

SPORTS

As F.B.I. Took a Year to Pursue the Nassar Case, Dozens Say They Were Molested

查看简体中文版
查看繁體中文版

By DAN BARRY, SERGE F. KOVALESKI and JULIET MACUR FEB. 3, 2018

For more than a year, an F.B.I. inquiry into allegations that Lawrence G. Nassar, a respected sports doctor, had molested three elite teenage gymnasts followed a plodding pace as it moved back and forth among agents in three cities. The accumulating information included instructional videos of the doctor's unusual treatment methods, showing his ungloved hands working about the private areas of girls lying facedown on tables.

But as the inquiry moved with little evident urgency, a cost was being paid. The New York Times has identified at least 40 girls and women who say that Dr. Nassar molested them between July 2015, when he first fell under F.B.I. scrutiny, and September 2016, when he was exposed by an Indianapolis Star investigation. Some are among the youngest of the now-convicted predator's many accusers — 265, and counting.

The three alleged victims then at the center of the F.B.I.'s inquiry were world-class athletes; two were Olympic gold medalists. Nearly a year passed before agents interviewed two of the young women.

The silence at times drove the victims and their families to distraction, including Gina Nichols, the mother of the gymnast initially known as “Athlete A”: Maggie Nichols, who was not contacted by the F.B.I. for nearly 11 months after the information she provided sparked the federal inquiry.

“I never got a phone call from the police or the F.B.I.” during that time, Gina Nichols, a registered nurse, said. “Not one person. Not one. Not one. Not one.”

The F.B.I. declined to answer detailed questions about the speed and nature of its investigation, or to provide an official who might put the case in context. Instead, it issued a 112-word statement asserting that the sexual exploitation of children “is an especially heinous crime,” and that “the safety and well-being of our youth is a top priority for the F.B.I.”

The statement also said that the many allegations against Dr. Nassar “transcended jurisdictions” — an apparent suggestion that internal efforts to coordinate among its bureaus and with other law enforcement agencies partly explained the inquiry’s slow tempo.

The agency left unaddressed the oft-repeated claim by U.S.A. Gymnastics officials that after initially presenting the sexual assault allegations to the F.B.I. in July 2015, they came away with the impression that federal agents had advised them not to discuss the case with anyone. The ensuing silence had dire consequences, as the many girls and young women still seeing Dr. Nassar received no warning.

Among them was Emma Ann Miller.

By the summer of 2015, Emma Ann, the only child of a single mother, was both a competitive dancer and just another Michigan kid immersed in the joys and dramas of middle school life. She got braces, with baby blue rubber bands that matched her eyes. She began receiving Snapchat attention from boys.

And once a month, she went to Suite 420 in a six-story office building close to Michigan State University in East Lansing, where her solicitous doctor, who encouraged everyone to just call him Larry, molested her.

According to her lawyer, Emma Ann had about a dozen sessions with Dr. Nassar between the summers of 2015 and 2016. The pain of the procedures increased, and her self-confidence plummeted.

“Whenever he asked if my lower back hurt, he would always find a way to touch me down there,” she said, explaining that Dr. Nassar would say that her pelvis was in need of adjustment. “Whether or not I said my back hurt, he would always find a way to, to. ...”

The young girl paused.

“I think I’ve blocked out a lot of what he did to me,” she said finally.

Urged to Keep Quiet

Only three years ago, Dr. Nassar was a popular doctor among the athletes he treated for U.S.A. Gymnastics, known for being goofy but maybe a bit too attentive. His treatments, which gymnastics officials believed were at the cutting edge, were also in demand at Michigan State, where he worked, as well as at Holt High School, and at a gymnastics academy called Twistars.

Issues had cropped up: a parent raising concerns about his behavior at Twistars; a female athlete or two at Michigan State complaining to no avail about inappropriate exams. In 2014, a university investigation of another complaint cleared Dr. Nassar of misconduct, but he was now required to have a third person present when treatment involved sensitive areas of the body — and to wear gloves.

