

# “Even If She Fell Down, She Kept Getting Up!” Teaching Women’s History through the Olympics

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“She was brave!” exclaimed third-grade student Kayla as she and four of her peers sat together in a circle on the classroom floor.<sup>1</sup> Kayla and her classmates were discussing what they had just learned about Tenley Albright, the first U.S. woman to win the Olympic gold medal for figure skating in 1956. Their preservice teacher, Kecia, had prepared a two-day social studies lesson on U.S. female Olympic athletes at their school in Queens, New York. As a sports enthusiast herself, Kecia believed that sports could be a unique platform to teach third-grade students about women’s history. “My intention was to inform learners on the contributions women made in sports,” Kecia said. However, by the end of the lesson, Kecia discovered that her students not only learned about the contributions of female athletes in Olympic sports history, but also about how these women demonstrated hard work, persistence, and resilience. This lesson addressed two social studies practices for the third grade in the New York State K-8 Social Studies Framework (Gathering, Interpreting, and Using Evidence; and Chronological Reasoning and Causation)<sup>2</sup> and three themes from the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (● TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; ● PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS; and ● INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY).<sup>3</sup> In addition, this lesson addressed Common Core Reading Standards three and seven for Informational Texts for third grade under “Key Ideas and Details” and “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” as well Common Core Writing Standard two for Text Types and Purposes for third grade (“Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly”).<sup>4</sup>

## Using Sports as a Platform to Teach Women’s History

Connecting the curriculum to students’ lives has long been viewed as an effective way to make learning meaningful for

students. Indeed, sports are a popular activity in which many students participate. Elementary students around the U.S. (and the world) compete in a variety of youth sports programs and enjoy cheering for their favorite teams. Teaching with sports, then, can pique students’ interests and engage young learners in the study of different topics, including many of those found in the social studies.<sup>5</sup>

Sports also can be a creative way to teach civic values. In the context of women’s history, students can learn how, over time, women’s increased participation in sports has led to greater gender equality. As a result of feminists in the U.S. challenging accepted notions of Victorian femininity around the turn of the twentieth century, more women began participating in sports, especially at women’s colleges in the 1920s in “a first wave of athletic feminism.”<sup>6</sup> Around that time, women also began competing in the Olympics. The 1900 Olympics in Paris, France, marked the first year that women participated in the international sporting event. The women represented 2.2 percent of the athletes, and they competed in five sports: tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian, and golf. By the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, women accounted for a record 45 percent of the athletes.<sup>7</sup>

These and other historical facts provide social studies educators with rich opportunities to teach young children about women’s participation in the Olympics and how, over time, women’s increased visibility has been a step towards gender equality. Furthermore, teaching about female athletes in the Olympics helps educators place more emphasis on gender in social education, a topic that education scholars have argued deserves more attention.<sup>8</sup> Studying the experiences, contributions, and achievements of women in history is a critical component in social education and one that is crucial in preparing young students for active and engaged citizenship in a diverse democracy.

## Planning the Lesson

Kecia's lesson comprised two 50-minute segments, taught over two days. She chose to focus her lesson on four U.S. Olympic athletes whose accomplishments spanned more than a century of the Olympics. She researched the backgrounds of these women and prepared short biographies to share with students. Each athlete won an Olympic sporting event at least once. (There were other athletes Kecia could have chosen, but she selected these four women because she was personally inspired by their stories.) Kecia intentionally selected a diverse group of women who came from different backgrounds, competed in different sports, and were Olympic participants at different times.

