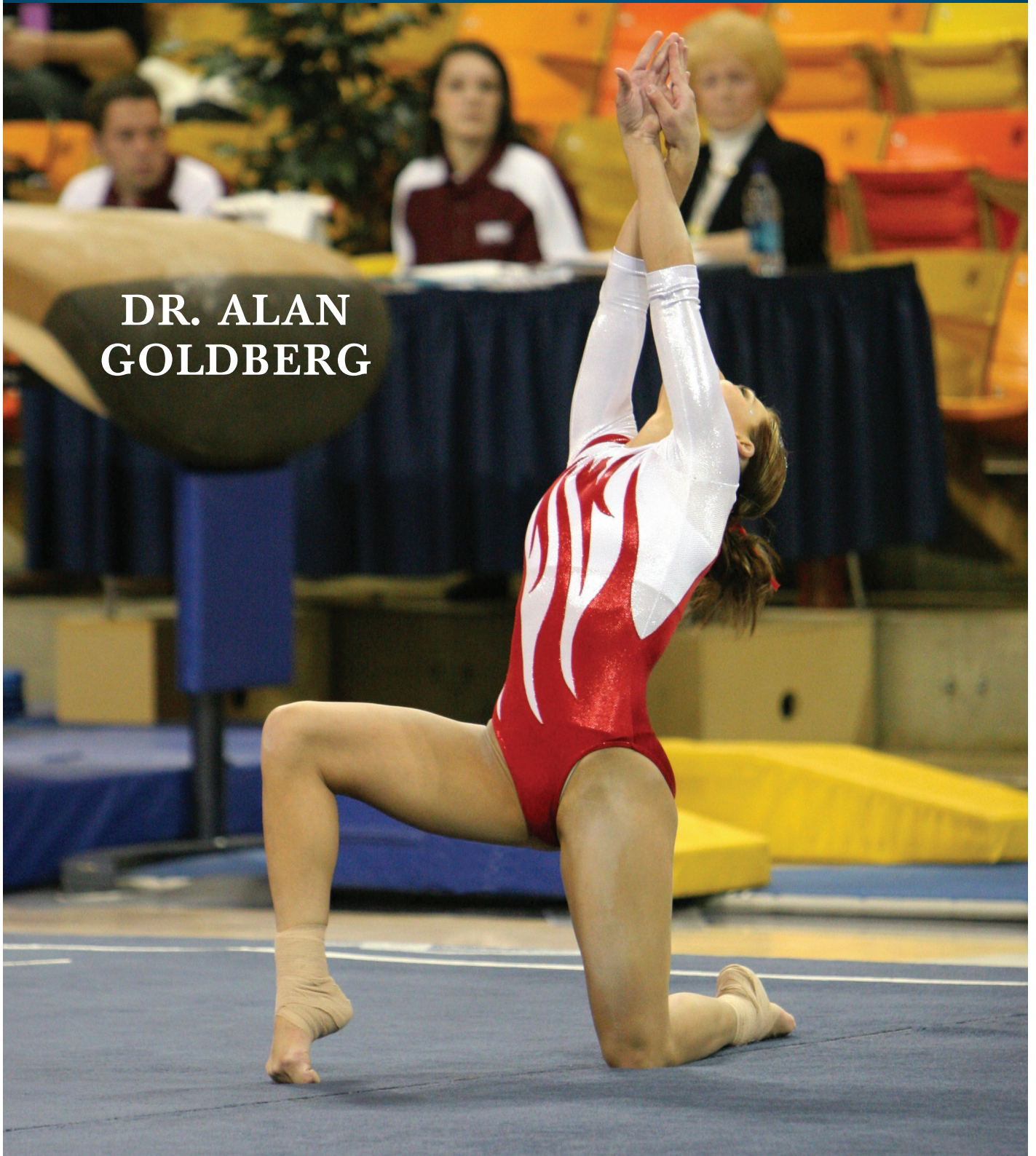


SECOND EDITION

Sticking It

A GYMNAST'S AND COACH'S GUIDE
TO DEVELOPING MENTAL TOUGHNESS

DR. ALAN
GOLDBERG



STICKING IT

**A Gymnast And Coach's Guide
To Overcoming Fears & Blocks
and Developing Mental Toughness**

The Competitive Advantage

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of the Mental Side of Gymnastics

Why Gymnasts Fail to Develop Mental Toughness

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING FEARS & BLOCKS

The Learning Process in Gymnastics

Why Gymnasts Lose Their Skills and Balk

The Four Sources of Danger

Roles On The Parent-Coach-Gymnast "Team"

CHAPTER 2

WHAT EVERY GYMNAST NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT HOW TO MASTER FEAR

Why Traditional Sports Approaches to Sports Fears Don't Work

Knowing the Signs of Nervous System "Activation"

How the Nervous System Works - The Activation-Deactivation Cycle

CHAPTER 3

THE MIND-BODY-PERFORMANCE CONNECTION

Getting to Know Your "Inner Coach"

The G.I.G.O. Factor

CHAPTER 4

USING YOUR BRAIN FOR CHAMPIONSHIP GYMNASTICS PERFORMANCE

Your Brain and Peak Performance

CHAPTER 5

9 STEPS TO MASTERING NEGATIVE THINKING

CHAPTER 6

5 STEPS TO BECOMING A CHAMPION

Step #1 Start With the End in Mind

Guidelines for Winning Goal Setting

Step #2 The Ultimate Secret To Athletic Success

Step #3 Champions BELIEVE in Themselves

Learning to BELIEVE in YOU!

Step #4 Champions Take Risks – The G.O.Y.A. Factor

Step #5 Using Failure as a Stepping Stone to Success

CHAPTER 7

HANDLING THE PRESSURE OF COMPETITION

The Causes of Stress

Reading Your Own Nervousness

Coping With “Bad Nervous”

Pre-meet/pre-event Coping Strategies

Coping With “Not Enough Nervous”

CHAPTER 8

DEVELOPING CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION

The Biggest Mental Mistake Made by Gymnasts and How to Avoid It

Control Your Eyes & Ears for Championship Concentration

Letting Go of Mistakes

Championship Concentration Pre-Event, Pre-Meet

Using Rituals to Develop Winning Concentration

CHAPTER 9

DEVELOPING SELF-CONFIDENCE AND A WINNING ATTITUDE

CHAPTER 10

BIG MEET PREPARATION - USING MENTAL REHEARSAL FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

Imagery Programs Your Peak Performance

Mental Rehearsal Guidelines

Mental Rehearsal Exercises

Making Mastery & Coping Recordings

CHAPTER 11

USING A CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A CHAMPION

The Importance Of The Mental Side

Do you know what it takes to become a champion? Do you know what you need to do in order to go as far and as fast as possible in this sport?...to reach those far off, scary goals?...Ask any successful gymnast, "WHAT IT TAKE TO BECOME A CHAMPION?" and you'll get predictable answers: They'll talk about the long hard hours training, developing and fine tuning their skills, the dedication, the strength and conditioning work necessary, because going as far as possible in this sport requires that YOU HAVE TO PAY YOUR PHYSICAL DUES! There is no substitute for consistent, hard work. You can't just lie around all day spilling Chips Ahoy cookies on your face and expect to reach your potential as a gymnast! YOU HAVE TO WORK ON YOUR STRENGTH, FLEXIBILITY, AND PROPER MECHANICS!

However, when the pressure of competition is turned up high, when you step out onto the floor at States, Regionals or Nationals, your success in gymnastics depends upon a whole other set of skills, your MENTAL ones.

Once you get to that big meet, your physical training and hard work are all in the rear view mirror! The proper technique and skills are engrained in your muscle memory! Your strength, flexibility and conditioning are all set from consistent hard work! At this point, whether you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys is almost completely determined by what goes on between your ears! It's at meet time that the mental dimension of your sport becomes MOST IMPORTANT! It's at meet time that your mental mechanics and technique better match your solid physical mechanics and training base.

STICKING IT

What do I mean by this? Well, there's absolutely no question that if you go into your floor routine, rings or vault with flawed technique, it will hurt your performance. For example, If your rotational speed in the air is too slow or you're not as tight as you need to be, or you lack the required flexibility, then it will throw everything off. Understand that the very same thing is true in relation to the mental side of your gymnastics!

If your mental mechanics are off, for example, if you focus on the wrong things before and/or during a routine, IF YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THE FEAR THAT IS A NORMAL PART OF THIS SPORT, if you allow yourself to get too nervous pre-event, if you concentrate too much on the score that you need to hit or on a difficult skill later in your routine, if you can't handle last minute negative thinking and self-doubts, if you hang onto past mistakes and disappointing events and if you don't believe in yourself, then you will perform just as poorly as if your physical technique was off!

This is something that I see all of the time with the gymnasts who I work with every year. Many are blocked by irrational fears, unable to do skills they've been easily executing for years, some consistently performing much better in practice than they do in meets, some plagued by perfectionism and lacking any real confidence because they are so hard on themselves. Then there are those who are easily intimidated by other competitors. And then there's the gymnasts who struggle handling the pressure of big meets or who are regularly flooded with last minutes doubts and negative thinking!

Every one of these examples points to the tremendous importance of the mental side of your gymnastics. Gymnasts who consistently struggle, who are paralyzed by fears and can't get themselves to do "easy" skills, who choke or otherwise perform below their capabilities, do so because they are unknowingly making some critical mental mistakes either before or during their events! If you want to get the very most out of your training, if you truly want to become a champion, if you want to reach those HUGE goals that you've set for yourself in gymnastics, then you have to begin today to consistently train the mental side of your sport!

You would NEVER leave the physical side of your training to chance! You would never go into a big meet physically unprepared without having done enough repetitions of your routines! So why would you leave such an important dimension as the mental side to chance? Far too many gymnasts do just that! They train physically and then go into those all important meets hoping that they'll perform well!

HOPE JUST WON'T CUT IT!

To become a CHAMPION, you must start to train like one, practicing physically AND mentally. To become a champion and to maximize your physical abilities, you must start to systematically train this mental side, what I call your “inner gymnast,” taking a little bit of time every day to learn to handle competitive pressures, concentrate and block out distractions, master negative thinking and self-doubts, rebound quickly from setbacks and mistakes, develop confidence, handle your fears, avoid psyche-outs and intimidation, and learn to think and act like a winner. These are the mental skills displayed by winners and you can learn them too!

That’s what this book is all about. It is designed to help you not only tackle the mental side of your sport, but to really master it. Everything I’ve written about in this book, I’ve learned from Olympic, Collegiate and elite athletes and coaches across your sport. I’ll be sharing their mental toughness strategies with you. I’ll be helping you recognize and avoid the mental traps that are lying in wait for you at those pressure packed meets. I’ll help you understand where those mysterious performance blocks come from, why you suddenly can’t get yourself to go for easy skills and what you can do to start to turn things around. I’ll teach you effective techniques to stay calm under pressure, focus on what’s important, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, quickly let go of mistakes and disappointments, mentally prepare for those big meets, master last minute negative thinking and doubts, and develop the self-confidence of a winner. TO DEVELOP THE MIND AND MENTAL TOUGHNESS OF A CHAMPION!

Why Gymnasts Fail To Develop Mental Toughness

Before we begin to train the mind of a champion, let’s get a bit of unpleasantness out of the way first. Let me tell you why this workbook won’t “work” for YOU. The biggest mistake that athletes make with their mental training is that they fail to PRACTICE IT PROPERLY. They hear about techniques that help you manage your fears, concentrate like a champion, think like a winner or stay calm under pressure, BUT they FAIL to CONSISTENTLY practice these techniques. If you read this book without taking time to work on the exercises, then you will not get as much out of it as you can. Sure you may learn a few things that might lift your performance up a bit...BUT, if you are really serious about becoming a champion, breaking through those frustrating blocks and taking your gymnastics as far as you can go, then you must take the time to REALLY develop these SKILLS.

STICKING IT

Mental skills are no different than physical skills in that you must practice both in order to excel. If you never practice a full twisting Yurchenko, Bryan, Garrison or Thomas in the gym, then you can't expect yourself to be able to perform them in a big meet situation. Similarly, if you never practice techniques for concentrating and blocking out distractions, you will NOT be able to stay focused under pressure. MENTAL SKILLS MUST BE PRACTICED FIRST IN A NON-STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT BEFORE YOU CAN DEPEND ON THEM TO WORK FOR YOU IN THE HIGH STRESS OF A BIG MEET!

Proper practice means that you must spend time with these on a regular basis. Ten to thirty minutes a day, 3-4 days a week is all that it takes for you to begin to excel mentally in the gym.

Furthermore you MUST be patient. Give yourself enough time with each of these skills to learn them. If you rush through these exercises or get frustrated because they don't work for you right away, then you'll be robbing yourself of the chance to truly get better as a gymnast.

Remember, the best athletes and coaches in and out of gymnastics actively use their mental skills to raise performance to another level. The Russian and Eastern European Gymnasts have always excelled because mental training has been a regular part of their overall development as an athlete. The coaches who consistently produce winners either directly or indirectly integrate this mental dimension heavily into their teaching. They work to teach their gymnasts to be mentally tough. The good news here? YOU CAN DEVELOP AND STRENGTHEN YOUR MENTAL MUSCLES AS WELL WITH CONSISTENT WORK!

Don't Reinvent The Wheel

This workbook is based on an important operating principle of peak performance and success: IF IT'S POSSIBLE FOR ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD TO DO SOMETHING, THEN IT'S POSSIBLE FOR YOU....If someone excels tremendously in this sport then it's possible for you to reach a comparable level of success. All that's missing is the HOW. What I mean by this is that if you can find out the STRATEGIES that successful gymnasts use, i.e. how they train, how they handle pressure, how they deal with bad breaks and setbacks, how they maintain motivation, how they deal with their fears and balking, etc., and if you start to regularly use these strategies, then YOU too can dramatically improve your level of performance!

Now before you jump up and scream that what I'm saying isn't true, save your breath. I KNOW MY OPERATING PRINCIPLE IS A BIG LIE! Just because you study and use all of the training strategies of Olympic gymnasts does not mean that you will be able to perform as good as them. However, the "lie" that I'm presenting to you here as an operating principle is a really good lie to organize your life around.

Let me explain.

If you find out the success strategies of all of the great gymnasts, what they do physically, mentally, how they eat, HOW THEY HANDLE THEIR FEARS AND BLOCKS and you start to practice JUST LIKE THEM, then you will lift your level of performance in the gym a tremendous amount. If you ACT AS IF this principle were true, then you will achieve far more as a gymnast than you would otherwise. DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL. Study the great athletes in this sport and learn from them. If you are real daring, then I suggest that you even call them up and talk to them! That's right, use your phone to help you pick their brains. Most will be more than happy to help you. DON'T TRAIN OR COACH IN A VACUUM. If you are open to learning you will improve quickly and be more successful than if you think you have all the answers. TALK TO, READ ABOUT AND STUDY THE EXPERTS. It's one of the FASTEST ways that you can improve.

Speaking of experts, that's exactly where the exercises in this book come from, the experts! Not me! I've borrowed EVERYTHING in this workbook from great athletes and coaches. All YOU have to do is TAKE ACTION and USE THEM!

So let's get started!

You Have A Super Gymnast Inside

As a gymnast you have tremendous potential. You have hidden resources. YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO DO THINGS THAT YOU NEVER IMAGINED! Now whether you believe this or not, it's true. Motivational speakers across the country throw around statistics like, "you only realize 5 % of your potential" or "you have 50 times more ability than you think you do". Personally, I have no idea how much of your potential you're using or if you have 20, 40, or 50 times more ability than you think. What I do KNOW from my work with athletes and other performers outside of sports is that you are NOT operating on all of your cylinders! You do NOT know what your limits are, nor how much you can achieve.

STICKING IT

I've seen the impossible accomplished too many times to really believe that most limits can't be broken. Roger Bannister's sub-four minute mile blew the lid off that impossible back in "54". Track & Field star Mike Powell broke Bob Beamon's long jump record, another impossible. A kid named Dick Fosbury set a world record and won a gold medal at the "68" Mexico City Olympics by going over the high jump bar backwards! Carol Johnston, a collegiate gymnast from Cal State Fullerton got 2 second place finishes on the final floor at the NCAA Championships and only had one arm! Jim Abbott, pitching phenom for the N.Y. Yankees didn't have a right hand! And Erik Weihenmayer, a blind mountain climber summited Mt. Everest and many of the other highest mountains in the world. The wonders of your limitless ability are all around you.

There is little that you cannot achieve if you have the right STRATEGIES, are MOTIVATED to succeed and are PERSISTENT. The only REAL limits that exist out there are the ones that you have in your mind. When you overcome those inner limits then you'll start doing the impossible.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING FEARS AND BLOCKS

One of the key issues which we will tackle first, an issue that is such a critically important part of your sport, is FEAR! Becoming a champion and going as far as possible as a gymnast requires that you learn to really understand and work with your FEAR. Part of this involves learning to change your relationship with this emotion. Far too many gymnasts mistakenly believe that fear is their enemy. They worry about balking, mysteriously losing their skills or getting too nervous to perform their best. FEAR, HOWEVER IS NOT YOUR ENEMY! On the contrary! If you want to go as far as possible, if you have dreams in gymnastics that you really want to achieve, then you can't reach them WITHOUT FEAR!

Why Gymnasts Suddenly Lose Their Skills

I get tons of calls each month from gymnasts at almost every level who have been struggling with various skills. They suddenly can't go backwards on beam or do their series without stopping in between skills, they're afraid to do a release move on bars, their giants freak them out, they can't tumble backwards anymore without balking before their tuck or layout, they've had to downgrade their vault because they can no longer get themselves to go for the one they've been easily doing for well over a year, or for some mysterious reason, they find themselves slowing down on the vault runway before they hit the vault table!

I don't know how you relate to these issues or if you have your own personal examples, but I do know that FEAR and its' often times disruptive effects are a common, constant training companion for a lot of gymnasts. Not being able to do skills that you know you can do, or feeling like no matter what you try, you can't get your body to just do it, can drive an athlete to distraction, the

frustration from this frequently killing your confidence and love of the sport and making you seriously question why you do gymnastics at all!

When you start struggling with fear, or for some mysterious reason, can't stop yourself from balking, it can touch off a self-maintaining cycle in you, your coaches and parents which will only makes the problem progressively worse.

Here's how it works:

When you lose a simple skill or start struggling with what you think is an unreasonable fear, you get super angry, impatient and frustrated with yourself. Your coaches may also get really impatient and frustrated with you because you're not just simply going for it. And then your parents, in wanting to help, might get concerned and even frustrated about all of this and just want you to get unstuck. "You know how to do it! Just do it!" Unfortunately all of these reactions, from inside of you and from those around you, just put that much more pressure on you, get you physically tighter and more distracted. When this happens, it will insure that your problem will not only continue, but will get even worse. When this happens, everyone's anger and frustration increases even more, and then things really go downhill fast!

Let's see if we can short-circuit this negative cycle by helping you understand where your performance blocks and fears comes from, and then teach you what you can do about it.

Fear is a Normal and Important Part of This Sport

So let's start with something very basic here. FEAR IS A NORMAL AND INTEGRAL PART OF YOUR GYMNASTICS! What this means is that you can't really do the sport without experiencing fear. Sooner or later in your gymnastics career, the fear may become overwhelming and you may find yourself balking and stuck. If that happens, that's normal!

Don't ever let anyone tell you that there's something wrong with you for being afraid and not being able to go! Don't let anyone ever tell you that periodically getting stuck and balking is abnormal and means there's something wrong with you BECAUSE IT DOESN'T! FEAR IS NORMAL. FEARS & BALKING HAPPEN!

