

What I've learned  
so far about love,  
faith, *and* living  
your dreams

*NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER*

# WINNING BALANCE

Shawn Johnson

OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST





# WINNING BALANCE

Shawn Johnson

WITH NANCY FRENCH

*What I've learned so far  
about love, faith,  
and living your dreams*



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## A Note from Shawn

We live by believing and not by seeing.

—2 *Corinthians* 5:7

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, many articles have been written about me. Most journalists have gotten the details right, though only a few seem to have truly captured something about who I am as a person, not simply as a gymnast. That's understandable, since most reporters have been assigned to cover a specific event or to give readers a status report on my training.

I wrote *Winning Balance* as a way to go deeper. Though my story is presented chronologically, it is not my autobiography. Instead, I wrote this book as a way to reflect on the lessons I've learned during nearly two decades of training, competition, and most important, everyday life.

That's why I chose to end almost every chapter with a short reflection called "Lesson I've Learned." Each one summarizes a key principle I've gained from my family, my sport, or my faith. I hope these lessons, along with my poems throughout the book, will inspire you as you seek to live your dreams as well. Even though your passions and background may be quite different from mine, I believe there is much we can teach each other.

Perhaps the greatest lessons I've learned so far are these: Everything happens for a reason, and God can be trusted to work



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all things together for good. I don't know what lies ahead for me, but I am convinced that I am on the right road. My hope is that something I've learned will help you, too, even if you can't see what's coming or if life's pathway has gotten a bit bumpy.

May we all enjoy the adventure that comes when we walk together—by faith.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shawn Johnson". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Shawn" and "Johnson" being significantly larger and more decorative than the rest of the letters.

FEBRUARY 2012

# Introduction

*Olympics*

*August 2008*

*Beijing*

THIS WAS IT—THE MOMENT I had worked for with all my might every day for almost as long as I could remember.

I was standing in the 2008 Olympic arena in Beijing with eighteen thousand people in the stands and hundreds of millions watching across the globe. My friend and teammate Nastia Liukin was preparing to begin her floor exercise and final rotation for the women's individual all-around competition. I would follow her, and I knew I had to give the floor routine of my life.

I'd set my sights on the highest possible goal—Olympic gold. The women's all-around is the most prestigious gymnastics event at the Olympics, the biggest prize of all. It was also the goal I'd had my eyes on since I knew that the Olympics were even a remote possibility. I was competing with twenty-three of the world's best female gymnasts, who represented fifteen different countries. Just a few days before, I'd taken the top spot in the preliminaries, when ninety-eight gymnasts had been vying for a spot in the finals.

To win the gold in this all-around competition, a gymnast has to get high scores in the vault, the uneven bars, the balance beam, and the floor exercise. It's called "all-around" because each of the four events showcases important—and different—gymnastics skills. The vault shows strength, the uneven bars display agility, the beam

proves the ability to concentrate under pressure, and the floor exercise demonstrates showmanship. Most gymnasts excel in just one of these disciplines, but the best all-around is someone who excels in all of them. In the Olympics, there would be no higher honor than winning a gold right here, right now.

I had arrived at the Olympics as the reigning world champion, having won the all-around in Germany the year before, when I was fifteen. Then, back in June, I'd won the women's Visa National Championships and two weeks later the Olympic Trials. In one sense, these victories seemed to put me in position to take the Olympic gold. However, winners of the world title are rarely able to follow up with an Olympic gold in the all-around. Gymnastics, after all, is the most fickle of sports. So many factors go into whether a performance is medal-worthy—injuries, emotional distractions, rest, diet, the judges' preferences, and even crowd reaction. With victory depending on so many variables, the competitions are exciting; the results, often unexpected. No one is ever guaranteed a win.

Mary Lou Retton won this competition in 1984, and I'd been compared to her throughout the Beijing Games. There was something about my muscular energy—as opposed to the artistry of the petite, pixie-like gymnasts—that caused viewers to make the comparison. To add to the pressure, I knew that somewhere up in the stands Mary Lou was watching . . . and hoping I would nail this routine.

I'd been told a thousand times since we'd landed in China that “this was my moment.” All of the missed leisure time, school hours, and dates had allowed me to focus on preparing for this competition, including the floor routine that was just seconds away.

Thankfully, the United States, represented by Nastia and me in the all-around, was in good shape. We had both done well on bars and vault. Not long before I had given a clean performance on the beam, sticking my dismount to enthusiastic applause.

Looking ahead to the floor competition, I was confident that if I hit my routine, I could win the gold. The floor exercise was one of my strongest events, and I could barely wait to get out there, where I could conceivably go all the way.

Then I broke one of my rules. My coaches had taught me from day one not to distract myself by watching the scoreboard at competitions. But this day of all days, I had a strong urge to look at it. When I glanced up, I nearly lost my breath. Scanning the top names, I noticed that mine was not among them. In fact, I was all the way down in eighth place.

