

MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING MANUAL FOR GYMNASTICS

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BASIC PRINCIPLES

You are not just a gymnast

Gymnastics is just one of many things you do well. The result of a missed arm circle, bad vault entry or poorly performed giant swing does not make or break you as a gymnast or a person.

You have friends, family, and other interests and skills. You're an athlete, student, young adult, community volunteer, and perhaps a sister or a brother.

You cannot control everything

You have no control over the condition of the equipment, the quality of the music system, the lighting, or judges.

You cannot control other gymnasts, whether they hit or miss routines or whether they have a positive or negative attitude.

Focus on what you can control: being "coachable," good form and alignment, a quality warm-up, and executing your routines as best you can. Gymnastics is an individual sport. When it comes right down to it, it is just you and the competitive floor. Focus on using the correct techniques and on your own thoughts and actions.

Staying positive is not enough

Staying positive is a good goal, but not realistic all the time. Self-talk including self-criticism happens to everyone. You cannot easily stop these thoughts, nor should you try. You can develop strategies to manage self-talk more effectively.

Stuff happens

Gymnastics is only a part of life. Sometimes lousy things happen: a friend gets injured or moves away, a family member gets sick, a relationship is strained or ends, a recurring injury gets worse. All of these aspects of life and more can impact your gymnastics performance. Keep perspective and remember that problems are temporary and that things change.

CHAPTER 1: MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING – WHAT IS IT?

Mental toughness is more than just mental. It's also physical and emotional. In order to be mentally tough in the gym, both in practice and in competition, you must have talent and be in peak physical condition. You must use good technique and practice/perform smart, in a way that prevents injury and promotes improvement. Mental toughness training allows gymnasts to tap into emotional and mental resources, to be used in practice and competition. These keep performance at its peak as often and as consistently as possible.

Jim Loehr (1993) is a noted sport psychologist who has worked with many top athletes over the last twenty years. He suggests the following for toughness: “Toughness is the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances.” Loehr describes four emotional markers of mental toughness.

Emotional flexibility – The ability to handle different situations in a balanced, non-defensive manner. Emotional flexibility also speaks to the skill of drawing on a wide range of positive emotions – humor, fighting spirit, pleasure.

Emotional Responsiveness – You are emotionally engaged in the competitive situation, not withdrawn

Emotional Strength – The ability to handle great emotional forces and sustain your fighting spirit no matter what the circumstances.

Emotional Resiliency – Being able to handle setbacks and recover quickly from them.

Like other aspects of mental toughness, these skills can be learned. It is not something genetic. For some athletes it comes more easily than for others. In general, to compete at this level, you probably have many of these skills already. However, for many gymnasts, there is room for improvement.

By being mentally tough you can consistently bring all your skills and talent to life. Being able to use your emotional life effectively will help you perform at your prime. The use of thinking skills, imagery, confidence building and other skills described later can be powerful techniques in reaching a high level of mental toughness.

CHAPTER 2: BUILDING SELF CONFIDENCE

WHAT IS IT? Self-confidence is the belief that you can handle the demands and challenges of gymnastics. It is based, in part, on how you have performed in previous practices and competitions. It also depends on how well you manage your inner critic and the way you think and feel about gymnastics.

WHY BOTHER? Self-confidence comes more easily to some athletes than others. When you feel confident you perform better. You’re more focused, better able to handle adversity and overcome debilitating fear.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. At times, even the most confident gymnasts have lapses. They begin to doubt their abilities. There are three practical and useful approaches to give your self-confidence a boost.

(1) Develop a list of personal affirmations – Write down a number of positive statements about yourself. Start with a few and add to it over time. These are meant to be general sport-related affirmations. For example: “I have made great progress this year;” “I am mentally tough;” “I love the challenge of critical situations;” “I focus well under pressure.”

Once you have come up with a number of affirmations, write them down on an index card and repeat them on a regular basis. They should include important aspects of gymnastics that have

meaning for you and can be repeated during practice, in the locker room, during competition, or even in preparing for a specific skill. It is useful to add to or change this list over time.

(2) Develop a list of achievement reminders – Three British sport psychologists, Bull, Albinson, and Shambrook recommend having this second list which speaks to your best previous performances (1996). For example:

“I reached my score goal last week”

“I competed a new skill last meet”

“I qualified for a championship meet”

Don't worry about being modest. This is for your eyes only. Like the personal affirmations list, you can update and change this list as needed. Try to be specific, listing smaller achievements than winning a meet. These are personal, you could list learning new skills or performing routines at a certain quality. List what is personally meaningful for you and feel free to review the list as often as necessary.

(3) Personal pep talks – Recall some of the most useful things a coach or a friend ever said to you about gymnastics or even life. Remember how their words affected you and how you were able to use those words and that support. Repeat them to yourself. Add to the list and develop it. Write it down or just focus on it when you need to.

