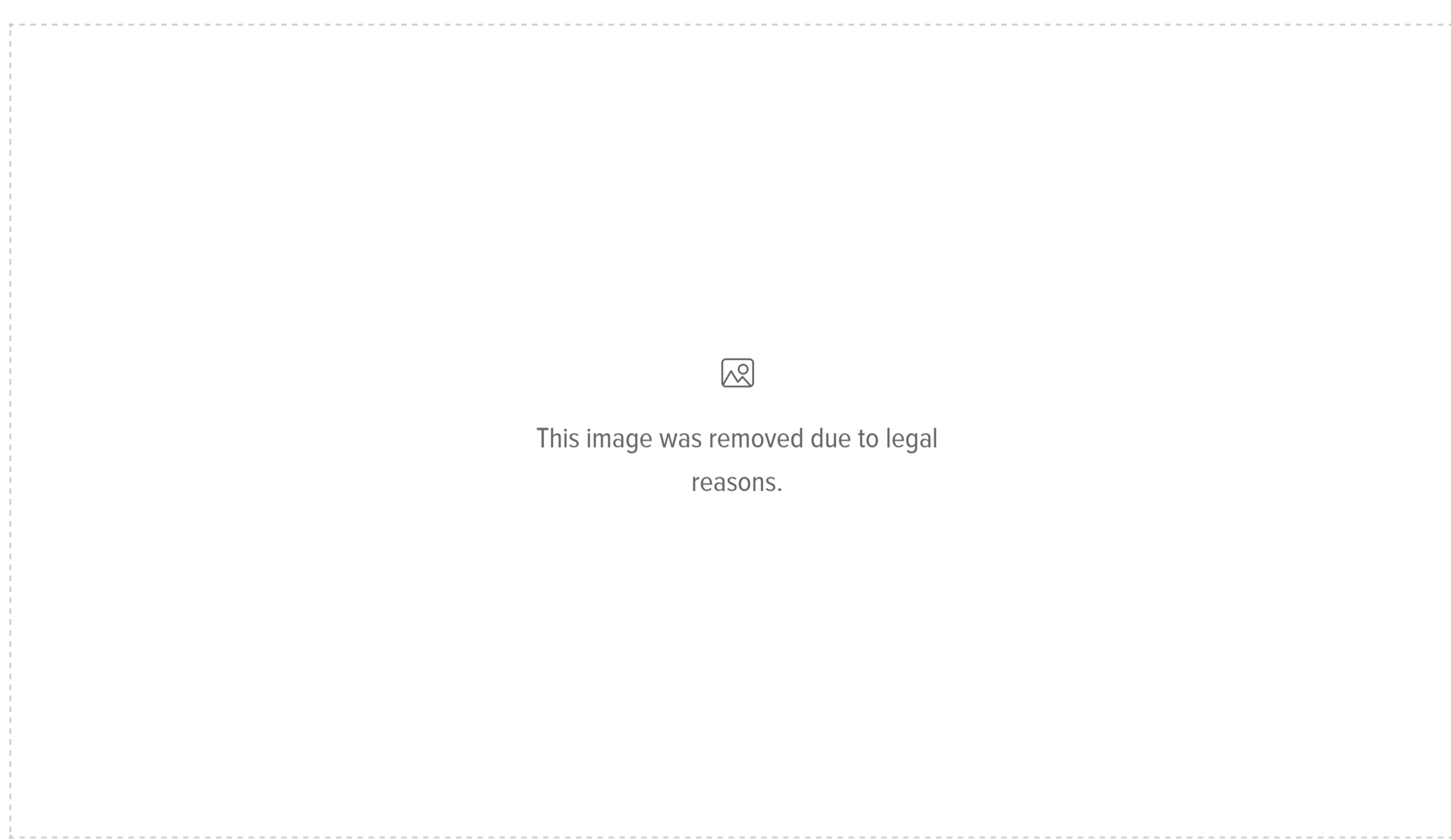


FEATURES

# The decades of black gymnasts who paved the way for Simone Biles

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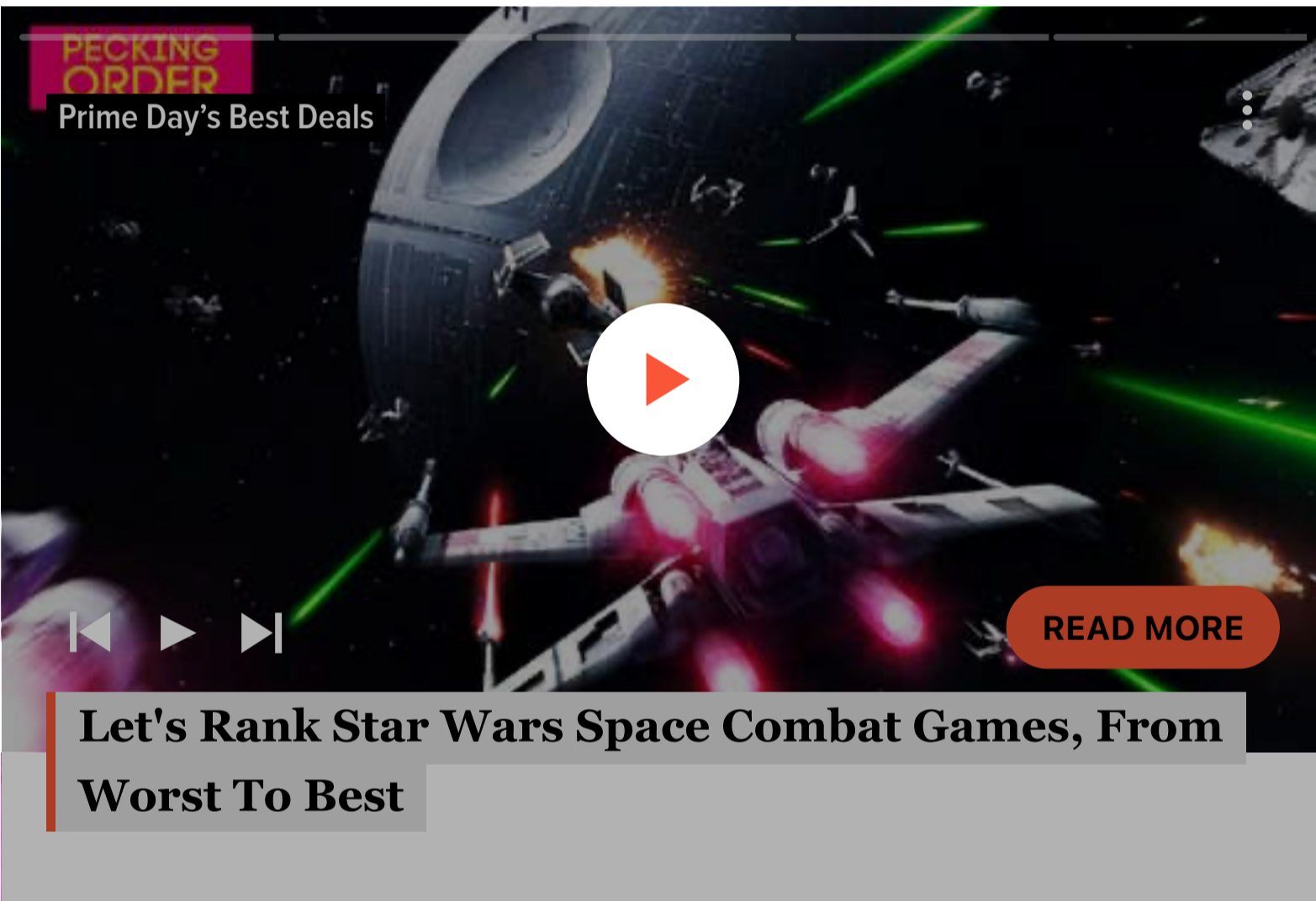
When Dianne Durham entered the arena at the 1983 National Gymnastics Championships at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she was greeted by her own personal cheering section. Her church from her hometown of Gary, Indiana, sent two busloads of congregants to support the gymnast. “They had a big banner that said, ‘We love you Dianne,’” Durham recalled. “Then I ended up winning the meet. It was an incredible moment.”

When Durham, who was then 14, won the national title in 1983, she was not only picking up the most important domestic title of the pre-Olympic year; she had become the first African American woman to win the senior national title, after pulling off a similar feat in the junior ranks in 1981 and 1982.

You’ve probably never heard of Durham since she never made it to the Olympics. A toxic mixture of injury and politics kept her off the 1984 team that competed in Los Angeles. It was at that Olympics that Mary Lou Retton (a training partner of Durham’s) clinched the all-around gold medal and leapt onto the Wheaties box. It was Retton, not Durham, who became a household name and icon.

