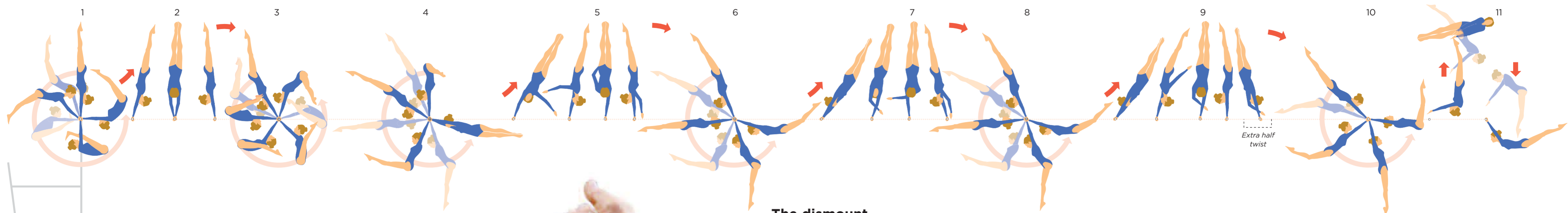


Beijing 2008: Gymnastics

He Kexin of China scored a 17.2 on the uneven bars at a World Cup meet in May, the best in any event under the sport's new scoring system, and teammate Yang Yulin posted a 17.1

An extraordinary sequence

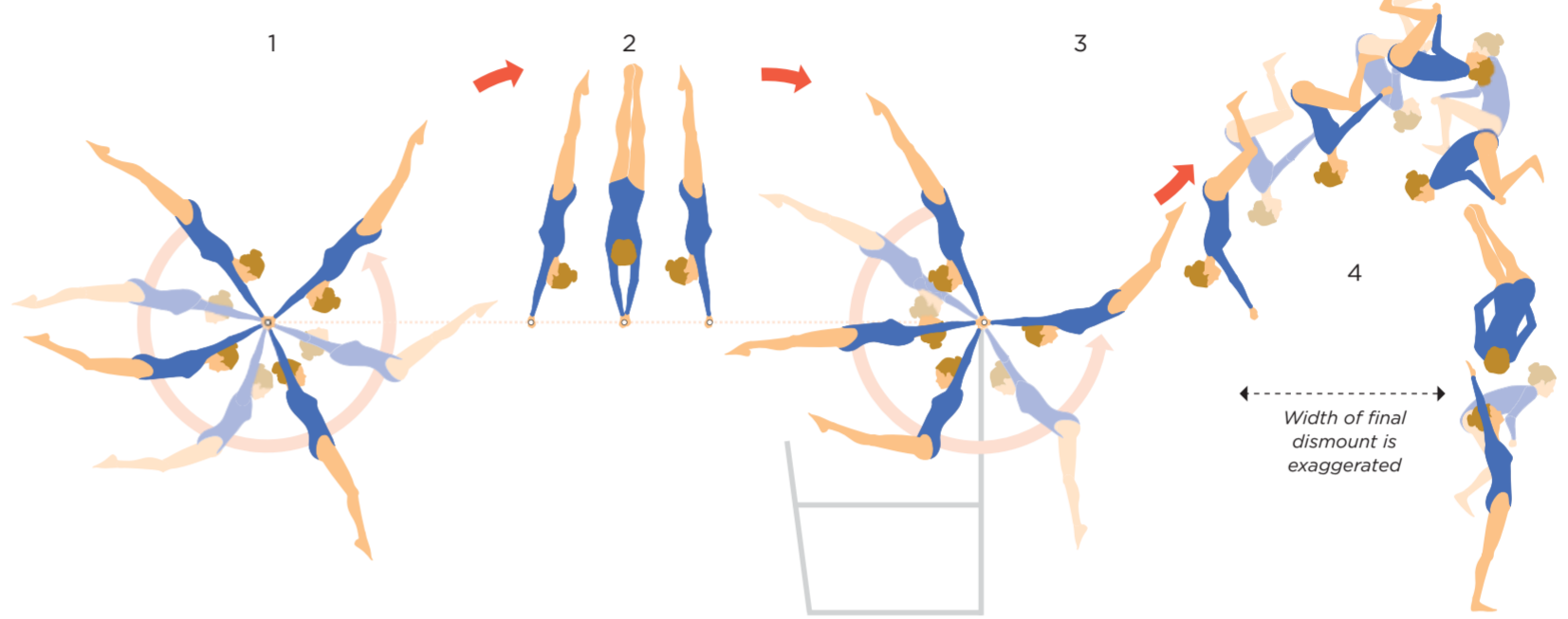
In this unique, rapid sequence, Liukin connects some of the most difficult skills used in competition by anyone in the world