As you progress through the levels and tackle new, more demanding skills, you will get afraid. You may get stuck. That's just gymnastics!

Gymnastics is very different than almost every other sport out there because of this fear element. Part of the reason for this fear is the nature of your sport. There are very few sports out there which demand that you train yourself to over-ride your body's natural response to doing things that defy gravity. What I'm saying here is that the human body was not designed to run at full speed, flip backwards into the air, doing a double sommi and a twist or two and then land on your feet. When the human body starts going backwards, seemingly out of control, our mammalian brain and nervous system immediately goes into a danger response. We feel fear and this triggers a natural self-protective response to try to stop this out of control movement and feeling. Gymnasts have to learn to continually override their natural fear and self-protective responses to stop.

The Learning Process in Gymnastics

The other factor that contributes to your fears and blocks in gymnastics has to do with the LEARNING PROCESS. That is, we all learn things, especially physical skills by making mistakes and failing. In fact, you can't really master anything unless you are willing to make ENOUGH MISTAKES! For example, depending upon the skill, it may take you several hundred attempts doing a new skill wrong, before your body learns how to do it right! And this is totally normal!

And while I'm on this topic of learning processes, let me tell you something else that's normal. Every gymnast has their very own unique learning pattern. Some athletes pick up new skills immediately, throw them with almost no hesitation and then have that skill for life. Of course, everyone would love to have this particular learning style. Other gymnasts take a very long time to learn new skills, often times months, and then when they finally get their skill, they have it. Still other gymnasts learn a new skill, lose it shortly after, get it back again, lose it and then finally get it back for good. While this may seem frustrating, this learning pattern is present with every skill this gymnast learns over the course of his/her career.

This is why COMPARING YOURSELF TO OTHER TEAMMATES WHEN YOU STRUGGLE IS SO DESTRUCTIVE!

If your learning pattern is that it usually takes you a very long time before you get something, then allow yourself this time. Stop wishing you were someone else and could do it faster. This kind of self-directed unhappiness, frustration and impatience will only interfere with your learning new skills and getting back your old ones!

STICKING IT

Now the ultimate model for mastering any skill is something you learned naturally long ago when you were just a baby and took your first few tentative steps towards walking. I don't know if you've ever seen a young child as they begin this process....but they first pull themselves up to a standing position, holding onto a chair or coffee table. They may bounce on their little legs, look at the world for the very first time from this upright perspective and then let go. What happens next is predictable. They don't yet know how to balance themselves so they fall on their butt! And This process gets repeated over and over again until the baby is actually able to stand and balance him/herself.

And then they take their very first step forward and, WHAMM! They fall on their butt! This process gets repeated over and over and over again. And sometimes, when the baby falls, the WHAMM is soft and they get back up smiling and giggling. At other times, their chin hits the coffee table on the way down and the baby gets up screaming! In either case, the baby continues to get up and keep trying. Each time the baby falls, it's learning valuable information about balance, how to hold it's upper body and coordinate it with the lower body, how to use the knees and ankles, how to coordinate the movement from left side to right, etc. Without falling enough, the baby could never learn to walk.

And this is how we learn anything: By messing up! Falling helps us and our bodies figure out what we did that didn't work and what we may have to try differently next time.

Now in most sports, this learning process is not a problem. If you play basketball, soccer, softball, baseball, swimming, etc., when you make a mistake or fail in the learning process, there are little to no negative consequences. Sure you might feel stupid, embarrassed or maybe a little frustrated, but there's not much else that can happen when you make mistakes in these sports. However, when you make a mistake learning a fly away, or double back or Yeager, at best you can fall and maybe only get the wind knocked out of you, or perhaps scare yourself badly without getting hurt, or at worst, you can really bruise yourself up or get injured to the point where you may have to be out of the gym for a while!

What I'm saying here is obvious. Gymnastics is not easy and there's always a risk of injury in the learning process. Now I don't say this to freak you out. I say this because I want you to have a healthy respect for yourself for having the courage to take on this sport. Whether you get this message or not from your

coaches, IT TAKES A TON OF COURAGE TO DO GYMNASTICS BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO ORGANIZE YOUR LIFE AROUND MOVING TOWARDS YOUR FEARS!

Most normal human beings organize their lives in the exact opposite direction, TO AVOID THEIR FEARS. But at every level in this sport, where you are challenged to learn new and more difficult skills, you have to move towards your fears. This is NOT easy! So if you're currently beating up on yourself because you're blocked by fears, BACK DOWN! Cut yourself some slack! EVEN If you're really scared right now, you have to have a ton of courage to be a gymnast! So put that stick away that you've been using to beat yourself up and instead, start patting yourself on the back!

To sum, because the only real way to learn is by making mistakes, the learning process in gymnastics is one of the things that makes the sport so very difficult! Making mistakes in the gym can sometimes come with scary experiences and that's why fear is so normal to the learning process!

Why Gymnasts Balk

How is it possible that you can have mastered a skill, have been doing it comfortably for years, and then, suddenly, you can't get your body to go for it, to do what it already knows how to?

Far too many coaches and gymnasts out there mistakenly believe that when a gymnast develops these unreasonable fears and suddenly can't get themselves to go for a basic skill, that they are a "head case," that they're weak mentally, aren't trying hard enough, don't care or just don't want it badly enough!

IF YOU'RE STUCK RIGHT NOW BECAUSE OF FEARS, AND YOU CAN'T GET YOURSELF TO GO FOR SKILLS THAT YOU'VE ALREADY MASTERED, UNDERSTAND THAT THIS HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU BEING A HEADCASE! This is actually NOT about your mind at all! It's about your BIOLOGY!

Let me explain:

You are an animal, of the class MAMMAL to be specific, and despite our highly developed thinking brain which puts us right at the top of the animal kingdom, when push comes to shove and we are in danger, it's our natural mammalian biology that takes over and runs the show, NOT our thinking brain.

What does this really mean?

Well the most important thing to mammals is not doing a double back, a giant, a back handspring or your series. Mammals don't give a hill of beans about any of these! Mammals only care about one thing: SURVIVAL! And our nervous system, our brain and all of our senses, (sight, hearing, smell, feel, etc.) are organized around keeping us safe! When our nervous system senses any kind of danger in our environment, whether physical or emotional, it will automatically jump into the "RED ZONE" with adrenaline flowing into our body, increased heart rate, faster, shallower breathing, tighter muscles and other physiological changes. As a result, we then instinctively respond with self-protective motor programs, i.e. FIGHT or FLIGHT, the most powerful reflexes we have in our body.

Here's how it works: A deer is feeding in the wild. It's nervous system is at a zero calm. Suddenly the deer hears a new sound in its' environment that wasn't there a few seconds before. Instantly the deer's nervous system goes into over-drive. It's heart rate accelerates, muscles tighten, breathing speeds up and it gets ready to protect itself by fleeing, because deer aren't much into fighting. Then the deer will "orient" or check out the environment to see if that sound it just heard means that there's a threat or not. If the deer discovers that what it heard was simply another deer coming into the clearing, then its' nervous system will immediately return to a zero calm and it can go back to feeding.

Let's just say that after a few more minutes, the deer catches an unexpected movement out of the corner of its' eyes and once again, its' nervous system ramps up into the red zone. It will again automatically orient and, when it does, it discovers that the movement it picked up was simply two squirrels running thru the leaves. The deer's nervous system will then immediately return back to that zero calm and it will continue feeding.

Suppose that later, the deer suddenly senses an unfamiliar scent in the environment. Again its' nervous system will jump up into the red zone and after it orients, the deer discovers that indeed this new smell is a source of danger, a predator! It's nervous system will then stay in that high energy state of that red zone, and then it will instinctively channel all of that energy into protecting itself by fleeing. Should the deer successfully escape, the deer's nervous system will then once again return to a zero calm and it will go about its' business as if nothing had ever happened.

Our nervous system is like that deer's in many ways, but we have trouble returning our nervous systems back to a zero calm. Here's why: Remember what I said about the learning process in gymnastics? Learning is all about making mistakes. However, whenever you mess up in the gym, you have the potential to either get hurt or, at the very least, freak yourself out with a scary near miss or hard fall. The way our bodies and nervous systems work is that we instantly memorize these kinds of upsetting experiences: Anything that is physically or emotionally upsetting to you like a bad fall, an injury, getting scared, seeing someone else in the gym fall or being embarrassed or humiliated by a coach.

When these upsetting events happen, it doesn't much matter what people around you watching may think about how bad a fall or an experience it was for you. It only matters what YOU think. So, sometimes you can have what looks like an insignificant event happen, maybe getting lost in the middle of a double back and landing harmlessly on your back. Maybe the worst that happens is you get the wind knocked out of you. BUT, the feeling of being lost going backwards totally freaks YOU out, and this experience gets registered in your brain and body as a trauma. It doesn't matter if the coach who was watching says to you, "You're fine, no big deal! Get up and do another!" because to you, it was a VERY BIG DEAL!

Each time that you have one of these scary or upsetting experiences happen, (and these can also include scary or upsetting events outside of the gym), you fall, bang yourself up or see one of your teammates do the same, your brain and body memorize the experience, all the images, sounds, emotions, feelings and negative thinking that go with it. These memories will then stay in your body and nervous system, out of awareness for months and even years. When other, similarly upsetting things happen, those memories will get stacked on top of the original ones. In fact, often times when upsetting things happen outside of the gym, those will get registered as well.

At some point in the future, when you're either under pressure because you're moving up to the next level or the meet season is fast approaching and you've got to get your skills back, OR, you're in any way reminded of these original experiences, (these reminders are usually out of your awareness, like a coach yelling at you, having to run fast or go backwards), then all of a sudden, components from the original upsetting experience get activated (images, emotions, physical tension, fear, scared and negative thinking), and bubble up into your consciousness. Suddenly you start feeling unsafe inside and in danger.

STICKING IT

This doesn't mean that you're thinking about the original upsetting events. You're just feeling a sense of danger or lack of confidence inside AS IF it's about to happen all over again!

When this occurs, biology takes over. Your nervous system, like the deer's, senses danger, but for you, the gymnast, the danger is really coming from INSIDE of you. When this happens you will automatically click into self-protective response.

Here's the problem though. When you're on beam getting ready to do a back handspring or on floor, about to begin a back tumbling pass, you can't really fight or flee. So when any mammal is in danger and its' self-protective options of fight/flight are blocked, there is a third, default survival option, THE IMMOBILITY or FREEZE RESPONSE that reflexively clicks in. You freeze, blank out and it feels like you can't get your body to do what it already knows how to do! This is your nervous system's attempt to keep you safe in the face of danger.

Now it doesn't much matter if you have the best back handspring in the gym. It doesn't matter if your teammates, coaches and parents reassure you that you can do this. It doesn't matter if you try to stay positive and tell yourself over and over again that "you can do this!" It doesn't matter if your coaches threaten you to "go or else!" Your nervous system, in sensing danger, freezes you to keep you safe. When this happens, your survival reflex of freeze easily trumps or over-rides your trained performance skills: End result: YOU BALK!

When you are stuck and unable to get your body to do what it already knows how to do, it's mainly because you don't feel safe inside. This is the REAL cause of your balking, because the inner danger you feel automatically triggers your self-protective response of freeze.

You're NOT, not going because you're "a head case!" You're NOT, not going because "you're not trying hard enough!" You're NOT, not going because "you don't want it bad enough" or "you don't really care!" I have never met a gymnast who would knowingly bring all of this frustration down upon themselves on purpose. What your coaches have been telling you about you and why you're not going is most often a product of their own frustrations, NOT YOU. You're NOT going because your nervous system is sensing danger and doing its job, protecting you and stopping you from getting hurt.

A Feeling of Inner Danger Causes Balking

Now you can tell yourself, “But I have no reason to be afraid!” “I have the best back walkover, back handspring, giant or Yurchenko in the gym!” Understand that it absolutely doesn’t matter what you consciously tell yourself. Positive self-talk or positive thinking from you or others will rarely, if ever calm your nervous system down. Why? Because your nervous system regularly confuses what is, right NOW, with what things feel like from the PAST. So today, you may have healed from that fall, injury or scary close call. You may be stronger and more capable than ever. But to your nervous system, the instant you raise your arms to go backwards, it FEELS JUST LIKE you’re about to get hurt again, just like you did several months or even a year or two ago!

Your nervous system regularly confuses what is TODAY, with what things feel like from the PAST!

The Four Sources of Inner Danger

#1 – Accumulation of past upsets

First, we have said that the inner danger that feeds your balking is a result of the accumulation of past upsetting experiences: i.e. Close calls, scary falls, injuries or seeing others in the gym or at meets getting hurt. Some of these upsets can have absolutely nothing to do with gymnastics like car accidents, family stressors like a divorce, etc.

#2 – Coaches responses to your being stuck

Second, this inner danger comes from how your COACHES respond towards you when you’re stuck.

If your COACHES get angry and impatient with you because you’re not going for it, if they express their frustration with you in front of the rest of the team, if they punish you or threaten you with negative consequences should you keep balking, i.e. “We’re going to move you back a level if you don’t get this right now!”, if they embarrass or humiliate you for not going, if they kick you out of the gym when you balk, then you will feel even less safe and get more stuck!

Gymnastics is the kind of sport where you REALLY need to be able to trust and depend upon your coaches to keep you safe. If they become emotionally demeaning, angry or frustrated, then you will not feel safe, and when that happens, you will become even more stuck and unable to go. Far too many

coaches in this situation, accuse the gymnast of not trying hard enough, not listening, not caring enough or just trying to get attention. Coaches who say these kinds of things are FLAT OUT WRONG!

Why?

YOU DO NOT HAVE CONTROL OVER YOUR BALKING. You are not doing this on purpose! Your “not going” is a product of your nervous system sensing danger and automatically shutting you down. Your survival reflex of freeze then easily trumps your trained performance skills which is exactly why you can’t get yourself to go for it! Your being stuck has absolutely nothing to do with your attitude, commitment, work ethic, desire or whether you’re trying hard enough!

The other complicating factor here with coaches is that when you start balking on a skill you’ve had for months, many refuse to spot you. They may tell you that you don’t need it or that this is “regressive” and they don’t want you to get dependent upon a spot when you didn’t need one before! THIS IS MOST UNFORTUNATE, BECAUSE SPOTTING WILL ALMOST ALWAYS HELP YOU BEGIN TO FEEL SAFE AGAIN. Spotting will help calm your nervous system down and convince it that things are actually safer now.

What you most need from your coaches when you’re afraid is their patience, support and encouragement, NOT threats, anger, impatience and demeaning comments. You need them to understand that your fear is normal. You need them to be kind to you! This is how GOOD coaches approach these issues. If your coaches aren’t doing this, then you may want to seriously consider changing gyms. It is NOT your fault that you’re stuck!

#3 - Parents and their reaction to your fears & balking

Third, inner danger can come from your PARENTS because of how they respond to your gymnastics as a whole, and to your fears, frustrations and blocks in particular.

One of the most important things for us when we’re younger is to make our parents happy and proud. When we do so, all feels right in the world and we feel that we have our parents love. This makes us feel very safe and secure. However, when we start to struggle, performance-wise, when we fail, when we’re suddenly plagued by fears and blocks, and unable to get ourselves to go, then we begin to feel, rightly or wrongly that we are frustrating and disappointing both mom and dad.

As a result, when we go to gym practice or to a meet, we feel that there's now a lot more at stake for us than simply getting over our fears, throwing our skills or getting a specific score. Now what is at stake is our "lovability" in the eyes of mom and dad. "If I stay stuck today, then mom and dad will be disappointed and unhappy with me, and when that happens, they might not love me as much!" While you might not consciously be thinking about this, this very powerful dynamic operates with a lot of stuck gymnasts, leaving them feeling that much more unsafe and stuck.

Most loving parents will have a really hard time watching you suffer in the gym. All they really want for you is to be happy and successful. When they watch your frustration and struggles, most parents really want to help. Although their heart may be in the right place, often times their "help" ends up making you feel even more pressure. Parents may be totally confused why you can't get yourself to do skills that you once used to easily do. They may even get frustrated with your inability to talk about these things on the car ride to and from the gym. Like your coaches, your parents may even make assumptions that you're not trying hard enough, don't want it badly enough or secretly want to quit the sport, but you just can't tell them!

Some parents may even directly pressure you to go, letting their own frustrations get in the way and threatening punishments if you don't get your skills back. This so-called "tough love" approach NEVER works and will REALLY make things that much worse for you, and them, putting a terrible strain on your relationship. In an attempt to be helpful, your parents may offer you suggestions and tips to get you unstuck. Unfortunately, if you're like most gymnasts, this kind of help also makes you feel that much worse!

What's important for you and your parents to keep in mind is that your gymnastics belongs to YOU. You are doing it because YOU love it. You're doing it because it makes YOU happy. You're doing it because YOU have your own personal goals in the sport.

You should NEVER do gymnastics to make others happy or proud of you. You shouldn't be doing gymnastics to get your parents love and approval. Loving parents do NOT tie their son or daughter's self-worth and lovability to how they perform in the gym. Loving parents don't expect a return on their "investment" of time, money and energy. Loving parents invest all of their time, money and energy into your sport because this is what loving parents do, NO STRINGS ATTACHED! Loving parents make it easy for you to do this sport, because they love you and they want you to be happy!

#4 - Perfectionism & How You Treat Yourself for Being Fearful and Stuck

Fourth, the internal danger that you feel comes directly from YOU, your PERFECTIONISM and how you treat yourself as you struggle with your fears and blocks.

Most gymnasts are PERFECTIONISTS. That is, they continually strive to be perfect, to always get everything just right. Now you may believe that this is a good thing, to strive to be the very best that you can be, and in a sense, this is half true. Always trying to be perfect can be good, because you're never satisfied with what you do and you always try to make yourself better! However, your perfectionism can also work against you and can become one of the BIGGEST OBSTACLES HOLDING YOU BACK right now and keeping you fearful, stuck and balking!

How, you may wonder?

Well, when a perfectionist "fails," when his/her performance doesn't measure up in their mind, then they ruthlessly turn on themselves, getting angry, frustrated and impatient with themselves. I see this all the time with gymnasts who have lost their skills and continue to balk. They get frustrated. They get angry! They put themselves down. They compare themselves to others in a negative way. They wouldn't even treat a total stranger as badly as they treat themselves! As a result, they spend most practices unhappy with themselves and in tears. Gymnastics stops being fun when you get down on yourself in this way....And guess what? When you stop having fun in the gym, you'll go nowhere fast! If you're not having fun, you will continue to struggle!

Understand this: Getting angry and frustrated with yourself will not motivate you. It won't build your confidence. It won't make it easier for you to go for your skills! What it will do is MAKE YOU FEEL EVEN MORE UNSAFE INSIDE and, therefore, will make you MORE STUCK!

Starting TODAY, you have to learn to be a better "INNER COACH" to yourself. You have to learn to forgive yourself for being afraid and being stuck! You're not doing this on purpose! You have to learn to start being kind to and patient with yourself. When you are too afraid to go, you need to be supportive and understanding, the way you'd be if your best friend were struggling JUST THE WAY YOU ARE RIGHT NOW! What might you say to him/her? "OK, that's all right. You'll try it again tomorrow!" And if tomorrow, you're still too afraid to go, "no worries, We'll let your nervous system take as much time as it needs

to calm down until you feel safer! And then, eventually, you'll get all of your skills back!" Simply put, You have to drop the anger, frustration and impatience because this is one of the main things that's keeping you scared and stuck in FREEZE!

