

Laurie Hernandez on Keeping It Positive

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After winning Olympic gold and skyrocketing to fame when she was just 16 years old, gymnast Laurie Hernandez decided to take a break from training to be a normal teenager and to determine if she still had passion for the sport. Following a two-and-a-half-year hiatus, the Team Toyota athlete is on the scene with a whole new

mindset surrounding the sport of gymnastics.

“I think I somehow love gymnastics more now than I did before,” she says. “A lot of things have changed for me for the better.”

Though Hernandez was passionate about gymnastics, she had to be sure that she actually wanted to train—and not keep going just because it was the only thing she’d ever done. With the Olympics in her sights since she was only 12, much of Hernandez’s childhood was centered around athletics. To this day, she continues to inspire fans with that infectious smile of hers and reminds the world that happiness off the mat can mean just as much winning gold.

Feeling the Spotlight

Hernandez was 16 years old when she competed in her first Olympic Games at Rio 2016. She won team gold and an individual silver medal in balance beam. As a part of Team USA’s now legendary “Final Five,” Hernandez catapulted from high school gymnast phenom to household name seemingly overnight.

The Final Five would be the last quintuple to appear at an Olympic Games, adding even more popularity to their mentions on social media and in-person appearances after doing so well in Rio.

“That was tough,” Hernandez says. “Coming from someone who would be home, go to practice, go to physical therapy and go back home for 11 years, and then suddenly I’m trying to go to the store and people are like, ‘You’re the gymnast!’ I couldn’t wrap my mind around it.”



Managing the highs and lows of being a professional athlete is something Hernandez had to learn at a young age. As a teenager on the world stage, she had to start advocating for herself and learn to handle the mental toll of the pressure. And part of handling that pressure meant taking a step back, even when she was happy with her athletic performance.

“I had to remind myself to take a break from gymnastics sometimes, mentally and physically,” she says. “Balancing school and gymnastics was really important, and now I’ve gotten better at letting my coaches in and telling them when I’m tired or if my body doesn’t feel right.”

Turning to Her Team

The intense spotlight died down a couple of months after the team's success in Rio, allowing Hernandez to be herself in public again. And as her training routine kicked into high gear, she's been able to rely on her teammates for support.

"Seeing all of these incredible and strong, fierce, stunning, graceful women out there doing what they're passionate about, I looked up to them all so much," she says. "I was definitely nervous to get back into competing. But seeing everybody again was so exciting and just helps me feel at home."

Off the mat, Hernandez has embraced being on Team Toyota, especially when the world came to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Toyota's been so supportive, especially when the pandemic first hit," says Hernandez. "They were one of the first sponsors to reach out to all of their athletes. We hopped on Zooms, checking in on each other. Overall, they just want to make sure that we're doing OK and that our personal well-being is succeeding just as well."



Looking Ahead

After Rio, Hernandez graduated from high school in New Jersey, and she was even crowned “Dancing with the Stars” champion (the youngest celebrity to win!), a thrilling experience that allowed her to channel her energy into something new.

Hernandez believes her personal growth has helped her athletic performance.

“There’s a lot that’s different already,” she says. “Even my mindset has changed. Being a little older and a little more mature has helped me appreciate the sport differently. Sometimes it’s why I’m so stressed, but for the most part, gymnastics is the reason why I feel peaceful and why I have so much joy.”

Having reconnected with the sport, Hernandez loves when she’s able to show off that new energy. “It feels like a different kind of love now than it did at 16, and I hope that radiates when I’m competing, and everybody can see.”