

Figure skating's expiration date

15-year-old Kamila Valieva's Olympic doping scandal exemplifies a sport that systematically uses and disposes of young athletes

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PHOTOS CNN

"It's going to be a Russian sweep. And Kamila Valieva—the newest phenom—is only competing against herself," said *CBC*'s "That Figure Skating Show's" resident co-host Asher Hill, just two months before the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. "The only one who can take her out is herself."

Heading into the Beijing Olympics, Valieva, on paper, had the perfect senior debut season. By the time she stepped on Olympic soil, she had broken nine world records and emerged with a gold medal from every competition she entered during the season.

The secret to Valieva's success? A brutal but effective jumping technique, popularized by her coach Eteri Tutberidze. But while skaters may obtain one season of success, Tutberidze's influence has created a skater turnover rate that reinforces a pattern of athlete disposability in elite sports.

Tutberidze, along with her team at Sambo-70 skating club, has schooled nine of the 12 ladies who have landed ratified quadruple jumps in competition. Her technique entails twisting the upper body before leaving the ice, essentially allowing for nearly a full rotation while the skater remains grounded. Utilizing Tutberidze's technique, otherwise known as "pre-rotation," athletes may execute what is functionally a triple jump with the bonus points of a quad.

Pre-rotation is more than a cheap hack to acquire more points, though. Combine twisting one's back nearly 90 degrees with the force required to rotate and remain airborne, and excessive pre-rotation becomes a guaranteed weekly trip to the physical therapist with complaints of back strain.

In Valieva, this pre-rotation has been exacerbated with her manipulation of "rippons," a term used to describe jumps where skaters throw their arms up above their heads. At Sambo-70, the rippon has become a dangerous tool. By twisting their raised arms along with the rest of their upper

bodies, the rippon allows skaters to perform pre-rotation to a more extreme degree.

As Tutberidze's skaters utilize momentum instead of muscle, the technique relies on a low body weight only feasible in pre-pubescent girls or unhealthy thin teens.

There is no sustainability in this strategy, but for coaches like Tutberidze, there doesn't need to be. Figure skating in the last decade has seen senior careers that have headlined and retired all within the span of two to three years, only to be overtaken by a new group of junior skaters, and the immense popularity of the sport in Russia means that there is always a new crop of elementary schoolers with the potential to become Olympians—at Sambo-70, athletes become disposable.

For an example of youth's dominance in the sport, look no further than Pyeongchang 2018 Olympics's headlining rivalry, Russia's Evgenia Medvedeva and Alina Zagitova, both of whom trained under Tutberidze. Medvedeva was 18 and the two-time reigning world champion going into the games, but ultimately lost Olympic gold to her younger teammate, who was 15 at the time. Zagitova's younger age meant that she was able to maintain a lower, prepubescent body weight, and could better utilize her coach's technique.

Medvedeva officially announced retirement in 2021 after nearly two years away from competition, due to a chronic back injury fostered by years of Tutberidze's dangerous technique.

"My back doesn't turn in one direction," Medvedeva said in an interview on a Russian Youtube channel. "I really love these jumps, but... maybe the age limit will be raised to 25 and I will be able to go out and dig deeper."

Or take Tutberidze's first breakout skater, Yulia Lipnitskaya, who withdrew from competition just two years after she enamored the world in her 2014 "Schindler's List" free program. She shared her struggle with anorexia under Tutberidze's hawkish gaze, explaining that she was put on a powder diet during her entire stay in the Olympic village. Lipnitskaya retired in 2017, checking into an Israeli eating disorder clinic in January of that year.

Having trained the likes of Valieva, Medvedeva, and Lipnitskaya, Sambo-70 hosts the most elite group



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of the Russian ladies figure skating national champions since 2016 have been Eteri Tutberidze's students.

17 yrs

has been dubbed the "ETERI EXPIRATION DATE" after Lipnitskaya, Medvedeva, and Zagitova suffered performance issues at 17.

of skaters. Yet it also fosters an immense fear of being overtaken, which can only be offset by more back-breaking, eating disorder inducing training. This toxic environment is furthered by the media: treating young athletes as phenoms with no concern for their abusive training settings allows coaches to continue subjecting children to unethical training methods under the guise of it all being natural talent.

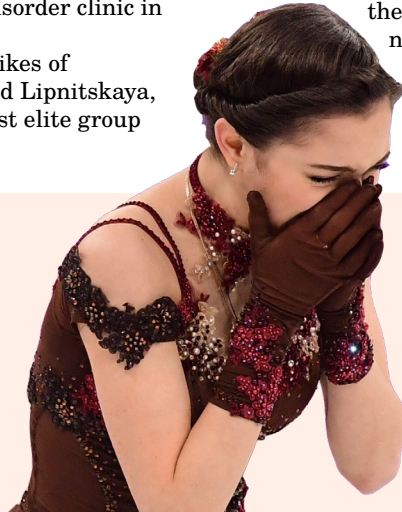
When Valieva tested positive for trimetazidine, a

substance banned in sports competition for increasing endurance, the *CBS* anchor's words rang true. The "only one who [could] take [Valieva] out [was] herself," as she struggled to maintain a pre-pubescent body that could withstand figure skating's increasingly onerous win-condition. While, as of Apr. 8, investigations into Valieva's doping are ongoing, these Olympics have made one thing clear: figure skating is no longer a sport for grown women. But with its dominant culture of abuse, is skating really fit for the youth, either?



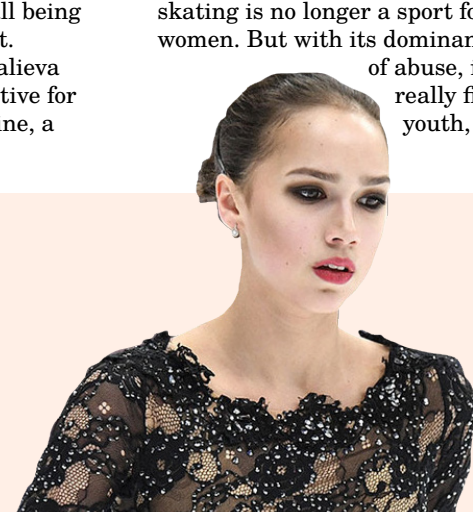
YULIA LIPNITSKAYA

pulled out of competition and checked into an eating disorder clinic just two years after her breakout "Schindler's List" program at the Sochi Olympic games.



EVGENIA MEDVEDEVA

skated on a broken foot at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. A month later, she withdrew from the World Championships after doctors found her medical state to have worsened.



ALINA ZAGITOVA

Transitioned to a role as a television presenter at age 19 after winning the 2018 Winter Olympics, 2019 Worlds, 2018 European Championships, and 2018 Grand Prix Final.