Please understand that I am not asking you to "think positive" and tell yourself "You can do this!" and "You've done it tons of times before so I know you can do it now!" because both you and I know that you've already tried telling yourself this stuff hundreds of times before and it NEVER WORKS! What I am asking you to practice doing with yourself is what a really good coach would do with you. Being patient, supportive, encouraging and allowing you to back up and work with a spot or work on lead-ups or less scary versions of the skill until you feel safer! Accept the fear. It's normal. Eventually when you drop your frustration and self-directed anger, you'll find that you start to relax and you'll begin to move forward again!

Now you probably know that learning to be a better "inner coach" to yourself is a whole lot easier said than done! The perfectionistic part of you will not make this easy for you. However, if you REALLY want to get unstuck, if you really want to overcome your fears, then this is YOUR VERY FIRST IMPORTANT STEP! It will take a lot of work and practice on your part! Begin by paying attention to how you've been "coaching" yourself whenever you've been fearful or balking in the gym. Learn to become aware when you are not a very good INNER COACH! The very first step in changing bad mental technique is that you must become aware of what you're doing wrong!

Notice when you're angry, impatient and/or frustrated with yourself and then practice being kinder, more understanding and forgiving. Maybe you even know a coach from the past who has treated you this way before, who has modeled this kind of behavior. Practice being like this coach to yourself. If you do this, you will find that things will begin to get a little easier for you. You will relax more in practice, start having more fun and begin to do better. MOST IMPORTANT: YOU WILL START FEELING SAFER INSIDE! And ONLY THEN will you begin to move thru your block.

Roles on the Parent-Coach-Gymnast "Team"

If you're worried that if you don't get your skills back, then your parents will be angry and upset with you, then you will get even more stuck! While we're on this topic, I'd like to help you understand the proper role that your parents should play in relation to your gymnastics. In order for you to go as far as pos-

sible in this sport, to be happy and successful, your mom and dad have very specific jobs that they need to fill on the Parent-Gymnast-Coach team. As you read this section, I invite you to have both your parents share it with you!

For you to be happy in this sport and have a chance to turn your gymnastics dreams into a reality, then you need to have a solid team behind you. What I call the Parent-Coach-Gymnast team. Each member of the team has a very important role to play. In order for the team to be successful and for you to have a rewarding and fulfilling experience in the gym, then everyone must “play” their proper role! However, when someone steps out of their role, for example when parents start trying to do the coach’s role, then the end result of this will be heartache for the gymnast and his/her parents and major performance problems!

Gymnast’s Role

THE GYMNAST’S ROLE IS TO HAVE FUN PRACTICING AND COMPETING, BE COACHABLE, DO YOUR VERY BEST THAT DAY AND TO BE KIND AND PATIENT WITH YOURSELF THROUGH THE LEARNING PROCESS.

Your role as the gymnast is pretty obvious. You need to love your sport, have fun practicing and competing, consistently go to practice, work hard, be coachable, do your very best given how you feel physically and emotionally that day, (NO-ONE can always be at their very best!), be a good sport, be a good teammate and someone who supports everyone else on the team, allow yourself to make mistakes and fail so that you can learn properly, work on your weaknesses and fears, be kind and patient with yourself through this process, etc.

Coach’s Role

THE COACH’S MAIN JOB IN THE GYM IS TO CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY FOR GYMNASTS TO LEARN AND EXCEL!

Your coaches’ jobs might be obvious to you as well, or not. Their MAIN job is to create a safe environment, emotionally and physically for you to learn and excel. They should be demanding in that they teach you the value of hard work and the pursuit of excellence, BUT NEVER DEMEANING.

Good Coaches Build Their Gymnasts Up Rather Than Tear Them Down.

Good coaches are KIND and PATIENT! When you struggle performance-wise or fail, they are there to support you and help you constructively grow from your failures. They don't make you feel guilty or play head games with you! They don't embarrass or humiliate you. They don't punish you for having problems in the gym! Good coaches don't ignore you when you are struggling! Good coaches teach you to regularly, GET COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE. That is, they teach you to move towards and challenge your fears and limitations, to regularly step outside of your comfort zone, and they do this with caring and sensitivity! And of course, good coaches teach the sport. They teach you proper technique, critique your mistakes and failures and provide you with the constructive feedback necessary for you to grow as an athlete.

Good coaches know that their relationship with you, the gymnast is their main teaching tool, so they make sure that whatever they say or do with you is always done in the context of this caring, respectful relationship. This means that they are honest and trustworthy with you and "walk the talk." That is, their actions match their words. Good coaches know that their job far transcends simply teaching you gymnastics skills, and that they are really teaching you how to be a good human being in the world.

Parents' Role

THE PARENT'S ROLE IS TO BE SUPPORTIVE, LOVING THEIR CHILD UNCONDITIONALLY, AND TO NOT COACH!

Your parents' job on the team is the MOST IMPORTANT one! Depending upon how well they carry out their role, parents can make or break your gymnastics experience. A parent's job is first and foremost, TO BE SUPPORTIVE. To be YOUR BEST FAN. This means that they are there for you emotionally whenever you do well and especially there for you when you struggle.

An important part of this parental support is to LOVE YOU UNCONDITIONALLY, in a way that has absolutely nothing to do with gymnastics or how well you're doing! This means that they don't tie your lovability and self-worth with how well you're doing in the gym or at a meet. Their job is to love and respect you just because you are their child and you're who you are. When your parents do this, you, as their son or daughter will feel much safer inside, and, as

we've been discussing, when you feel safer, you will begin to move through your performance block!

PARENTS HAVE TWO MAIN JOBS IF THEY WANT THEIR GYMNASTS TO BE HAPPY AND SUCCESSFUL:

#1 BE UNCONDITIONALLY LOVING AND SUPPORTIVE

#2 TO NOT COACH

Equally important for your parents to know, if they really want you to go as far as possible in this sport, be a peak performer and be as happy as you can be, is that their other important job is to NOT COACH! That's right! Your parents' job is to not "coach" you. This means that they shouldn't be offering you advice or suggestions before you head off to practice. They shouldn't be critiquing your performances after practice or meets on the car ride home! NEVER! They shouldn't be telling you everything that you did wrong or what you need to work on to improve. They shouldn't try to motivate you before practice or meets, or force you to do extra work or cross training at home. These jobs all belong to the coach, and parents who get into coaching in this way put excessive pressure on their kids, make them feel less safe inside and create serious unhappiness and performance problems!

Remember, I encourage you to share what I'm saying right now with your mom and dad. Most parents who push their kids, or try to coach them before and after practice or meets really mean well. They want you to be happy and successful. Their hearts are in the right place. However, they just don't realize that what they're doing with you when they take on this coaching role is having the exact opposite effect of what they may have intended! The parents JOB is to NOT COACH and while they may intend to help, this kind of coaching behaviors from parents NEVER HELPS!

CHAPTER 2

WHAT EVERY GYMNAST NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT HOW TO MASTER FEARS

Why Traditional Approaches to Sports Fears Don't Work in Overcoming Fears & Blocks

In a traditional approach to sports fears there are specific techniques to help you deal with your fears. These include "positive self-talk" where you practice coaching yourself through your fear in a positive way, "thought stopping" where you learn to stop the negative, fear related thoughts, "mental rehearsal" or visualization in which you visualize yourself safely and correctly doing your scary skills while feeling calm and confident, using positive performance cues or "mental choreography" where you have key words that you repeat in your head to get you to go, concentration training to help you focus on what you want to have happen and relaxation techniques to help you calm your fears down.

While all of these skills are really useful for you to have in your mental toughness toolbox, they rarely if ever help the fearful, stuck gymnast get unstuck. For these tools to be effective, they have to be consciously used. That is, you have to remember to employ them. For example, when you're on beam trying to go for your back handspring and feeling terrified inside, you have to consciously remember to calm yourself down. The problem here is that the fear usually comes up instantly and powerfully, and no conscious techniques will really work to calm you down.

This is exactly what happens when you try to use positive self-talk to get yourself to go. You can tell yourself all kinds of positive things while you wait in line for your turn to tumble. "You've got this!" "I can do it!" "I'm going to go

today!" "I've been doing this pass for years!" "I'll be fine!" "1, 2, 3, GO!" However, all of this positive self-talk is totally ineffectual in the face of your fears. It just doesn't work and you're left feeling like you can't get your body to go and do what it knows how to do!

We can say that there is one basic strategy for mastering fears: MOVE TOWARDS THEM! Fear feeds on one thing and one thing only: AVOIDANCE: The more you avoid something you're afraid of, the more your fear grows. To master fear, you have to do the thing that you're afraid of, a little bit at a time, over and over again and eventually you'll get more comfortable, calm down and be able to do that fearful skill. However, both you and I know that this is a whole lot easier said than done!

Related to this technique is the EAT AN ELEPHANT strategy for handling fear. You know the riddle, HOW DO YOU EAT AN ELEPHANT? Answer: ONE BITE AT A TIME. If you take a huge scary obstacle or goal and chunk it down into small enough pieces, then little by little, you will master it! It's the "inch by inch, anything's a cinch. Yard by yard it may be too hard!" strategy.

If you take something that you're afraid of and break it down into much smaller building block skills, doing it on the floor first, then doing it on the floor beam, and then doing it on the middle beam with a pad on top and then the medium beam with a spot and then the high beam with panel mats stacked right up to the beam, and then gradually remove one mat at a time. You might already know about this progression because your coaches have probably used it with you before.

As an overall strategy for working with your fears, the EAT AN ELEPHANT strategy is critical for you to use with what I'm going to teach you to help calm your nervous system down and get over your block. The small steps that you take are very important in gradually helping you feel safer and safer. The trick, however, as you use this strategy, is to not get angry, impatient and/or frustrated with yourself whenever you have to take a step or two backwards, which you will always have to do in this overall process.

OVERCOMING FEAR IS ALWAYS A TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK KIND OF THING AND WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT IS HOW YOU RE-ACT WHENEVER THE STEPS BACK OCCUR!

Keep in mind that the steps backwards that you may find yourself taking are absolutely normal and don't EVER mean that you're back where you started!

So let's briefly sum up the important points here:

1. Fears and blocks, are a natural part of this sport
2. Fears and blocks are fueled by past scary experiences in and sometimes out of the gym.
3. Your brain and body memorize these experiences and can hold them out of your awareness for years.
4. When you are either under pressure or in any way reminded of these past experiences, your nervous system instantly goes into the "RED ZONE," senses the danger and automatically clicks you into FREEZE to protect you.

This is why you can't get yourself to go. This is why you balk on skills that you know how to do because your survival reflexes push your trained performance skills offline.

THE KEY JOB HERE FOR EVERY STUCK GYMNAST IS TO HELP YOU CALM YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM DOWN SO IT DOESN'T GET AUTOMATICALLY TRIGGERED INTO THE SELF-PROTECTIVE, DANGER RESPONSE OF FREEZE!

Knowing the Signs of Nervous System "Activation"

When your nervous system gets activated, (i.e. nervous, frustrated, angry, excited, etc.) there are four different ways that you know that this is happening:

#1 Thinking – As you get nervous or activated, your inner chatter or self-talk will increase and frequently get negative. For example, you'll hear things like, "What if I balk again? What if I land on my neck again and get hurt? What if coach gets angry with? Everyone else is going, how come you can't?"

#2 Images – Whenever we think, we automatically make images or movies in our mind that accompany the thoughts. For example, you may replay a past scary or upsetting fall, see yourself balking, "see" and "hear" your coach yelling at you, or imagine yourself falling and getting hurt.

#3 Emotions – When we think those kinds of thoughts and start "playing"

related images in our mind, this produces certain emotions. Emotions include fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, happiness, sadness, etc.

#4 Felt Sense - This represents your internal, bodily experience of what you're experiencing mentally. For example, one gymnast who's scared may report to me that she can feel the fear in her chest and throat, that it's hard to breathe and her throat feels tight. Another gymnast might say that he can feel his heart racing and butterflies in his stomach. A third gymnast might report that she feels physically very tight in her arms and legs. These physical sensations of difficulty breathing, tightness in the chest and throat, faster heart rate and butterflies in the stomach, and physical tightness in your muscles all represent what I call "felt sense."

Felt Sense is the "Compass" of the Nervous System.

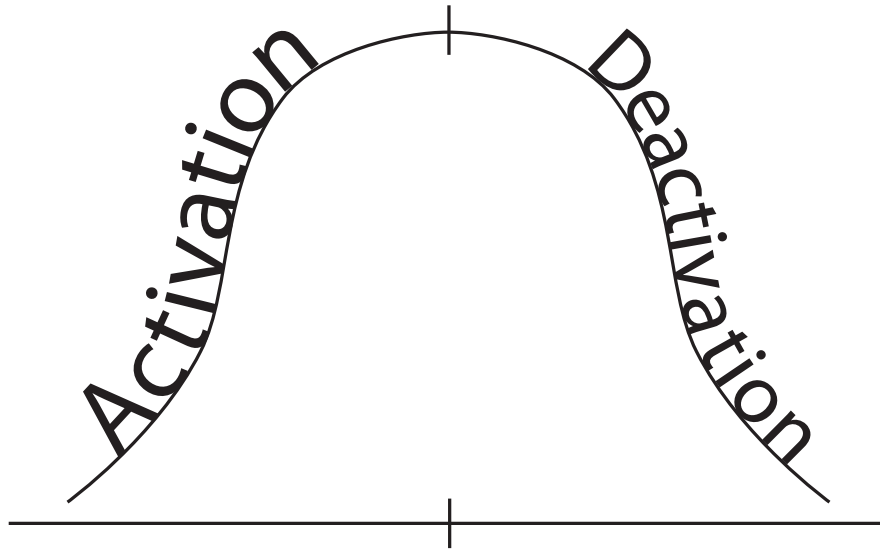
What you need to know as a gymnast is that felt sense or what you're feeling physically inside your body is what I call the "compass" of the Nervous System. A compass is something that you use to find your way out of the woods if you're lost. So let's just say that you're lost in the woods and I give you a compass and tell you to head N-NE for 20 minutes and then you'll get out of the woods. What will you do? Well, hopefully you'll follow the compass and that N-NE course for the 20 minutes and you'll find yourself no longer lost!

A problem arises here because very few of us really listen closely to what is going on inside our bodies, especially if we're scared, frustrated or angry! When we are flooded with these upsetting emotions, we instead tend to focus on our thoughts and the images that accompany them. When you balk, you hear inner chatter like, "WHY can't I do this!? I should be able to! Everyone else is! I'm so scared I'll get hurt again, but I shouldn't be! C'mon! You've done this stupid skill for years! What's wrong with you?!", etc. When we follow our thinking, images or emotions we will get hopelessly lost.

How the Nervous System Works - The Activation - Deactivation Cycle

All living things are governed by the natural cycles of activation and deactivation. The sun comes up in the morning, birds begin to sing, animals come out of their holes, and we get up and go about our business. This is the "activation" part of the cycle. And then later on in the day, the sun sets, it gets dark and everything quiets down, we go inside and eventually go to sleep. That's the deactivation phase of the cycle. You inhale, that's activation. You exhale, that's

deactivation. You get angry or frustrated. That's activation. You calm down, deactivation. You get really scared or anxious. That's activation. You eventually calm down and relax. Deactivation. You get excited about something, activation. The excitement gradually fades leading to deactivation.



When our nervous system is operating smoothly, these waves of activation and deactivation are manageable. However, when we have very upsetting, scary things happen to us, things that FREAK us out like seeing a friend fall or falling ourselves, the waves of activation and deactivation get interrupted and we might go from manageable activation to a much higher activation, until we get completely overwhelmed and go into freeze. This is what is really going on for many blocked gymnasts who can't stop themselves from balking! Their nervous systems get stuck in overwhelm and freeze.

So the burning question here is how can you get your nervous system to cool down, leave the "RED ZONE" and RETURN to a zero calm? WE do this is by following or what I call "tracking" the "felt sense" sensations in your body. So when you get activated, or you start feeling scared, and you put all of your attention on where you feel the sensations of the fear, like butterflies in your stomach or the feeling of your heart pounding, a very interesting thing happens: WHAT GOES UP ALWAYS COME DOWN. When our nervous systems get cranked up into the danger zone and we simply observe the physical sensations of the activation, without trying to do anything with them, our nervousness will go up, reach a peak by itself and then release all by itself.

What I am discussing here is a very high level skill. The problem arises because most athletes pay far more attention to their thinking, the attached images and the emotions they bring up when they get scared. They listen to their thinking as if it's the voice of truth whispering in their ears, predicting the future. However, when you get activated (i.e. nervous or frustrated) and you follow your thinking, your activation level will go up, and keep going up until you get completely overwhelmed and freeze. When you get scared for example, and you follow your thinking, by listening to and focusing on the thoughts, it's like throwing logs on a fire that you want to put out. The fire will get bigger and bigger until it rages out of control and burns your house down!

To really grasp this very powerful and important mental skill, you must come to understand that the thoughts that you regularly have at the gym in practice or at meets are not important. They do not predict the future. They are not facts. Your thoughts are nothing more than brain wave activity which increases when you get activated. Most gymnasts listen very carefully to and believe everything that they think. What I'm telling you here is basic:

YOU DON'T ALWAYS WANT TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING THAT YOU THINK!

Please understand that I am NOT telling you to "stop thinking" here. This is impossible! What I am telling you instead is that you need to learn to allow your thoughts to just simply be there without focusing on them, trying to change them or trying to "be positive!" You want to learn to place your focus on what is going on in your body, sensation-wise rather than on the thoughts.

An example:

Last year I worked with a 15 year old swimmer who was absolutely panicked that she would throw up in the pool during a meet. While this had never happened to her, or anyone else she knew, Jackie was convinced that it would happen to her, and if it did, she convinced herself that she'd never get over the humiliation of this.

The morning of the meet, Jackie would start getting nervous (activated). She'd notice that she was feeling butterflies in her stomach, which is pretty normal as you get ready for any meet and your first event. These "butterflies" in her stomach are what I'm calling "felt sense." When she first noticed them she began thinking, "This isn't good! Something is wrong here!" Before she got to the pool, there were only a few butterflies and they were small. However, once she got to the meet, her activation level would climb even more and the

butterflies would spread all over her stomach. When this happened, she'd start thinking. "Oh NO! What's happening?"

Remember, your thoughts are just brain wave activity. They are NOT the truth of what will come! However, your thoughts, when you listen to and believe them, will only serve to throw logs on the fire of your nervousness, making it that much bigger and stronger! Soon Jackie would notice that her heart was pounding in her chest (felt sense) and then she'd think. "Oh my God! Something's REALLY wrong here, I just know it!"

These thoughts, in turn, would make her stomach feel queasy and her head hurt, (felt sense) and then she'd think, "I knew I shouldn't have eaten breakfast... I think I might get sick!" Even more thoughts would lead to her panic rising that much more inside of her, as she noticed that her breathing became much faster and shallower (felt sense) And then she'd think, "It's going to happen. I'm going to get sick in my race! I'm going to throw up! I just know it!"

By this point she was in such a panic state that she was reduced to tears and couldn't even compete. So I said to her...

"What I would like you to do when you first notice yourself getting activated, scared, worried or frustrated, is shift your attention to the sensations in your body and AWAY FROM YOUR THOUGHTS. Simply allow your thoughts to be there without listening to or debating them. I'd like you to get curious about what is going on in your body and just track or follow those sensations around. They may go up, down or not move at all. They may increase in intensity, stay the same or decrease. They may change into another sensation completely. If your thoughts persist, no worries, just allow them to be there and again, switch your focus of attention back to your body and what you can notice."

And then she said to me, "You know, as we talk about this stuff, I can actually feel myself getting nervous and worried right now because I have another meet coming up next week!"