CHAPTER 3: THINK LIKE A WINNER – COGNITIVE STRATEGY

WHAT IS IT? Cognitive strategy involves the relationship between thoughts and athletic performance. The way you think directly affects feeling and behavior. Even though your best performance often occurs with no conscious thinking (“being in the zone”), this does not happen all the time. Developing these cognitive strategies can help limit distractions and aid performance.

WHY BOTHER? The pressure of gymnastics and competition can lead to self-criticism and negative self-talk especially because of the individual nature of the sport. This will likely affect your performance. It is possible to alter this self-talk in a way that benefits performance.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU: USING SELF TALK. Self-talk is the way one makes perceptions and beliefs conscious. What we say to ourselves can be positive or negative. The first step is making it conscious.

(1) Awareness – First you need to be aware of your inner voice. You may be very conscious of your internal dialogue. If not, pay attention. Recall your best and worst meet and remember what was going through your head during each meet. Many gymnasts find that they do best when they focus on what they're doing (like “extend off the board,” “keep my weight on my toes,” “stay tight in my handstands,” “pull up”) rather than the outcome (“do this routine for a 9.5,” “make finals”). Doing this will not only help the situation at hand, but also help you in future high-pressure or competitive situations by focusing on what you did in those good and bad situations rather than concentrating on their result.

(2) Focus – Certain words can help you regain or sharpen your focus; these words can come from you or from remembering words said to you by your coach, for example, “stretch,” “reach forward to the beam,” “straighten your arms during the cast handstand.” You need to know what works for you.

(3) Building Confidence – Self confidence has to do with your expectation for success, included in this is knowing how you define success. Is it placing in a meet, or the skills you do or reaching the next level in competition? **Self-talk can either boost or undermine your confidence.** Since you can control self-talk, keep it focused on performance not outcome or your sense of self. For example, instead of saying to yourself “don’t go over,” focus on the correction that will lead to you doing the skill correctly like “stay tight and see the landing.” Perhaps when doing a skill you’re scared of instead of saying to yourself “don’t fall,” say, “go for it.”

(4) Changing bad habits – Self-talk can be an aid in correcting technical errors. For example, your vault entry is not working well. Talk yourself through it based on the corrections given to you by your coach. If you’ve been having trouble with your vaults because you’re doing your entry incorrectly, you may say to yourself “arm circle earlier” or “stay hollow.” This is especially helpful right before beginning your vault run because it will ingrain the correction in your mind while doing the vault and prepares you mentally to make the correction. Changing bad habits through self-talk is probably one of the most important training techniques used in the sport.

(5) Taking it up or down – There are many times you want to pump yourself up or cool yourself down. This depends on the competition and your internal state. Certain words like “explode;” “hit it;” or “let’s go” can energize, where words like “focus;” “relax;” and “stay calm” can have a more relaxing effect. Knowing which words have which effects is important because chances are you will not always be in the ideal frame of mind during competition and will want to alter your emotional state.

MODIFYING SELF-TALK. We all have an internal critic. It’s the voice that comes out of nowhere and is negative, critical and seems to want to make you choke. The following techniques will help you deal with internal conflict.

(1) Staying positive is not enough – Staying positive and upbeat is great, but not realistic all the time. It’s a myth to think that you should always be positive and if not, something is wrong. Instead, listen to your inner critic and put it to work for you in a positive way. There are four steps to managing the critic.

Listen without debating – Note what is being said.

Example: “You will never do a good geinger in a meet”

Examine the statement – Use facts, reason and rational thinking.

Example: “The last time I competed a geinger what did I score and how did the skill compare to those I do in practice? What do my geingers look like in practice and how often do I do them? I can improve this skill in meets if I do more in practice, make the corrections I’m asked to and go on every turn I give myself”

What can you learn – Once you have explored the reality of your self-criticism, what can you gain from this?

Example: “The best geingers I’ve done are when I concentrate on good mechanics in my tap swing and not on catching the bar, which I may have a tendency to do in meets.”

What else can I work on – How can I make this a good learning experience?

Example: “By working on this skill I can also improve my tap swing which will help me get my blind changes. This will lead to an overall improvement in my bar routine.”

(2) Reframing – This involves putting a different meaning on the criticism or experience.

For example, you find out that you are within three tenths of the meet leader and you have one routine left. As you step onto the floor you can feel your heart racing, your legs feel weak and you begin to think up worst-case scenarios for the outcome of this routine. Your critic says “Oh no I can’t make my double pike, I am going to screw up and ruin my chances of winning.” Counter this sentiment with “Breathe, focus, let go and just do the tumbling pass like you know how to do it.”

(3) Thought stoppage – This is for a particularly troublesome criticism that keeps coming up. In order to do this you can use verbal (e.g. stop), visual (e.g. look at your coach) or physical (e.g. perform a drill for the particular skill) cues.