Still, the doctor was trusted enough to conduct his procedures — including one called “intravaginal adjustment” — without supervision when treating the country’s best gymnasts at the Karolyi ranch, the exclusive and secluded national team training camp, about 60 miles north of Houston. Gymnasts of international caliber, like Ms. Nichols, of suburban Minneapolis, would spend a week each month at the ranch, under the exacting supervision of the revered coach Martha Karolyi.

But at the ranch in late spring of 2015, Ms. Nichols’s personal coach, Sarah Jantzi, overheard the 17-year-old girl talking with another elite gymnast, Aly

Raisman, about Dr. Nassar's invasive and inappropriate techniques. The alarming information was quickly shared with the girls' parents and, by June 17, with officials at U.S.A. Gymnastics.

Gina Nichols, Maggie's mother, recalled telling Steve Penny, then the president of U.S.A. Gymnastics, that the police had to be called immediately. But he insisted that she not tell anyone, she said. The organization would take care of alerting law enforcement.

Weeks of silence passed, Gina Nichols said, interrupted occasionally by admonitions from Mr. Penny to keep quiet about the matter — although the United States Olympic Committee has said that U.S.A. Gymnastics reported that one of its physicians had been accused of abusing athletes “and was in the process of contacting the appropriate law enforcement authorities.”

U.S.A. Gymnastics eventually retained what it called “an experienced female investigator” — a specialist in workplace harassment. After completing her interviews, the investigator recommended on Friday, July 24, that Dr. Nassar be reported to law enforcement.

Ms. Nichols and Ms. Raisman competed the next day at the U.S. Classic in Chicago. Gina Nichols said that she saw Mr. Penny at the event and that he told her: We're working on this. Keep it quiet.

On Monday, July 27, gymnastics officials contacted the F.B.I. in Indianapolis, where U.S.A. Gymnastics has its headquarters. The next day, its chairman, Paul Parilla, and its president, Mr. Penny, met with F.B.I. agents who, they later said, assured them they had come to the right place. Forty-one days had passed since U.S.A. Gymnastics first received the report of the sexual abuse of one of its charges.

At this moment, F.B.I. agents in Indianapolis were also immersed in the child-exploitation case of Jared Fogle, the longtime pitchman on Subway television ads. Mr. Fogle was arrested that summer on federal charges of sexual exploitation of a child and distribution of child pornography, and later sentenced to nearly 16 years in prison.

The gymnastics officials provided the agents with contact information for three gymnasts: Ms. Nichols, Ms. Raisman and someone emerging as the central complainant: McKayla Maroney, then 19, a retired Olympic gold medalist who by the summer of 2015 had become a minor celebrity, struggling in public to find her next purpose in life — a struggle she has since indicated was related to serious emotional issues stemming from the abuse.

They also turned over copies of videos of Dr. Nassar demonstrating his technique as he chatted clinically about pulled hamstrings, buttocks and trigger points. Reporters for The New York Times have seen the videos, which show him kneading the legs of girls before his ungloved hands begin to work under a towel, between the girls' legs.

“It’s not a fun place to dig,” Dr. Nassar says to the camera.

“Do the hand-shaky thing,” he adds later, demonstrating how he shakes his hand vigorously when it is deep between a girl’s legs.

W. Jay Abbott, who at the time was the special agent in charge of the F.B.I. bureau in Indianapolis, said on Thursday that while he did not watch the videos, he vividly remembered the reactions of colleagues who had.

“I will never forget sitting around the table and thinking, What?” said Mr. Abbott, who retired in January. “And the reaction of my special agents who were very well versed in this was one of disgust. That is why we worked it with such urgency.”

He added: “At the time, it was being portrayed as a legitimate medical procedure. But to the layman, like ourselves, we were — ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’”

The next day, U.S.A. Gymnastics quietly, even surreptitiously, relieved Dr. Nassar of any further assignments. It later issued a statement saying: “U.S.A. Gymnastics understood from its meeting with the F.B.I. that it should not take any action nor communicate anything that might interfere with the F.B.I.’s investigation.”

All the while, Dr. Nassar continued his uncommon treatment techniques on young patients.

