

## Paired Texts

UP  
CLOSE

**Theme** As you read these two articles, think about what it means to be a winner.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S  
6 WORDS IN BOLD



# The

# G

13-year-old  
gymnast  
Elena Arenas  
has her sights  
set on winning  
Olympic gold.  
But what does it  
really take?

Reported by Jane Bianchi

**T**he pressure was intense at last July's American Classic gymnastics meet, one of the most important of the year for top female gymnasts. Thirteen-year-old Elena Arenas had been preparing for months. She felt sure she was ready. Until disaster struck.

Elena was beginning her floor routine, a performance of lightning-fast tumbling passes, gravity-defying flips and twists, and sky-high leaps. She was finishing up one of her easier tumbling runs, when *boom!* she fell.

She finished the routine, but the fall cost her a full point in the judging, putting her instantly behind.

Her next event was the vault, and she needed a top score to make up for the lost point.

Instead came failure.

girl



Who

Can

FLY

Elena sprang out of the vault, and, once again, she fell.

Another full point vanished, and so, it seemed, did her chances for a top spot. She had two events left, but her confidence was badly shaken. How could Elena go on?

## In Her Blood

Right now, in gyms across America, about 4 million kids are participating in gymnastics programs. Most are girls, and the vast majority will quit within a few years. That's because gymnastics is one of the most demanding sports there is.

To excel in women's gymnastics, an athlete must compete in four different events: floor exercise, vault, balance beam, and uneven parallel bars. Gymnasts must have the strength of a football linebacker, the **stamina** of a marathoner, the grace of a ballerina, and the courage of a circus daredevil.

Like most competitive gymnasts, Elena has been flipping and spinning since she could walk. Gymnastics is even in her blood. Her mother, Kim, was a champion gymnast at the University of Georgia. Her father, Pete, is her coach. By age 5, Elena was competing in meets

For Elena, every move must be perfect.

and returning home with stacks of gold medals. Last year, she reached the highest level for her age group: junior international **elite**.

This success has come at a high cost. Elena trains more than 30 hours a week. This past year, Elena's schedule of meets and camps became so demanding that she had to leave her middle school. She now takes online classes.

There are other **sacrifices** too. Sleepovers are a no-no; staying up too late can ruin the next day's training session. The same for junk food. A sweet treat for Elena comes in the form of an "energy ball" made of oats, peanut butter, honey, chocolate chips, and flax and chia seeds. (Delicious, she reports.)

But these are small sacrifices, Elena says. She misses her friends, but she has plenty of company at home, with two sisters, a brother, and her dog, Brantley. Gymnastics has made her strong, disciplined, and focused.

## Olympic Dreams

And then there's her dream: to make the Olympic team. An Olympic gold medal in gymnastics is a prize more valuable than almost any other in women's sports. Gymnast Gabby Douglas won the gold in the women's all-around competition at the 2012 London Olympics. Since then, she has earned millions of dollars and become a hero to kids around the world.

Elena will still be too young to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. But she has her sights set firmly on the 2020 games. The competition will be fierce; there are only five spots on the team. But



# A Special Kind of Gold

**B**ridget Matsen is an Olympian. The teen from La Grange, Kentucky, is one of 4.4 million athletes around the world who participate in the Special Olympics.

This worldwide program, founded in 1968, organizes athletic competitions for kids and adults who have **intellectual** disabilities. Bridget was born with Down syndrome, which makes it hard for her to learn certain things.

Unlike the Summer Olympic Games, which happen every four years in one city, the Special Olympics holds events almost every day all around the world. Athletes don't have to try out, and they can choose from dozens of sports. Bridget plays basketball, and she recently began to swim as well.

Bridget loves the medals she's won, and her parents and three brothers are often on the sidelines, cheering for her team. But for Bridget, the Special Olympics isn't about winning. The program has helped her become more confident and fit. Perhaps most important, it has given her opportunities to make friends.

"It's not always easy for kids like Bridget to meet people she can truly connect with," says her mom, Terri. "But through the Special Olympics, she has made so many wonderful friends."

And those friendships make Bridget feel like a winner. ■



Bridget, front row, third from left, with her Special Olympics basketball team

experts believe Elena has a strong chance.

What **distinguishes** her is more than just her talent and focus. To succeed, an elite athlete needs the mental toughness not only to win, but also to pick herself up when she fails.

Which brings us back to last summer.

It didn't seem possible that Elena could recover after her two falls. She needed 52 points to be among the day's winners and to qualify for an even more important meet.

It was hopeless. Or was it?

"There was a part of me that still thought: 'I can make it,'" Elena says.

She nailed the next two routines. When the final point totals were **tallied**, Elena stared in amazement.

She had scored 52.1.

Today, Elena is training harder than ever, the dream of Olympic gold shining bright in her mind.

"I think if I win one," she says, "I just might never take it off." 🦄

## WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

Winning means different things to different people. Explain that statement using details from the articles about Elena and Bridget.

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