

No more Open Team World Championships - a critical look

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What have they done?

With all the hype about the Olympic Qualification criteria, did anyone notice the 2022 version of the FIG

Qualification Places				
The 40 highest All-Around Men's gymnasts and the 49 highest All-Around Women's gymnasts without a team qualified, based on the All-Around ranking results of the Qualifications and the allocated quota places mentioned below for each Continent, will qualify by name with a maximum of two (2) gymnasts per NF.				
The Host Country is guaranteed one All-Around gymnast quota place, if not already qualified with a Team or an Apparatus gymnast. Any unused Host Country places will be allocated to the next highest eligible All-Around gymnast based on the All-Around ranking results of the Qualifications from the Continental Championships to which the Host Country belongs.				
Continental Allocation (Quota Places)				
	Men		Women	
	Team	All-Around	Team	All-Around
AGU	5	6	4	8
OGU	1	2	1	2
PAGU	4	6	5	11
UAG	1	2	1	4
EG	13	23	13	23
Host	0	1	0	1
Total	24	40	24	49

Technical Regulations (version 2 - September 2021 --- Section 2, after pg. 55)? The mid-quadrennial Artistic World Championships have gone from open access to being restricted to 24 MAG and 24 WAG teams. And, the qualification is through Continental Championships, which all understand to be the bastions of ethical and well controlled judging that we all know have too often become war without bullets. But with World & Olympic team and AA qualification at stake the scrutiny will be greater than usual.

If you look closely at the chart from these regulations, the Continental team

allocations are alarmingly restrictive. There are massive restrictions for the all-around as well. Eighty, in addition to the 329 team and AA listed spots, are specialist spots (8 per apparatus) from the World Cup circuit.

This decision, without much detail, was made by the FIG Council in May 2019. Given the universal and enormous significance of this change, it should have been ratified (or forced to be debated and ratified) by the 2020 FIG Congress that was Covid-delayed until the end of 2021. It seems that did not happen as these Technical Regulations are dated before the Congress. In the Congress exactly 40-years earlier, there was a resoundingly rejected proposal for an A- and B-World Championship with top and bottom two exchanging for the next worlds. At least there was some possibility of mobility and no restriction on participation.

A look at the numbers

The FIG President, who clearly "forced" this decision, said at the time *"Every national federation, even the smallest, must have a chance to host a World Championship."* This is pure fantasy. It will always be the richest

	WAG	MAG	Total	W + M teams
Post-Olympic World Championships (no teams since 2005)				
2005 Melbourne	95	216	311	0 teams
2009 London	146	243	389	0 teams
2013 Antwerp	134	259	393	0 teams
2017 Montreal	146	239	385	0 teams
2021 Kitakyushu	112	189	301	0 teams - Covid
Mid-quadrennial World Championships (open until 2022)				
2006 Ahrus	223	279	502	33 + 43 teams
2010 Rotterdam	218	299	517	34 + 45 teams
2014 Nanning	250	311	561	38 + 48 teams
2018 Doha	230	260	490	42 + 46 teams
2022 Liverpool	201	208	409 _{quota}	24 + 24 teams
Pre-Olympic World Championships (24 team max since 2007)				
2003 Anaheim	224	323	547	35 + 52 teams
2007 Stuttgart	214	253	467	24 + 24 teams
2011 Tokyo	216	262	478	24 + 24 teams
2015 Glasgow	261	276	537	24 + 24 teams
2019 Stuttgart	234	258	492	24 + 24 teams
2023 Antwerp	201	208	409 _{quota}	24 + 24 teams

federations. He also repeated the 40+ year mantra of the championships being too long and too costly (recall, they were cut in half after 1995 with the elimination of compulsories and cut again for 2007 and future pre-Olympic World Championships.) And he said this will make them *"more thrilling"*. More fallacy. True; they are long and costly; but, much more importantly, they are also motivating and educational and friendship-building and thrilling and special because they are "WORLD" Championships; not because they are smaller. And, as in all sport, it is not the qualifying rounds that are most thrilling, it is the finals sessions where the fourteen gold medals are contested.

The chart shows that the 2007 reduction to 24 teams did not materially affect the total participation numbers because

individual participation remained essentially open, but these Technical Regulations dramatically reduce those opportunities as well. Total numbers hovered around 500 for the pre-Olympic and mid-quadrennial World Championship; and around 400 for the non-team post-Olympic World Championship. These new Technical Regulations eliminate about 100 individual participants for 2022 and 2023 to a maximum of 409. Note, all the total numbers shown include non-AA gymnasts and do not reflect the actual per-event competing numbers which are usually about 25% lower. Cutting team numbers to 24 in 2007 and again this year for the only remaining open Team World Championship, reduced WAG teams by about 33% and MAG teams by 50% - but notice the 24-team decision applies to both regardless of its unequal effects. Interesting also is that the promise of other FIG programs such as the coach education Academy Program was to help bring more federations to this level. That has shown itself to be true but is now squashed for all those federations that have worked hard to improve. The message: "Stay within your Continent forever."

