

FOREWORD BY MARY LOU RETTON

COURAGE TO SOAR



A BODY
IN MOTION

A LIFE
IN BALANCE

SIMONE BILES

WITH *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR MICHELLE BURFORD

“I’ve seen Simone Biles grow as a person and gymnast over the past several years, and what is perhaps most impressive of all is Simone’s genuine, kind-hearted spirit and love of life. As one of her biggest fans, I am excited about what the undoubtedly bright future has in store for this fantastic and admirable young woman. As you read the pages of *Courage to Soar*, you will delight in getting to know this Olympic champion who was allowed to be a child and has grown up in a loving family that still plays a huge part in balancing her life. She is everything you would hope for in a champion—humble, kind, genuine, and an overall amazing human being.”

—DOMINIQUE MOCEANU, youngest Olympic US gold medalist in gymnastics history (age 14) and New York Times bestselling author of *Off Balance*



“Simone’s narrative outlines a great success story for all ages. In *Courage to Soar*, you will learn firsthand how Simone was able to combine her great natural talent with dedication, perseverance, and, yes, sometimes small sacrifices, in order to reach her goal. I truly enjoyed being part of her journey to world fame!”

—MARTHA KAROLYI, US National Team coordinator, 2000 to 2016, including the Olympics



“Simone Biles became America’s sweetheart this summer in Rio, but her story is what will make people fall in love with her forever. Filled with strength, courage, and inspiration, *Courage to Soar* is truly a remarkable story about an amazing athlete and person. Not only did I enjoy the journey Simone takes you on, but I continuously felt inspired through each chapter.”

—NASTIA LIUKIN, five-time Olympic medalist, motivational speaker, broadcaster

COURAGE TO SOAR

A BODY IN MOTION, A LIFE IN BALANCE

SIMONE BILES

WITH MICHELLE BURFORD

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

Courage to Soar

Copyright © 2016 by Simone Biles

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook.

This title is also available as a Zondervan audio edition.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-75966-9

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

This is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals involved. In addition, this book is not intended to provide gymnastic instruction, and readers should not attempt any of the gymnastic moves contained within this book, including “the Biles,” without proper training, safety measures, and the supervision of a qualified gymnastics coach.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Ron Huizinga

Interior design: Denise Froehlich

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 /DCI/ 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Power of a Dream



Foreword by Mary Lou Retton

The first time I met Simone Biles, I knew she was special. She was an outrageously talented twelve-year-old dynamo, and I was handing her a gold medal at the Mary Lou Retton Invitational meet in Houston. As she gave that now famous smile and thanked me, I immediately noticed she possessed a unique combination of skill and character: an incredible God-gifted athleticism and explosive power on the mat, a commitment to doing the hard work, and, most important of all, the grace, belief, and joy in gymnastics that would take her all the way. It was only a matter of time before the world learned just how high Simone could fly.

Even before the 2016 Olympics, Simone had already amassed a total of fourteen World medals, ten of them gold, the most ever won by an American female gymnast. She'd garnered three consecutive World Championship titles—the only woman to win three in a row—and claimed her fourth straight US National title. In Rio, on the world's biggest stage, she quickly added to that medal count when the American women took gold in the team

COURAGE TO SOAR

competition. Then, in the all-around final, Simone continued her historic bid, posting huge scores on vault, uneven bars, and beam. But this was the Olympics, and Russia's Aliya Mustafina and Simone's own teammate Aly Raisman were on her heels. In the final rotation, Simone was the last to take the floor.

Watching her, my mind flashed back to my own make-or-break Olympic moment in Los Angeles in 1984, when all that stood between me and the all-around gold medal was a flawless routine. In my case, the last rotation was vault, and my coach, Bela Karolyi, was on the sidelines yelling, "You can do it, Panda! Never better!" Hearing my nickname, and feeling the full weight of everyone's hopes, I focused. Somehow, I knew I would do the vault of my life that day. It didn't matter that an American gymnast had never won the Olympic all-around. I would be excellent, because I believed I could be.

Now, all these years later in Rio, as Simone saluted the judges and stepped onto the mat, something about the way she held her shoulders, loose yet determined, told me that she, too, believed. I thought, *She's got this*. The crowd hushed. The music rose. And Simone took off, tumbling, spinning, and soaring her way into the record books. Her routine was impeccable. She didn't just win—she dominated. I may have been the first American gymnast to earn all-around Olympic gold, and I'm proud of that, but I'm even more proud that I'm now part of a special sorority that includes Carly Patterson in 2004, Nastia Liukin in 2008, Gabby Douglas in 2012, and in 2016, Simone Biles.

