



August 4, 2021

Olympic-Sized Lessons

The Olympic Games now taking place in Tokyo have already given us some Olympic-sized lessons.

Simone Biles, who can rightly be considered the greatest gymnast of all time, a true G.O.A.T, has taught us so many lessons. Simone came down with a malady called the “twisties”, a situation where gymnasts who do so much twisting in their routines suddenly lose their sense of exactly where they are in the air, putting themselves in danger of a fall and serious injury.

Simone realized it was happening to her and made the decision to withdraw from competition on the biggest stage and under the most intense lights. Some criticized her decision. But, Simone taught us the lesson of courage, of paying attention to our own bodies and doing what is best in spite of immense pressures. She also taught us about the value of a life. Simone said the outpouring of love and support she has received has made her “realize I’m more than my accomplishments and gymnastics,” which, she added, she had previously “never truly believed.” Simone, you have value beyond your many, many accomplishments. Simone, your life matters. Black Lives Matter.

And, Simone’s decision opened a door for teammate Suni Lee to win the gold medal in the women’s gymnastics all-around final. After Lee won the gold, her father John Lee told “TODAY” that there are “no words to express” how much the medal means to his family. He then had a message for Biles. “I’m gonna tell (Sunni) that I’m super proud of her,” John Lee said, via NBC 5 Chicago. “I want to tell her too that no matter what, I’ll support her, and I want to tell Simone that she truly is the G.O.A.T. because she let my baby girl bring me a gold medal.”

Simone Biles and tennis star Coco Gauff have also taught us about the importance of safeguarding our mental health. In reporting in USA Today, Biles, the most decorated active gymnast in the world and a survivor of sexual abuse by former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, prioritized her well-being over an audience hungry for her performance, withdrawing from the team final and the individual all-around competition because she had “to do what’s right for me and focus on my mental health.”

“We also have to focus on ourselves, because at the end of the day, we’re human, too,” Biles said. “So, we have to protect our mind and our body, rather than just go out there and do what the world wants us to do.”

“For a while, I saw a psychologist once every two weeks. That helped me get in tune with myself so that I felt more comfortable and less anxious,” Biles told [Health](#) magazine in June, explaining that she prioritizes her mental health whenever she feels like she needs to.

“One of the very first (therapy) sessions, I didn’t talk at all,” she told [Glamour](#) in June. “I just wouldn’t say anything. I was like, ‘I’m not crazy. I don’t need to be here.’” Over time, however, she learned anyone can benefit from it.

“I thought I could figure it out on my own, but that’s sometimes not the case. And that’s not something you should feel guilty or ashamed of,” she added. “Once I got over that fact, I actually enjoyed it and looked forward to going to therapy. It’s a safe space.”

Along with the lessons of courage, value, generosity, and mental health, we also just need to see more Black Americans compete in the Olympics. But, before there can be successful Black elite adult athletes, there need to be Black children playing a sport. We need to provide opportunities in our schools so that the talent we know is there in our communities can be developed, supported, and nourished. Our schools need the proper funding to support every type of athlete. We need to support the dreams and aspirations of our Black young people, so they can see themselves on a Wheaties box after their Olympic triumph. We can do this, if we have the will to support our schools and our children to live the motto of the Olympics: “Faster, Higher, Stronger - Together”.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District