- **Margaret Abbott** was a golfer at the Olympics in 1900, the first year that women competed. She also was the only athlete among these four who did not receive a gold medal for her first-place win. She received a gilded porcelain bowl instead.<sup>9</sup>
- **Tenley Albright** won medals for figure skating, a silver at the 1952 Winter Olympics and a gold in 1956.<sup>10</sup>
- **Jackie Joyner-Kersey** competed as a track and field star (long jump and heptathlon) in the 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 Summer Olympic Games where she won six total medals, three of them gold.<sup>11</sup>
- **Simone Biles** won gold (team, all-around, vault, floor) and bronze (beam) medals at the 2016 Summer Olympics.<sup>12</sup>

## Day One: Introducing the Athletes

To open the lesson, Kecia led a whole-class discussion during which she asked students to share their prior knowledge about the Olympics. One girl, Amanda, said that the Olympics were an event where “the greatest players from every country compete for the gold medal.” Noah added, “The [2018] Winter Olympics were in Korea.” After this discussion, Kecia explained that during the first Olympics in ancient Greece, men competed as athletes, and women crowned the winners. In response, Lauren said, “I like climbing and biking, and if I had to crown people who did all of these things, I’d just feel really sad.”

After the large-group discussion, Kecia told the students that in 1900, female athletes began competing in the Olympics. She explained to the students that the class would learn about four Olympic women athletes by reading short biographies, studying photos, and creating timelines. She explained that they would work in small groups of four to five students each, and each group would study one athlete, then report its findings to the whole class. Students would look for information not just about the athlete's Olympic achievements, but also about

major events that took place in her life.

Kecia carefully selected photographs she found online that showed each athlete competing in her respective sport. For example, a photo of Albright showed her skating on the ice, and Biles's photo captured the athlete suspended in the air above a balance beam. The purpose of using these photos was to support information shared in the biographies, as well as to help students make additional observations about each athlete.

Kecia explained that each group would complete a timeline as a group, but that each student would also create his or her own copy of the timeline. On a template provided by the teacher, the timeline would be constructed from a vertical line down the center of the page (read from top to bottom), with designated spaces on either side of the line for students to indicate a range of years (beginning with the athlete's birth, and ending with the present day, or the year of an elderly athlete's death), and to write descriptions of events in the person's life. (Teachers replicating this lesson, however, could select a timeline template based on their own individual preferences.) To ensure that students understood how to complete the timeline, Kecia modeled how to construct one by drawing on the life of Laurie Hernandez, a gold-medal U.S. gymnast in the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. (Upon introducing Hernandez, one boy shouted enthusiastically, “I saw her in the Olympics. She was awesome!”)

The students dispersed into their assigned small groups, and Kecia and her cooperating teacher distributed the biographies, photos, and timeline templates. As Kecia circulated around the classroom to observe the students working, she noticed the groups engaging in meaningful conversations about the athletes. For example, the students who studied Tenley Albright discussed how brave they thought she was. As a child, Albright contracted polio and took up figure skating as a form of therapy.<sup>13</sup> The students also were impressed that after the Olympics, Albright attended Harvard Medical School and became a surgeon. “She never gives up,” one student commented.

The group studying Jackie Joyner-Kersey discussed the athlete's success and determination. “Even if she fell down, she kept getting up!” Alex said. When the students were asked what they learned about women's history by studying Joyner-Kersey, they replied, “Never give up!” The children also said that Joyner-Kersey's story encouraged them to be “up for a challenge.” The student groups studying Abbott and Biles were equally inspired by their athletes' stories. Students thought Abbott was successful because she was “the first woman to win.” Regarding Biles, the students described her as “brave” and “strong.”

At the end of the lesson's first segment, Kecia gathered her students together for another group discussion. She asked them what they had learned so far. The students shared events from their timelines, described their impressions of the athletes, and acknowledged each athlete's unique contributions. Kecia then pushed her students' thinking further by asking the children

to find common links among the four athletes, even though the women had lived at different times and had competed in different sports. After a few minutes of collective brainstorming, the class concluded that the four women shared at least one main characteristic in common: “hard-working.”