What had gone wrong? I'd been competing at an international level for several years, and I'd never been so low—even after falling off a beam!

I've always loved math. Not only can I easily figure out how much to tip a good server at a restaurant or how much money I could save by getting the jeans on the sale rack, I can also quickly calculate what scores gymnasts need to receive in order to advance.

Looking at everybody's scores after the beam competition, I did a quick calculation. I knew who still had to go up in scoring and what scores they had to get. I also knew what score I had to get to receive a gold medal.

I tried to push these numbers out of my mind as we warmed up on the floor. After the Chinese and Russian gymnasts had given strong performances, Nastia competed with the seamless elegance she's known for. Now I was waiting on the blue mat, ready to show the world what I could do. As soon as Nastia's score was announced, I would be given the signal to go and would have my chance at the top spot on the podium.

When her score flashed on the screen, my stomach dropped.

*15.525.* That gave her a final overall score of *63.325*—a full seven-tenths of a point higher than the highest possibility I'd calculated while standing on the sidelines.

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On TV, the announcers were telling the world what my quick calculations had already told me. I would not win the gold medal. Even if I went out on the mat and performed perfectly, my score wouldn't be high enough to capture the gold.

My ultimate dream was out of reach.



PART I

## Finding Fire

*Find the fire deep inside.*

*Watch it burn and stay alive.*

*Keep it lit and give it a light.*

*Give it life and make it bright.*

*Know that what you do is who you are:*

*Forever and always you'll be a star.*



CHAPTER I

# UNBREAKABLE

Other things may change us, but we start and end with family.  
—*Anthony Brandt*

THE FIRST SCORE I EVER received was given on January 19, 1992, at Iowa Lutheran Hospital in Des Moines. I was one minute old when the doctor took me aside to perform the routine Apgar test, a simple examination given to newborns to determine their health at birth. The Apgar—which stands for appearance, pulse, grimace, activity, and respiration—evaluates the baby’s muscle tone, heart rate, facial movement, reflexes, and breathing. Based on those factors, the test assigns a score from zero to ten.

After taking medication to prevent premature labor, my mom had anxiously waited for her due date—and then waited some more. Despite fears that I would arrive early, I actually arrived late. When the doctor discovered the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck, he called a neonatal specialist to work on me as soon as I was born. My parents could tell something was wrong by the concerned look on the doctor’s face and the frantic way the nurses were caring for me.



They watched as the specialist worked on me in the corner of the room before telling my parents that they needed to move me to the neonatal nursery. Dad followed the nurses when they whisked me away. He wasn't going to let me out of his sight. And I wasn't looking good. The first thing Dad noticed was that my skin looked gray. The doctor said I had been without oxygen for a while, so I wasn't responding the way a healthy baby should. They put me in an incubator for forty-eight hours so they could monitor my health, and I became more responsive pretty quickly.

Only later, when my parents were going through paperwork, did they see the score of my Apgar test: a big, fat zero.

By that time, though, I'd recovered from my trauma and looked like any other healthy six-pound, nine-ounce newborn. My parents were hoping I'd be strong enough to one day run and play like other kids, but they had no idea that the nearly seven-pound bundle of joy they were holding was a future Olympic champion.

After all, even if I'd had an easy birth, there was no reason to believe I'd be particularly athletic. Dad played hockey and wrestled in school, but Mom never participated in organized sports. She did gymnastics recreationally but never competed. However, both Mom and Dad roller-skated, which is what brought them together. They met when they were only thirteen years old at a roller rink in a small Iowa town. Maybe it was the romantic music playing over the loudspeaker or maybe it was just destiny, but soon they were skating hand in hand around that rink.

They saw each other around town whenever possible, even though they didn't attend the same school. Because her family moved several times, Mom attended three different high schools in the area. Yet Dad was a constant in her life. Mom had a little motorbike, which she would ride four miles to see him. They also sat together at football games, and Mom started going to Dad's wrestling matches. In 1977, they decided to get mar-

ried two weeks after Mom graduated from high school. Because she was just seventeen, she had to get her parents' permission. Needless to say, their engagement raised eyebrows around town. The fact that I didn't show up until fifteen years later quieted the rumors.

In the meantime, Dad went to work for a construction company, learning to frame and then becoming especially skilled at interior trim work. Several years before I was born, he and his brother started their own contracting business. Mom, who had grown up helping her mom keep the records for her stepdad's business, continued working in bookkeeping and accounting.

Growing up, Mom's family had moved around a lot, so once she was married, she worked hard to create a warm, welcoming home with my dad. Not long after they married, they got a dog, the first of several family pets. Dude, their first golden retriever, arrived just about a year before I did. He would become one of my first playmates.