After Simone's all-around win, Nastia Liukin, an NBC Olympic commentator, declared, "Simone Biles is the best we've seen." And US team captain Aly Raisman, who took silver in the Olympic all-around, joked that second place was the first slot available to the rest of the field, because Simone was in a class of her own. Over the course of the two-week competition, Simone would earn five medals in all—two more golds in the event finals for vault and floor, and a bronze for the balance beam. She became the first American woman ever to win the vault title, and the only one to take home four gold medals in a single Olympic year.

Everyone now knows what I sensed in Simone back in 2009—that she is one of the greatest athletes of all time. In Rio, she remained steady and even lighthearted in the midst of a media storm of expectations. She resisted the hype. She simply went into the arena and did her job, enjoying every moment without allowing the weight of what she'd set out to accomplish to crush her. She understood that whatever happened, as long as she did her best out there, she would get up the next morning, still smiling. This is what I've come to admire most about Simone—her ability to stay humble, shake off setbacks, cheer wholeheartedly for her teammates, and stand in her own true light.

Like all of us, Simone has faced her share of adversity. As her story here will reveal, she has had her dark days, her moments of despair. But she has emerged from her trials and sacrifices stronger and more determined to make them count. And along the way, she has helped to transform gymnastics, pushing its athleticism to new heights. When I went

COURAGE TO SOAR

to the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, female gymnasts were expected to be cute little pixies; slender, graceful butterflies. I was never that. I was solid and muscular, a born tumbler, exploding off the apparatus with force. Mine was the kind of athletic power more often associated with male gymnasts than female. Today, that very style is Simone's strength. Combined with her skill and artistry, her level of difficulty and technical mastery are nearly unbeatable, which may be why Simone hasn't lost an all-around meet since 2013. Thanks to Simone and her generation of competitors—and to the oversight of the now legendary USAG women's coordinator Martha Karolyi (who's been described as her husband Bela's "engine")—female gymnasts are no longer asked to demure little girls as they perform what may well be the hardest and most dangerous maneuvers in all of sports. With Simone at the forefront, American women gymnasts have embraced and now fully express their formidable athletic power.

When I give motivational talks to young people, I tell them that if they truly believe in themselves, and are willing put in the effort, they can achieve anything. Simone is living proof of that. Back when I was coming up, my only role models were gymnasts on the other side of the globe. Now, American girls with Olympic-sized dreams don't have to look any farther than home to find the best in the sport. But it's important for them to understand that every victory they witness is the pinnacle of a lifetime of hard work and a willingness to confront life's obstacles. Simone was able to stand on the Olympic medal podium, not once but five

times, because through all her struggles, doubts, and personal sacrifices, she never gave up. Simone *believed* she could be excellent. You'll come away from her inspiring story knowing that you can be too.

CHAPTER 1



Decision Day

*"You will not always be strong, but
you can always be brave."*

—BEAU TAPLIN, WRITER

My eyes stayed glued to the Jumbotron high above the arena. It was Day 2 of the 2011 Visa National Championships in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I was waiting to see if I'd made the USA Gymnastics (USAG) women's artistic junior team. My heart was pounding so hard that I thought everyone could hear it. After competing against the best of the best in my sport, had I actually made the cut?

We all knew the rules: Only the most qualified gymnasts would make the team. And as always, USAG coordinator Martha Karolyi would have the final say on which gymnasts,

COURAGE TO SOAR

and how many, would represent our country. For years, I'd dreamed of being one of those powerful girls in their shimmering leotards, flying through air, sticking the landing every time. I'd imagined having medals around my neck, chalk dust on my legs, and a bright smile on my face. More than anything in the world, I wanted to be chosen for the team.

My parents, Ron and Nellie, have always taught me that the first step to making dreams real is to ask for God's guidance. Did I mention that I'd been doing that all year? In church every Sunday, with my younger sister, Adria, at my side, I'd kneel with my eyes tightly shut and pray for my family and my teammates. I'd then visualize making the national team, imagining it like a movie. That was my prayer, and I believed God was with me on this. After all, he'd given me not just my love of gymnastics, but also the courage to fly high above the arena floor. But had I done enough? As I held my breath and gazed up at the screen, all I could do was hope.

At the time, I was fourteen and small for my age. A four-feet-eight-inch ball of nonstop energy, I liked to say I was four feet nine just so I could feel taller. But I was also strong. I'd been born with the kind of biceps and muscled calves that, back in third grade, had earned me the nickname *swoldger*—a cross between *swollen* and *soldier*. Some girls might have been offended by that, and at first, I did think it was kind of mean. But after a while, I embraced it. I was like, *Yeah, I'm stronger than half of the boys in my class, so don't mess with me*. It helped that I was starting to rack up some wins in gymnastics meets, where most of my teammates had muscles too.