CREATING A PLAN. You may already do some of these things well, however, each skill can be further refined and developed. Remember, this manual is just a starting point. After trying some of these cognitive strategies, consider creating a self-improvement plan with a performance enhancement specialist.

CHAPTER 4: IMAGERY TRAINING FOR PRIME PERFORMANCE

WHAT IS IT? Imagery training is the mental practice of a skill or a given task without actually doing it. Imagery training involves more than visualization – it includes other senses as well.

WHY BOTHER? Imagery is a powerful tool when used correctly. It can provide an edge in enhancing physical performance and is useful in both pre-competitive and competitive situations.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. Imagery is probably associated most with Olympic track and field athletes and gymnasts. Imagery training, which is also called “visualization”, is especially useful for skill related performance. These six skills are foundations for using imagery as a part of training.

(1) Practice – Just like developing any new skill, imagery requires practice. It requires commitment and should become a part of daily routine. Fortunately, imagery can be practiced while traveling, during warm-up or during a meet.

(2) Relaxation – Generally, imagery works best when you’re relaxed. When relaxed, you can focus more easily on a positive image. When learning it can help to practice visualization right before you go to sleep at night, because you are likely to be relaxed and able to focus wholly on this task.

(3) Timing and Control – For the most part, imagery is optimal when used in real time. This may be difficult to do at first. Many gymnasts say that when they begin to try to visualize skills or routines they can only see themselves doing the skills poorly or falling. If this happens it is helpful to slow down the images until you can see or feel the skill being done well and then speed it up little by little until you can see it in real-time. Slowing down the images can also be useful to help analyze certain techniques or make specific corrections. Remember that you have control over all these images. So if you have trouble visualizing a skill correctly ask yourself what seems off about it and then concentrate on fixing that aspect of the image, much like you would while practicing your own skills.

(4) Using internal and external perspective – Depending on your own style, you will tend to imagine scenes from inside your self, or from outside as if watching a performance on a screen. It is ideal to be able to do both so try practicing imagery in steps. First, visualize another gymnast doing the skill. Choose someone with a similar body type and style. It could be a famous gymnast who executes the skill perfectly (this may require you to begin in slow motion). Next replace that gymnast with a picture of yourself. In this stage you are looking at yourself performing the same skill as the “role model” gymnast just did. The last step is to place yourself inside your body and see and feel what you would while doing the skill. Pay attention to visual cues, timing and body placement. Being able to use both internal and external perspective is useful because it allows you to translate ideal performance to your own performance. Although you will tend to use one form over another, try to be able to use both internal and external perspective.

(5) Using all five senses – Imagery is more than just visualization, try using your sense of smell, hearing, touch and even taste. It works best when you see what you would see, feel what you would feel, hear what you’d hear and even taste what you would taste. The object is to get the sensation as true-to-life as possible. This means that if you are visualizing for a specific competition, picture yourself in the meet situation in the actual venue in which you’ll be competing. Here are some examples of how to use your senses while visualizing

Smell: take a deep breath and smell the gym

Hearing: hear the murmur of the people in the stands and the announcement of your turn

Touch: feel yourself walk onto the mat, and how it feels under you while you pose for the start of your floor routine. Feel where your arms are positioned coming out of your rebound in your first tumbling pass, where you grab your legs for a double back or place your hands for a twist, feel a tight, aligned opening and then how the floor feels when you land.

Taste: taste the chalk or maybe a sport drink to take one last sip before getting on the equipment.

(6) Triggers – Triggers can be certain words or phrases that call up specific images of performing a skill well. Triggers are often associated with a strong emotion. *For example:* “extend” may be used to explain you position coming off the spring board or “tight” might be to remind you to land strong after a leap. These often come from corrections given to you by your coach. Music can be used in the same way. You can try listening to the same song or verse to get you in the competitive mind-frame. For example, Greg Louganis, a diver, heard music from the musical “The Wiz.” Triggers are very personal, so find what works for you.

Greg Louganis (1995), generally thought of as the greatest diver of all time, visualized each dive. He used visualization when learning new dives and in preparation for meets. He describes seeing a dive in slow motion so he “was able to take the dive apart and memorize it step by step.” So not only is imagery a good competition tool, it also is useful in learning new dives because it helps prepare your mind and can help eliminate the fear stemming from the newness of the dive. It is like a lead-up for your head. This example applies to gymnastics as well. Breaking down and visualizing each skill allows your mind and body to prepare to learn new skills and compete old ones perfectly.

Athletes from a wide range of sports have found imagery to be extremely valuable in enhancing performance. It is important to recognize that it works best when combined with actual practice of the skill; imagery is not a replacement for regular gymnastics practice, but instead, it is enrichment.