Treatment and Dread

Emma Ann Miller remembers the summer of 2015 as her “best summer ever.”

She competed in a dance competition in Las Vegas, where she performed to a song from “Legally Blonde,” and won a trophy that was two and a half feet tall — about half her height. She spent time at a sleep-away Bible camp, where she went kayaking, horseback riding and zip-lining, and had water balloon fights.

“We T.P.’ed the boys’ cabin down the hill and had a Silly String fight with two of the other girls’ cabins,” Emma Ann said with a laugh. “Someone threw a frog into one of the girls’ cabins. It was so much fun.”

But then there were those monthly visits to the office of Dr. Nassar — doctor to “all of these super-high-up Olympians” — who had treated her mother for years for injuries related to a car accident. Given that Emma Ann had known him her entire life, he was almost like family, an intimacy reflected in the half-dozen photographs of her that he displayed in his treatment room.

Dr. Nassar first molested her when she was 10, she recalled. She remembered the pants she was wearing — black leggings with white flowers, from Aéropostale. She was having back and neck issues, and he had her remove the leggings and put on loose shorts. In a medical supply room that doubled as a treatment room, he began exploring “down there.”

“He was like, ‘Is this O.K.?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t know,’” she said. “And he was like, ‘Just hang in there.’ I didn’t know how it felt. I just knew that it hurt.”

In the summer of 2015, the treatments hurt even more. She had tried wearing three pairs of underpants or especially tight shorts — anything to keep Dr. Nassar’s fingers from probing her. Now that she was older, she began lying that she was having her period.

At some point, Emma Ann told her mother that she preferred not to be alone with Dr. Nassar. That did not end it. She said he continued to abuse her while positioning himself so that her mother couldn't see what he was doing. He would grope the girl beneath a white towel meant to convey propriety, all the while chatting with her mother, a kindergarten teacher.

How's your class going?

"I knew that he had helped my mom, so I had to persuade myself into thinking that he also helped me," Emma Ann said. "But I wasn't really sure."

Emma Ann now knows that she was not alone. The growing number of other girls who say they were being molested between the summers of 2015 and 2016 includes Alexis Alvarado, 19, who began seeing Dr. Nassar in 2010 for a stress fracture in her back. He began that treatment by massaging her legs, but then his hands crept up until, she said, his fingers were inside her. She was 12.

"I didn't realize what he was doing was wrong," Ms. Alvarado said. But she explained that he "thought everything could be fixed through the butt." That is why her gymnastics teammates in Lansing, Mich., called him the "butt doctor."

The monthly appointments continued through the summer of 2015 and into the next year. So did her shame, and dread.

The same was true for Hannah Morrow, of Naperville, Ill., who will turn 18 on Tuesday. Several times a year, starting when she was 11 or 12, she took the four-hour car ride to see Dr. Nassar, looping around the bottom coast of Lake Michigan. At some point, she started listening to playlists she compiled to help keep her mind off what was about to be done to her.

She'd try to get hooked on a new song to sing in her head, over and over. Her favorite, "I Write Sins Not Tragedies" by Panic! At the Disco, included the line: "It's much better to face these kinds of things with a sense of poise and rationality."

As with Emma Ann Miller, Hannah also began wearing tighter pants and underwear that covered more of her buttocks, in the unrealized hope that it would

dissuade him. She struggled to reconcile his outsize reputation with what he was doing.

“If all of those Olympians loved him, there’s nothing wrong,” Hannah remembered thinking. “Even though I feel weird with what he’s doing, I guess I shouldn’t. I’d make excuses: He doesn’t realize he’s too close to my butt, or that he brushed over my boobs.”

Finally, F.B.I. Contact

In late July or early August, F.B.I. agents asked Ms. Maroney to travel to Indianapolis from her home in California to discuss the allegation, according to her lawyer, John Manly, but she declined. It is unclear why an agent did not travel to see her in person. As a result, the first substantive interview of an alleged victim in a child-molestation case was conducted by telephone.

