

Ruhi Qurashi: The Passionate Muslim Gymnast

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The song starts with a catchy beat, and a group of young girls start bobbing their heads to the rhythm. Sophomore **Ruhi Qurashi** dons a pair of skinny jeans and a loose gray and pink shirt. She starts swaying in the center of the carpet, ready to bust a move. With a hijab covering her hair, she starts doing spins and twists that come naturally. She keeps doing other popular dance moves, such as the Cat Daddy, which requires you to move your hands in a circle on the sides and move down, and the Dougie, which involves shifting to the left and right with style. Keeping calm and having fun, she seems to be expressing herself in every way possible.

Many people assume that if you wear a hijab, you can't do certain things, and that dancing and other activities are forbidden by Islam.

"I'm not like a professional dancer, but I do dance for fun, and it's a great way for me to feel like myself. It's frowned upon by religion but culture-wise, it's acceptable," Qurashi says.

If you watched any of the girls' gymnastics meets, you probably noticed Ruhi strutting her stuff on the beam. As she is twirling and spinning (slowly so as to not fall off), you notice that she's happy and excited to be doing what she does.

Qurashi does a couple of cartwheels and tuck jumps across the beam, her hands covered in chalk for a better grip. You hear shouts in the crowd from her family and friends. "Go Ruhi!" they bellow. "You can do it!" She puts on a straight face and prepares for her big finale: a backflip off of the beam. Her coach goes up to the beam for support, and in a blink of an eye she does it. She gracefully flips off of the beam and lands elegantly right on her feet as her hands fly up in the air to let the judges know she's done.

Qurashi's coaches are impressed with her skills and happy to have her on the team.

"Ruhi is truly an amazing team member. She brings a lot of energy to the gym, and she's improved a lot since last year. It's really interesting how she ties in her religion and an American sport to do something she really loves," says girls' gymnastics coach **Sue Arcus**.

Qurashi has to compromise in order to do what she loves.

“My parents felt kind of iffy at first because the type of clothing worn for practice and meets isn’t ideal for my religion, but showing them my passion for the sport really made them understand how much gymnastics meant to me and would do my best to cover up during meets, so I could stick to my religion’s way. When the season really started and I was chosen to compete on the beam at meets, my parents would always show up to the home meets to support me last year and do the same this year.”

Her family is quite supportive and understanding about Ruhi’s wants.

“I’m very proud of her because I know she’s very active and she’s liked gymnastics for a long time. But I also think that she shouldn’t spend a lot of time on it because her academics and religion are very important. I think it’s amazing how she’s improved so much, considering the fact that she started last summer. I’m very, very impressed and proud of her,” said Ruhi’s mother, **Amena Khatoon**.

Yet Ruhi does feel a little different compared to the other girls in gymnastics.

“Having to wear a hijab restricts me from showing my full potential,” she said. “Sometimes I wish I don’t have to wear it because it bothers me how people react to the hijab. They act differently than they would if I were not to wear it. Some people are very ignorant as to how I deal with my situation. I constantly get questions about how I can do dance and gymnastics without it getting in the way of my religion. It irritates me that they don’t understand.”

Girls on the gymnastics team seem to think otherwise.

“She’s a really good, supportive teammate. She likes to have fun while she gets something accomplished. She’s just an amazing person to have on the team,” sophomore **Cami Lee** says.

Luckily, Niles West is a very culturally diverse school. When other school’s come here to compete, Ruhi feels a bit uneasy.

“I remember when we went to a dual meet against Evanston away, and I just got these weird looks from the other gymnasts [on the Evanston team], which really made me realize how different I felt from everyone else. It’s obviously not something they see every day, but they have to realize that my religion means as much to me as gymnastics does.”

When Ruhi isn’t choreographing a new dance or working on improving her skills in the gymnastics gym, she is usually at home practicing her religion, Islam. Ruhi reads the Qur’an and tries her hardest to pray the compulsory five times a day. She loves and shows much pride in her religion, but little things about it bother her.

“My religion doesn’t put as big of an impact on my life as I thought it would, but it does restrict me from doing some things I please to do, like partying or hanging out with boys,” she said.

Her Islamic friends are supportive, if a bit surprised, at Ruhi’s actions.

“I think it’s really cool how [Ruhi] is a gymnast. Even though this school is very diverse, you don’t really see a lot of Muslim girls doing sports because of the clothing required; however, gymnastics can be more lenient,” junior **Fatima Farha** says.

For long-term future plans, Ruhi is planning on studying something in the English or science and medical fields at her dream college: Northwestern University. As for the near future, Ruhi hopes to try out for Orchesis, gymnastics, and tennis this upcoming year. She also wants to do Poetry Slam and Digital Art & Design. Along with these extracurricular activities, she will continue to be committed to her religion.

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