### Day Two: Writing about the Athletes

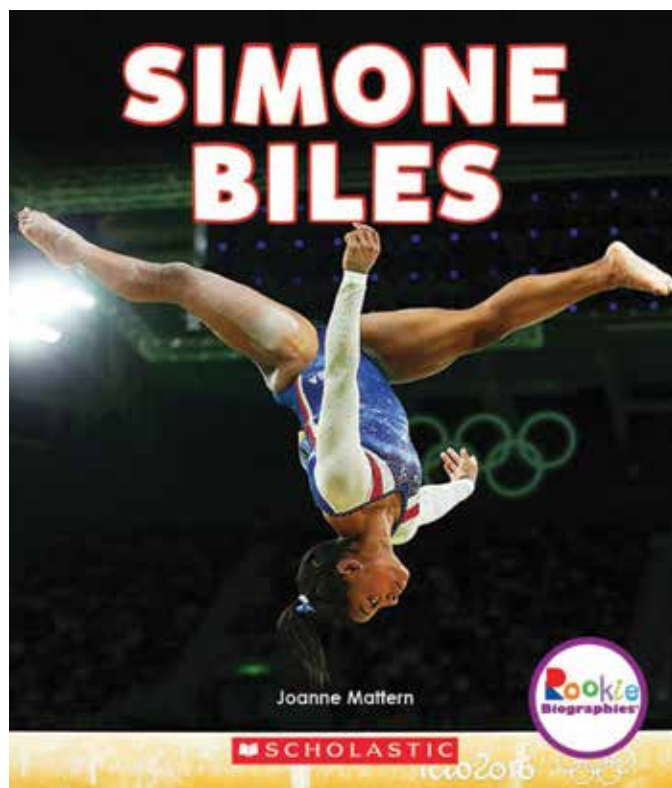
To begin the second day of the lesson, Kecia built on the knowledge her students gained on the first day by asking the children what they learned. The students explained that they had read about four female athletes in the Olympics, and they shared information they had written in their timelines. This brief

review not only served as a “warm up,” but also as preparation for the individual assessment that was to come.

Kecia introduced the assessment—a writing assignment accompanied by an illustration—in which the students had the opportunity to share what they learned. For the writing component, Kecia asked the students to use the biographies, photos, and timelines to document historical facts and accomplishments of the athlete their group had studied; to describe the traits that helped each athlete achieve success; and to explain how the athletes served as inspirational role models. For the drawing component, Kecia asked the students to create illustrations that depicted their impression of the athlete.

The students produced thoughtful work that reflected their new knowledge. For example, Sam wrote that Albright was “a passionate person... I think the Olympics would be worse if women were not allowed to participate because we’re all equal, no one less, no one more.” Regarding Simone Biles, Rebecca wrote that she herself was similar to Biles because she and Biles were both “risk-takers, brave, and mentally smart.” Rebecca also commented, “She inspires me because she taught me to be more kind, smart, [and] confident.” After the students completed their writing and drawing assignments, they shared their work with the class.

To close the two-day lesson, Kecia led a final group discussion. She asked her class to talk about some of the contributions the four athletes made. The students shared the athletes’ accomplishments, as well as different ways the women inspired them to overcome challenges of their own. This portion of the lesson provided one final opportunity for Kecia to engage her



students in thoughtful analysis. She asked her students what the four athletes’ accomplishments demonstrated. The students indicated that the Olympians’ achievements showed hard work, dedication, and athletic skill, and that their Olympic participation demonstrated society’s progress towards greater gender equality. As one student declared about Joyner-Kersey, “I think she was important because most girls usually aren’t allowed to participate. She is always up for a challenge!”

Kecia was pleased that her students learned what she hoped they would, but she also was touched by the increased confidence and determination her students developed in the lesson. “Teaching social stud-

ies to young learners can be a challenge,” she said. “At first I was nervous, but the students learned that anyone can accomplish anything.”

