



USA GYMNASTICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Tom Forster says he wants to lead USA Gymnastics by inspiration, not intimidation. Will it work?



AP

Tom Forster talked to the media during the podium training day of the competition at TD Garden in Boston on Wednesday.

By Matt Porter

GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 17, 2018



As it relates to the competition floor, USA Gymnastics is on top of the world. This isn't a basement-dwelling franchise hoping a change of GM and coach will put it on the road to a long-awaited title. This is the Patriots canning Bill Belichick, Robert Kraft selling the team and planning to take on the AFC East. (Perish the thought, Patriots fans, of events that would necessitate that.)

The Larry Nassar sex abuse scandal [has wrought drastic and needed change](#). So here's Tom Forster, who on July 1 assumed the role once held by both Bela and Martha Karolyi and Valeri Liukin — none of whom, for different reasons, are still associated with USA Gymnastics.

The new women's high-performance team coordinator (a new title, previously called national team coordinator) says he brings a kinder approach to his sport. He says he wants to lead by inspiration, not intimidation.

Sounds good. Will it work?

The Americans will bring uber-talented Simone Biles and three others to Tokyo in two years, hoping a fresh approach will produce familiar results.

The US women won all-around gold at the last four Olympics, and team gold at the last two. They won team gold in Rio de Janeiro by the widest margin ever. During Martha Karolyi's

run as national team coordinator (2001-16), the American women won 22 Olympic medals, 10 of them gold. She and her husband, Bela, built Romanian gymnastics from the ground up in the 1970s, came to the US the following decade and coached America's top gymnasts for three decades. A host of those competitors have publicly described a culture of verbal and emotional abuse. The US team doctor under their watch, Nassar, will spend the rest of his life behind bars.

Forster replaces Liukin, who succeeded Martha Karolyi after her retirement following the Rio 2016 Games. Liukin, a double-gold medalist for the Soviet Union at Seoul 1988, stepped down in February, citing in part the "stress, difficulty and uncertainty" of the Nassar case fallout.

Forster, who has been a national elite developmental coach since 2010, competed at Penn State and has produced a few elite gymnasts at Colorado Aerials (Colorado Springs, Colo.) with his wife, Lori. He doesn't have the in-gym chops of the Karolyis. He is pragmatic about that.

"I think the job is more relational, it's culture, it's leadership, more than technical," Forster said Wednesday on the floor of TD Garden, prior to US Nationals. "I'm new to it, but that's my gut."

Forster's reputation in gymnastics world is on the sunny side. An NBC video profile from the 1996 McDonald's American Cup, posted on USA Gymnastics' YouTube page in 2012, called him a "nice guy from Colorado," narrator John Tesh saying Forster had "a novel idea: to treat gymnasts positively." As Deadspin noted, alluding to a bit of spin on NBC's part, Joan Ryan's bestseller "Little Girls in Pretty Boxes" was published the year before. That book focused on abusive coaching practices in figure skating and gymnastics, particularly those of the Karolyis.

Biles, considered the best in the world, said Wednesday her interactions with Forster have been "very few, but all pretty good," she said. "Very encouraging. Very welcoming."

Asked if the sport was "going in the right direction," Biles paused.

“Um . . .” she said. “Good question. I’m not so sure yet. Hopefully it’s going in the right direction, but nobody can know until [new CEO] Kerry Perry speaks up . . . [I] have not had too, too much interaction with her.”

Forster seems a bit more open. One veteran reporter who watched him interact with gymnasts on the floor during recent competitions noted his style was different than his stormy predecessors.

“I’ve heard that they like it,” said Forster, who noted he has made connections with “90 percent” of elite US gymnasts as a developmental coach. Sitting and watching isn’t his forte.

“I’ve worked with them when they weren’t on the national team yet, when they were struggling and learning new techniques,” he said. “So I at least have a relationship with them, and I can still see some of the qualities or the little glitches that they have now that they had then, and I can go up to them and say, ‘Do you remember we talked about. . . ?’ That’s why I do it. The benefit of that is they feel comfortable with the coordinator, that’s all.”

USA Gymnastics cut ties with the Karolyi Ranch amid the scandal. It has not announced plans for a new training facility. Forster didn’t reveal the location Wednesday and said he isn’t involved in the search for a permanent site. He noted “we have a spot that we can do that now, at least in 2018,” he said. “We’ll have three camps coming up. That will help.”

EVO Athletics in Sarasota, Fla., is the interim national team training site through 2018. A USA Gymnastics spokesperson said it is considering proposals for a permanent site.

Last spring the Karolyis sued USA Gymnastics for \$1 million for allegedly reneging on an agreement to buy their ranch/training facility in Huntsville, Texas.

Forster said he wants gymnasts to feel they can voice complaints without fear of retaliation.

“Some of the fear — I don’t know if it was real, but it was certainly perceived, and we want to change that,” he said. “There’s always going to be stress at these camps, because they’re trying to become the best athletes in the world.”

“To me, it’s like telling the NFL players, ‘Oh, just relax. Don’t worry. Yeah, you dropped that pass. Don’t worry — I’m sure no one noticed.’ Of course, they noticed. They watch everything. And that dropped pass may have meant \$150,000, whatever, right? It matters. Well, these girls aren’t getting money. It’s about their dreams, their goals . . . that’s enough anxiety. They don’t need any other anxiety on top of that.”

Forster said USA Gymnastics has added a new athlete liaison, one who has no power to choose teams or impact their standing, as a sounding board for athletes. He said the rep will have to have competed on a World or Olympic team, “so they know what they’re going through.”

One of the immediate changes as a direct result of athlete feedback: open scoring at selection camps, the next of which will be in September. Individual judges’ scores and deductions will be made public, as they will at nationals. “Coaches will be able to file an inquiry, like they do here,” Forster said. “Every once in a while, a judge could miss something.”

USA Gymnastics believes Forster represents a fresh start. Whether that means the American dynasty is over is a topic for another day.

“We don’t want to let the country down,” he said. “So there’s that piece of it. The piece of the culture part, to me, is symbiotic with us trying to win in the right way. I’ve read through all the manuals. There isn’t anything in any of our manuals that demands we win medals. Not one. No matter what the press has said, whatever. There isn’t anything that says we have to win medals.

“We have to put the best team out on the floor. That’s our job, and we’re going to do it in the best, positive way we can, so athletes have a great experience doing it. That’s the hope. Well, it isn’t hope — it’s mandatory I do it.”

matthew.porter@globe.com@mattyports