

SPORTING LEGENDS: NADIA COMANECI

SPORT: GYMNASTICS

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1970 - 1981

Nadia Elena Comaneci (originally Comaneci) (born November 12, 1961) is a Romanian-born gymnast, winner of five Olympic gold medals, and the first to be awarded a perfect score of 10 in an Olympic gymnastic event.

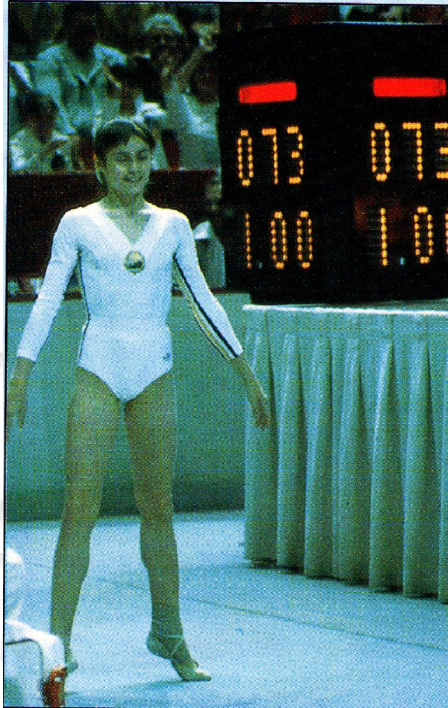
She is considered by some to be one of the greatest athletes in the 20th century and one of the world's greatest gymnasts of all time.



She first competed nationally within Romania in 1970, as a member of her hometown team. She was soon coached by Bela Karolyi and his wife Marta, who would later defect to the United States and become coaches of many great American gymnasts. As a 13-year-old, Comaneci's first major success was at the 1975 European Championships in Skien, Norway, winning three gold medals and one silver. At the Pre-Olympics competition in Montréal in 1975 Nadia won the All-Around title. That same year the Associated Press named her their "Athlete of the Year."

At age 14, Comaneci became the star of the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montréal, Québec. Not only did she become the first gymnast at the Olympics to receive the perfect score of ten (which she repeated 6 more times), she also won three gold medals (individual all-around, balance beam and uneven bars), a silver medal (team all-around) and a bronze (floor exercise). Back home, her success led her to be named a "Hero of Socialist Labor," the youngest Romanian to receive that recognition. Nadia had earned 19 perfect scores before Montreal.

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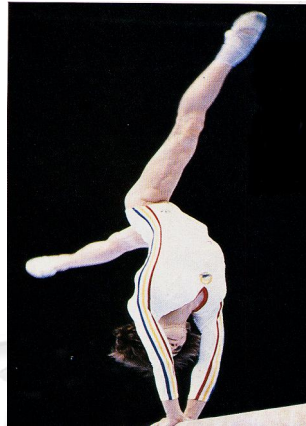
Comaneci's excellent performances at Montreal '76 made her a gymnastic superstar.

Comaneci successfully defended her European all-around title in 1977, but the Romanian team controversially walked out of the competition during event finals to protest the scoring. An overweight and out of shape Comaneci showed up at the 1978 World Championships. A fall from uneven bars resulted in a 4th place finish, but she won the beam title.

In 1979, a newly slim Comaneci won her third consecutive European overall title (becoming the first gymnast, male or female, to do so). At the World Championships that December, Comaneci led the field after the compulsory competition but was hospitalised prior to the optional portion of the team competition for blood poisoning due to a cut in her wrist from her metal grip buckle. Against doctors' orders, she left the hospital and competed on beam where she scored a 9.95. Her performance helped give the Romanians its first team gold medal.

She participated in the 1980 Summer Olympics, placing second in the all-around to Yelena Davydova. In her book "Letters To A Young Gymnast", Nadia explains her defeat by writing "That Day Yelena just performed better". Comaneci retained her Olympic title in the balance beam, tied for the gold medal in the floor exercise, and the Romanian team finish second.

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Whilst being a great all-rounder, Comaneci was at her masterful best on the Beam.

Comaneci retired from competition shortly after these Games. Her last major competition was at The World University Games in Bucharest in 1981 where she won 5 gold medals. However there were allegations of bias on the part of the judges as the Romanians themselves provided half the judges here.

Between 1984 and 1989 she was a member of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation and helped coach the Romanian junior gymnasts. In November of 1989, she defected to the United States. Comaneci spent most of her time touring and promoting lines of gymnastics apparel, Jockey underwear, aerobic equipment, and even modelled wedding dresses. In 1994, she was engaged to US gymnast Bart Conner and returned to Romania for the first time since her defection. Comaneci and Conner were married in Romania in April of 1996.

In 1999, Comaneci became the first athlete to be invited to speak at the United Nations to launch the Year 2000 International Year of Volunteers. She is currently busy with gymnastics and charity work around the world. She and her husband own the Bart Conner Gymnastics Academy, Perfect 10 Production Company and several sports equipment shops, and are editors of *International Gymnast* magazine.

On June 29, 2001, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Comaneci is Vice-Chair of the Board Of Directors of International Special Olympics, Honorary President of Romanian Gymnastics Federation, Honorary President of Romanian Olympics Committee, Ambassador Of Sports Of Romania, Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and a Member of International Gymnastics Federation Foundation.

She has received two Olympic Order awards from the IOC. In addition, Comaneci has started a charity clinic in Bucharest to help orphanage children in Romania.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

Nadia Comaneci is regarded by many as the finest gymnast of her generation, and rightly so.

Her performances at the 1976 and 1980 Olympic Games were of legendary stuff. It was the way in which she made everything look so easy that was so impressive, especially those gravity-defying moves performed on the Balance Beam!

Her legacy continues to this day, as her achievements have inspired the next generation of young, aspiring Romanian gymnasts.

Many people remember the 1976 Montreal Olympics for her performances, and that assures her Sporting Legend status.



Comaneci possessed tremendous flexibility, strength and speed; all the essentials!