a perfect 10.0 in the uneven bars during the 2018 NCAA national championships in April.

Nineteen powerful paragraphs

Hundreds of athletes have accused Nassar of sexually abusing them under the guise of medical treatment. The abuse became public in 2016, when two gymnasts told the Indianapolis Star. Soon, Olympians such as Aly Raisman and McKayla Maroney began revealing they had been molested, too.

Nichols said nothing. She wasn't ready to talk publicly about how Nassar touched her "in places I really didn't think he should" while ostensibly treating her for a knee injury during a national team camp in Texas. But more than a year before Nassar's abuse became public, Jantzi had reported it, after overhearing a discussion between Nichols and a teammate.

Jantzi said "something didn't seem right" about what she heard. After questioning Nichols, she relayed the information to Rhonda Faehn, senior vice president of USA Gymnastics, on June 17, 2015.

"I asked [Maggie] to tell me more," Jantzi said. "When she did, I said, 'I have to report this.' [The idea of] 'Should I not report it? Am I going to risk something?' was not even a question. And if it is, who cares? She as a kid and a person is more important than her gymnastics career."

The Nichols family was told to stay quiet and did so for 2½ years. After Maggie did not make the Olympic team, she started her college career at Oklahoma and boosted the Sooners to the NCAA team championship as a freshman in 2017.

She also began to consider publicly revealing her abuse. Attorney John Manly, who represents the Nichols family and scores of others in lawsuits related to Nassar, told Maggie that adding her name to the list of survivors would help move things forward.

With the support of her coaches and parents, she set a date for her announcement, then called it off.

“We were so sick of carrying that secret,” Gina Nichols recalled. “I was worried, but we were confident it was the right thing to do, to get it out there. But Maggie was scared. She was so worried about how people were going to look at her.”

Jantzi understood. She expected some people to say Maggie wanted money, or that she was only speaking out because she didn’t make the Olympic team. Her advice: When Maggie felt ready to hear all that and ignore it, she would be ready to come forward.

Though the season opener against Georgia was only six days away, Nichols asked Manly to send out her statement on Jan. 9. Kindler worried about the timing, but she quickly realized it was a sign of Nichols’ fortitude.

“After Maggie didn’t make the Olympic team, it hurt her confidence a little bit,” Kindler said. “Her first two years at OU, I felt like we were rebuilding that self-esteem. For her to have the strength and confidence to come out with this right before the season, that was a huge step.”

In 19 powerful paragraphs, Nichols bared every emotion she and her family had kept hidden. The hurt. The anger. The sense of betrayal.

Up until now, it read, I was identified as Athlete A by USA Gymnastics, the U.S. Olympic Committee and Michigan State University. I want everyone to know that he did not do this to Athlete A, he did it to Maggie Nichols.

‘An inspiration’

Nichols’ news went national. TV trucks came and went from her parents’ home all day long, as Gina and John did interview after interview.

Maggie had no more to say that day. As the only gymnast to come forward during her competitive season, she needed to stay focused on her training — and if she was under attack, she didn’t want to know. Nichols didn’t look at her phone until practice ended late in the afternoon.

When she finally picked it up, her worries vanished. “I saw so much positive feedback,” she said. “So many people had texted me or messaged me on social media. It was super cool to see how much support I had.”

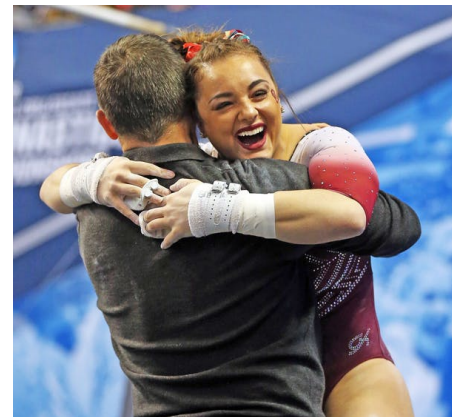
Kindler saw it, too. Though she said the praise was “constant,” one particular moment stood out.