### From Kecia Robinson’s Perspective: A Personal Reflection

*The following reflection was written by Kecia Robinson, the teacher of this lesson:* Throughout the two consecutive days of this lesson, I observed how engaged my students were in the learning process. When I saw how many hands went up after the lesson’s opening question, I knew I had captured the students’ attention. As the children read biographies about the four Olympians, they discovered traits and facts about the women that astonished them. For example, the third graders were astonished that Tenley Albright was determined not to let polio stop her from being a great athlete. One student noted, “I’m surprised Tenley was sick and still became a great Olympian!” The class also learned about the Olympians by studying visual prompts. Viewing these photos helped the students make more meaning from the biographies they read.

A potential change to my lesson would be the way students worked in groups. As I observed the four groups working, I noticed that some students were domineering. In the future, I would remind all students that it is important to hear all opinions in relation to a topic. In addition, I may use more time to give background knowledge before launching into the group study activity.

In preparation for the lesson, I wondered how engaged my students would be in the central focus of the lesson. However,

by reading short biographies and creating timelines, my students were able to demonstrate their knowledge of the U.S. women Olympians. Social studies is a subject that has to be taught with enthusiasm. I was thrilled at the interesting details my students noticed.

## Conclusion

By selecting a topic that students could reflect upon thoughtfully, Kecia made social studies learning meaningful and challenging for her students.<sup>14</sup> The children learned that the increased participation of women in the Olympics led to greater gender equality. Furthermore, by studying the stories of four athletes in detail, Kecia's third graders realized the importance of confidence and determination in their own lives. In this way, Kecia made social studies learning personal and powerful for her students. Kecia's third-grade class came to understand that stories from the past can influence their own growth and development in the present. 🌍

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## Notes

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. New York State Department of Education "New York State K-8 Social Studies Framework" (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2017). [www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/curriculum-instructions/ss-framework-k-8a2.pdf](http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/curriculum-instructions/ss-framework-k-8a2.pdf).
3. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (NCSS: Silver Spring, MD, 2010).
4. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.3 and RI 3.7 for Informational Text in Grade 3; and

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2 for Grade 3, [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

5. For example, see the recent *Social Education* theme issue on sports: September 2017 (vol. 81, no. 4).
6. M. A. Messner, "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5, no. 3 (1988): 200.
7. International Olympic Committee, "Key Dates in the History of Women in the Olympic Movement" (2019), [www.olympic.org/women-in-sport/background/key-dates](http://www.olympic.org/women-in-sport/background/key-dates).
8. M. S. Crocco, "Gender and Social Education: What's the Problem?" in *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities* (3rd ed.), E. Wayne Ross, ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006): 171–193; C. L. Hahn, J. Bernard-Powers, M.S. Crocco, and C. Woysner, "Gender Equity in the Social Studies," in *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity through Education* (2nd ed.), S. S. Klein, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 335–358.
9. M. Fox, "Margaret Abbott: The First American Woman to Win an Olympic Championship," *New York Times* (2018), [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked-margaret-abbott.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked-margaret-abbott.html).
10. National Women's Hall of Fame, "Tenley Albright," (2018), [www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/tenley-albright](http://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/tenley-albright).
11. International Olympic Committee, "Jackie Joyner" (2017), [www.olympic.org/jackie-joyner](http://www.olympic.org/jackie-joyner).
12. U.S. Olympic Committee, "Simone Biles: Artistic Gymnastics" (2018), [www.teamusa.org/usa-gymnastics/athletes/simone-biles](http://www.teamusa.org/usa-gymnastics/athletes/simone-biles).
13. International Olympic Committee, "Albright Overcomes Severe Injury to Rule the Ice" (2016), [www.olympic.org/news/albright-overcomes-severe-injury-to-rule-the-ice](http://www.olympic.org/news/albright-overcomes-severe-injury-to-rule-the-ice).
14. NCSS Position Statement, "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies," *Social Education* 80, no. 3 (2016): 180–182.

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Student's crayon drawing of Jackie Joyner-Kersey jumping over a hurdle.

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