And I said to her, "GREAT! So let's just follow that nervousness you're feeling right now. Where do you notice it in your body?" And she said, "It's in my stomach. Those butterflies are starting to move around." And I said "Wonderful! Just be curious about them and let's see where they want to go?" And then she said, "Oh no! They're getting bigger, I can feel it!" And I told her, OK! Those are just your thoughts, 'Oh No, they're getting bigger.' So just notice what happens next... and then she said... "But they're moving up in my chest and I could

get sick!" And I said, "OK, those are also just thoughts, 'They're moving up in my chest and I could get sick.' "Instead, let's just follow the sensations and see what comes next!"

And then she said, "Oh my God, my heart's pounding, and something's definitely wrong!" And I said, "That's OK. Those are also just thoughts, 'Something's definitely wrong!' So follow your heart as it pounds", And she said, "Wow... that's weird... it's starting to slow down" and I said, "Cool, just follow the slowing down and see what comes next..." And she said "Well there are funny feelings in my arms, like something's moving down them and... (long pause), they're gone! Oh my God! Like my stomach feels normal again!"

And I said to her, "When you get scared or nervous, and you just follow the sensations of the scared or activation in your body, what goes up, must always come down and it will do that all by itself. All you have to do is simply allow your thoughts to be there and instead, get curious about and follow the sensations in your body."

Now sometimes this process may take two to three minutes or less. If you have enough time during practice you may want to start practicing it in the gym! Don't fight the fear. Don't try to push it away. Don't try to positively coach yourself when you get scared. Instead, allow the thoughts to be there and put your attention on the sensations of the activation in your body and begin to follow them. Try not to get frustrated or discouraged if in the beginning you have trouble doing this. This is a learned skill and takes time. Whenever you notice yourself having strong feelings of any kind, practice following them in your body.

In fact, what I would like you to do EVERY DAY for homework if you can, is to notice any time you're feeling good, in or out of the gym,...feeling proud, competent, happy, or excited about anything, and I want you to practice taking some time to carefully follow those good feelings wherever they are in your body. This kind of practice by itself will help your nervous system calm down and better handle the activation that happens when you get scared.

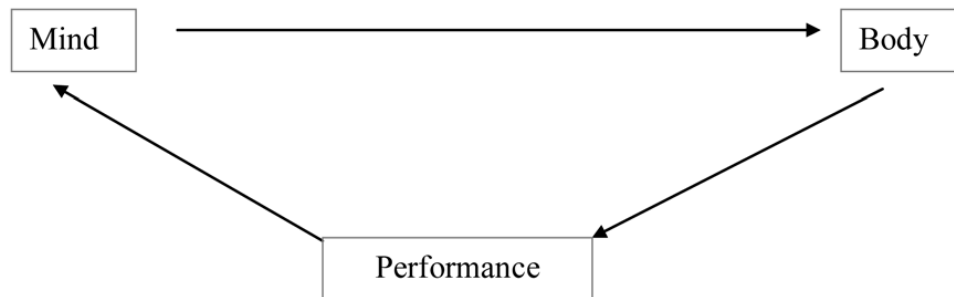
Very Important!

As a general overall strategy in the gym, if you get too scared to do something, i.e. too activated, don't impatiently turn on yourself! Don't force yourself to stand there on beam, for example, until you finally go! Get down and take a step or two backwards. Do lead up skills. Put some mats down. Take your tum-

bling to the tumble track or tramp! Do something that feels just a little safer. If your fear is too high, then listen carefully to your nervous system and work on lowering your activation level! If you take steps to patiently help yourself feel just a little safer whenever you're scared, then your trained performance skills will come back online by themselves! However, if you continue to ignore your activation level, ignoring that you're feeling unsafe, and instead angrily berate yourself for not going, then you will get more and more frightened and more and more STUCK!

CHAPTER 3

THE MIND-BODY-PERFORMANCE CONNECTION



All Performance is Self-Fulfilling

One of the first things that you must understand if you're going to develop the mind of a champion is the idea that ALL PERFORMANCE IS SELF-FULFILLING. What I mean by this is that YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU EXPECT AS A GYMNAST. Go into a meet or practice expecting to fall off on beam or run into the vault and you will. Go in expecting to have fun and perform your best and you will! This is because of the Mind-Body connection. Let me explain.

If you go into a meet situation and you're telling yourself things like, "God those other gymnasts are so much better than me... I feel lousy... Last meet I blew my bar routine and it's stunk in practice all week... what if I don't qualify... all my friends have ALREADY moved beyond me", etc., then this is what will begin to happen inside your body:

Muscles will Begin to Tighten

Breathing will Become Faster and Shallower

Your Heart and Pulse Rate will Go Up

Your Hands and Feet will Get Cold

The MAIN reason for these physical changes we've discussed in Chapter 1. If your nervous system begins to experience "danger" in the gym, if you don't feel safe when you get ready to throw a tumbling pass or giant, then this inner sense of danger will be reflected physiologically, in your body as your nervous system revs up and prepares to protect you.

The end result, performance-wise of all of these self-protective physical changes in your body are quite damaging to everything that you do in the gym:

Your reflexes and foot speed will slow down, (tight muscles will do this EVERY time).

Your movements will become less fluid and more mechanical, (tight muscles again).

Your rotational speed of your skills in the air will slow down, (this means that you'll be an accident waiting to happen!).

Your timing and balance will be thrown off .

You'll lose your feel of the apparatus, (from the loss of circulation in your hands and feet).

Your endurance and strength will be compromised and you'll feel like you're totally out of shape.

What I'm saying here is that one of the main difference between your BEST and WORST performance has to do with what you think, say to yourself and image, BEFORE, DURING and AFTER you perform. These "MENTAL STRATEGIES," (your thoughts, self-talk & images) before your best performances are always VERY different than the ones that you use before your WORST ones.

Getting To Know Your "Inner Coach"

Exercise #1

Reviewing Past Peak Performances

Find yourself a quiet place, free from distractions. Think about the last time you had what you would consider an awesome meet or practice, the last time that you really felt great as a gymnast, either for one event or for all of them. With your eyes closed, use your imagination right now to go back in time to this meet and SEE, HEAR and FEEL everything that went on in this practice or competition that made it so special.

STICKING IT

FIRST, focus on what was going on for you BEFORE things started. What were you thinking? What was the voice of your “inner coach” saying to you about the day? Were you looking forward to it or not? Did you have any imagery going on pre-event?

SECOND, what was going on for you (if anything) mentally DURING your routines. What kind of self-talk were you aware of? If you made a mistake, slipped or even fell off, how did you deal with it mentally? What did you say to yourself about these?

THIRD, what went on mentally after the events and the meet or practice ended? How did you make yourself feel? How were you evaluating yourself?

Exercise #2

Reviewing Past Bad Performances

Sit quietly and comfortably in a place that's free from distractions. Now I'd like you to do something a little less pleasant. Think about the last time you had an awful performance, the last time that you went into the gym and felt really disappointed with how you performed! Close your eyes and mentally go back in time to this disappointing performance. See, hear and feel right now everything that you did when you were at this practice or competition.

FIRST, think back to what was going on mentally BEFORE things started. What kind of expectations did you have? What was your pre-event self-talk like? Were you dreading the meet or any particular routines? What kind of imagery did you entertain, if any?

SECOND, What was going on mentally DURING your performances? What kind of self-talk did you have? What were you thinking about? How did you deal with mistakes or any fear that might have been there? If you messed up in one event how did it affect the rest of that routine and/or your other events?

THIRD... What happened after the event/meet or practice? What did you say to yourself? What kind of feelings did you generate inside?

Compare & Contrast

If you spend a little time with these two exercises examining both your good and bad performances, then you'll soon begin to notice a particular pattern.

The thinking and self-talk related to your best performances will be vastly different than the thinking and self-talk associated with your bad performances. HOW you perform is DIRECTLY affected by WHAT you think, before, during and after each routine. In fact, oftentimes routines are nailed or bombed BEFORE you even begin them!

How often have you mentally taken yourself out of a meet BEFORE the judges even signaled to you their readiness, because you got psyched out by another gymnast, over-thought the event and your skills, was unhappy about your order in the rotation, couldn't stop thinking about a score that you needed or couldn't get your last event out of your mind?

Take 5 minutes or so with a pen and paper to jot down what you just discovered to be the mental differences between your good and bad performances. Make a list of the kinds of self talk that you were aware of before and during your good routines. Then do the same thing for the self-talk related to the bad routines. Now compare the two. If you want, you might find it useful to examine several good and bad meets. You should begin to see a pattern develop.

This first series of exercises should help you understand that good and bad performances are NOT random, but instead are DIRECTLY related to your headset. If you go into a meet or practice feeding yourself negativity, your performance will reflect this. When you make mistakes and you mentally hang onto these, you'll find that you end up making even more mistakes! Conversely, if you go into the meet or an event with positive self-talk, you'll be more relaxed and perform much closer to your potential. You'll quickly rebound from mistakes and they will have no adverse effect on the rest of your routine or later events.

These exercises are important because they will provide you with an awareness of your before and during performance mental strategies, (thoughts, self-talk & imagery). It's this AWARENESS that will then help you make the necessary changes to become a mentally tough gymnast. Without awareness, you will NOT be able to change negative or self-defeating thoughts or behaviors. Instead, you will become a victim to them.

AWARENESS IS THE KEY TO CHANGE

Let's say that you are having trouble moving backwards on the beam or floor, and the main reason for this is technical. That is, you may be doing something wrong technique-wise. Change and improvement can only happen AFTER you

become aware of EXACTLY what you are doing wrong. Once you can feel, see and understand your technical mistake, THEN and only then will you be in a position to correct it.

We can say that this same principle operates mentally. You must FIRST get to know your negative performance related thought patterns before you can change them. And in relation to your fears, you must learn to become aware of what goes on in your body, “felt sense” wise when you begin to get nervous or activated. It’s this awareness of the physical changes that happen inside when you get “activated,” (scared, frustrated, angry) that will eventually put you in a position to be able to “track” or follow the physical sensations until they eventually go away as your nervous system de-activates. If you seem to fall apart under the pressure of those bigger meets or certain opponents seem to knock you off center, you must FIRST become aware of how you mentally sabotage yourself in these situations before you can then correct the problems.

As a gymnast it is critical that you do not underestimate the power of your “inner coach”, i.e. your self-talk, in affecting your confidence level, how calm you stay and ultimately, how well you perform. I’d like to demonstrate this mind-body-performance connection to you in a “hand’s on” way with the following exercise:

Exercise #4

The Power Of The Mind-Body Connection

Find yourself a space that’s free from distractions. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart and arms resting comfortably at your sides. Understand that this is an exercise to test the power of your imagination.

Raise your arms straight in front of you so that they are perpendicular to your body, shoulder height and so that your palms are facing each other. Take your left palm and turn it up towards the ceiling. Take your right thumb and stick it up in the air. CLOSE YOUR EYES AND USING YOUR IMAGINATION ONLY, imagine that in your left hand, the palm-up one, you have a very heavy book, like a Webster’s Dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string which is connected to a balloon and that balloon is filled with helium.

Using ONLY your imagination, imagine that your left hand is getting heavier, and heavier and falling...and that your right hand is getting lighter and lighter and rising. Repeat these self-suggestions to yourself slowly, over and over again: “My left hand is getting heavier and heavier and falling.....and my right

hand is getting lighter and lighter and rising..." Allow yourself enough time with each of these suggestions so that you begin to imagine this happening.

Repeat these suggestions of heaviness and lightness to yourself for about a minute. Now open your eyes, look at both arms and see if you can notice a difference in the height of your arms and the physical feelings in each. If you really let your imagination run free, then chances are good that you both saw and felt a difference. The left arm probably felt heavier and more fatigued than the right one.

The G.I.G.O. Factor

If you did experience feelings of fatigue and tension in your left arm, UNDERSTAND that these feelings were very REAL. What wasn't real was the book. That was totally and completely in your imagination.

This exercise highlights very clearly how the thoughts and the self-talk that you entertain in your head go directly into your body, make physical changes, and then DIRECTLY affect your performance. For example, if you're telling yourself before you mount the beam that you're going to fall off, those suggestions will literally tighten your muscles, make you feel shaky and eventually knock you off balance so that you will fall! If you think that just because you had a bad warm-up, your routine will ALSO be bad, then you'll be RIGHT! This is what I call the GIGO factor. GIGO is an old acronym taken from the early days of computer terminology and it stands for Garbage In, Garbage Out. If you program "garbage" into a computer, i.e. the wrong commands, then it will give you "garbage" back out, it won't do what you want it to!

If you program "garbage" into YOUR computer, i.e. your brain, that is, you're continually comparing yourself with others, being negative, putting yourself down or filling your head with "I can't" "I'll Never!" and "This is impossible," then the "garbage" that you will get back out is that you'll be right! You won't be able to do things!

For example, let's say that you're set to do your floor routine and you need a good score here to stay in contention. However, you're anxious about your back tumbling pass. Before you go, all you can think about is, "what if I get lost again...last week I landed on my head and neck. I don't want that to happen again." These thoughts and focus are the Garbage In. The garbage out is, tight muscles and you'll either balk or your pass will be poorly executed!

REMEMBER, PERFORMANCE IS SELF-FULFILLING. YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU EXPECT.

Tell yourself you “can’t” do something, or this “always” happens to me and don’t be surprised if you’re right! It’s critical then that your self-suggestions and “inner coachings” are positive. Instead of garbage in, garbage out, you want to put Good Stuff In and then you’ll get Good Stuff Out! To get you started on this process, KEEP A DAILY PERFORMANCE JOURNAL.

Performance Journal

Start to log all your thoughts, self-talk, feelings and attitudes before, during and after you practice and compete. DO NOT DO THIS EXERCISE WHILE YOU ARE PRACTICING OR COMPETING. Log these thoughts at night after practice when you can really concentrate on them.

If you try to do this while you’re at the gym, then you’ll become far too distracted to be able to properly execute. The purpose of this exercise is to help you become more aware of your typical “inner coaching,” NOT more distracted. Try to capture the exact words, phrases and even the voice tones that you use on yourself. Not only will the journal help you to begin to develop an awareness of any negative thought patterns, but just the process of paying attention to, and recording these thoughts will help you begin to eliminate them.

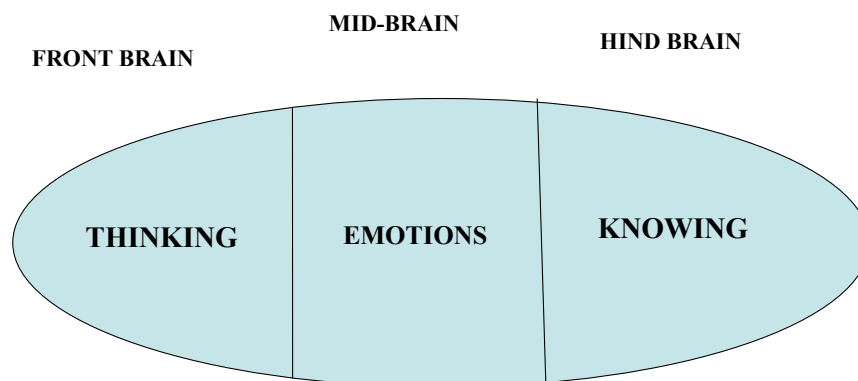
CHAPTER 4

USING YOUR BRAIN FOR CHAMPIONSHIP PERFORMANCE IN THE GYM

Your Brain And Peak Performance

While we're on this topic of thinking and its impact on how well you perform, it is absolutely critical that you as a gymnast understand that one of the main differences between performing your best and choking lies in the part of the brain that you're in as you perform. That is, when you're at your best you are functioning from your HIND BRAIN and when you struggle, performance-wise, you're stuck in your FRONT BRAIN. Let me explain:

HUMAN BRAIN



As you can see in this side view depicting the human brain, it's broken into three parts: The FRONT BRAIN; MID-BRAIN; and HIND BRAIN. Each part of your brain controls different functioning in your life, in and out of the gym. Your FRONT BRAIN's job is THINKING. If before an event, you are thinking about

STICKING IT

the score you need to get, a difficult skill in the middle of your routine, how your practices haven't been going so well or how badly you did on your last event, then you're in your Front Brain, because our Front Brain controls our thinking. If you are in the middle of a routine and you mess up and then start thinking about how upset you are that you made that mistake AGAIN, what this might mean for your event score, what your parents might say to you after the meet or whether they'll be disappointed in you, then you're in your Front Brain because thinking is the Front Brain's job.

The MID-BRAIN controls EMOTIONS and the HIND BRAIN controls KNOWING. The "knowing" that I'm talking about here isn't IQ or intellectual knowledge. It's the knowing that comes from doing, that comes from experience. For example, you know how to walk, talk, ride a bike, etc. All of the things that you have been doing over and over again for a long time get turned over to the control of your Hind Brain.

To understand the difference between when you perform your best and when you struggle, between your best and worst meets, we're going to briefly look at how your FRONT BRAIN and HIND BRAIN work or "process" information. We will leave the MID-BRAIN out of this discussion.

FRONT BRAIN	HIND BRAIN
conscious	unconscious
uses words/sentences	images & muscle memory
analytical	coordinates the whole
judgmental	non-judgmental
extremely slow	instantaneous

The above table depicts the processing differences between your FRONT and HIND brains. Let me explain.

When you are in your FRONT BRAIN and THINKING, this part of your brain processes things CONSCIOUSLY. All this means is that when you are in your Front Brain, you are AWARE of the processing because you can hear yourself thinking. For example, after you fall or miss a skill, you can hear yourself thinking, "God! How could you have done that! You've nailed that skill all week in practice! That's ridiculous! You are a total head case!"

Front Brain processing USES WORDS AND SENTENCES. That is, we think in words and sentences, one sentence after another in a linear fashion. This is

the language of your Front Brain. Front Brain processing is what's called, ANALYTICAL. That is, your Front Brain tends to break things down into component pieces. It would be like having your coach instructing you in micro detail on everything that goes into having a perfect back tumbling pass, including your timing, power generated, rotational speed in the air, what you're doing with your upper body, lower body, etc. Front Brain processing is like having an unassembled, 100 piece puzzle in front of you, but you're only focusing on one piece at a time and you don't see the whole picture.

Front Brain processing is also JUDGMENTAL. That is, your Front Brain is a critic who is continually evaluating you, and not in a positive way! For example, "That was terrible!" "How could you have over rotated?" "You really screwed that up!" "I can't believe you are performing so badly!" "Sam/Jackie is so much better than you!" etc.

Because your Front Brain processes this way, consciously, using words and sentences, and breaking things down into their component pieces, Front Brain processing can only handle very simple things, (There is NOTHING simple about gymnastics), and can only process as fast as you think, one sentence after a second, after a third. This means that Front Brain processing is WICKED SLOW! Imagine trying to consciously instruct yourself through all the technical things that you must do in order to correctly execute a giant flyaway or a round off, back handspring, back tuck! You wouldn't get two words in the first instructional sentence out before the move or tumbling pass was over!

Now let's look at how your Hind Brain works. HIND BRAIN processing goes on UNCONSCIOUSLY. That is, when you're in your Hind Brain you are NOT AWARE of it. When you walk down the street you don't think about your walking technique or whether you're lifting your knees high enough! When you do a back tuck, you don't think about all the things your body is doing in order to execute it. You just DO it without conscious thought!

Hind Brain processing uses IMAGES AND MUSCLE MEMORY. The language of your Hind Brain consists of pictures and body feel. Muscle memory is what you develop as an athlete from hours upon hours of practicing the same skills and movements over and over again. Hind Brain processing is the opposite of analytical. Instead of breaking things down into their component pieces, your Hind Brain takes all the pieces that go into correct execution and COORDINATES THEM INTO A WHOLE. Everything that goes into a Suk or Yurchenko from the speed of your approach down the vault runway, how you time and hit

the vault springboard and your timing and execution of the vault on the table are coordinated by your Hind Brain. The Hind Brain takes that 100 piece puzzle, and puts together all of the pieces into a whole so your eyes are drawn to the finished picture.