Imagery can also be used in a more general fashion. For example, let’s say you’ve been balking a lot. Imagine yourself in practice going for every bar release and every beam series, no matter what they look like. How would that practice feel? What would you learn? Be creative in finding ways to help problems mentally.

Your imagination can have powerful effects in shaping your reality. You may be surprised at how helpful it is to imagine yourself being successful in meet situations that have been difficult in the past. The more you practice and rehearse these skills in your head, the more likely it will affect your actual performance.

USE YOUR BODY. Another aspect of imagery is combining it with “practicing” your skills in slow motion. After you visualize your skill, try pairing that visualization with movements that replicate each skill. For example if you were doing a blind change on bars. Do a back extension on the floor with a spotter so you can turn in slow motion. Lean to your turning side and lift your arm. Paying attention to the timing, body alignment, and placement of your arms and legs, repeat and complete the turn. Place your hand on the floor in “reverse grip”. While you do this it is helpful to visualize what you would see in the skill at the same time. You can also do this in real time. Incorporate corrections that you’ve been given into the slow motion. Slow motion is a very useful tool for both practice and meets. This is a good tool to use with imagery and helps commit movements and positions to muscle memory.

MAKING A PLAN

1. Before starting an imagery program it is important to review the benefits and limitations of imagery. It can be useful, but it is not a magic bullet.
2. It will work best if you are committed and fully integrate imagery into your regular training routine.
3. You may need assistance to help develop, refine and evaluate an imagery-training program.

CHAPTER 5: GOAL SETTING STRATEGIES

WHAT IS IT? Goal setting means achieving a specific level of performance in a certain amount of time. Goals usually focus on improving a measurable skill, such as “I will learn a straddle back to handstand on bars this year” or “I will qualify for Nationals this season” or “I will score 9.5 or better on both of my vaults in the next meet.”

WHY BOTHER? This is a valuable, widely used technique in sport psychology. Goal setting results in a higher level of performance and provides focus, facilitates effort and leads to new skills.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. In general, the following five strategies provide the basis for utilizing goal setting as a way for improving performance.

(1) Challenging yet realistic – Finding the right balance between pushing oneself without setting yourself up for failure. For example, a realistic goal might be “Qualify for Regionals this year.”

(2) Be specific – “I will commit myself to learning two new bar skills I believe I need to be competitive and I will engage in training habits that lead to quality meet performance”

(3) Breaking it down – Use short-term goals as stepping-stones towards long-term goals.

Example: Summer:

Develop a strength and conditioning program

Work on flexibility and imagery

Fall/Preseason: Learn a double layout off of bars and a triple full on floor

Go on every turn – no balking

Bring the skills onto the hard mat and put into routines

Develop meet preparation techniques for use in season

Winter/Competitive Season: Compete double layout and triple full in routine

Visualize my skills once a day

(4) Implement strategies to achieve goals – In order to reach your specific goals you must develop specific skills for achieving them. This can be separated into four separate times of the year:

Summer (club is in training)

Work on flexibility and develop a total body-conditioning program.

Begin to visualize skills, including those you wish to learn in the coming year

Talk to your coach about his/her performance and outcome goals for you

Review basics such as alignment, form, etc

Begin to learn new skills beginning with drills

Fall (preseason)

Continue to visualize new skills and practice them regularly

Deal with issues of fear

Listen to, understand, and execute the corrections given; be coachable

Move the skills into routines if possible to prepare for competition

Winter (club is in season)

Fine tune skills, focusing on alignment and timing

Focus on doing skills consistently in routines

Continue to be coachable

Decide whether or not to compete the new skills; how will you best earn points?

Increase visualization and mental preparation for pressure situations

(5) Chart it – This is absolutely critical and needs to be a part of your daily routine. Become obsessive. For example, use index cards or make a chart. Some gymnasts find it helpful to keep a binder that includes sheets from each meet, long-term and short-term goals, past goals, a new skill log, conditioning log, and any team expectations or team guides that might be provided by a coach. Having all relevant material in one, organized place makes keeping track of goals, progress and successes easier and more fulfilling.

(6) Evaluate – It is crucial to continually evaluate and assess the effectiveness of goals. Goals can change and so evaluating them with input from others, such as coaches, trainers and performance specialists, is important. It is helpful to establish regular meeting times with these individuals for the purpose of evaluating goals. This way you can ensure that your goal remain both challenging and realistic.

SETTING A PLAN

- 1) Before beginning a program it is important to set your goals in writing with input and receive assistance from others.
- 2) Don't do too much all at once. Keep it manageable by starting with one or two goals.
- 3) Take it seriously and make it a part of your training. Regular reevaluation of goals is critical for this to be successful.

CHAPTER 6: COMPETING IN THE ZONE – PART I

WHAT IS IT? Think about those times when you've been "in the zone." It's amazing-as though you can do no wrong. You've probably competed your best when "in the zone." This section is about helping you get into the zone more regularly. Miracles don't happen, but there are things you can do to help move toward a higher level of consistent performance.