An extraordinary sequence

- 1. Out of the handstand, this inside staldler begins the stunning sequence
- 2. Switches directions
- 3. Front staldler with hands in difficult grip
- 4. Loops around the bar
- 5. Executes the first pirouette, called an Ono, on only her left arm
- 6. Loops around the bar
- 7. Executes the second pirouette, called a Healy, on only her right arm
- 8. Loops around the bar
- 9. Executes the third pirouette with an extra half-twist on only her left arm
- 10. Loops around bar
- 11. Performs a Gienger, a twisting release move high above the bar

The dismount



The dismount

- 1. After several more challenging skills, this loop prepares her for the dismount
- 2. Stops and switches direction and grip
- 3. Swings backward
- 4. Double-front half-tuck dismount

DAMEON RUNNELS/Staff Artist

Raising the bar

Liukin sets new standard with high-flying routine on uneven bars that puts her in the hunt for gold

Story by KATE HAIROPOULOS Staff Writer khairooulos@dallasnews.com
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When Nastia Liukin's turn to fly, pirouette and loop around the uneven bars comes — whether it be in front of NBC's cameras or at a national team practice at Camp Karolyi in rural New Waverly, Texas — every eye is glued on the lithe 18-year-old from Parker.

"I feel that," Liukin said. "Everyone wants to see this thing everybody's talking about."

It will only be intensified on the grand Olympic stage in Beijing.



Nastia Liukin chalks her hands to help get a grip on a routine that ranks as one of the world's most difficult.

The back story

Valeri Liukin, Nastia's father and coach, created this breathtaking routine after Nastia narrowly finished second on the bars at the world championships the last two years. A savvy strategist, Valeri squeezed the most out of the new scoring system. He also knew his daughter would need every advantage heading into Beijing.

"I told her, if you want to win, if you want to have a chance, you have to do it," Valeri Liukin said.

Nastia Liukin likes to say the new routine is twice as hard as the one she used in competition in 2005. And that one was good enough to win the world title.

Made up of 28 skills — only 10 count toward the scoring — it features ridiculously hard skill connected to ridiculously hard skill, and leaves Liukin gassed by the time she unleashes her double-front, half-tucked dismount.

No other U.S. gymnast approaches her 7.7 difficulty start value on any apparatus.

"It's all because of this new code," Liukin said. "As much as people hate the new code and no perfect 10, it really has brought out the best in all of us. Yeah, the difficulty is tremendous but I think it makes it a lot more fun for everybody."

Liukin will have competition. He Kexin of China has the same start value and scored 17.2 on bars at a World Cup meet in May.

Liukin and Kexin have never competed head-to-head.

"Nastia is absolutely amazing," said Kim Zmeskal-Burdette, the 1991 all-around world champion who now coaches in Coppell. "It's very hard even for us coaches not to stop."

What's the big deal? It's in the unique skills, the stunning difficulty and the beautiful execution.

At the U.S. national championships in June, Liukin scored 17.1 on the bars — the highest score recorded by an American gymnast under the new scoring system, instituted in 2006.

If Liukin can ring up comparable numbers in China — international judging is often more stringent — she would not only give a huge boost to the U.S. team's medal hopes and put herself in contention to win individual gold on the bars, she also would boost her chances for the all-around gold, the most glamorous medal in the sport.

"Her routine includes lots of very difficult skills and they're done so close to perfection, technically," said Martha Karolyi, the U.S. national team coordinator. "Her bodylines are so perfect. ... This is one of the very best bar routines in the world."

The routine

Before Liukin begins, she chalks her hands and checks the grips on her arms and wrists for tightness. Valeri crouches nearby, anxious.

"I get pretty nervous," Nastia Liukin said. "I take my last deep breath."