Hind Brain Processing is NON-JUDGMENTAL. You either do something or not, without any evaluation or criticism. Because your Hind Brain processes this way, unconsciously using images and muscle memory and coordinating things into a whole, your Hind Brain has the ability to process unbelievably complex information in a split second, processing INSTANTANEOUSLY!

Based upon what we're saying here, which part of your brain do you want running the show when you're competing or in the gym practicing skills that you know how to do? That's right, the Hind Brain. Your Hind Brain is like an Elite level gymnast! He/she is strong, powerful and has excellent technique. Your Hind Brain is where all of your gymnastics skills lie. Your Front Brain, on the other hand is totally clueless when it comes to gymnastics! Your Hind Brain is far too slow and inept to keep up with the complexity and speed of this sport.

So if you go out into the gym for a practice or meet and you try to think your way through your skills or events, or you're continually evaluating and criticizing everything that you do, then you are allowing the clueless gymnast to take over! The time to think is NEVER DURING A SKILL OR ROUTINE! NEVER! Thinking takes far too much time and distracts you from focusing on the moment by moment execution of your skills and routine.

This is not to say that you never want to use your Front Brain. There are times that you want to evaluate your performance and skills. There are times you want to break down your routine and skills into pieces and analyze what worked and what didn't. However, you don't EVER want to do this while you are competing, and you don't want to do this when you are pressuring yourself to throw a skill that you know how to do.

Instead, you should save the analysis for a non-pressured practice session, after the meet is over. In addition, it's fine and even necessary to be in your Front Brain when you are learning new skills. Remember, your Hind Brain takes over things that you already know. When you first learn new skills, you don't know. Therefore you must go through your Front Brain first in the learning process before your Hind Brain can take over. With the learning of new skills, thinking is not only fine, but very necessary to integrating new technique.

CHAPTER 5

MASTERING NEGATIVE INNER COACHING

As I've been implying throughout this workbook, NOTHING GOOD EVER COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! NOTHING! When you consistently put yourself down after a mistake or bad routine or catch yourself doing things wrong, the only "good" you'll do for yourself is to kill your self-confidence and make yourself too nervous to perform to your potential. I don't have to tell you that there's nothing positive in being negative in that way!

But having said that, let me state something that you REALLY need to understand as a gymnast! While being negative will hold you back, you can't really stop yourself from having negative thoughts or doubts! Thinking, whether it's positive or negative is very normal to the human condition. Trying to stop your negative thinking is like trying to lasso the wind! It's not going to happen! What's far more important than stopping negative thoughts and replacing them with positive ones is LEARNING HOW TO MANAGE AND RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO THE NEGATIVE ONES! More on this a little later in this chapter...

Imagine struggling with a particular skill or series of skills and getting really upset and frustrated with yourself for your struggles! Tell me. How will being negative and upset with yourself about this help you relax and focus enough to get your skills back? You know it won't! Being negative in this situation will only serve to kill your confidence, tighten you up further physically and make you feel that much less safe as we discussed in Chapter 1! When that happens, your performance block will only get that much worse!

Simply put, when the frustration driven negatives start, you have to learn to do two things: First, change how you respond to your negative thoughts; and Two, retrain your “inner coach” so that he/she becomes more positive and supportive. Let’s first talk about HOW to “retrain” your inner coach:

#1 Keeping a Negativity Log

Spend at least one week as an “investigative reporter”. Who are you going to investigate? YOU and your negative “inner coach.” Each night jot down all the negative things that you said to yourself that day both at school and at the gym. As you got ready for practice, what negatives did you feed yourself? As you went through practice, what negatives were bopping around “upstairs?” If you started to struggle in practice, what uninspiring things were you thinking? If your coach got angry with you or lost his/her patience for your balking, what was the response from that inner critic? Without editing or attempting to “be positive,” try to allow these typical negative thoughts to flow. However, be sure to sit down that very night and record each and every one of these negative thoughts. You may be surprised to find that just by deliberately paying attention to how negative you are for an entire week, you’ll actually begin to cut down on some of your negativity.

#2 Using a “Victory Log” To Break the Negativity Habit

After spending some time getting to really “know” your “negative inner coach,” let’s start to train a more positive one. Negativity is nothing more than a bad habit. For most of us it’s much easier and more familiar to be negative than it is to be positive. Right NOW it’s time to stop giving in to this self-destructive temptation! Starting today, I want you to keep a journal of all your small “victories.” Whatever you did that day that was even a little positive should get recorded. For example, if you normally won’t even get up on high beam and attempt a back handspring, but today you did one with a spot, then record that. If you have a tendency to continually compare yourself with your teammates and today you managed to stay focused mainly on yourself, then record that too. If the coach said something positive to you about your effort, attitude, or focus, then that should get in there as well. As you look for these small victories it is critical that you IGNORE that negative part of you that most likely will be saying, “Ohhh, isn’t that cute, you maintained a positive attitude today!” DON’T CENSOR THE POSITIVE! NO VICTORY IS TOO SMALL.

When Will You Need Your “Victory Log?”

You should spend time daily recording at least 10-15 little victories. If you

come up with more, GREAT! Your victory log will provide you with a helpful perspective when things aren't going well. Whenever athletes go through rough spots in their training or career they tend to forget that they ever accomplished anything positive. It's during these tougher times that your victory log will provide you with a much needed, more positive perspective.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Use your victory log daily for at least 30 days. Turning a bad habit around and developing a new one usually takes about a month. However, my suggestion is that you get in the habit of using your victory log as a regular part of your training all year long. It will only take you a few minutes every evening to make your entries and this small investment of time will pay off in huge dividends later.

#3 Eliminate the "C" Word to Build Confidence

The biggest confidence drain to your competitive performance is COMPARISON. When you compare yourself to teammates or opponents during practice or right before that big meet, you will be setting yourself up for failure big time! When you play the comparison game you'll ALWAYS lose! First of all, what others are doing is TOTALLY irrelevant to what YOU are doing. Second, comparisons frequently ignore or discount your strengths, accomplishments and unique gifts. Third, the gymnast who compares him/herself to a teammate or opponent is most often using the worst part of their imagination to evaluate themselves. Why? Because our internal view of a teammate or opponent is usually skewed so that they always looks much faster, stronger or more skilled than we do. Think about YOU and YOUR training. Think about your strengths and your skills. Forget about what your teammates or opponents are doing. In the end, they are basically irrelevant to you, your goals and how well you'll perform. To help you blow the whistle on comparisons and end this confidence killing habit, spend a week or two logging your comparison thoughts on paper. Like with the "negativity journal" keep a record of all your comparison thoughts at practices, meets and even in school. You may be completely surprised to finally become aware of just how much comparing you're currently doing. Remember, AWARENESS is the first step to change. To be able to put an end to the comparison habit you want to become exquisitely aware of exactly how and how often you're doing it.

#4 "Make Lemonade"

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade out of them!" This old adage instructs you to take the bad things that happen to you during your gymnastics

career and “reframe” them in a more positive way. When you get in the habit of looking for the solution in the problem, sooner or later you’ll discover that you’ll get much further as an athlete and individual. Dwelling on problems will always keep you stuck in them. Reframing these same problems by looking for solutions will get you back on track and in the fast lane again. Examples of reframes: Your teammate and best friend is consistently doing better than you and/or is NOT struggling with fears and blocks like you and it’s starting to make you upset and jealous! Reframe = My best friend is REALLY being a best friend and giving me an opportunity to get much better as a gymnast by challenging me to work harder. This is an “opportunity” to take my gymnastics to the next level.

There are a lot of distractions at the meet where you’re competing and it’s beginning to bug you. Reframe = This is a wonderful opportunity for me to work on my concentration abilities and to practice staying focused on what’s important and letting go of everything else. You have to compete against a really strong team and you’re feeling intimidated. Reframe = This is yet another opportunity to both challenge myself and lift the level of my performance because better opponents will teach me far more than weaker ones. You had a mediocre or disappointing meet and you’re starting to get down on yourself. Reframe = You learn more from failures than you do from successes. I can learn what I did wrong in this meet, and in my specific events and use that info to get better.

Exercise: Take the following problems and reframe them, and then begin practicing this mental skill on a daily basis:

You have never performed well in this meet before.

Reframe =

Large crowd with college coaches watching.

Reframe =

You have to go in your least favorite spot in the event rotation.

Reframe =

Your hardest event is first.

Reframe =

The hardest event is last.

Reframe =

Your warm up didn't go well.

Reframe =

Your first event went poorly.

Reframe =

In training, the coach seems to be harder on you than everyone else. Reframe

#5 Turn Negatives Into Positives

Negativity is a nasty habit that will undercut your confidence and sabotage your performance. It is always in your best interests as an athlete to begin to develop the much better habit of being positive. Understand that **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE!** When you hear your negative self speaking up in practice or right before an event that you're struggling with, don't take him/her seriously enough to listen. Instead get in the habit of substituting 4- 5 positive things. Imagine how you would end up feeling if every time you had a negative thought, it was instantly followed by 4- 5 positive ones. For example, "He's so much better than me and I'll never be able to compete with him" can be followed by: "He may be a better gymnast than I am right now, but I've got a strong work ethic and will continue to push myself to get better and better." Remember, when you first try to turn negatives into positives, you can count on part of you **NOT** believing the positive messages. Understand that it is **NOT** important whether you believe these positives in the beginning. It is only important that you get in the habit of immediately replacing any and all negatives with 4-5 positive thoughts.

Exercise: At home, take 4 of your typical pre-practice or pre-meet negative thoughts and for each negative statement, come up with 4-5 positive thoughts. Remember, you don't necessarily have to believe these positive statements in the beginning. If you keep using this strategy of turning a negative thought into multiple positive ones, within a few short weeks you'll find yourself in the habit of being positive.

#6 Using Affirmations

Another powerful tool for systematically turning around a negative attitude and building confidence is by getting in the habit of using **AFFIRMATIONS**. An affirmation is a **POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT YOU MAKE ABOUT YOURSELF AS IF IT IS TRUE RIGHT NOW**. For example, if you consistently get too nervous before your meets, your affirmation might be, "The bigger the meet, the calmer and composed I am!" If you tend to get much too nervous if you have a bad warm-up and it negatively affects your event performance, then your affirmation might be, "I consistently perform at my best, regardless of my warm-up" If you tend to be negative under pressure then your affirmation could be, "I stay positive **NO MATTER WHAT!**" If you have one event that intimidates you, your affirmation might be, "I'm a star on high bar!" or "I love beam!"

When used correctly, affirmations form powerful bridges between how you are NOW and how you would like to be in the FUTURE. Your affirmations should be written on index cards and posted all around your room so that you see them continuously throughout the day. Carry some in your schoolbooks. Put some in your locker. Have some in your gym bag. Like positive statements, it is not necessary that you believe your affirmations in the beginning. It is only important that you make a point out of looking at these positive statements over and over again throughout the day.

#7 Affirmations and the Presleep Technique

One effective way to get your affirmations into your unconscious and muscle memory is to use the “pre-sleep technique.” Take one particular affirmation that you’re working on at the moment, i.e. “The bigger the meet, the calmer and composed I am!” and repeat it to yourself slowly as you lie in bed at night with the lights off. After the first repetition, try to imagine, in as much detail as possible, experiencing yourself doing just that, being in a big meet pressure situation and maintaining your composure and performing the way that you know you can. Slowly repeat your affirmation a second time, once again imagining yourself staying focused and composed under pressure. Continue this sequence of slowly repeating your affirmation with the accompanying imagery a total of 15 - 20 times before you fall asleep. If you find that you only get through 10 repetitions before sleep overtakes you, don’t worry. Continue this technique every night before bed.

#8 Mastering Last Minute Negative Thoughts and Self-Doubts

While using the above techniques will certainly help you build your self-confidence and become more positive about your gymnastics, by themselves they will NOT eliminate all of the negative thinking that is so common to every gymnast’s experience!

WHY?

Because LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVITY ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL. Even the very best gymnasts in the world sometimes entertain these thoughts during practices or even right before their big events or meets. When this happens, most gymnasts get knocked off balance when they begin to hear this flood of inner negativity start. They get “emotionally hijacked” so-to-speak by these negatives, letting their fears and worries run away with their confidence, focus and, as a consequence, good performance.

STICKING IT

It is absolutely critical for you to understand that you can still have the meet of your life, or a great practice even if you are flooded with last minute doubts or negativity. How is this possible?

The trick is not to allow yourself to get caught up with or engage the negative thinking. How do you do this? You must train yourself to use the negative thinking and self-doubts as neutral signals to simply RELAX AND REFOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND. For example, if you're ready for a particular event to start and you hear yourself thinking, "what if I fall again today.? You know I haven't been hitting this in practice!" then you want to quickly and calmly shift your focus back to what you might normally be doing right before you perform, i.e. your pre-event routine, warming up, stretching, etc.

At "crunch time" or even during practice, you do NOT want to engage or fight with the negative thoughts and doubts in your mind. Right before or during your meet, you don't even want to try to be positive! That's right! When you're waiting for the meet or your next event to start, you don't ever want to try to turn the negative thoughts around into positives! Why? If you start thinking, "I'm being negative, I've got to be positive," then you are thinking and you end up immediately distracting yourself from focusing on this upcoming event and what you need to be doing in your body.

Remember our discussion about the Front Brain in Chapter 4. When you are thinking right before or during an event, you are in the wrong part of your brain, the part that can't keep up with the speed and complexity of doing gymnastics! Performing like a champion is all about trusting your instincts, focusing on what your body is doing in the moment and letting your skills just flow. Therefore, any time your mind is throwing out negatives, cautions, doubts or the "what if's," you want to immediately shift your focus to what is happening on the apparatus, in your body in that moment!

Here's a metaphor for dealing with any "assault" by negative thinking and self-doubts. When these last minute negatives begin to "attack" you, you want to respond to them as if you were an Aikido master. Aikido is a "soft" martial art where the practitioner meets an assault by utilizing the attacker's own force and momentum to effortlessly neutralize him. The fighter skilled in Aikido may, for example, quickly slip to one side, grab his attacker's wrist and twist it in just such a way as to completely and immediately render his assailant powerless. Rather than letting yourself get caught up in fighting with your own negativity, you want to effortlessly side step those thoughts by REFOCUSING ON

THE TASK AT HAND, the skill you're doing in that moment. If the negatives persist, then again, refocus without emotionally engaging them.

Please understand that learning to respond in a relaxed, neutral way to your last minute negative thinking and doubts is a VERY high level, ELITE mental skill that takes practice. Far too many athletes tend to listen to and believe all of the thoughts that they have! Remember, your thoughts don't predict the future. They are NOT real. They are just a product of your nervous system getting revved up. Negative thinking is never a problem for you! The real problem here is always how you REACT to the negatives and doubts!

#9 Use Humor

Another strategy you might try is to greet your typical negative thoughts and doubts with humor. For example, if you're waiting for the judges to signal you that they're ready and you hear yourself think, "you're going to blow it, you're going to fall!" Instead of engaging those thoughts by thinking, "NO I'm NOT!" or "Stop thinking that! That's being negative. I'm going to nail this routine!" you might quickly think "Gee, that was really helpful! Thanks so much for sharing! Perhaps you may want to get yourself a soft drink and a snack, and I'll chat with you when I'm done!" When you use humor on yourself in response to these last minute negatives, you neutralize the emotional reaction so common to them and therefore you end up staying calm and relaxed, both of which are absolutely critical to your performing your best when it counts the most.

CHAPTER 6

5 STEPS TO BECOMING A CHAMPION

I want to provide you a road map for becoming a winner. Follow it closely and I GUARANTEE you that your performance level will rise several notches. Ignore it and your successes will be few and far between. Like all the ideas and strategies in this workbook, these 5 strategies belong to hundreds of world class and Olympic level athletes across every sport. All you have to do is read and follow them closely.

Step #1

#1 Start With the End In Mind - Have a Dream

If you want to be as good a gymnast as possible, then you have to BE SMART about your training. This means simply that you have to have a clear goal or direction. You have to know where you want to go in order to get there. As a competitive tennis player I unknowingly limited my potential because, despite the fact that I worked hard and trained every day, I had no direction. I had no big dream, nor any goals that were useful to me. I just put my time in.

Most successful athletes begin their careers with a dream. Sometimes that dream is so big and so unrealistic that they are too embarrassed to share it with anyone because they are afraid they'll be ridiculed for having it. A dream will give your life a focus in which you can then channel your energies. It will give you a reason to consistently work hard. A dream or what I call your "BIG ENOUGH WHY" will provide you with the motivation to persist in the face of obstacles and defeat. A dream will draw you like a magnet towards it's achievement.

What I am saying here is that one of the first steps in becoming a champion is to use your imagination! You create your own reality. Start by using your

imagination to think about how far you want to go in this sport. Do you want to compete on a national level? Do you want a college scholarship to a big gymnastics school. Do you want to go all the way, make your country's national Team and compete in the Olympics, maybe even medal? EVERY GREAT ACHIEVEMENT STARTS WITH A SHAKY THOUGHT OR FANTASY. The more you dwell on this fantasy the more it begins to take shape and become more real to you.

REMEMBER,. ANYTHING THAT YOU CAN CONCEIVE OF (DREAM), AND BELIEVE IN, YOU CAN ACHIEVE!

Motivation is all about having this BIG ENOUGH WHY. Why are you training? Why do you want to put all that time in the gym? Why are you sacrificing and giving up other more, possibly more enjoyable things for gymnastics? If you have a big enough WHY, you can accomplish anything! So the question I want you to consider is what is your WHY?

I know what happens when you let your imagination run away with these kinds of questions. There's a little voice that raises its negative little head and starts to put you down, or ridicule you for being so stupid to think that you would even think that you could do THAT. Humor yourself right now! Suspend judgment and disbelief. Think about your dream...what are your gymnastics goals? But let's START WITH THE END IN MIND.

Exercise #1 Your Future Gymnast

Sit quietly in a room where you will be undisturbed for the next 15-20 minutes. Have your arms and legs uncrossed and close your eyes. Take a few minutes to relax yourself as much as possible. You can focus on your breathing, take yourself to a relaxing place or otherwise calm yourself as best as you can.

Now briefly think about your ultimate goal or dream as a gymnast. If you could create a movie in which you'd be the star, where would you be? How far would you have gone in the sport? Would you be a level 10 gymnast, be at a specific college on scholarship or on the National team? Try to be as specific as possible and REMEMBER, suspend any and all judgments about the reality of this happening or not.

Let those thoughts briefly fade for now, and in your mind's eye, I would like you to go to a very relaxing place which we will call your RESOURCE PLACE. You

can create this place in your imagination or you can mentally return to a special beach, lake, mountain or place that you've been to before. See, hear and feel everything that you would if you actually were in this special place. Try to fill in the details of the scene, the sights, movements, colors, lighting, sounds, smells, etc....

NEXT... Imagine that you can see your FUTURE SELF in this place, the gymnast that you are growing to become. Your ideal or dream gymnast that you were thinking about when we first started this exercise. Imagine that you can watch him or her as they stand in front of you. What do they look like? How do they carry themselves. What do they sound like when they speak?

NEXT... Imagine that you can now watch them begin to move on the floor, beam, bars, vault, etc. Study very carefully what they do: Their coordination, upper body strength, speed, confidence and power. Watch them as they practice executing different tricks, but do so by carefully taking note of everything that they do.