WHY BOTHER? Clearly you perform your best when performing at your peak. However, many gymnasts don't realize there are specific mental skills you can use that help you move towards prime performance.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. There are three critical areas for achieving more consistent performance: (1) Developing a consistent pre-competitive routine; (2) keeping your intensity level balanced under pressure; (3) Being aware of your attentional state and the way it affects performance.

PRE-COMPETITIVE PERFORMANCE. Virtually every athlete has had the experience of being in the zone. Research has shown that for most athletes the experience occurs spontaneously and is generally short-lived. Being well prepared every time you go into the gym will set the stage for a consistent, high-level of performance.

(1) Develop a consistent pre-competitive routine – Being prepared eliminates problems and increases the likelihood of success. This involves everything you do the day of the meet from the time you wake up until your first event in the meet.

Your routine will vary depending on whether your competition is towards the beginning or the end of the day and whether it is at home or away. Remember that these routines are not rituals and so they are adaptable; you can adjust them depending on the situation. Unlike routines, rituals are superstitions; they tend to control you and can get in the way of prime performance.

There are three stages in a pre-competitive routine: pre-meet, arrival at the gym, and final preparation. Each phase of your pre-competitive routine should address both physical and mental preparation. The pre-game stage should also address equipment.

PRE-MEET

Equipment – Make a checklist of everything you need for the meet. A possible list could include:

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| Competition leotard | Gym bag |
| Grips | Portable CD player |
| Warm-up suit | Hair ties and glitter |
| Snacks (like sports bars, fruit, and water) | Tape and prewrap |

Physical – What time do you wake up? What do you eat for your first meal? What other obligations do you need to take care of before going to the gym? When is your warm-up? It is important to address all of these obligations and develop as consistent a routine as possible.

Mental – This may involve visualizing all your dives in the meet setting or reviewing your goals for that meet. This also might include talking with your coach or finding time alone. You should know in what mental state you compete best, so begin to get in that frame of mind. Some athletes engage in relaxation, meditation or reviewing or writing in a journal.

ARRIVAL AT THE GYM

What time do you arrive? How much time do you need between arriving at the gym and your warm-up? Are there team meetings or meetings with coaches or the trainer you have to attend before competing?

Equipment – What equipment needs to go with you while you compete? Gather everything and find a place of your own to put your gym bag during the meet. It is useful to choose a space that is easily accessible and gives you your own space to go to during the meet if you so choose. Gather everything you will need and put it there all at once. The equipment may include:

| | | |
|-------|--------------------|---------|
| Grips | Portable CD player | Gym bag |
| Drink | Beam shoes | Tape |

Physical – Do you need to eat something before the meet begins? What will you do to warm up, do you need to do something aerobic or do you just need to stretch? Note if there are any specific skills you need to work on in warm-up, like certain skills, drills, or

landings. Do you need to work with any physical problems or injuries, like taping your wrists or other problem areas? Are you too hot or too cold?

Mental – Become comfortable with your surroundings. Find out how many gymnasts there are in your group and how long you will have between each event. Assess your intensity level. Do you need to increase or decrease it? How is your focus and concentration? Are there any distractions you have control over? If yes, fix them, if no find a way to combat them.

FINAL PREPARATION

This is the time for any fine-tuning. Do you need to do any specific stretching before the meet begins or you get onto the beam? Check to make sure you have your gym bag and you have a place to settle during the meet. Do you need to talk to your coach before the meet begins? How is your focus and concentration? It is necessary to make adjustments on thinking, imagery or relaxation strategies?

Bull, Albinson and Shambrook (1996) divide the final preparation phase into three distinct phases – preparation, focusing and execution. Before discussing these it is important to understand the use of attentional cues since they are used sequentially in each phase.

Attentional cues can be verbal, visual or physical. These concentration cues help you intensify, relax and concentrate. There are no set cues, only unique groups that work differently for each athlete.

Visual cues involve intense focus on something specific in the environment. For example, the beam placement, your team logo, the spring board at vault or even the judges getting into place.

Physical cues require doing something. For example, practicing your beam routine on a line, stretching, walking or jumping, closing your eyes.

Verbal cues are a single word that you repeat silently. For example: relax, focus, power, and get ready.

(1) Preparation phase – Use physical cues to tune in attention. Three clearing breathes to help relax upper body. Occurs during warm-up and before the meet begins. Some gymnasts find listening to music helps sharpen concentration during this time. Think about visualizing routines and doing skills or parts of skills in slow motion.

(2) Focusing phase – Occurs right before you actually do your routine. For gymnasts this has two parts, before you're on the equipment and while you're waiting to salute to the judge. While you wait to do your routine, while another gymnast is going or you're waiting for your name to be announced, visualize one final time. Keep your body in its ideal mental state. Breathe and erase all distractions.

