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ELEGANT AS EVER

DISTINCTLY graceful even among her glorious Soviet teammates, 1981 world floor exercise champion Natalia Ilienکو is hopeful that timeless style can find its place amidst the trick-focused substance of the sport today.

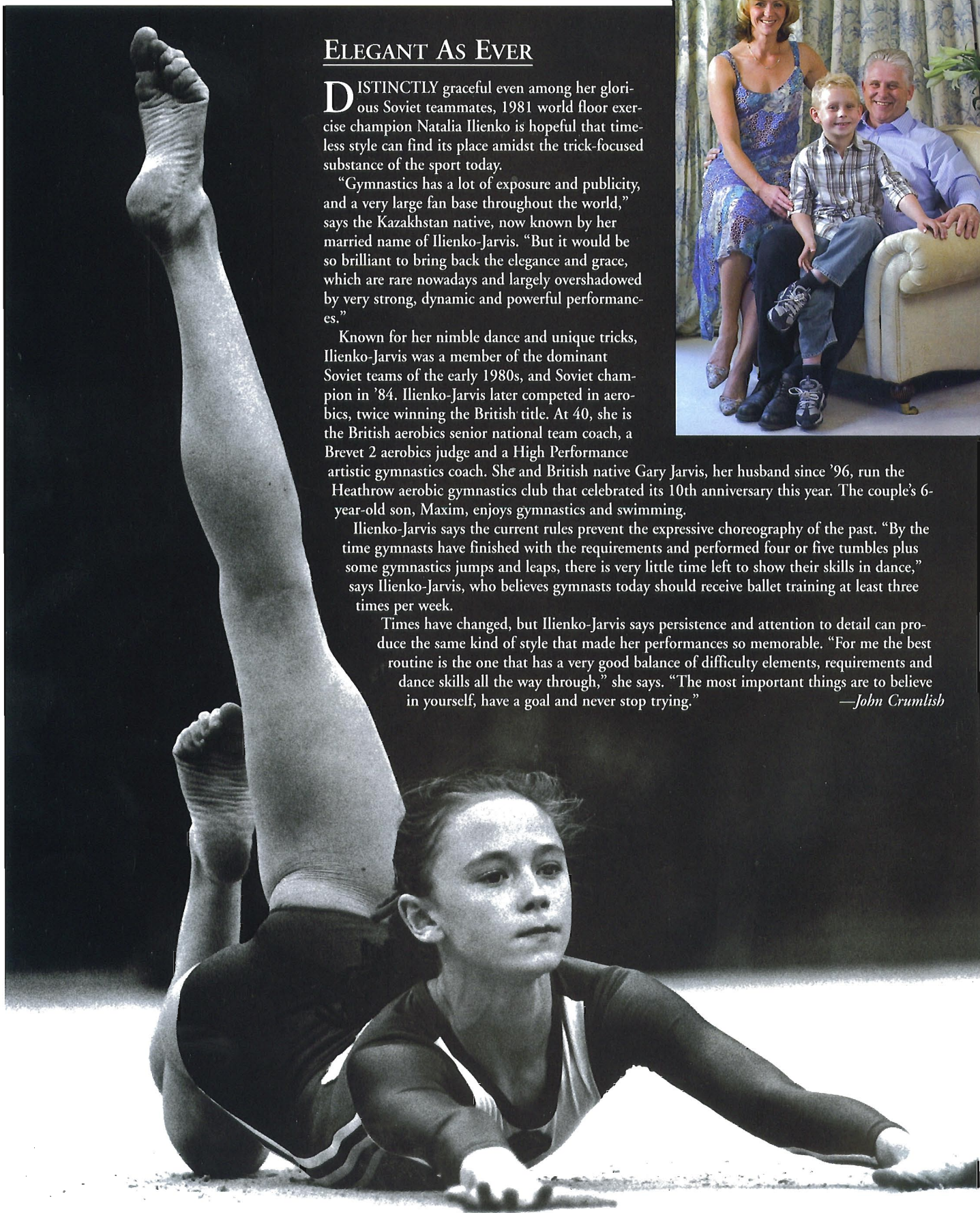
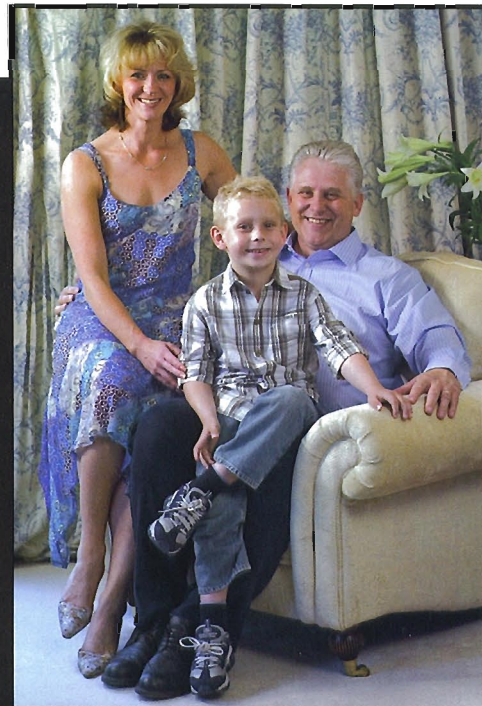
"Gymnastics has a lot of exposure and publicity, and a very large fan base throughout the world," says the Kazakhstan native, now known by her married name of Ilienکو-Jarvis. "But it would be so brilliant to bring back the elegance and grace, which are rare nowadays and largely overshadowed by very strong, dynamic and powerful performances."

Known for her nimble dance and unique tricks, Ilienکو-Jarvis was a member of the dominant Soviet teams of the early 1980s, and Soviet champion in '84. Ilienکو-Jarvis later competed in aerobics, twice winning the British title. At 40, she is the British aerobics senior national team coach, a Brevet 2 aerobics judge and a High Performance artistic gymnastics coach. She and British native Gary Jarvis, her husband since '96, run the Heathrow aerobic gymnastics club that celebrated its 10th anniversary this year. The couple's 6-year-old son, Maxim, enjoys gymnastics and swimming.

Ilienکو-Jarvis says the current rules prevent the expressive choreography of the past. "By the time gymnasts have finished with the requirements and performed four or five tumbles plus some gymnastics jumps and leaps, there is very little time left to show their skills in dance," says Ilienکو-Jarvis, who believes gymnasts today should receive ballet training at least three times per week.

Times have changed, but Ilienکو-Jarvis says persistence and attention to detail can produce the same kind of style that made her performances so memorable. "For me the best routine is the one that has a very good balance of difficulty elements, requirements and dance skills all the way through," she says. "The most important things are to believe in yourself, have a goal and never stop trying."

—John Crumlish



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