

The Olympic Ring

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#SANJOSE2016

*Grace
Under
Pressure*

Ashton Locklear, my hometown girl from Hamlet, North Carolina, makes her bid for the U.S. Olympic Team at the women's gymnastics trials in San Jose.

Grace Under Pressure

Ashton Locklear and I wouldn't seem to have anything in common.

She's a she, 18 years old, a gymnast and a member of the Lumbee Tribe.

I am not.

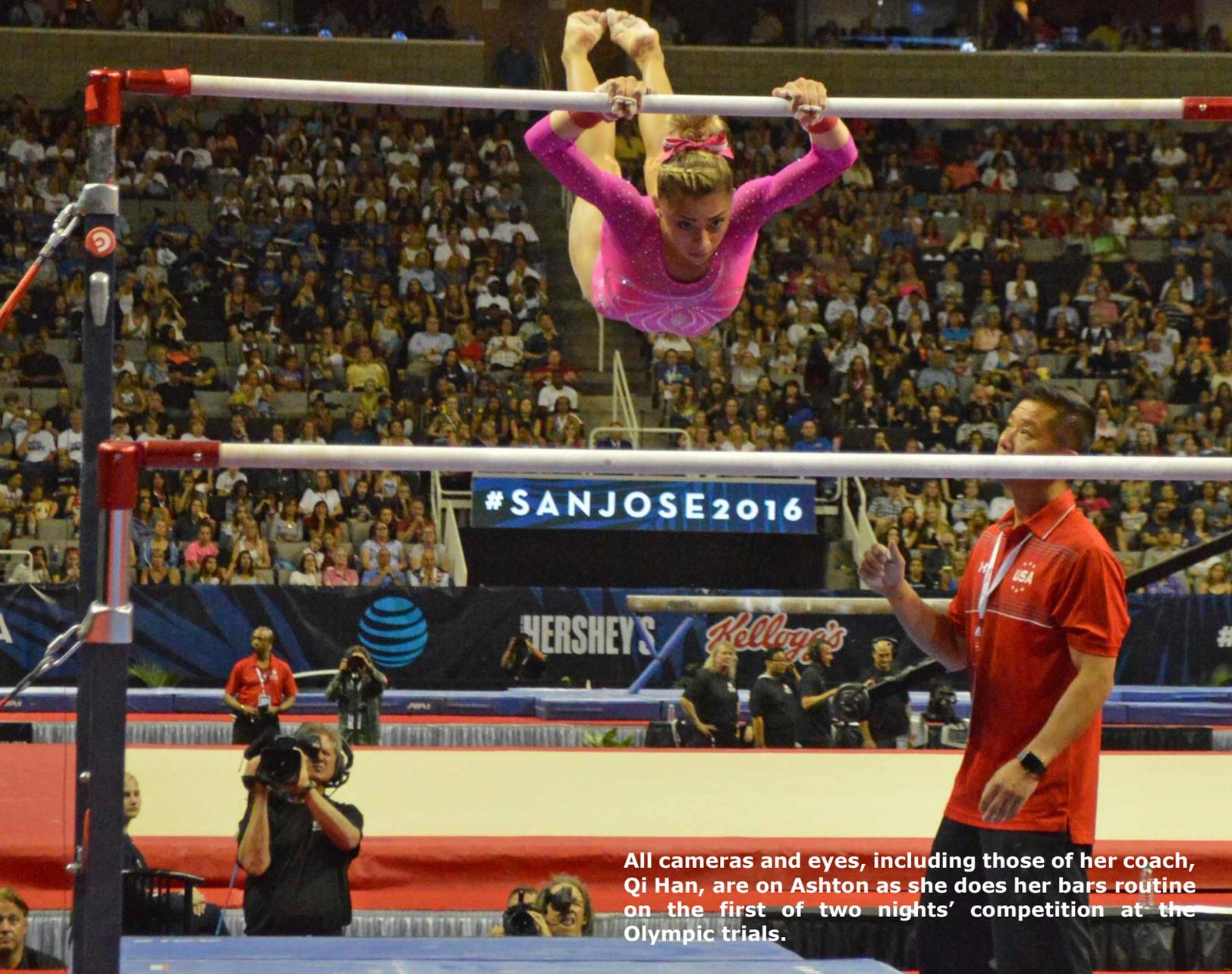
But a couple of years ago her name popped up in one of my Google news searches that scours the internet looking for anything that mentions Hamlet, North Carolina – my home town.

It was a story from the *Chicago Tribune* that said this girl I'd never heard of (although the woods back home are full of Locklears, Oxendines and Chavises) had won the uneven bars in a gymnastics competition.

I knew from my past experience covering the Olympics that something was up, and I asked around. No one in Hamlet seemed to know Ashton. But I had a pretty good idea why.

Kids from hamlets can't get that good for most

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All cameras and eyes, including those of her coach, Qi Han, are on Ashton as she does her bars routine on the first of two nights' competition at the Olympic trials.

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Olympic sports unless they grow up at a ski resort.