(3) Execution phase – Repeat a positive physical cue. Perform.

You are now standing on the mat and have saluted to the judge. It could be argued that these last few seconds are the most important in the meet. Repeat a cue word such as stretch, stay tight, or go hard; your triggers may be helpful here. Breathe and go.

PART II INTENSITY REGULATION – STAYING COOL UNDER PRESSURE

Intensity is the way your mind and body become energized. How to reach the best intensity level for each prime performance differs for each gymnast. One key goal is to identify an ideal level of intensity and achieve it.

Utilize the Goldilocks principle; find the right amount of intensity, neither too much nor too little. **Over-intensity** is when you get “too up” for the meet. You can feel this affect your body, such as “butterflies,” sweating, hear racing, shaking legs or hands and/or shortness of breathe. You may also find yourself agitated, tense and distracted. This can also involve negative self-talk.

Sport psychologist Jim Taylor (1996) identifies five major causes of **over-intensity**:

1. The demands of the situation
2. Your resources to manage the demands
3. Consequences of the situation
4. The meaning placed on the consequences
5. Recognition of bodily reactions

For example, Joe was competing a skill he had never before done in a meet (demands) and he felt very unsure of his ability to perform it well (resources). He was convinced he would mess up his take-off and fall off the P-Bars (consequences) and this would ruin his chances of placing well (meaning).

Focusing on consequences and exaggerating the meaning of one meet or one skill in a meet can lead to problems with over-intensity. It can be useful to monitor any irrational thinking and modify it in order to keep your perspective.

External social issues, such as the expectations of coaches, other gymnasts, fans, the media, or family can cause overintensity. Worry over meeting the expectations of others can trigger a fear of loss of respect, support or love. Fear of failure that is at times just outside of conscious awareness is common among gymnasts.

Environmental factors also contribute to the intensity level. This involves unexpected or uncontrollable events, for example, quality of the bars, quality of the competition, climate conditions, injury or sickness.

Under-intensity is not as common, but does happen. These are the times when it is difficult to “get up” for the meet. You are dragging and lack your usual energy. This could result from an obvious physical event such as a long commute or sickness. It can also be psychological in nature such as overconfidence, an early sign of over-training and burnout or under-confidence to meet goals.

GETTING TO PRIME INTENSITY. Remember that there is no magical formula for achieving prime intensity. It will be different for each gymnast. Also, each athlete requires

different things in order to reach prime intensity. **Figuring out your best intensity level is the first step.** This requires a close look at what you do before and during the meet. This is done at three levels – **Physical, Thinking and Feeling, and Social and Environmental.** It is important to look at these factors from one of your best and worst meets.

(1) Your physical state – How did you feel before the meet and during the meet? How relaxed were you and how did your body feel? Did this change when you got onto to the equipment?

(2) Thinking and Feeling – What was going on in your heard before and during the meet? What were you feeling? Did this change when the meet started?

(3) Social and Environmental Causes – Were you competing at home or away? Did you have to sleep someplace other than at home the night before? Was your event in the morning or afternoon?

CHANGING YOU INTENSITY LEVEL. To get to your prime intensity level you must focus on three areas – **physical, thinking/feeling, and control.**

PHYSICAL

Breathing – Most of us pay little attention to how we breathe. However, when you're in a high-pressure situation, pay attention to your breathing. When you begin to tense up you begin to take short, shallow breaths. Some athletes even hold their breath without even realizing it. This makes tension worse. To relax, breathing deeply is key because it will loosen you up. It is important to feel your breath go all the way down, deep into your abdomen, fill up and then out slowly through your nose or mouth through tightened lips. This is an easy skill to develop and it works.

Deep muscle relaxation – When you feel yourself tighten up this can bring you down and keep you loose. It will also help you be aware of the tension in your body. This skill involves the progressive tightening and relaxing of all muscle groups throughout your body. This helps you feel the difference between tense and relaxed muscle groups and allows you to loosen in any situation.

Centering – Combine this with deep breathing. This involves standing in a position of strength, as if trying to keep someone from pushing you over. You focus on your center of gravity and your feet against the floor. You use deep breathing by taking in fresh air, exhaling with a key word and relaxing.

THINKING AND FEELING

Guided Imagery – This involves the ability to visualize a peaceful scene, such as the beach or the mountains and really get into the details of it. Music can be used with imagery if it helps you settle down. Gymnasts often choose a certain song or set of songs to play before and during a meet to help guide this.

Thinking Skills – Two important skills are reappraising and key words. Reappraising refers to the consequences and meaning we attach to certain meets or situations. When you evaluate things in a negative or exaggerated fashion, your intensity level tends to shoot up. It is important to carefully evaluate you situation and your performance skills accurately.

