

At first glance, Morgan Hurd is your typical homeschooled junior. She enjoys her online curriculum, she likes to read, and she gets fed up with the funny looks from her doctor's office receptionist when she tells them that she doesn't need a school note. She seems like an average homeschooler, except for one small detail—Hurd is the best gymnast in the world.

“Winning Worlds and just being at Worlds... it's amazing,” says Hurd, a smile in her voice. Hurd has been in gymnastics since she was three—just two years after she was adopted from China—but it wasn't until she began homeschooling in sixth grade that her gymnastics career really took off. A four-foot-six dynamo who wears glasses, braces, and loves Harry Potter, Hurd became an instant fan favorite. A string of competition wins ultimately led her to the 2017 Women's Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Montreal, where she triumphed over a slew of older and more experienced competitors to receive the gold medal. She's not slowing down: now her sights are set on next year's world championship.

Hurd's status as a successful homeschooled athlete may seem like a foreign concept to some homeschoolers. Homeschoolers aren't allowed to play sports with public and private schools in many states, and often, city rec leagues just don't offer the level of competition that athletes would like.

This is a problem I experienced firsthand. When I discovered a passion for softball when I was fifteen, I also discovered that my rank as a homeschooler limited me to the city rec league—and as my dreams grew bigger, the two-game-a-week schedule and lackadaisical attitude of my coaches and teammates hemmed me in tighter. Some people say that when homeschoolers choose to not attend public school, they're also

choosing to not participate in public school sports. Others say that if homeschooled students meet the same academic standards as public school kids, the homeschoolers should be allowed to play. But whichever way one leans, the reality is still this: homeschoolers can't play.

Although my playing time was limited, I had no trouble finding time to train. Even as I began taking difficult dual enrollment classes, I still got done with my school in plenty of time to spend hours doing carefully-planned plyometric workouts and heading to the batting cages with my brother when we knew they'd be empty. My flexible schedule served me well: the first season I played softball, several strangers saw me on the field and asked how long I'd played travel ball, never guessing that it was only my first season playing rec. And a year after I touched a softball for the first time, I was being recruited by multiple college coaches—all because homeschooling offered me ample time to practice, work out, and train. I ended up not playing college ball because of nagging injuries and health problems, but if I had, I'm convinced it would have been because of homeschooling.

Hurd was someone who definitely needed the flexible schedule that homeschooling provides. Gymnasts on the national team are required to travel to Huntsville, Texas, for one week each month. There, on the sprawling complex that makes up the Karolyi Ranch, they train under the sharp gaze of national team coordinator Valeri Liukin. Hurd recently started an online program, so it's easy to pack up her homework and take it along. "I try to do as much as I can in-between practices," she says.

Hurd thinks that managing her gymnastics career and public school wouldn't be completely impossible. "I'm a person that doesn't need to do... consecutive hours in the

gym, because I would say I'm a pretty fast-paced worker. So I just go in and get my stuff done and get out as soon as I'm done." A few of her teammates attend public school either full-time or part-time; although gymnasts who attend public school are rare, do exist. But Hurd says homeschooling was definitely the right choice for her. "I was really excited. I've actually always wanted to be homeschooled, and I didn't necessarily like the public school setting that much. I like how I get to go at my own pace; I get a lot more done."

For many years, Hurd was an athlete whom I followed longingly as I searched for a competitive team on which to play. And her story—the tiny homeschooler who has risen to gymnastics fame—offers hope to a myriad of other homeschooled athletes who are passionate about their sport and hope that they too can find their place in the world of athletics.