When she leaps up and grabs the low bar and swings into the first handstand, she needs to feel centered, legs tightly together, toes pointed.

As she powers from the low bar to the high bar and into another handstand, she is about to start a point-loaded sequence — bang, bang, bang, bang — of world-class skills.

"I have to feel dead on," Liukin said. "This is where it starts."

Liukin moves from the handstand into skills looping around the bar called an inside staldler and a front staldler. Like much of the rest of the routine, they require difficult hand grips and angles, with strength and flexibility that are hard to fully appreciate on the TV screen.

"You probably can't see this because she's so flexible and good," Valeri Liukin said. "You must develop flexibility when you're little — later you have too much muscles and you hurt your shoulders. We did our homework. You can't just become a professor at SMU if you didn't go to school. ... You can't just teach elite gymnasts. You have to build elite gymnasts."

Next comes the most stunning part of the routine — a sequence featuring three one-armed spins above the eight-foot high bar.

"It's crazy that she's pirouetting left, pirouetting right and then back to pirouetting left," said Chris Korotky of *Inside Gymnastics*.

Those are all exceptionally difficult skills few gymnasts in the world would try back-to-back-to-back.

It doesn't stop there. Liukin goes directly into a high-flying release move called a Gienger, in which she releases the bar, twists, and catches it again on the way down.

Liukin said she is sometimes nervous about flying through the air.

"I just feel I go kind of high, so it's one of the things that scares me," she said. "In practice, my dad is always standing there so I feel more secure. But in competition, he can't touch me at all."

Once Liukin grabs the bar, she has completed a sequence that adds a whopping .8 to her difficulty score.

"I still have a whole second part to go," Liukin said. "But after that's done, I feel pretty confident going through the whole routine."

Not that Part 2 is easy. Liukin throws in

another release move, this one called a Tkachev, in which she throws herself above the high bar.

Then Liukin ventures, headfirst, back down to the lower bar using a skill called a Pak salto. She struggled with this move at the U.S. Olympic trials, and it was one of the trickiest to adjust to as she experienced two major growth spurts in her career. But when she does it right, "she literally just floats to the other bar," Korotky said.

At this point, Liukin is well into her marathon routine.

In training, she has focused on building endurance, though she can only do so many routines — usually three full ones and three each of Part 1 and Part 2 separately — a day. The evidence of the work is in her calloused palms and wrists, which are often marked with a deep gash, what gymnasts call a "tear."

By the time Liukin swings back onto the high bar, she's almost out of gas for her double-front half-tuck dismount.

She can perform it flawlessly alone, but after the whole routine, it is especially hard to pull off.

"I don't hear anything until my dismount," Liukin said. "At trials, especially, I felt like the whole arena was cheering for me, and I can hear that. That always helps. I can't let them down."

Liukin made mistakes on the routine in recent competitions, but its difficulty level leaves some room for error. A performance approaching flawlessness, though, could result in gold.



Liukin hopes her performance on the bars leads to a triumphant exit in Beijing.

On Page 1A

Nastia Liukin has lived up to her parents' championship legacy as she chases her own Olympic dream.

More on Nastia

Check out our coverage of Liukin during her run up to the Games, including stories, photos and slideshows, on dallasnews.com/sports

Plenty more to do

While Liukin's bar routine is the most "wow"-inducing of her events, she is a medal contender as an all-around gymnast. U.S. teammate Shawn Johnson, as the reigning world and national all-around champion, is the favorite, though Liukin could challenge her.

Liukin is the reigning world champion on the balance beam. Her signature move on the four-inch wide beam is a flip forward in which she starts the leap on one foot, lands on the other and then goes into a scale, one leg extended behind her.

In the floor exercise, her unique skill combinations and dancer's lines are her strength, in contrast to the springy excitement of some gymnasts.

Her vault, a Yurchenko twisting one-and-a-half, is one of the easiest in competition, so Liukin goes for points by executing it cleanly.

"If you look at her physical abilities, she's probably at the bottom of the pack of the whole national team," Valeri Liukin said. "But look at her floor routine — she gets [good scores]. That's her technique, that's preparation, that's smart thinking. ... You can't just be smart on bars, it has to be everywhere."