A look at Continental Qualification

And, the President said it *"will enhance the value of the continental championships"*. The peculiar problems of Continental Championships (For example, not one could meet the Technical Regulations specified deadlines this year.) are too numerous to list here, but rather than enhance their value, this risks exacerbating the ethical disrepute and negative publicity into which gymnastics has fallen. It also punishes the less rich federations that now must attend an additional previously unscheduled championship at great cost. Just like judges' advancement and access to the World Cup circuit for qualification and a \$2000 penalty for not providing a judge, etc., this new allocation system is once again Eurocentric or "wealth-centric" or "rest-of-the-world-ignorant" or "who cares?". The cost of travel to such championships is massive for Africa (consider Algeria to South Africa), and for America (consider Canada to Argentina), and for Asia (consider Lebanon to Japan). Much of Europe can reach their championship faster with a whole team by mini-bus than the others can by air and can do so for the cost of a tank of gas rather than costly flights for each member of the delegation. And national federations that qualify must then pay to go to World Championships as well. The problematic cost and time needed for entry visas barely exists for Europeans. These Continental Unions also do not have budget-airlines that are common in Europe. The rich get richer. Congratulations to the small countries such as Benin, Nicaragua, Fiji, and Bahamas that can now host a World Championship in addition to the Executive Committee. Really?

A Continental qualification Team World Championship was held only one time previously, in 1994. It was accompanied by so many costly and ethical problems that it was decided never to do it again. Short memories? The unequal conditions for 1976 Olympic qualification were so corrupt and expensive that it had to be abandoned half-way through and was also never tried again. Short memories? Now we are back to Continental qualification and unequal conditions. What could go wrong? Our history tells us.

An inspection of the three previous mid-quadrennial World Championship participations (2010-2014-2018) reveals that over that time-period 57 different federations fielded MAG teams and 31 of them had placed among the top 24. For WAG, it was 49 teams and 29 placed among the top 24. Not included are many other known teams from the continents that could not participate for financial or other reasons, such as, for example, Latvia, Cuba, Malaysia, and Algeria. Of the 250-300 participants for each of WAG & MAG, about 150 of each competed all-around. It will now be well below 100 with the 5-4-3 format and 80 of the 409 spaces reserved for specialists.

What are the predictable consequences?

So, what can be predicted to be the unintended consequences? Instead of 60 or more federations pursuing team gymnastics, perhaps only 30 will continue to bother. Without local media interest and without a true world team and AA ranking, many will receive even less government funding. With greatly restricted possibilities for AA qualifiers, the only remaining opportunity for them is to try to qualify specialists through the World Cup circuit because, once all the team and AA gymnasts are removed, almost any country could

aspire to one specialist spot (but being a World finalist from among about 100 is not likely). But for most non-European federations, the cost to attend four World Cup events is prohibitive and more so because a judge must also be sent. The rich get richer. Interestingly and perhaps inadvertently, the decades long unwavering Japanese philosophical position to focus on teams and AA will have been destroyed by a Japanese president. For MAG by example: How should the 25 and growing number of member federations of Africa react with 1 team and 2 AA gymnasts? How about Asia with 5 teams and 6 AA when 13 teams had participated in the recent past; and America with 4 teams and 6 AA though 10 teams had participated; and, for that matter, Europe with 13 teams though 31 teams had participated and 18 had been among the top 24. It is similar for WAG. I suppose that many of these "*smallest national federations*" will rush to host a World Championship for the guaranteed AA spot. NOT! They will abandon team and possibly all-around gymnastics, coaches will be less in demand, judges' advancement will not be possible. All because of a FIG imposed system-wide disincentive for them. And, how many teams that deserve to be among the top 24 will be eliminated by a quota system that may artificially qualify lesser teams? Will the open (for now) post-Olympic non-team World Championship every four years suffice to sustain interest? The next one will be in 2025, and guess what? They massively restricted that one as well. All federations can send up to 3 WAG and 3 MAG gymnasts but only two performers per apparatus. That means only one AA gymnast; or if federations send two gymnasts, they can have two AA.

Who is accountable for this world-wide disincentive?

I have attended 30 FIG Congresses since 1975 and understand the "sheep-like" and frequently uninformed voting. But the technical committees (who I hope were consulted) and the Executive members and most appallingly the Council members who are specifically elected to represent their continents and are in charge of Technical Regulations, failed and betrayed their constituents, failed the future development and aspirations of the wider gymnastics world. But these VIPs will have increased chances to travel, to supervise, to campaign. The President's additional comment from May 5, 2019; "*It was also crucial for us to implement a qualification system for Paris 2024 that everyone can understand while being fair to the best athletes.*" is also spurious. Qualification goes from a higher number to a lower number; not from 24 teams to 24 teams. The 2022 World Championship is not part of any real Olympic qualification except the top three teams will qualify and they, of all teams, emphatically do not need this two years before the Games. This was a sledgehammer solution. I challenge you to try to understand this "*everyone can understand*" document and see if you can do so even after multiple readings - and then imagine translations for non-English speakers. Easiest for everyone to understand was the older pre-2004 process of qualification at the open access pre-Olympic World Championship that provided equal conditions for all. Fairness, as the President stated, should certainly be directed at the best athletes - AND, AND, - also at all other aspiring athletes and coaches and judges and federations in the gymnastics world.

What a shame. What will the newly formed "New and Developing Countries Support Commission" think when developing countries are excluded in advance? What will the national federations think once the reality of this diminishment and disincentive is understood? Will there be a counterproposal for a more inclusive future at the Congress this September (this is the year that proposals are permitted)? Will there be a reckoning at the next election Congress in 2024?

It is not too much for the gymnastics world to demand one open-team World Championship every four years. The extra two days of competition is an enhancement and a motivation and a benefit to the gymnastics world. It is not the place to save two or three days of organization. It is not the place to impose a massively unfair and unequal-cost Continental qualification system. It is not the place to present fantastical and spurious justifications for the unjustifiable. This counters FIG's mandate for the development and growth of world gymnastics.