Notice their focus of concentration. How they handle mistakes when they make them. Watch everything about them and how they conduct themselves in the gym.

NEXT... Imagine that you can float up out of your body from where you are watching and float right into their body so that NOW you become your ideal or future gymnast in your imagination. Pretend that you are now them, that you can associate and closely identify with this future, older, super-gymnast. Imagine that you can see, hear and feel EXACTLY what they would.

If you were this gymnast right now, what would you believe to be true about yourself and your abilities? Now, as if you were this gymnast, spend some time performing just the way that you saw them performing. Feel what it is like in your imagination to control your body and move through space just the way they do. Carry the exercise over to performing in a big meet situation. See, hear and feel yourself, as this FUTURE SELF gymnast on the apparatus, in a meet...

Spend 10 minutes a night with this exercise before you go to sleep, pretending in your imagination that you are living your dream. It's been said that YOUR IMAGINATION RULES YOUR WORLD. This is a constructive way to take control of that world. Regular practice of this exercise will help you get one step closer to turning your dream into a reality.

Motivation from Goal Setting that Really Works

What's the best way for you to move towards that dream? And how can you keep yourself motivated through the long haul?

First understand that MOTIVATION IS A PERSONAL THING - IT'S UP TO YOU! You can not depend on other people to get you motivated. Sure, coaches, parents and other gymnasts can help steer you in the right direction. But it's up to you to do the actual work. This is why it's important for you to have a big goal or BIG ENOUGH WHY that's really worth working and sacrificing for.

EATING ELEPHANTS

However, you can't just stop here with that dream. If all you do is have a big dream, and you don't ground that dream in the day to day reality of practice, then you won't go anywhere. One of the biggest mistakes athletes make around goal setting is to pick out a huge, faraway goal for themselves, i.e. "I want to go to the Olympics", and then they forget about it. If you want to be successful and have the motivation to keep yourself going, you must figure out a way of taking your ultimate goal and breaking it down into smaller and smaller pieces.

In other words,

YOU MUST TAKE YOUR DREAM AND BREAK IT DOWN INTO YEARLY, 6-MONTH, MONTHLY, WEEKLY AND ESPECIALLY DAILY GOALS IN ORDER TO MAKE IT HAPPEN!

This is known as the "eat an elephant" strategy. We've already briefly talked about this in relation to getting over your fears. The only smart way to "eat an elephant" is to break it down into bite size pieces. You eat an elephant one bite at a time. If you try to shove an entire leg into your mouth at one time, you'll get a wicked case of indigestion. Same thing with that big dream. If you constantly focus on how far away it is and ALL that you have to do to accomplish it, then you'll get a serious case of mental indigestion, i.e. you'll get DISCOURAGED and lose your motivation.

It's the accumulation of very small successes on a daily and weekly basis that fuels your motivation and keeps you going. It's the idea that

INCH BY INCH ANYTHING'S A CINCH, YARD BY YARD IT MIGHT BE HARD!

STICKING IT

Understand also that your goals should function like a road map to help you start your journey, keep you on track, and insure that you end up where you were heading. Therefore you want to be smart about those goals.

FIRST - ASSESS WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW!

If your goal is to reach the elite level as a gymnast and/or get a college scholarship, and you are currently a level 6 or 7 gymnast, start by honestly assessing your STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES in every aspect of the sport. Look at your upper body strength, coordination, flexibility, endurance, skill level, physical speed, ability to handle fears, mental toughness, etc. Consult with your coach or someone who really knows you and the sport. Be open and honest with yourself. You can't get better unless you first acknowledge your weaknesses.

NEXT - FIND OUT WHAT SKILLS ARE NEEDED TO REACH YOUR GOAL

What do the elite or scholarship gymnasts have that you don't? What are the skills and strengths that are necessary to compete at this level? Talk to your coach, college/elite coaches and even college and elite gymnasts to help you with the answers. And remember about asking the experts! If you do make an opportunity to talk to some of these athletes, find out exactly HOW they did it. What was the road that they took?

Knowing where you are NOW and what you SPECIFICALLY need to work on to reach your dream in the future will provide you with a very clear path to follow to success. Once you have this path outlined, all you have to do is follow it! It's similar to using what I call the "1-10 exercise".

ON A SCALE OF 1-10, WHERE 1 = YOU'RE THE LEAST EXPERIENCED GYMNAST IN THE WORLD AND 10 = YOU ARE THE GYMNAST WHO'S REACHED THAT GOAL OF YOURS, WHERE ARE YOU? COME UP WITH A NUMBER. NOW, IF YOU CAME UP WITH A 4 OR 5, WHAT DO YOU SPECIFICALLY NEED TO WORK ON TO RAISE YOUR NUMBER TO THAT 10?

One important point that I am trying to get across here is that your success starts with your ability to DREAM. Dream big! Have big scary goals...BUT...If you are going to build your castles in the sky, MAKE SURE THAT THE FOUNDATION OF THAT CASTLE IS ON THE GROUND! In other words, you must tie your big goal to your daily, in-practice goals for the whole process to really work for you. If you can connect what you are doing in practice TODAY to that

goal you have 3-4 years away, you will get much more out of practice and will maintain a high degree of motivation.

For example, a very talented figure skater was having trouble dragging herself out of bed every morning at 4 am to train in an ice cold rink for 2 hours before school. After missing several practices she came up with a way to get beyond the day to day discomfort of having to leave that warm bed. She found a photograph of the top Romanian skater that she knew she'd be facing in the next World Championships and put the picture by her bedside. Under the photo she wrote the following words: "Comrade, while you were sleeping, I was training". This was all that she needed to bring her long term goal into the present. This is what you must do:

Plan For the Future, But Work in the Present!

Use the following goal-setting exercises to help you take the first important step in becoming a champion: START WITH THE END IN MIND. Refer to the Goal Setting Guide at the end of this section to help you develop effective goals.

Goal Exercise #1

1. Write out a list of ALL the goals that you wish to attain in gymnastics.
2. Prioritize them in order of importance to you and in relation to time. That is, label which are short term (up to 30 days), intermediate (4-6 months) and long term (a year and up). Remember, intermediate and short-term goals should lead you directly to your long-term goal.
3. Break the short term goals into smaller chunks (remember the elephant) by developing 2-4 mini-goals or steps that you can take to help you reach these short term goals. Mini-goals should be workable on a daily basis, in practice or on your own.
4. ASK THE EXPERTS! Consult with your coach, sport psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, dance coach or other experts to help you identify exactly what you need to work on.
5. Check your goals against the Goal Setting Guidelines at the end of this section to be sure that your goals meet all the criteria.

Guidelines for Winning Goal Setting

1. Make sure the goals are YOURS (not your coach's, parents' or friends').
2. Make your goals CHALLENGING but REALISTIC.
3. Make your goals SPECIFIC. Vague and general goals like "I want to be better or stronger" are not as helpful as "I want to reach level 9 or bench press my exact weight".
4. Make your goals MEASURABLE. You have to be able to specifically monitor your progress.
5. Make your goals COMPATIBLE. (a goal of wanting to build up your speed or flexibility is not compatible with a goal of doing extra wind sprints or flexibility work once a month).

Your goals should be FLEXIBLE to allow for CHANGES. (If you set a goal too high or low, you need to be able to make the appropriate adjustment.) Remember, your goals should NOT be etched in stone, they should serve as general guideposts for your efforts.

6. Set a TIME FRAME or TARGET date for each goal. (Time pressure will help you stay motivated towards completion.)
7. Put your goals in WRITING. (Write down your goals, sign them and keep them continually in front of you. This will help you make more of a commitment to working on them. REMEMBER INK THEM, DON'T JUST THINK THEM!
8. PRIORITIZE your goals. (Arrange the goals in relation to their importance to you and your long term objective.)

Step #2

The Ultimate Secret to Athletic Success

There is one factor that separates successful athletes from everyone else. It has nothing to do with more talent, ability or God-given gifts. It's a factor that can neutralize disabilities and enable a less talented performer to beat out a more talented one. It's a simple "secret" so common that it is regularly dismissed by most players. It's a four letter word: WORK!

The secret to success in gymnastics is HARD WORK. That's right. There is no

short-cut to excellence. You have to do it the old fashioned way! Athletes that make it in every sport aren't necessarily more talented, stronger, or faster. Their edge lies in their work ethic. They WANT that goal more and are willing to do all the sweaty, uncomfortable extras that most other athletes won't do.

Your DESIRE and a never-say-die attitude will take you much further than your natural talent or skills would by themselves. Hard work will put success in a picture where no one else can see it.

Not everyone has the physical talent and ability to make the Olympic Team. However, if you have a big enough WHY, that is you REALLY want something, AND you are willing to "pay your PHYSICAL dues", then what you do accomplish will take you FAR BEYOND the normal limitations of your physical abilities!

IF YOU WANT TO BECOME A CHAMPION THEN IT'S UP TO YOU One other important aspect of hard work. If you want to go as far as possible in gymnastics then YOU have to take responsibility for your training. NO ONE can make you great except YOU! Too many athletes put this important responsibility on coaches, parents and everyone else except themselves. When something goes wrong they get into pointing the finger and blaming, "It was the judges' fault I scored so low today", "I would have made the team if it wasn't for ..." "I would be a much better gymnast, skater, diver, etc. if I had a better coach!"

This mentality of "GOOD PERFORMANCE, GOOD GYMNAST, BAD PERFORMANCE, BAD COACH is the way loser's think! It's up to YOU to take your training seriously enough to work hard towards YOUR goals. That's right! They are YOUR goals! When you blow off practice, dog it or goof around when coach isn't looking, or complain about having to do extra hard practices, you're only fooling and hurting YOURSELF! Remember the 10 most important 2-letter words in becoming a champion!

"IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME!"

Step #3 Champions Believe in Themselves N.M.W. (No Matter What)

GYMNASTS ARE LIMITED MOST BY WHAT THEY BELIEVE IS POSSIBLE. Your belief system can make or break your competitive career in and out of the gym. What you believe can empower you to spectacular performances or drag your routines right into the gutter. The one characteristic of successful

gymnasts is that they have a strong belief in themselves. Even if they suffer setbacks, injuries or big failures, they maintain a positive belief in themselves and their abilities.

Remember, performance is self-fulfilling. YOU GET WHAT YOU EXPECT. It's your belief system that sets this all in motion.

Let me explain. If you don't believe that you can do something, then you will be less determined and persistent in your efforts to accomplish that task. When you run into setbacks and obstacles, (which you have to in order to be successful), you will be less likely to hang in there to see them through. WHEN YOU FAIL TO PERSIST, YOU WILL PERSIST IN FAILING! Each time you fail you will have more "evidence" or proof to support your FAULTY belief that you CAN'T. Thus you have set in motion the self-fulfilling cycle of losing!

However, if you go into any situation and believe in the back of your head that you CAN DO it, a whole different cycle is set into motion. When you fail or run into obstacles, you'll keep your determination and persist until you are successful because deep down you KNOW that you can do it! WHEN YOU PERSIST IN BEING PERSISTENT, YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO ULTIMATELY REACH THAT GOAL. This is the self-fulfilling cycle of winning because each success reinforces your CAN DO beliefs!

If there's one event or skill that always seems to push your fear buttons and frustrate you, it would be easy for you to stop believing in yourself and your ability to EVER master this particular skill. However, if you went into your next practice session and had to perform this skill, yet still BELIEVED that you couldn't do it and NEVER would be able to, your resultant apprehension and lack of persistence would insure that you would continue to stay stuck!

To become a champion, you must start by learning to believe in yourself. That's right, I said LEARN! You can learn to develop the belief of champions. THE BIRTH OF EXCELLENCE BEGINS WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU CAN CHOOSE YOUR BELIEFS. You can choose beliefs that empower you or those that hold you back! It's just like having your own garden. What you reap in terms of performance depends on what you plant, or your beliefs.

"YOUR MIND IS LIKE A GARDEN. WHAT YOU HARVEST DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU PLANT. PLANT WHEAT AND IT WILL GROW. PLANT STINK-WEED AND THAT'S WHAT YOU'LL GET."

I once spoke to a freshman wrestler on the phone who had just recently upset the defending State Champion in his weight class. The funny thing about his victory was that he didn't know WHO his opponent was before the match! NO ONE ON HIS TEAM HAD TOLD HIM THAT THIS GUY WAS UNDEFEATED AND THAT HE WAS SUPPOSED TO LOSE. This young man did NOT know how great his opponent was and so did NOT develop any negative beliefs about the outcome of his match, beliefs which would have surely held him back.

"THERE IS NOTHING THAT YOU CAN'T ACCOMPLISH IN THIS WORLD. YOU HAVE NO HANDICAPS. YOU HAVE NO LIMITATIONS. PERHAPS YOU MAY HAVE TO FIND YOUR OWN UNIQUE WAY OF DOING THINGS. IT MAY TAKE YOU LONGER THAN EVERYONE ELSE. YOU MAY HAVE TO WORK TWICE AS HARD AS EVERYONE ELSE....BUT YOU HAVE NO LIMITS"

Too many athletes are limited mentally by what they BELIEVE is possible for themselves. As a gymnast and a person, you have tremendous potential inside of you. YOU HAVE A SUPER GYMNAST INSIDE. In order to get him/her out, you must first BELIEVE that they are actually there!

A FABLE ABOUT BELIEFS AND LIMITS. Once upon a time, a farmer noticed some unusual activity behind his barn which continued for several weeks. Two huge majestic birds continually circled the area, coming and going at different times. When the farmer went to investigate, he noticed a huge nest perched at the very top of his barn. After a little research he realized that the birds were eagles.

One day he decided to try a little experiment. He snuck up to the nest, took out one of the eggs and placed it in one of his chicken coops with some other eggs in a hen's nest. Two weeks passed and all the eggs in the chicken's nest hatched, including the strange looking, larger one. All the new born chicks were then taken out by their mother to parade around the barnyard and to learn all the things that chicks need to know, i.e. how to walk like a chick, scratch for feed, peck for corn, etc. All the chicks learned their lessons well, including the huge, funny looking one that had come from that strange egg.

Months passed and the chicks grew into chickens. While they'd flap their wings and squawk a lot, they never flew because EVERYONE KNOWS that chickens can't fly. The biggest "chicken", which looked very much like an eagle, followed all the other chickens around, acting like a chicken, which is of course what he BELIEVED himself to be.

One day he was out in the middle of the barnyard scratching for feed when this majestic bird soared overhead. Everyone in the yard stopped to gawk. The big “chicken” who was really an eagle asked King Rooster, the wise old sage of the barn yard, what kind of bird could fly so powerfully and gracefully. King Rooster proudly replied, “That my son is an Eagle, the greatest bird of all!” The funny looking chicken, gazed wistfully up to the clouds and replied, “Oh how I wish I were an eagle so that I might fly like that.” Where upon King Rooster and everyone else listening began to laugh. “Don’t be silly, son”, the rooster advised, “You’re a chicken and everyone KNOWS that chicken CAN’T fly!”

And so for the rest of his life, the big, funny looking chicken stayed in the barn yard, acting like a chicken, wishing he was an eagle and never even once attempting to fly.

“BELIEF IN LIMITS CREATES LIMITED PEOPLE.” Is it easy for you to learn to believe in yourself? Like everything else I’ve been discussing in this book, it takes hard work and consistent practice. But this will be harder than most things that you have to do because it involves other people. Let me explain.

Too many athletes today are not into taking risks and going for it. These athletes are more concerned about being one of the gang socially and fitting in, than pursuing their own dreams. If you have a big goal in gymnastics, a huge dream, then the one thing you won’t be able to do is “fit in”. If you decide to really GO FOR IT, then you will set yourself apart from the majority of people your age who are heavy into being average. People that have big goals and channel their energies to work on achieving those goals usually become open targets for ridicule.

They are made fun of and put down for thinking that they can achieve THAT! It’s the High School freshman who spoke to me after one of my talks who had a dream of going to the Atlanta Olympics in “96”. His “friends” and acquaintances thought that was the most ridiculous thing they’d ever heard. It’s the 6th grader who wanted to play in the “98” World Cup and gets laughed at for dreaming so big. Or the young man who was shooting for Olympic gold on bars.

It’s very easy to be mediocre and average. It takes no particular energy nor strength to fit in with the gang. But if being average and being liked is one of your priorities, you’ll never become a winner! You have to dare to be different!

You have to BELIEVE in your dream and have the GUTS to openly pursue it.

And when you start to excel, you most likely will have to deal with the issue of other people's jealousy. This is especially true for female gymnasts more than males. When a female gymnast starts getting good, it's not at all unusual for some of her teammates to respond by turning against her, talking behind her back, excluding her from social events and doing everything in their power to make that gymnast feel badly for excelling! Why? These gymnasts may be uncomfortable with the fact that while you may really be going for it, they are NOT! When they see someone else who's really striving for excellence it makes them feel inadequate. If you are pursuing your dream, you may remind them that they aren't pursuing theirs. Their answer? They "rain on your parade" so-to-speak. The message of these mean spirited teammates is clear: "By pursuing your goals and getting better than me, you are making me feel badly about myself! Now I will make you feel badly until you stop trying so hard to be better than me!"

Understand this: If your "friends" respond to your successes in this manner, by turning against you and excluding you, then they are NOT your friends! Real friends would NEVER treat you in this manner. Instead, they would help you celebrate your successes and be inspired by them, NOT threatened by them!

5 Steps to Learning to Believe in Yourself

#1 Don't Listen to the Experts

Do not listen to anyone who tells you that you can't reach your goal. The ONLY experts that you should listen to are those who support your dream, encourage you and provide you with strategies for getting there.

In 1954 the "experts" tried to tell Roger Bannister that the human body couldn't run a mile in under 4 minutes. In the 60's they tried to tell us that we could never put a human on the moon. There were and still are many "experts" that claim that US Gymnastics can never really be a dominant force in the sport. For every dream, there are hundreds of "experts" waiting in the wings to explain why that dream CAN'T be realized.

#2 Eliminate Words Like "Can't", "Never", and "Impossible"

These words are self-limiting. Rip them out of the dictionary in your mind. When you use them on yourself you will hold yourself back. You do NOT really know what is possible in your life. Make a conscious effort on a daily basis to

rid yourself of this kind of self-limiting language. If you're going to use words like "can't" add a big YET to them. "I can't do that YET" means that up until now you haven't been able to, BUT, it's still possible in the future. Remember, the language that you use on yourself directly effects your performance and whether or not you'll achieve your goals.

#3 Practice Doing the Impossible on a Daily Basis

There are two kinds of impossibles: Impossible impossibles and possible impossibles. The impossible impossibles are things like flying, running faster than a speeding bullet, stopping a tractor trailer going 90 mph with your pinky, etc. These you can't practice without serious risk to your life. However, you CAN practice the possible impossibles. These are things that you THINK or BELIEVE that you can't do. On a daily basis you want to begin to challenge those limiting beliefs and move towards these tasks. Maybe you don't think that you can learn to move backwards with confidence, develop significant upper body strength, get over a specific fear or block, learn to stay calm under pressure or talk in front of a group. Take one thing that you THINK you can't do, and work on it EVERYDAY! It doesn't even have to have anything to do with gymnastics.

EVERY TIME YOU CHALLENGE YOUR LIMITING BELIEFS BY MOVING TOWARDS THEM, YOU WILL EXPAND THEM! After all, this is exactly the strategy that you need to use to overcome any fears or blocks that you might have. If you keep doing or moving towards that which you are afraid of, soon you will have no choice but to LOSE that fear!

#4 Surround Yourself with "Go-For-It" People

Make sure that you have people around you that totally support your dream and goal. If your friends belittle you, then think seriously about getting new ones. Reaching a big goal is hard enough as it is without having people around you throwing up obstacles. Have friends who themselves believe in pushing their own limits and pursuing excellence. That way you'll both be able to support each other.