Once Mom was pregnant, they talked about choosing the perfect name. They loved "Shawn," which was going to be my name whether I was a girl or a boy. If I'd been a boy, I would have been Shaun Douglas, after my dad. However, since I was a girl, I was named Shawn Machel (pronounced like the traditional spelling "Michelle") after my mother, Teri Machel Johnson. I used to hate my name because the kids at school thought it was a boy's name. However, I've grown to love its strength, uniqueness, and meaning: God is gracious.

By the time we left the hospital, my parents had the healthy newborn they'd waited so long for. Though they were certainly ready to welcome a baby, Mom was a little afraid. I seemed so delicate and tiny. When she gave me a bath, she was more hesitant than if she had been washing fine china. When she changed my diaper, she was worried she'd hurt me.

That's how Dad ended up doing a lot of the bathing and the feeding when we first came home from the hospital. After working all day doing trim work, he would come home and immediately bathe, feed, and take care of me until bedtime. This might explain why I'm such a daddy's girl even to this day.

Once when I was still a baby, I was lying on the couch when Dude, who had just noticed movement outside the window, jumped on top of me to get a closer look. Mom was convinced that I'd punctured my lungs and frantically called the doctor.

"Well," he asked, "is she breathing?"

"Yes," my mom replied.

"Then," he assured her, "she's going to be just fine."

After a few months, Mom learned I wasn't nearly as breakable as she thought. She found that my arms could actually be raised and bent to fit into my tiny clothes. My head survived, even when she stretched the opening of a shirt to fit around it. Bathing me and changing my diaper now came naturally . . . no matter how much I wriggled.

And—wow—did I wriggle.

In fact, by the time I was about six months old, my mom began noticing that when I eyed something, I was so determined to get it that I rolled sideways until I could reach it. I completely skipped the crawling stage. When I was nine months old, my parents looked up one day to see me toddling into their room, grinning from ear to ear. I had flipped out of my crib and sauntered to their bedroom. They had no idea how I'd learned to walk.

I never slowed down after that. Once, I crawled up on the kitchen counter to try skydiving. (Hey, I was little . . . so the counter seemed as high as the sky to me back then.) When I landed, my teeth went through my bottom lip, and there was blood everywhere. But that injury didn't stop me for long. As a toddler, I would pile all of my toys on the floor as a makeshift ladder to reach the top of our enter-

tainment center. From there, I'd jump onto the red leather couch, pretending it was a trampoline.

Even more fun than trying these daredevil tricks myself was urging my cousin, Tori, to do them with me. Tori, the daughter of my mom's sister, is two years older than I am and a bit more cautious. I had to talk her into doing flips over our couch. When she stayed over on Saturday nights, we'd sleep in the bunk beds in our basement. I loved to do flips and pull-ups on them, as well as hang from the bars. At first Tori just watched, but before long she was doing them with me.

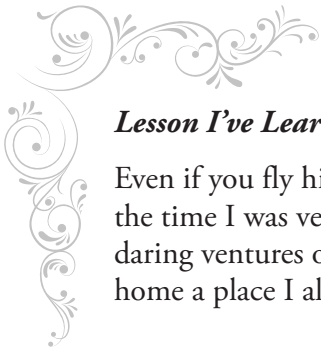
Tori and I also loved to play outdoors. Sometimes we dressed up and acted out stories; other times we would take turns tying a rope around our waists and pulling each other in a wagon. Since I was smaller and younger than Tori, I'd also jump on her back and let her carry me around.

I'm an only child and Tori's brother is eight years older, so I guess it's not surprising that we not only played like sisters—we also fought like them. I admit I was usually the instigator. When we'd be playing in the basement, occasionally I'd hit her lightly, waiting for her to respond. Almost always, she'd give me a funny look and keep playing. But I'd go running upstairs, crying that Tori had hit me. Though she was the one who got in trouble, she never held it against me.

Tori also joined me in my first tumbling and dancing classes. Because I was so physically active, Mom decided she needed to find an outlet for all of my energy. Even though Tori went with me, I had no desire to continue either of those activities. So my mom took me to a local gymnastics center and signed me up. It's not that she was particularly fond of the sport. She just knew that I needed a large, open (and soft!) place to play. And I loved it. Even though the coaches were very strict, I enjoyed tumbling and running and always had a smile on my face while I was there. For three years,

I happily went to the gym at least once a week. My coach told my mom that I was full of energy, but not full of talent.

Then Mom heard about a new gym that was closer to our home. One day after dropping me off at my gymnastics class, Mom drove to that facility and watched a class through the windows. She was struck by how happy all the young gymnasts appeared and how much fun they seemed to be having. She never imagined that she was staring at my future.



***Lesson I've Learned***

Even if you fly high in life, stay grounded. From the time I was very small, my parents supported my daring ventures out into the world, while making home a place I always wanted to come back to.