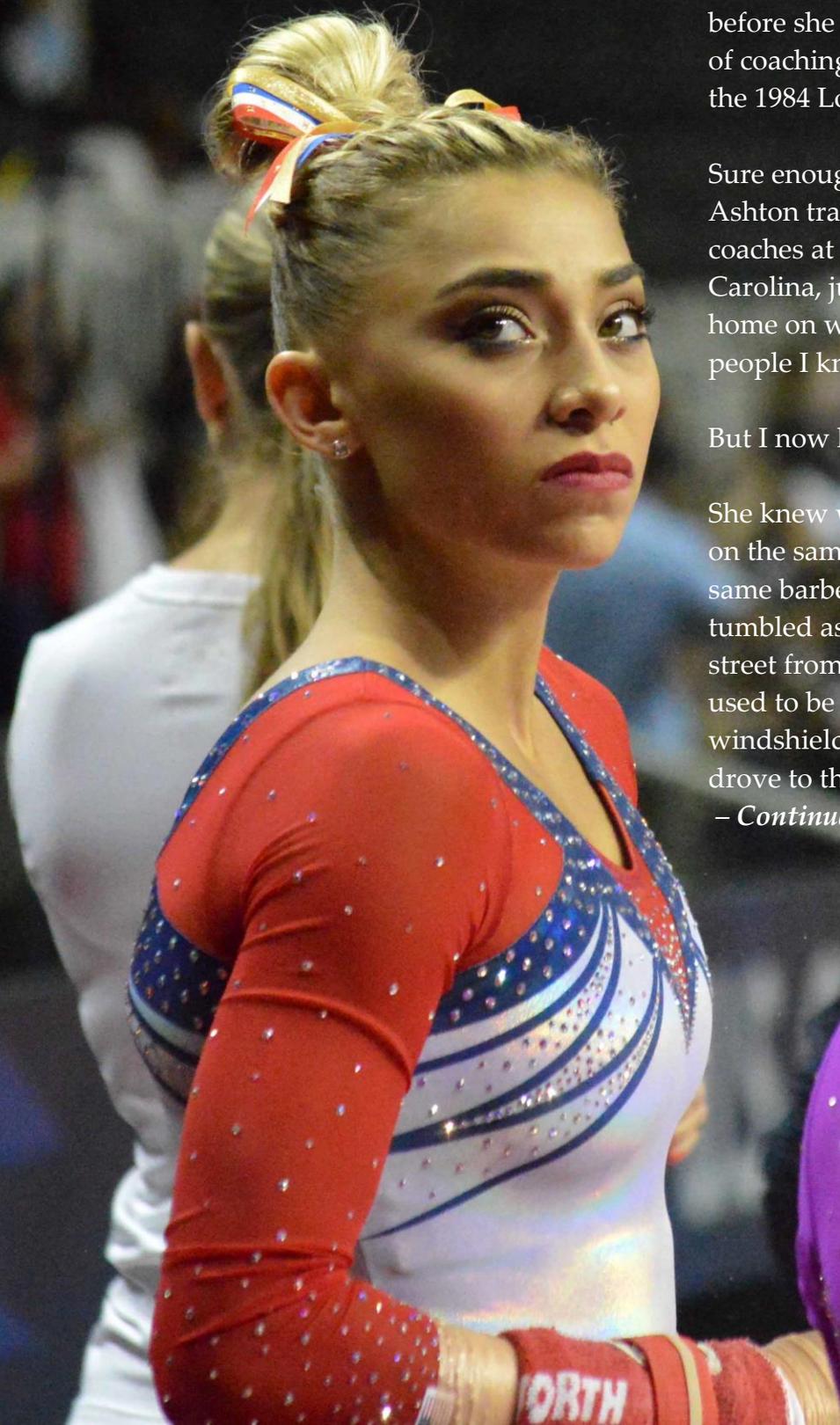
Mary Lou Retton left home and family in Fairmont, West Virginia, to move to Houston before she entered high school to get the level of coaching she needed to win a gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Sure enough, after some research, I found that Ashton trained all week under two Chinese coaches at a gym in Huntersville, North Carolina, just outside Charlotte, and came home on weekends. There was no reason for people I knew in Hamlet to know her.

But I now knew we had a lot in common.

She knew where City Lake was. She walked on the same railroad tracks I used to, ate the same barbecue I did. The gym where she first tumbled as a 2-year-old is right across the street from where Tug Jones' Esso station used to be – where they washed the windshield and checked the oil before we drove to the beach.

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Ashton in the media interview room after the conclusion of the trials with her coaches, Qi Han, left, and Yiwen Chen, right, who are husband and wife. They were members of China's national gymnastics team and, like Ashton, narrowly missed making it to the Olympics. Han was injured and Chen lost in her trials. There is a lot of international coaching movement to and from the United States in Olympic sports, but it has particularly benefited the United States in women's gymnastics since Romanian Olympic coaches Bela and Marta Karolyi, who coached Nadia Comaneci at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, defected in 1981. Two of five athletes on this year's U.S. women's gymnastics team have personal coaches from other countries: Aly Raisman (Laurent Landi, France) and Madison Kocian (Mihai Brestyan, Romania). Romania's women's gymnastics team, once the best in the world, did not qualify for next month's Olympics in Rio de Janeiro although a couple of its athletes qualified individually. Marta Karolyi, now 73, will retire as head of the women's team after Rio.



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So a few weeks ago, I asked the *Richmond County Daily Journal* – which is the *Chicago Tribune* for everywhere east of the Pee Dee River to the Scotland County line – if they needed someone to cover Ashton when she came here to San Jose for the U.S. Olympic Trials.

They did, and an old friend from USA Gymnastics in Indianapolis agreed to give me a credential.

I called Marta Karolyi in Houston, the Dunavent family that Ashton and her mother live with during the week, people from the Lumbee Tribe and, finally, Ashton herself.

She was just like me. She saw the Olympics on TV as a young child, wanted to go to those places and do those sports.

Ashton Locklear is one of my peeps.



Ashton did not make the five-member women's gymnastics team but was named one of three alternates who will also travel to Brazil for the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, which begin Friday, Aug. 5. You can find links to all of my coverage of Ashton in the *Daily Journal*, beginning with my profile of her, on the home page of my website at www.jodymeacham.com. If you click on her picture there, you can see a slide show of more pictures from the Olympic trials.