#5 Talk To, Read About, Watch and Listen to People that Have Overcome Obstacles to Make It

You can expand your belief system by reading about or talking to other people who have done the "impossible". They will provide you with real life examples that anything is possible. If you immerse yourself in books, CDs and videos of

these kinds of people, then it will help you firm up your beliefs that YOU CAN DO IT too! The movie “Lefty” is about Carol Johnston, a one armed gymnast who ended up getting a college scholarship to a D1 program and then going on to medal at NCAA’s! This movie DRAMATICALLY shows you exactly how much is possible when you don’t believe in the impossibles!

Step #4 Champions Take Risks - The Goya Factor

The major difference between positive thinking and believing is ACTION. People who REALLY believe in themselves back that belief up with action. If you want to become a champion you have to take risks. You have to regularly practice stepping outside of your “comfort zone.” Your comfort zone or all of the things that you can easily do or handle. They don’t stretch you! Being a peak performer in and out of the gym is all about practicing GETTING COMFORTABLE, BEING UNCOMFORTABLE! You can NEVER reach your potential as a gymnast if you play it safe or cautious! You have to be willing to “go out on a limb” if you want to be able to taste the fruits of success and victory.

Too many athletes spend too much time thinking and talking about what they will do. Not enough of their energy is focused on action. Talent, ability, and the best strategies in the world will NOT help you if you never use them. Let me explain:

A few years ago I worked with a very talented figure skater who had the physical potential to compete on a national level, with the best of them. He had a great coach, a former Olympian who exposed him to all the physical and technical strategies he needed to really make it. He came to work with me so he could learn to develop mental toughness. I taught him everything I know about the mental side of performance and provided him with the skills that would help him compete successfully at the top. His coach and I covered ALL the bases to help him become a champion. All except one! HIM! He never practiced or seriously worked on any of the skills we taught him. He talked about his training a lot, how good he was going to get and how far he’d go, BUT he never took serious ACTION.

He is a classic example of the athlete with “permanent potential”. Because he failed to GOYA (GET OFF YOUR BACKSIDE), he never went anywhere. You must be willing to put yourself and your skills on the line. You must be willing to take risks! It’s your ACTIONS that will motivate you!

“DON’T WAIT TO GET MOTIVATED BEFORE YOU TAKE ACTION. TAKE ACTION AND THEN YOU’LL GET MOTIVATED!”

Step #5 Champions Use Their Failures as Stepping Stones to Success

Want to know THE most important secret to reaching your dreams? The one strategy in gymnastics and life that will guarantee you success? The mental attitude that separates the winners from losers inside and outside of sports? The answers to all three has to do with FAILURE, and how you respond to it.

I mentioned that winners regularly take risks. They put themselves on the line. They go for it! One of the very COMMON things that will always happen to you when you do this is called FAILURE. While you may have been told that you have to go out on a limb to get the fruit, you may not know that frequently when you're hanging out on that branch, you'll fall a lot.

Failure and setbacks are part of the scenery you must pass on the road to success. You know that failure is the only way that you can learn in this or any other sport. You have to fail a set number of times in the learning process before you can master any new skills. You can't reach your goals without these failures and the setbacks that frequently accompany them. Winners know this well. In fact, one of the characteristics of successful athletes is their ability to deal with failure.

Because they are willing to take more risks, champions actually fail MORE than most other athletes. However, it's their attitude towards their failures that enables them to get back on their feet and then rise to great heights. Champions view their failures as OPPORTUNITIES to learn and improve as athletes. They don't LIKE losing or failing. I've never met a champion that did. However, when they do fail or suffer some other setback, they use it as important feedback to get stronger.

You have two options available to you whenever you fail: YOU CAN GET FURIOUS OR YOU CAN GET CURIOUS!

1. You can mistakenly view the failure as evidence of your inadequacies and shortcomings. In this way you can emotionally use the failure to angrily beat yourself up and make yourself feel lousy.
2. You can get curious about what you did that didn't work and what you need to change in order to do better next time! In this way you learn from the failure by using it as feedback, as a way to improve and become a smarter, stronger gymnast and person.

If you take option #1 after your failures, then you'll be left feeling depressed, worthless and de-motivated. Setbacks and failures will be devastating for you and hang you up for long periods of time. Further, you'll be more likely to quit a quest long before you reach your goals with option #1!

If you go for option #2, then you will rebound very quickly from your setbacks. Failure will not adversely affect your self-esteem or motivation, but instead will leave you even more determined and focused to reach your goal.

Option #2 is the ONLY option for winners. You must view your setbacks as TEMPORARY, and opportunities to learn. You must get curious whenever you fail and begin to look for what you need to change/improve/work on!

Every setback or failure that you experience always has these two sides to it. You can view it as a positive or a negative. That's your CHOICE! While you may not be able to control the setback or failure, you CAN LEARN to control YOUR ATTITUDE and RESPONSE to the failure. This is even the case with injuries. Very often, an injury will temporarily sideline you and prevent you from practicing your favorite tricks or routines. Perhaps all you can do in the gym is upper body work or stretching. The injury may provide you with an unexpected, yet wonderful opportunity to focus in on and strengthen this part of your routine, getting stronger or more flexible. Or perhaps all you can work on are your mental skills. A forced layoff for 3-4 weeks will provide you with time to develop mental toughness or to sharpen your mental rehearsal and visualization skills.

Understand that a baby can ONLY learn to walk by falling ENOUGH! Each fall provides the baby's muscle memory with valuable feedback as to how to stand, balance and move. Without the repeated failures, there could be no walking. That's why I always say that ANYTHING WORTH DOING, IS WORTH DOING BADLY (at first)!

Remember, there is really only one way that you can ever fail and that's by trying something once or twice and then totally giving up!

It is ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL that you change your attitude towards failing, setbacks and losses. Even the most basic skills in this sport require hundreds of repetitions (mistakes) before mastery is possible. If you go out into the gym and are afraid of making mistakes, getting hurt or failing AGAIN, you will physically tighten yourself up and perform poorly. You perform your very best routines when you have nothing to lose and when you are NOT THINKING

ABOUT THE OUTCOME. Losing and failing are part of sports and not something to worry about. If you make a meet or qualifying so important that the thought of failing freaks you out, then you will NOT perform well nor will you reach your goals!

I once worked with a young gymnast who was stuck on her round off-back handspring-back tuck combination. She had been unable to execute this skill for over a year since she fell on her back after having gotten “lost” in the middle of her tuck. Despite the fact that her injury wasn’t a serious one, her fears of this happening again had paralyzed her and months would go by in the gym without her even attempting this skill. Even though she was perfectly able to do this tumbling pass, she was sure that she’d get lost and fall again. She had lost her confidence and aggressiveness on the floor and this kept her focus of concentration on her past accident and fears of it happening again. She was totally preoccupied with everything that she was AFRAID would happen. The real problem here of course was that her nervous system was stuck in the danger zone, leaving her feeling totally unsafe anytime she thought about doing her back tumbling.

While your focus of concentration must be on your routines and skills, in the NOW, one skill at a time, we know that this is far easier said than done if you are feeling unsafe inside. What is critical when you fail, make mistakes and balk is that you treat yourself with kindness and understanding. Getting upset with your failures and stuckness will only make you feel more unsafe inside, and therefore that much more stuck! Remember, fear and balking are a very natural part of this sport. Losing skills that you have mastered happens to a lot of gymnasts. Being afraid and balking isn’t your real problem! Your real problem? Your real problem is how you respond to your fears and balking.

Be patient, forgive yourself for being temporarily stuck and be patient with yourself. Take time to take a few steps back. Get a spot. Pile mats up next to the beam. Work on the tumble track or tramp. But most important, lose your self-directed anger! It’s uncalled for and unkind. You are afraid and balking because your nervous system is sensing danger and simply doing its’ job of keeping you safe!

CHAPTER 7

HANDLING THE PRESSURE OF COMPETITION

The foundation of mental toughness is your ability to stay calm and composed under pressure. If you can't control your level of premeet and during event nervousness, your performances will ALWAYS be inconsistent and you'll never reach your potential as a gymnast. All the talent, strength and coordination in the world won't help you if you get too uptight before you compete. Excessive nervousness will neutralize your edge and leave you physically tight and mentally tentative. This chapter is designed to teach you HOW to "read" your own level of nervousness and then HOW to handle it if you find yourself getting too uptight before or during a big meet.

The Causes of Stress

There are many things out there that can get you too uptight to perform your best. The importance of the meet, size of the crowd, size, skill, strength and reputation of your competition, the gym that you are competing in, the apparatus, JUDGES, parents, coaches, order of events, the quality of your warm-up, AND, the skills that you have been struggling with and afraid of in practice! You may THINK that these are the reasons that you start to feel nervous, that these elements are CAUSING your stress. This, however is NOT entirely the case! In relation to stress:

IT'S NOT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU OR AROUND YOU THAT'S IMPORTANT, BUT WHAT'S HAPPENING INSIDE YOU THAT COUNTS

Other gymnasts, judges, noise level or event order DON'T make you tense. Instead, it's what you SAY TO YOURSELF about these opponents, officiating

or meet conditions that is the REAL culprit in raising your anxiety level to the ceiling. The commentary of your “inner coach” is what really causes the stress reaction that you feel. How else can you explain the fact that two equally talented gymnasts can get up on beam in a high pressured meet situation and both come out with very different results. One gymnast, regardless of how big the meet is, consistently sticks her routine, while the other gymnast usually falls 2-3 times through the course of an almost identical routine. Both gymnasts face the same stressors. The difference is HOW they interpret those stressors to themselves and then HOW they deal with them!

To put it very simply:

PEOPLE, PLACES AND SITUATIONS DON'T MAKE YOU UPTIGHT, YOU MAKE YOURSELF UPTIGHT!

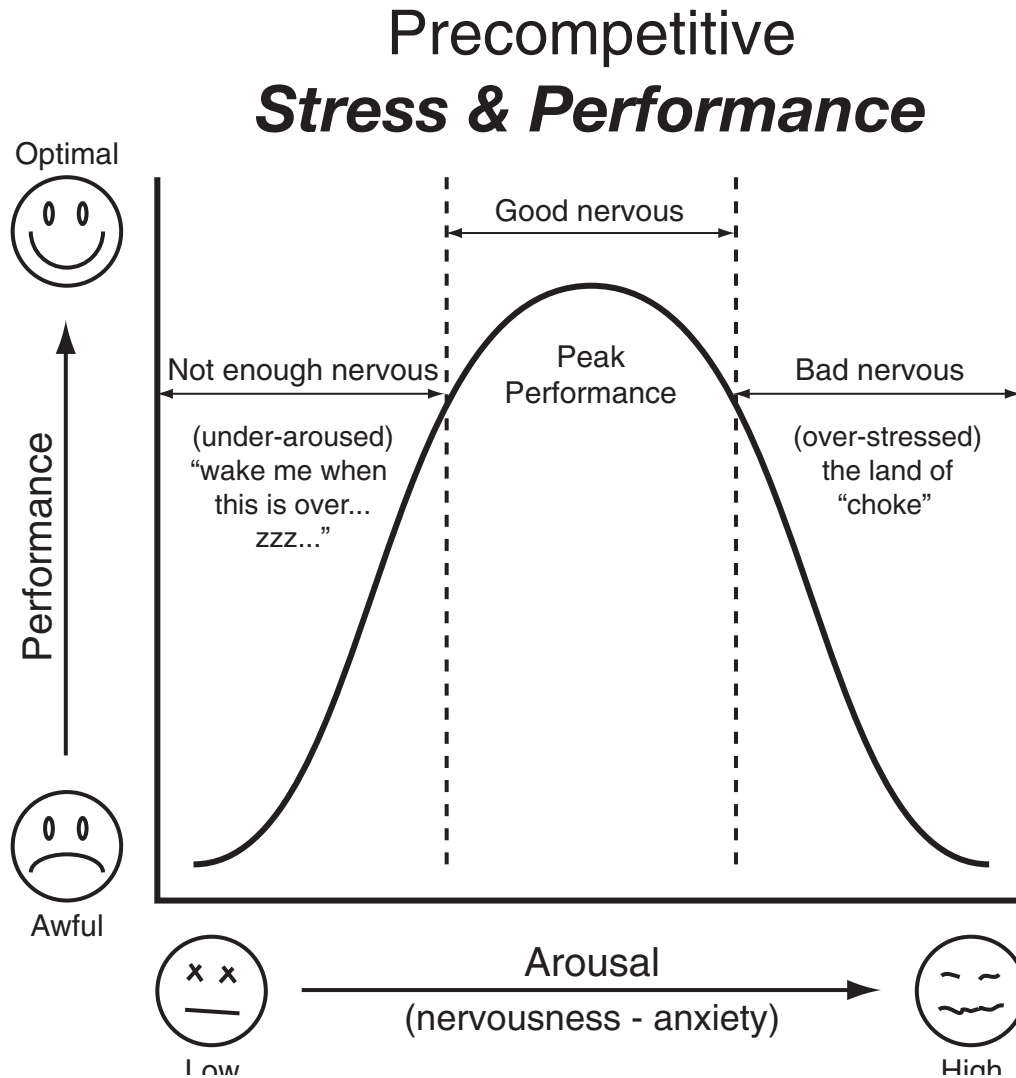
And the BIGGEST cause of choking and stress for a gymnast is when he/she tries to CONTROL THE UNCONTROLLABLES. What are the uncontrollables? The uncontrollables in a meet are all the things that are TOTALLY out of your control: The gym and meet conditions, judges, your competition and how well they do or do not perform, the size of the crowd, your score, the place that you finish in, anything in the PAST like how the last week of training has gone, the behavior of your coach etc.

If you choose to focus on, or try to “control” these uncontrollables, then you will make yourself uptight, undermine your confidence and end up performing way below your ability. This means that if a baby screams in the stands as you're about to mount the beam and you start to get distracted and upset, you are focusing on and trying to control an uncontrollable. Likewise, if you think the judges are blind and scoring unfairly and you're wasting energy thinking about them, then you are trying to control an uncontrollable. If you blow your first event in the meet and you keep thinking about it, you are focusing on the PAST, a HUGE uncontrollable.

Mentally tough gymnasts focus on the one thing that they can ALWAYS control in a meet or practice, THEMSELVES! YOU are in TOTAL control of how YOU CHOOSE to react to all of these uncontrollables.

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS AND PERFORMANCE The graph in figure # 1 shows the relationship between stress and performance. It depicts how well you perform at different levels of physiological arousal or nervousness. If you want to become a mentally tough gym-

nast, then it's your job to develop a WORKING understanding of this graph. Let me show you how:



The VERTICAL AXIS on the graph, from low to high, measures how well you are performing. If you are low on the graph you are "stinking the place out" with an awful performance. You're falling off of everything and crashing into the apparatus! If you're high on the graph, then you're "walking on water" so-to-speak and having a peak performance. Everything's clean, tight, powerful and whatever you do, you STICK it!

The HORIZONTAL AXIS from left to right measures how nervous or stressed out you are. If you are way over on the left side of the graph, you're not ner-

vous at all. That is, you're so relaxed that you're basically "out to lunch!" As you progressively move to the right, your anxiety level gradually increases. When you are way over on the right side of the graph, then you are having a full blown anxiety attack, totally freaking!

The graph shows that as you get nervous premeet, pre-event or pre-practice, your level of performance improves. If you continue to add stress, your performance reaches a peak. And if you continue to add stress, then your routines begin to disintegrate right before your eyes and head down the old "tubes".

On the graph I've marked off 3 different kinds of nervousness: Good, Bad, and Not Enough Nervous. It is important for you to understand that EVERY GYMNAST IS NERVOUS BEFORE A BIG MEET. Some nervousness is important for you to get mentally and physically up to perform your best. However, you have to make sure that you are at the "right" amount of nervousness for you. If you're "not enough" nervous, your routines will be flat and uninspired. If you're into "bad nervous," you'll be physically too tight to execute well. You have to be into good nervous in order to stick your routines. How can you tell the difference?

Bad Nervousness is what I've been talking about when I said your nervous system gets over-activated and goes into the "Red Zone." That is, you sense an inner danger and you end up reflexively freezing as a self-protective response to that danger. Any time you can't get yourself to go for skills, when you blank out in the middle of a routine or skill, then you are over-amped in Bad Nervous!

Reading Your Own Nervousness

Every gymnast in your gym has the performance arousal curve working for him or her. However, everyone is different. Every athlete responds differently to pressure. What stresses one gymnast into "bad" nervousness gets a second gymnast into "good" nervous and doesn't get a third gymnast out of "not enough" nervous. It's therefore critical for you as an athlete to be able to "read" your own levels of nervousness and to be able to clearly tell the difference between all three. As a coach, you must be able to do this with each of the gymnasts on your team.

If, for example, you know that you are into "bad" nervousness before a meet or that all important beam routine, then you can do something constructive to calm yourself down or "de-activate" your nervous system before your performance suffers. AWARENESS IS THE KEY!

There are three ways that you experience anxiety or nervousness, and therefore three ways that you can read your level of preperformance nervousness:

1. Physiologically (physical changes in your body)
2. Mentally (changes in your thoughts, self-talk and focus)
3. Behaviorally (changes in how you act)

As you begin to get nervous, **PHYSICALLY** your body immediately responds with increased heart and pulse rate, faster and shallower breathing, tighter muscles, butterflies in your stomach and/or feelings of nausea, cold hands and feet, dry mouth, increased sweating, frequent yawning and an urge to urinate. Further, the blood flow leaves your extremities (hands and feet) and you're left with coldness in your fingers and toes. **MENTALLY**, your thoughts have a tendency to speed up, you experience difficulty concentrating or you tend to focus on the wrong things, you become critical of yourself and others, you begin to entertain self-doubts and fears, and you find yourself locking your concentration in on the source of your anxiety. As you get nervous your **BEHAVIORS** also change. You may stop moving and sit quietly, you may start jumping around and talking non-stop. You may get very serious or very giddy. You may become hostile or angry, or you may engage in nervous habits or superstitious rituals.

All of these changes are neither good or bad. They are simply indicators of what happens to you when your nervous system gets activated and you start feeling that. Your job is to figure out which of these changes are associated with good nervous, bad nervous and not enough nervous. That way you'll be in a position to change your arousal level if necessary.

Exercise #1 Discovering "Good Nervous"

The purpose of this first exercise is to help you get to know **YOUR** preperformance signs of good nervous, that is, what happens physically, mentally and behaviorally for you when you are into "good" nervous. By recognizing what thoughts, feelings and behaviors lead you to great performances, you can then more easily identify the preperformance state that you need to achieve to produce your best efforts both in practice and at meets.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you will be undisturbed for a period of 5-15 minutes. Have a paper and pencil handy. Think back to the last time you had a great meet, where you were **REALLY** pleased with your routines and

performances. Close your eyes and mentally take yourself back to this place, but just before it began. See, hear and feel in as much detail right NOW, everything that you did back then.

- A) Examine the PHYSICAL sensations in your body. What were you feeling just before the meet and/or those great routines? If you had butterflies, where were they in your body? What did your arms and legs feel like? Did you feel sick to your stomach? Did you feel tired or energized? Were you yawning a lot? How about your breathing? Take a few minutes to jot down all of the physical sensations that you noticed went with these signs of "good" nervous.
- B) Next examine what was going on MENTALLY premeet and pre-event. What was the dialogue of your inner coach? What kind of self-talk were you aware of? What were you focused on? Did you entertain self-doubts? Were you looking forward to the start of the meet? Now write down what you can remember to be these mental signs of "good" nervous.
- C) Finally, how did you BEHAVE or ACT before the meet? Did you sit quietly or jump around? Did you listen to music, joke with teammates or talk about the meet or things totally unrelated to gymnastics? What kind of little rituals did you engage in? Write down all the behavioral signs of good nervous.
- D) Repeat A-C examining several other great meets or events that you've had.

