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Olympic Sized Controversy

According to the rules governing Olympic gymnastic competition, female gymnasts must be at least 16 years of age to compete. The rule was put in place in 1997 to prevent the exploitation of young children who can be harmed by the rigors of world-class gymnastic competition and who also have an unfair advantage in flexibility over their slightly older counterparts. In order to qualify for competition, athletes must turn 16 during the year of the Olympics.



China denies allegations that documents were falsified so that the girls could compete in this year's games. But legendary gymnastics coach Bela Karolyi, who has been consistently critical of the Chinese gymnastics program during his appearances on NBC's Olympics broadcasts, insists that the Chinese competitors are too young.

"These people think we are stupid," Karolyi said. "We are in the business of gymnastics. We know what a kid of 14 or 15 or 16 looks like. What kind of slap in the face is this? They are 12, 14 years old and they get lined up and the government backs them and the federation runs away. There is an age limit and it can't be controlled."

If China has lied about the ages of its female gymnasts, as appears to be the case, it wouldn't be the first time. Writing in the *Huffington Post*, David Flumenbaum notes:

At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, three years after the minimum age was raised to 16 in gymnastics, Chinese gymnast Yang Yun competed and won a bronze medal in the uneven bars (coincidentally this event is also He's specialty). Yang's passport said she was born on December 24, 1984 and turning 16 in the year of the Games, making her eligible. She later confessed in a television interview that she was only 14 at the time of the competition and that she and her coaches had lied about her age.

Investigators have uncovered what appears to be incriminating evidence. Chinese newspapers and official gymnastic rosters indicating that the girls are too young to compete have been unearthed. Due to these findings, the International Gymnastics Federation has been urged to provide further proof of the athletes ages and the investigation is currently underway.

(AP Images)



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