That the first black female American national gymnastics champion emerged in the early 80s (and the first African American Olympic female gymnast, Luci Collins, was on the 1980 team that never competed due to the boycott) may come as a surprise for the average Olympic viewer. For those who follow the sport once every four years, the story of black gymnasts probably begins with Dominique Dawes, who is most famous for being a member of the Magnificent Seven, the 1996 gold medal winning U.S. team, though she was also a member of the bronze medal winning 1992 and 2000 teams. After Dawes, black gymnastics history for most people probably skips ahead to 2012 with Gabby Douglas, the all-around champion from the London Games, and then to Simone Biles, who won the all-around at the Olympic trials on Sunday and will represent the U.S. along with Douglas, 16-year-old Laurie Hernandez, Madison Kocian and Aly Raisman in Rio.

This timeline gives the impression of a sport almost entirely bereft of black representation in the higher ranks. But if you search the years between the Olympics, you’ll find [black female gymnasts](#) winning world championship medals, dominating the national championships and filling out college team rosters for years.



After the first night of competition at the 2014 National Championships, Biles, the leader after four events, sat down to address the press. There, one reporter asked her about being the only black gymnast competing in the senior event, gymnastics [blogger Lauren Hopkins](#) recalled. Indeed she was, but that year was not typical as only eight gymnasts competed in the all-around. (Another African American gymnast, Elizabeth Price, had won the 2014 American Cup and the overall world cup series title, but announced [her retirement from elite competition](#) to matriculate at Stanford and join their gymnastics team so she was not present at this competition.) Biles, according to Hopkins, rattled off names of gymnasts of color, most of whom were competing in the junior division that year though the senior division had diversity in addition to Biles. Kyla Ross, the 2012 Olympic team gold medalist and the 2013 world all-around silver medalist, is not white. Neither is Ashton Locklear, who is a member of the Lumbee Tribe. Or Veronica Hulst.

“She listed other girls competing and was kind of visibly annoyed,” Hopkins recalled. In her response to the question, Biles resisted being [tokenized for her race](#). But she was also schooling the reporter for not recognizing that facts on the ground had changed.

A quick look at the results of the recent 2016 Secret U.S. Classic affirms Biles’ take on representation. In the junior division, 8 of the top 20 were black or biracial. The field that qualified to the junior national championships later that month was also quite diverse. It was 37 percent white, 31 percent black, 24 percent Asian and 8 percent Hispanic. (Racial and ethnic breakdowns at the highest levels of elite gymnastics are not tracked by any organization.) These larger annual domestic meets are a more useful way of measuring representation among high level gymnasts in the U.S. than looking at the composition of Olympic teams where only five or six spots are available for an event that takes place for two weeks once every four years. Making that team is not only a testament to your talent and hard work, it’s a testament to your good fortune, that you’re relatively uninjured at the decisive moment, that you’re really good where the team happens to be weak. For instance, a general U.S. team weakness on bars in 2011 propelled Douglas into contention for the world championship team, despite a disastrous showing at nationals that year, because she is strong on that piece. If the only data you use to testify to minority representation (or lack thereof) is drawn exclusively from Olympic team composition, you’re missing the forest for one very specific tree that only comes around once every four years.

**The all-white 2008 Olympic team can be seen as something of an aberration, rather than the norm, in elite gymnastics in the U.S.**

That said, Olympic team composition over the last two decades hasn’t been an all-white affair. The 1992 team had two gymnasts of color out of the six team members—Dawes and Betty Okino, who is the daughter of a Romanian mother and Ugandan father. The 1996 Olympic team, which had seven members instead of the usual six, had Dawes and Amy Chow, an Asian American gymnast. Four years later, the team size was reduced back down to six and 50% of that team were gymnasts of color—Dawes and Chow again and a young up-and-comer from Las Vegas named Tasha Schwikert. In 2004, Mohini Bhardwaj, an Indian American gymnast, and Annia Hatch, who had previously won a vault medal for Cuba at the 1996 worlds, were both on the six person team. In 2012, the three alternates were non-white or biracial: Price, Sarah Finnegan and Anna Li. Given this context, the all-white 2008 Olympic team can be seen as something of an aberration. rather than the norm, in elite gymnastics in the