Key words – Certain words can be used as triggers or cues to help modify your intensity. The first set of words is for bringing down your intensity, these include: settle down, cool, easy does it, focus, relax, breathe and stay loose. The next set is for pumping up your intensity: explode, get pumped, hustle, aggressive and fire up. Choose which words work best for you or choose your own.

Acceptance – Lets get real. There are times when everyone gets nervous, especially before a competition. A well-known football coach used to ask his players who got nervous before the game. He found that the guys who admitted they had nerves actually played better. The coach said that he actually got more nervous about the players who said they didn't get nervous than those who did. Keep in mind that nerves are a part of the sport and are one way that your body gets pumped and prepared to perform well. These skills are excellent ways to use this energy and channel it to improve your performance.

CONTROL

Satchel Paige, a great baseball player, once said **“If it's outside your control, ain't no use worrying, 'cause it's outside your control. And if it's under your control, ain't no use worrying, 'cause it's under your control.”** Right on Satchel!

Just worry about what you can control. Make a list of the things you can control, such as what you eat, how you handle yourself at the meet, what you do in warm-up, your routines. On the other side make a list of the things you can't control such as judging, temperature of the gym, equipment quality, other gymnasts. Focus on the “control” side of the list.

Unexpected events and unfamiliarity are also outside of your control. It is useful to identify the things that can go wrong prior to or during the meet and develop strategies for handling them. For example a traffic jam gets you to the gym late. How can you shorten your preparation time to fit this situation, while still being effective? It may be useful to make a list of unfamiliar events that could occur and effective strategies for handling them.

When you find your optimal intensity level remember what it feels like and how you got there. This way you will be better able to recreate the feeling for another meet.

PART III – ATTENTIONAL FOCUS

Sport Psychologist Robert Nideffer (1992) believes that playing in the zone and choking are both examples of altered states of consciousness (ASQ).

According to Dr. Nideffer it all depends on the way you focus your attention. An altered state of consciousness occurs when you experience a change in the sense of time, perception of the world or ability to think and remember.

An example of time distortion occurs when seeing an enjoyable movie and being surprised that two hours have gone by. This is known as time compression. A perceptual distortion can occur when dreaming. During the dream, common objects can take on strange qualities, shapes and sizes.

The same thing can happen in gymnastics. When you are performing well in both a meet and practice everything feels more natural, you can complete routines well. When you are not performing well each skill feels out of time and routines feel labored. If you have ever competed “in the zone” or you have choked, you have the ability to alter your state of consciousness.

In order to do this we need to look at four different types of concentration or attentional focus. (Nideffer, 1991)

(1) Broad internal focus – This involves thinking, planning and analyzing. This happens when you are studying the schedule of a meet. You are focused on making sense of a lot of information.

(2) Broad external focus – This happens when you have to look out at what is going on around you. For example, you look into the stands and see people you know and look at other events.

(3) Narrow internal focus – This means rehearsing a performance before you do it. For example, you practice the routine or skill you are about to do in slow motion.

(4) Narrow external focus – This is about reacting or performing. For example you go up in your hurdle and find that you are too far forward, you adjust to the situation and complete the vault.

Typically you constantly move from one attentional focus to another. Playing in the zone happens when you’re immersed in either an external or internal focus of attention. Generally, performing well shifts your attention less frequently. Your focus is more external and you spend little time “in your head.” Athletes often describe the experience as if they’re not thinking, “it just happens.” In contrast, a poor performance often happens when your focus is mostly internal.

When your attentional focus is external performance seems automatic. As a result, you can stay focused on task relevant cues, which allow you to do the task at hand, which is completing one skill at a time. At these times you feel more in control and almost as if you know what will happen next.

When you choke, your focus is probably too much inside your head. Things don’t seem clear, it’s harder to anticipate well, and attention is difficult.

Keep in mind that these categories are not rigid boxes, but places on a continuum. Your goal is to move steadily toward a narrowing, external focus. Even when performing well or in the zone, this is not necessarily your upper limit.

In order to help you move along the continuum toward a narrow external focus, you need to develop ways to stay outside of your head. This involves identifying distractions and refocusing attention. No athlete is able to stay in the zone all or even most of the time. The goal is to help you keep your momentum toward the development of concentration skills and the ability to quiet distractions.

Sport Psychologist Shane Murphy suggests using the “four R’s” when you get distracted: react, relax, reflect, renew. All of this should only take a few moments and can be used in virtually any situation.

REACT – When you make a mistake you get upset with yourself. Don't ignore it, but don't let it become so big that it messes up every aspect of your meet. Allow yourself the emotional reaction, but just keep it in perspective.

RELAX – Use one of the methods described earlier to help you settle down. Keywords, breathing, imagery, centering or muscle relaxation are all useful tools to use.