Meanwhile, Ms. Nichols and Ms. Raisman continued their gymnastics pursuits — both competed at the P & G Championships in Indianapolis — but they still had received no word from any law enforcement official about the allegations now lodged with the F.B.I.

Some of the delay appears to have been related to questions concerning federal-versus-state jurisdiction, as well as jurisdiction within the F.B.I. itself. Although the Indianapolis bureau had received the information, the alleged sexual abuse by Dr. Nassar had taken place in Texas, at the Karolyi ranch, and in Michigan, where he lived and worked. And Ms. Maroney lived in California.

According to Mr. Abbott, his agents in Indianapolis did not have the case for long. “When we consulted with the U.S. attorney, we knew right away that we would not have venue,” he said. “It was never really our case.”

Mr. Abbott said that his agents conducted some interviews, but he declined to say with whom. He also said written reports were sent within weeks to F.B.I. offices in Michigan and Los Angeles.

The retired agent emphasized how the sensitivities and difficulties of child-exploitation cases can contribute to the length of investigations. “You are dealing with victims who sometimes don’t want to be interviewed,” he said. “It is extremely delicate. And you also have the parents of minors who are sometimes not comfortable with interviews.”

Asked why federal law enforcement officials did not notify people — other gymnasts, parents, coaches — that a potential child molester was in their midst, Mr. Abbott said, “That’s where things can get tricky.”

“There is a duty to warn those who might be harmed in the future,” he said. “But everyone is still trying to ascertain whether a crime has been committed. And everybody has rights here” — a reference to both the alleged victims and the person being accused.

The Nassar case might have been further complicated, he said, by the fact that “there was a vigorous debate going on about whether this was a legitimate medical procedure.”

U.S.A. Gymnastics officials said that around this time they were told that pertinent interviews had been completed and that the case had been transferred to another jurisdiction. Indeed, on Sept. 12, Ms. Maroney was directed by U.S.A. Gymnastics to contact the F.B.I. East Lansing office.

According to Mr. Manly, the retired gymnast’s mother, Erin Maroney, “called repeatedly,” but received no follow-up response.

Two weeks later, on Sept. 27, Dr. Nassar announced on Facebook that he was retiring from the women’s national team staff, notwithstanding a note he had posted in late June saying he would remain with the team through the summer of 2016.

He did not elaborate.

In April 2016, Ms. Raisman shared a gold medal with the national team at the Pacific Rim Championships in Seattle, while Ms. Nichols damaged a knee during training, underwent surgery, and was out for several weeks — a reminder of the physical toll of the sport. Meanwhile, neither she nor her parents heard anything

about the federal investigation that U.S.A. Gymnastics had instructed them to remain silent about.

The Raisman family was similarly frustrated. According to a person close to the family, Ms. Raisman and her mother, Lynn, repeatedly reached out to Mr. Penny to find out about the status of the federal investigation, only to be told that an F.B.I. agent would be getting in touch with them.

Finally, the absence of information about the federal investigation — and the increasing concern of the victims and their families — prompted Mr. Penny and Mr. Parilla, the U.S.A. Gymnastics officials, to visit the F.B.I.'s Los Angeles bureau in early May. Mr. Parilla lives in Southern California, as does Ms. Maroney, and Mr. Penny stopped in Los Angeles while returning from an overseas trip.

“As time passed, concern about a perceived lack of development prompted Board Chair Paul Parilla and C.E.O. Steve Penny to report the matter a second time to a different F.B.I. office,” U.S.A. Gymnastics said in a statement to The Times on Friday.

Through a lawyer and a spokeswoman, Mr. Parilla and Mr. Penny declined to be interviewed for this article.

The visit appears to have jump-started the federal investigation into Dr. Nassar. Agents asked for more information, including a list of the members of the national women's gymnastics team. And on May 17, the F.B.I. finally interviewed Ms. Maroney in person.

It had been 294 days since the F.B.I. was first notified of accusations against Dr. Nassar.

A few weeks later, on June 13, Gina Nichols received an email from Michael Hess, an F.B.I. agent then based in Los Angeles. “I am looking into a complaint that was filed involving alleged misconduct by an individual associated with U.S.A. Gymnastics,” he wrote. “When you have a moment, please give me a call at the below numbers.”