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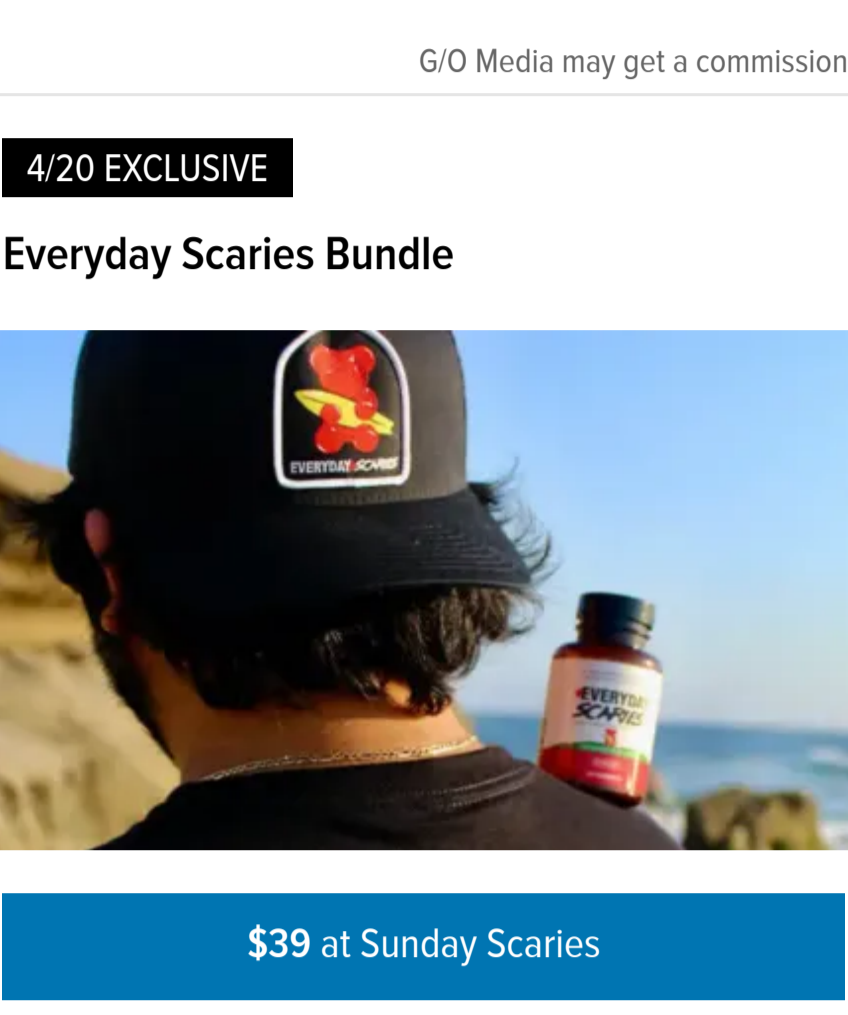
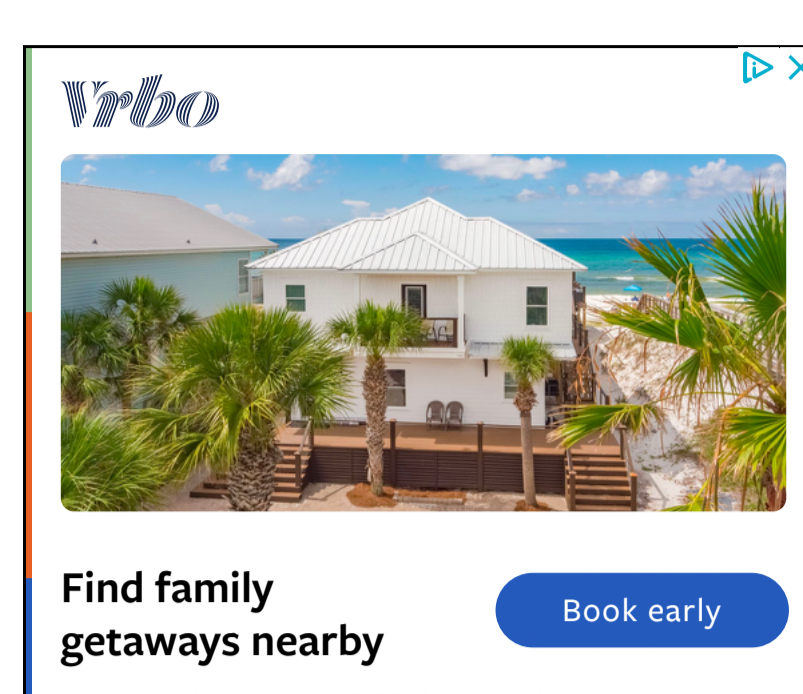


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