REFLECT – Figure out what interfered with your performance, and then move on. Talking to your coach in between routines will probably help with this. Ask him or her to give you a correction on the routine you just completed and then give you something to think about for the next routine.

RENEW – Let yourself refocus. Take routines one at a time; concentrate your efforts on the next routine. Imagine yourself getting out of your head and shifting to a narrow, external focus, like before you made the error.

CHAPTER 7: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TEAM BUILDING AND COACHES

THE TEAM

WHAT IS IT? Gymnastics is primarily an individual sport, but chances are you are part of a team. While the team can't help you do a particular skill, it can help your performance by creating a mutually supportive atmosphere. It is important to recognize that your attitude can greatly impact your teammates and theirs can have a strong impact on you. Groups are powerful and the team can influence your performance in both subtle and obvious ways.

WHY BOTHER? The idea of a team in gymnastics is peculiar because the act of competing routines is very individual. There are however, instances when your performance affects team standings in meets, where you are expected to perform as a team, not just as an individual. By learning how groups function, you can better appreciate how the team affects you and how you can use the power of the group to improve your individual performance. For example, competing in a supportive environment, knowing that people are behind you and pulling for you to do your best can help your mental and emotional state. Other gymnasts understand the difficulties of the sport, what causes frustration and how easily things can go wrong. Use their understanding as a source of support.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU. There are many ways to understand groups. The functioning of the group depends on many different factors, such as leadership style, morale and cohesion, social dimensions and success rates.

It is often difficult to have a team mentality during a meet because maximizing your performance may not allow you to encourage or watch your teammates or even help them reach their optimal emotional state 100% of the time. This is OK. Focus on how you can be a part the team before and after meets and at interval times throughout the competition. Team dynamics in practice are crucial to creating a supportive environment; learn from your teammates. Talk about the sport, talk about likes, dislikes and fears. This way you take care of your self, act as a member of the team and contribute to a healthy training and competing atmosphere.

One important area to highlight concerns the roles of different gymnasts on a team and how these affect the team. All groups tend to assign roles to different individuals. There are formal roles based on ability level or age, as well as informal roles. (Carron 1988) Informal roles are important and come about in ways that have more to do with one's personality style rather than ability and technique. For example, informal roles are team clown, team leader, moody gymnast, and perhaps wimp.

According to Dr. Carron, three conditions are necessary in order for there to be a link between individual roles and team effectiveness. These are role clarity, role acceptance and role performance.

Role Clarity – This concerns the extent to which athletes are clear what their formal role is on the team. A lack of clarity can lead to confusion, reduced confidence and increased conflict among coaches and other divers.

Role Acceptance – This is the extent to which athletes are satisfied with their assigned role. It is possible to be clear about your role, yet be unhappy with it.

Perceived Role Performance – This concerns how well athletes are performing their specific roles. Even if one is clear and accepting about their specific role, without adequate performance, overall team cohesion may suffer.

Often times, other team members may be unaware of the unique challenges of a specific role, which can lead to undue criticism. Sports psychologists have found that when individuals on the team have a full appreciation for the demands of different positions or skill levels, they are usually more cohesive. This can be achieved by simply talking more to each other about your specific role.

COACHES

Coaches play an important role in any sport, but especially in gymnastics. Having a good, working relationship with a coach is essential for success in the sport. So much of gymnastics is based on trust. Both in trusting yourself and your coach. Trust is so essential in gymnastics because of the danger and fear involved. When a coach says you are ready to do a new skill, it is essential that you believe him or her. This is also true when your coach corrects your skills; you must believe what is said and be willing to trust it enough that you will try to make the correction. If you do not have a high level of trust with your coach, then think about talking to him or her.

Coaches and gymnasts develop strong bonds and mutual trust and respect. Therefore gymnasts have an extra special resource to use. Your coach will often know your mind and body as well as you do. Having someone this focused on your success and this in tune to your ability is incredibly helpful. Talk to your coach regularly and honestly regarding skill goals, fears, etc. This way both of you are on the same page when it comes to practices and meets.

Also, gymnastics affects life outside of the gym and life outside of the gym affects gymnastics. Some gymnasts find it useful to inform their coach of what's happening in their lives outside the gym. This does not mean you should relate private information, but rather keep him or her

abreast of things like how school is going or whether or not you've been feeling sick. This can increase the level of understanding between coach and gymnast.

THE GYMNASTICS COMMUNITY

In most cases, members of the gymnastics community are mutually supportive. gymnasts and their families recognize the difficulty of the sport and respect the work and dedication that the sport requires. This shared sense of community can provide some comfort during the pressure of competition. It can help to know that if you fall on a skill or balk that it happens to everyone at one time or another and that other gymnasts understand that. In a way, the community surrounding gymnasts can be seen as a secondary team.

So even though gymnastics is primarily an individual sport, it is important to remember to utilize the supportive resources of the coach and the gymnastics community.

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