It was a stressful time: Her daughter was preparing for the Olympic trials. But several days later, the gymnast went to a suburban Minneapolis building, not far from her home, to meet Mr. Hess, who had flown in from Los Angeles.

In addition, a person close to the Raisman family said that the F.B.I. also contacted Ms. Raisman in the summer of 2016. While Mr. Manly — who represents Ms. Raisman, Ms. Nichols and Ms. Maroney — applauded the diligence of Mr. Hess, he expressed amazement that so little had been done for so long.

“Given who these women were, all competing for their country, and given that these assaults had occurred in different states and countries, there was an obvious need to have a multilayered, multijurisdictional investigation,” Mr. Manly said.

Gina Nichols, who had been instructed by U.S.A. Gymnastics not to talk about the matter, recalled that while venting in a subsequent telephone conversation with Mr. Hess, the agent told her:

You can talk to anybody you want.

Lasting Scars

That August, in Rio de Janeiro, Ms. Raisman had an Olympics for the ages, demonstrating poise and leadership as she won three medals, including gold. But Ms. Nichols, returning from her knee injury, was ultimately not invited to join the Olympic team — even as an alternate.

Meanwhile, Emma Ann Miller continued to keep her treatment appointments with Dr. Nassar. But the abuse had worsened, and she no longer felt like the bubbly teenager she had been only a year before. She stopped taking selfies because she felt ugly and fat. She’d cry if she received an A-minus on a paper or test, thinking it was evidence of her stupidity.

“I didn’t even want to order a drink at Starbucks because I was so scared I’d mess it up,” Emma Ann said.

Her mother, Leslie Miller, struggles now with her rage. “Look at what he did to my happy girl,” Ms. Miller said, in tears. “Look at all the people who could’ve

stopped him earlier. My goal is to find every single one of them in the haystack — expose them all, so this will never happen again.”

The Story Becomes Public

It was only a matter of time.

On Sept. 12, 2016, The Indianapolis Star published an in-depth investigation detailing allegations that Dr. Nassar had repeatedly molested two gymnasts when they were young. One woman had filed a criminal complaint with the police in Michigan. The other, initially described only as an Olympic medalist, had filed a lawsuit against the doctor and U.S.A. Gymnastics in California. Neither was involved in the F.B.I. inquiry.

Suddenly, the Nassar case took on urgency. As other girls and women began calling the Michigan State University Police to file complaints, their numbers eventually growing into the dozens, their abuser did what he could to mask his behavior, including throwing hard drives containing more than 37,000 images and videos of child pornography into the trash for pickup in the morning.

But trash pickup in his neighborhood was late that day, allowing a police officer to find the horrifying material while executing a search warrant on behalf of the university police.

By the close of 2016, Dr. Nassar was in custody. By the close of 2017, he had been convicted of myriad state charges, as well as federal child pornography charges, based in large part on that state search warrant. Given that he has been sentenced to nearly two centuries in prison, Dr. Nassar will likely die there.

In recent weeks, a communal catharsis has played out, as dozens and dozens of empowered victims or their proxies have confronted the doctor at sentencing hearings. The angry but resolute words of Aly Raisman and McKayla Maroney and Maggie Nichols have echoed in the courtrooms of Michigan.

So, too, have the words of the lesser-known accusers, those girls and young women who report they were abused in the year after allegations were first

presented to the F.B.I. in Indianapolis: the likes of Alexis Alvarado and Hannah Morrow — and Emma Ann Miller, who in November turned 15.

Correction: February 6, 2018

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Holt High School. Lawrence G. Nassar did work there, but it is not his alma mater. An earlier version of this article also misstated the number of medals Aly Raisman won at the Rio Olympics. It was three, not six (she has six Olympic medals over all).

Susan C. Beachy, Elisa Cho and Alain Delaqu erie contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on February 4, 2018, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Molested as F.B.I. Case Plodded for a Year.

  2018 The New York Times Company