At an Oklahoma basketball game, immediately after Nichols’ revelation, the coach was speaking to fans and mentioned Maggie’s courage. “A mother came up to me with her daughters,” Kindler recalled. “She said, ‘I just want you to know what an inspiration [Nichols] has been. We are so proud of her.’”

“I thought, ‘That’s a huge impact she’s having, on probably a lot of parents everywhere who hope to never go through this kind of thing.’”

Still, Kindler said Maggie was emotionally drained. For three weeks after the announcement, the team tried to protect her from being overwhelmed. Messages of admiration and gratitude poured in from everywhere, and Nichols tried to respond to every one.

She repaid her teammates and coaches by performing better than ever. In the fourth meet, against UCLA, Nichols earned her first perfect-10 of the season, on balance beam. She would add seven more perfect scores and 45 individual event titles in 15 meets.



Get to know Maggie Nichols, 2018 Star Tribune Sportsperson of the Year

“I didn’t know if coming forward would put a lot of pressure on me,” Nichols said. “But it took a weight off me. It helped me in so many ways to have so much support.”

That carried into the NCAA championships. In April in St. Louis, she nailed every event to win the all-around, tying the meet record with a score of 39.8125.

As she stuck her final landing to earn a perfect 10 on bars, the crowd leapt to its feet. Nichols’ teammates engulfed her in hugs, but she had no idea she was the champion; she had been so tightly focused that she hadn’t looked at the scoreboard. When Kindler told her, Nichols said, it was a moment she would never forget.

‘All the power’

Coach Mike Hunger, the Twin City Twisters’ founder, said Nichols “will go down as the best collegiate gymnast ever” if her final two seasons resemble her first two. But he believes she will be remembered for much more.

“I’m very proud of the way Maggie has handled everything,” he said. “She came out quietly. She wanted a couple of bad people to be put away. That happened, and she moved on.

“Some of the other [Nassar accusers] are like, ‘Look what we did, look what we did.’ But Maggie didn’t want the limelight. She just wanted to do what was right.”

Since Nichols made her statement, USA Gymnastics has declared bankruptcy. The U.S. Olympic Committee has taken steps to revoke its status as the sport’s national governing body. Former CEO Steve Penny is facing a felony charge of tampering with evidence, and a congressional investigation is underway.

Nichols said those consequences “needed to happen,” with more justice yet to come. She is part of ongoing lawsuits against USA Gymnastics and the USOC. Gina Nichols said the family “still has many secrets” about the abuse and the coverup, which she expects to come out as the investigations progress.

“It just eats at us,” Gina said. “I’m not as strong as Maggie. To do what she did at the NAAs, when the whole world was looking at her and knowing she was Athlete A, I don’t know where she finds the strength.”

There is more healing to be done, too, for the survivors already known and the ones who continue to come forward. Though Nichols says she is done with Olympic-level competition, she hopes to remain an agent of change. The athletes “have all the power now,” she said, and she wants to be part of the movement to ensure her sport’s governing body is humane, ethical and accountable.

With the 2019 season starting on Jan. 5, Nichols is ready to be judged again. Though she no longer has a secret to hide, she has not shed Athlete A completely.

Its shadow lingers in her new floor exercise, which tells the story of this year. Like Nichols’ life, the routine features multiple twists and moments where she is upside down. Though it requires strength, it is ultimately about grace, and about trusting she will always land on her feet.

“I know that I’ve helped myself, and I’ve helped so many other people,” Nichols said. “Sometimes it was hard. Sometimes it was overwhelming. But I know I did the right thing.”

Nichols won several honors this year, not only for the NCAA all-around gymnastics title, but for her part in exposing USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar’s serial sexual abuse.

(<http://www.startribune.com/get-to-know-maggie-nichols-2018-star-tribune-sportsperson-of-the-year/503466991/>)

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