By the time I got to Nationals, I'd been training at Bannon's Gymnastix in Houston, Texas, since I was six. Believe it or not, that's actually pretty late for an elite gymnast. Most girls are flipping and tumbling in Mommy and Me classes before they're three, so in a way, I'd been playing catch-up. But if there's one thing everyone knows about me, it's that I love a challenge.

Maybe because I was always so much smaller than everyone around me, I had this fierce drive to prove myself. So if someone told me to do five push-ups, I'd do ten. If someone tried to tell me I couldn't perform a skill (except maybe on bars, but we'll get to that later), it only made me want to do that skill flawlessly.

That didn't mean I was reckless. Competitive gymnastics can be a dangerous sport, and I understood just how important it was to be well-prepared. In competition, we always performed the skills we'd practiced and mastered in the gym, because as any gymnast can tell you, there's a fine line between being courageous and ending up with a major injury.

At the Visa National Championships, I'd had to walk that line. Martha Karolyi had sent word through my coach, Aimee Boorman, that she wanted to see me perform the Amanar, aka the two-and-a-half twist, which includes a round-off back handspring entry and a two-and-a-half twist on the layout. In other words, it's one of the hardest vaults in the world—and I had never performed it in competition.

"Aimee, I'm not ready!" I said, hyperventilating. "I haven't practiced the two-and-a-half enough. It's not safe."

COURAGE TO SOAR

“Simone, you’re the one who has to go out there and do the vault,” she told me calmly. “So whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

In the end, I stuck with my planned back handspring double-twisting Yurchenko, a vault I knew I could pull off. But my execution that day wasn’t the greatest. I’d blasted off the vault with too much power, which caused me to lose control and make an obvious hop on the landing. Long story short, I barely squeaked out a tie for seventh on the vault.

Then again, given that this was my first season as an elite junior gymnast, I’d medaled more than I thought I would. To my surprise, I’d even finished first in some events at earlier meets. But as I went up against the girls I admired—stars like Lexie Priessman, Katelyn Ohashi, Madison Desch, and Amelia Hundley—I was intimidated by how good they were. There was something else too: I thought that if I went out and beat these girls, they wouldn’t like me. And more than anything, I wanted these girls to see me as one of them. At Nationals, this lack of confidence had messed with my head.

Now, as I watched the mega screen where the roster of names would appear, I felt, deep down, that I could’ve done better. Maybe if I’d trained more, spent longer hours practicing in the gym, mastered more challenging skills—like the Amanar—I might be feeling less scared.

A roar went up in the arena as the name of the highest scoring junior gymnast lit the screen. Katelyn Ohashi. No surprise there. Katelyn had killed it on all her routines. I cheered for her loudly.

One by one, the rest of the names appeared on the

overhead screen. Number two, Kyla Ross. Number three, Sarah Finnegan. Number four, Lexie Priessman. I held my breath, wishing with everything in me that my name would be next. Number ten. Number eleven. Number twelve. Then came the final girl—Madison Desch, number thirteen. One row below the list of winners, at number fourteen, I saw my own name. I'd missed making the junior national team by one spot. *One.*

I kept a smile plastered on my face as an announcer called each new team member to the stage. The rest of us stood on the sidelines as the chosen ones laughed and high-fived and hugged each other. As devastated as I felt, I was still happy for the other girls; they'd worked hard to make it this far. Still, I had to swallow my own disappointment as I watched photographers snap pictures that would later appear in *USA Gymnastics* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, *Time for Kids*. All the glossies I'd pored over in my bedroom at home, admiring the gymnasts who'd reached the top of the sport.

Tears were bubbling up inside me, but I refused to let the other girls or the coaches see me cry. I kept telling myself I'd done my best, trying to drown out the little voice in my head that whispered, *But did you really? Couldn't you have worked a little harder? Why didn't you do more?* The truth is that my heart was breaking. I had come to Nationals with a goal of making the 2011 team, and it didn't happen. I simply hadn't been good enough.

That's how my journey as an elite gymnast began—with a defeat that put an ache in my heart and doubts in my mind. As much as my family and coaches had cheered me on

COURAGE TO SOAR

through hours and hours of training, through wobbles and missteps, through bumps and bruises, I was always secretly afraid that I'd let them and myself down.

Maybe it's good we don't know what will happen next in our stories, because if we did, we might not turn the page. Or we might skip ahead and never experience the good that comes out of the hard moment we're living through.

I thought my failure at the 2011 Nationals was an ending, but it was really a beginning—a turning point on a journey I still can't believe I'm taking. No one is more surprised than I am that the little girl with the big muscles ended up on a path from foster care to an Olympic stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Some might call that destiny. I call it a blessing, a gift from God, and a miracle.