Exercise #2 Discovering "Bad" Nervousness

Like the above exercise, the purpose of this one is to help you develop an awareness of your preperformance level of activation. Specifically this exercise will help you begin to recognize the physical, mental and behavioral signs of "bad" nervous or "over-activation." Knowing that you are slipping into bad nervousness will allow you to utilize one or more relaxation control techniques in this chapter to bring you back to "good" nervousness and optimal performance.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you'll be undisturbed for 5-15 minutes. Like the first exercise, have a pencil and paper nearby. Think back to the last time you had a particularly AWFUL meet or upsetting practice, a time when you felt totally frustrated and disappointed in how you performed. A time when your poor performance was directly related to being TOO nervous.

Close your eyes and mentally return to this time, seeing, hearing and feeling in as much detail as possible all that went on then.

- A) Examine the PHYSICAL sensations in your body that were associated with “bad” nervousness. What did you feel in your arms or legs? Were you overly tired? Did you feel sick to your stomach? Were you physically tight and if so, where? Did you have butterflies flying around? Write down all the physical signs of bad nervousness
- B) What was going on MENTALLY before this meet or event? What were you telling yourself? What were you focusing on? If your mind was racing, what was it racing over? What expectations did you have that day? Were you dreading a particular routine or skill, or hoping the meet would end before it started? Write down all of the mental signs of “bad” nervousness.
- C) How did you ACT premeet or pre-event? Did you hang out with teammates or stay to yourself? Were you joking around or acting angry or upset? Were you moving around pre-event or sitting quietly? Jot down all the behavioral signs of “bad” nervousness.
- D) Repeat A-C examining several other performances that you’d rather forget in which you choked or did poorly because of your fear or nerves.

NOTE: If you are the kind of gymnast who performs poorly because you are underaroused or into “not enough” nervous, repeat this exercise using steps A-D and examining meets where your performances suffered because of this.

Exercise #3 Compare and Contrast

Take a few minutes now just to review the differences you’ve discovered between “good”, “bad”, and (if appropriate) “not enough” nervous. If you examined several meets/practices in each category you should begin to see a pattern developing. “Bad” nervous looks, feels and sounds differently than “good” nervous. In the beginning the differences may even seem slight or very subtle. If you are patient and look carefully at your performances in this way, soon you will be able to quickly recognize the thoughts, physical sensations and behaviors that represent all three kinds of preperformance nervousness.

Coping with Bad Nervous

If you are too nervous before an event, you won’t perform to your potential. If you know that you are into “bad” nervous, what is needed are some ways to

calm yourself down so that you can get back in control. This section will present a number of relaxation strategies that, IF PRACTICED, will help you turn “bad” nervous into “good” nervous.

Coping Strategy #1

Tracking” Your Activation Level

As I discussed in Chapter 2, one of the most effective ways of learning to master your level of over-activation is by “tracking” or following the “felt sense” part of your nervousness. “Felt sense” is what we notice going on inside our body when we are nervous as opposed to our thoughts or the images that we make in our mind: Felt sense = The increased heart rate, faster shallower breathing, funny feelings in our stomach, physical tension in various parts of our body, shaking, tingling, twitching, etc.

The way our nervous systems works is in waves of activation and deactivation. When you get nervous or activated, your nervous system has a built in tendency towards equilibrium or balance. That is, your nervous system wants to follow the activation with deactivation or calming down. What will help your nervous system accomplish this balancing act is by allowing your attention to go inside your body to the felt sense, the inner feelings of nervousness, and then simply tracking wherever those sensations go. When you do this, the sensations may increase, decrease, stay the same or change to something else, but eventually, the activation will calm down within a period of 2 -3 minutes.

Unfortunately most athletes ignore what they're feeling inside or get scared by it and try to get away from those uncomfortable feelings. In doing this, they end up following their thoughts instead. For example, let's say that you have to do a back tumbling pass and you're starting to feel afraid. Your heart rate increases and you get butterflies in your stomach. And then the thinking starts: “What if I get lost inside that back tuck again.” A problem always arises when you get scared and you follow your thoughts: Your fear and activation will increase! “If I get lost, I could land on my neck again. I could get really, seriously hurt. That was really scary the last time that happened. Oh my God! What if it happens again?”

While you can't stop yourself from thinking, you can learn to allow those thoughts to just pass through your mind and instead, get much more interested in the physical feelings of the nervousness inside of your body. Once mastered, this is a powerful way for you to calm yourself down out of bad nervous!

Coping Strategy #2

Act As If" You Are "Good" Nervous

One of the first things that you can do to help you stay calm under stress, especially at a big meet, is to try to repeat all the signs of "good" nervous before you perform. For example, if before your very best performances you went off by yourself, focused on your routine, and used mental rehearsal, then be sure to do this before every meet/event. However, if sitting by yourself and concentrating on your event causes you to get too uptight, (and you know that bouncing off the walls, joking around with teammates and having non-gymnastics related thoughts causes you to perform well), then make sure you're hanging around with teammates and NOT discussing the meet before it starts. Even if you're uptight before a meet, try repeating the self-talk and behaviors that accompany "good" nervous.

Coping Strategy #3 Simulation

The BEST way to learn how to handle competitive pressures is on a daily basis in PRACTICE. If you are use to practicing under stress, then you will perform well under pressure. This is the concept of STATE BOUND LEARNING. If you understand this concept it will help you excel when the heat of competition is turned up high.

State bound learning is easily explained by the following experiment: Psychologists took rats and put them in an inebriated state, i.e. they got them drunk. Once in this state the rats were taught to run a maze. As long as the rats were in this drunken state, they knew the maze well. However, once the rats got sober, a different state, they could no longer figure the maze out. Once back in the drunken state they were again able to remember their teachings and run the maze.

Most athletes practice in a different mental/emotional state than exists in competitions. In practice they are relaxed and rarely pressured. However, big meet situations present an entirely different mental/emotional state. The best coaches and gymnasts in this sport intuitively understand the concept of state bound learning. They make sure that their practices simulate as closely as possible the physical and mental stressors that are presented in meets.

Simulation is based on the idea that anything familiar, that we're used to, helps us feel calmer. That is, anything that you have to confront day after

day will ultimately become so familiar to you that it will no longer cause you stress. It's the UNEXPECTED that will knock you off center and cause you to freak out. That's why it's so important to move towards your fears and blocks rather than away from them. By integrating competitive elements into your practice sessions, by trying to simulate meet pressures as much as possible, you will best train yourself to handle the heat of competition.

This is the concept of ETU. i.e. EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. If you can anticipate the kinds of things that would normally psych you out, and then practice (mentally and physically) successfully handling them, you will not get knocked off center when they occur. If big crowds or a lot of distractions have a tendency to get to you, try to practice (or imagine yourself practicing) in front of a crowd or with a lot of distractions. If you have a tendency to stress out when you make mistakes or fall, practice rebounding quickly whenever these situations occur in the gym. Maybe you can even have the coach arrange a "crowd" to watch your routines if this gets you uptight. If you feel that you don't ever compete well if you don't get to do certain things in your pre-event warm-up, then practice deliberately leaving those things out and doing your routines.

There are no limits to how much you can use simulation to help you prepare for any pressured situation when the simulation is MENTAL. Many gymnasts will pretend that various practice routines that they go through in the home gym are really being done at important meets, or they will take the simulation home with them and imagine these meet situations over and over again. They will "experience" themselves confronting any stressor and successfully handling it.

Simulation is all about perfect practice. IT'S PERFECT PRACTICE OR PRACTICE THAT BEST PREPARES YOU FOR COMPETITION, THAT MAKES PERFECT. Just going through the motions in the gym is nowhere near as effective as if you make those motions important. Assign some meaning to what you are doing. Create a tough meet situation in your mind's eye. Being mindless whenever you practice and just going through the physical motions will not help you get the most out of your practice time.

Coping Strategy #4

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR) I mentioned before that relaxation is a foundation skill in mental toughness training. It helps you handle the pressure of competition, cools your body down in between and after big meets, enables you to maintain the right focus of concentration and properly

prepares you for the use of mental rehearsal. Without the ability to relax, you can never reach your potential as a gymnast.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION is a foundation skill in relaxation training. It teaches you not only HOW to relax, but also how to RECOGNIZE exactly where you put tension in your body. It's an easy skill to teach as a coach and with practice, an easy skill to learn as a gymnast. Like any of the relaxation skills that follow, mastery comes from regular practice. Coaches should plan on spending 20-25 minutes of two practices in the BEGINNING of the season to teach gymnasts this skill in a group setting. Athletes should then take it upon themselves to practice PMR every night before bedtime for approximately two weeks. After this period of time you will be able to streamline the exercise and relax very quickly.

In PMR, you work your way through the muscle groupings of your body alternating contraction or tightening with relaxation. You should hold the tension in each muscle group for 10 seconds and be sure that contraction is no more than 90% of your strength. Remember to maintain relaxation in all other muscles except the ones being tightened.

PREPARATION:

Allow 20-25 minutes for each PMR session in an environment that is free from distractions. You may want to take the following directions and make your own relaxation recording. Slowly record the following script, allowing 10 seconds for each contraction and 10 seconds for each release. You can even get creative and plug in relaxing music in the background as you record it. Lie comfortably on your back, feet spread about 18" apart, hands by your sides, palms up. Close your eyes.

STICKING IT

PROCEDURE:

1. Begin to tighten all the muscles up and down your right leg until you reach 90% tension... Pointing the toes either toward or away from your head will help you increase tension. Raising the leg one half inch off the ground also helps to tighten muscles. Hold the leg tension for 10 seconds...Hold it... Study the tension... Feel it.
2. Now repeat to yourself, the words, "let go," and as you do, ever so gradually allow the leg muscles to relax, letting the tension flow out onto the floor, bed or surface you're lying on... Feel the difference in your leg now...Inhale slowly and deeply, filling your abdomen, pause,...and then exhale comfortably...
3. Repeat the entire procedure for your right leg again, noting the difference between being tight in that area and loose...End by inhaling deeply and exhaling.
4. Next, tighten all the muscles up and down your left leg and hold the tension for 10 seconds...Hold it...Study the tension...Hold it...Now repeat to yourself, "let go" and again, let the tension ever so slowly drain from the left leg. Note the sensations that accompany the growing relaxation...the heaviness, warmth,...tingling,...lightness or other feelings that are associated with looseness. Inhale slowly...pause...and then exhale...
5. Now repeat the entire procedure for your left leg again...doing everything that you just did in step #4...then inhale slowly and comfortably...pause...and then exhale slowly...
6. Now tighten your buttocks muscles to 90% tension and hold it...Become aware of the feelings of tension...Hold it...Now repeat those words, "let go" as you let the tension slowly drain from this area...Feel the looseness here. Inhale...pause...exhale.
7. And once again, repeat step #6 for your buttocks muscles...Inhale...exhale.
8. Next, tighten your abdominal muscles noting the sensations of tension here. Hold it...Study it...Hold it...then "let go" and allow the tension to flow from this area. Feel the difference. Study it closely...Inhale...then exhale.
9. Repeat step #8 procedure for the abdominal muscles. Inhale...exhale.

10. Tighten all the muscles of the chest and across the back of the shoulders by pushing your shoulder blades back and into the floor and your chest out. Feel the tension,...study it,...Hold it...now "let go" and feel the relaxation as it flows into this part of your body. Inhale comfortably and slowly and then exhale...
11. Repeat entire procedure for your chest and shoulders. inhale...pause...exhale.
12. Now tense the muscles of both arms by slowly making fists and increasing the tension to 90%. Notice the feelings of tension up and down the arms. Hold it... Study it...and then say those words, "Let go" and allow the tension to drain down your arms from your shoulders to your fingertips. Inhale...pause...exhale.
13. Repeat entire procedure for both arms, becoming aware of the sensations that accompany tension and relaxation. Inhale...pause...exhale.
14. Next, tense the muscles in your neck by pressing down with your head into the surface that you are resting on. Notice the tension in this area. Feel it,...hold it...study it...then "let go" and allow the tightness to slowly drain from your neck. Study the difference here. Inhale...pause...exhale.
15. Repeat procedure for the neck. Inhale...pause...exhale.
16. Tighten your jaw muscles by clenching your teeth together. Note the feelings of tightness in this area. Feel it,...hold it...then "let go" and allow the tension to drain from your jaws. Inhale...pause...exhale.
17. Repeat entire procedure for jaw muscles. Inhale...pause...exhale.
18. Tense the muscles in your entire face...grimace, frown, clench your teeth. Hold the tension and feel what that is like...Hold it...study it...then, "Let go" and allow all the facial muscles to relax and soften. Feel the difference. Inhale...pause...exhale.
19. Repeat procedure for face. Inhale...pause...exhale.
20. Tighten all the muscles in your body to 90% tension—Your arms, legs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck, face and feel the tension. Hold it for 10 seconds and then "let go" and slowly allow your body to become totally loose and limp. Inhale...pause...exhale.

21. Repeat procedure for entire body. Inhale...pause...exhale.
22. If any areas of your body remain tense, focus on them by tightening, holding the tension, then letting go.

Understand that you must first practice the skill of relaxation in a non-stressful environment in order to effectively learn it so that it will hold up under pressure. Trying to practice under stress, any skill that you haven't yet mastered is an exercise that's always doomed to fail! However, once you have gotten proficient at PMR in a non-stressful environment, you will have the ability to quickly relax yourself anywhere.

DEVELOPING A RELAXATION CUE—TRANSFERRING YOUR RELAXATION TO THE GYM

Once you have learned any technique to lower your level of stress, you can develop a relaxation CUE to help you quickly recapture those feelings of calm. A relaxation cue is a personal symbol or reminder that you can use to help you calm yourself quickly and effectively regardless of the environment. When you are under stress, simply focusing on or repeating that cue will be sufficient to help you get back in control. At the end of your PMR practice (or any other), focus on the feelings of relaxation in your body. While you are feeling these sensations, allow yourself to come up with a cue or symbol that you will use to represent these relaxed feelings. Your symbol can be a word, "cool", "calm", "chill", "loose" etc.; a phrase like "let go", "I'm in charge", "I'm calm and collected", etc.; a color, light blue, pink, sea green,; an image, a wave, beach, lake, mountain, etc.; or a kinesthetic feeling in your body. Once you've picked out a cue, WHILE you are still relaxed do the following: Inhale and focus on the relaxation, exhale and focus on your cue....Inhale and feel the relaxation, exhale and repeat that cue to yourself. End EVERY relaxation session with 10-12 slow breaths where you focus on your relaxation cue while you feel those relaxed sensations.

Coping Strategy #5

Autogenic Training (AT)

Certain physical sensations regularly accompany a relaxed state: heaviness or lightness in arms and legs, a feeling of warmth in the limbs, slower heart beat, slower and more even respiration, and a coolness in the forehead. Because your thoughts have a tremendous influence over your body, it is

possible to control how relaxed or tense you are by what you say to yourself. AT is the ability to create a state of physical relaxation on cue. By repeatedly giving yourself suggestions in order, you can, with practice, control your physiological responses—including heartbeat, blood pressure, respiration and body temperature—to achieve a relaxed state under big meet pressure. In the beginning, you may need to spend 15-20 minutes per session. With practice, like PMR, you will be able to completely relax on demand in less than a minute.

PREPARATION:

Find a quiet place that's free from distractions. Sit comfortably, back straight, feet flat on the floor, arms uncrossed. You will do each of the five steps in sequence. Have a clock handy to time yourself. Read over the instructions for each step before you do it so that the phrases will be clear in your mind. Close your eyes and try to develop a PASSIVE, LET-IT-HAPPEN attitude as opposed to a FORCING, MAKE-IT-HAPPEN one. Initially you may not be able to achieve some or all of the desired feelings. This is quite natural and to be expected as part of the learning process. DO NOT respond by TRYING HARDER!

PROCEDURE:

1. HEAVINESS OF THE LIMBS. Repeat over and over for about 4 minutes, "my hands are beginning to feel very heavy...they are feeling heavier and heavier...my arms are feeling heavier and heavier...my legs and feet are feeling heavier and heavier...I can feel the heaviness moving up and down my arms and legs... heavier and heavier"
2. WARMTH IN THE LIMBS. Repeat over and over again for about 4 minutes, "My hands are beginning to feel warm...they are feeling warmer and warmer...the warmth is spreading up my arms...warmer and warmer...my legs and feet are feeling warmer and warmer."
3. CARDIAC REGULATION. Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, "My heart is becoming slower and more regular...it is becoming slower and more consistent...my heart beat is becoming very regular and very slow"
4. BREATHING REGULATION. Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, "My breathing is becoming slower and more regular...slower and slower...slow and regular"
5. COOLNESS IN THE FOREHEAD. Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, "My forehead is beginning to feel cool...it is feeling cooler and cooler", etc.

Coping Strategy #6

Breathing Exercises

One of the first places that stress hits you physiologically is in your breathing. As you begin to experience that stressful situation, your breathing begins to speed up and get shallower. When you are relaxed, your breath is deep and slow and in your diaphragm. With increasing stress, your respiration begins to speed up and move upward in your chest until, under extreme stress, you have a tendency to either hyperventilate or hold your breath. I have seen far too many gymnasts fall apart in the middle of their routines because they were so uptight that they forgot to breathe as they went through it! Now I realize that this may sound silly, but if you've ever "choked" before, perhaps you can relate to what I'm saying. Too shallow breathing kills your endurance, weakens your body strength and makes concentration impossible. Further, if you happen to hold your breath as you attempt a trick, your muscles will be much tighter than they would be if you were breathing normally or exhaling on execution.

Probably the FASTEST way for you to get yourself or a gymnast back in control is to change the rate and depth of breathing. By taking slow, diaphragmatic breaths when you're in a tense situation you will be able to calm yourself quickly and effectively. If you have practiced one of the following exercises you will be even more successful at accomplishing this task.

1) Breath Control Training

Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, arms uncrossed in a space that is free from distractions. Allow 5 minutes practice time for this exercise. Close your eyes and shift your focus of concentration to your breathing. Inhale to a slow count of 4, pause, then exhale to a slightly faster count of 7 or 8. As you inhale be sure that you are filling up your abdominal area. To insure this, you may want to place one hand on your diaphragm and feel it rise and fall with your breathing. Repeat this process of inhaling to a slow 4 count and exhaling to the 8 count. Every time that you find your mind drifting, quickly and gently bring yourself back to your breathing and INTERNAL counting.

2) Breath By 3

Preparation and practice time are the same as #1. Inhale to a slow count of three...pause to a slow count of three...exhale to a slow count of three...pause to a slow count of three. Continue this sequence for the 5 minute period

focusing on your breathing and counting. It is not necessary in this exercise to deliberately deepen your breathing. Be sure that you are quick to catch yourself drifting and return to your breathing and counting focus.

3) Breathing Meditation

Preparation and practice time are the same as #1. For this exercise, you focus your concentration on your breathing. You can keep your attention on the rise and fall of your diaphragm or on the air going into and out of your nose and mouth. Your breathing is NOT altered at all for this exercise. Distractions should be handled as in #1 and #2. Mentally, this exercise involves simply “watching” your breathing.

Coping Strategy #7 Music

Many gymnasts have learned to handle the pressure of big meet competitions by listening to certain kinds of music before the meet starts. Music can have a powerful effect on your level of arousal. Soft, classical music can soothe you and calm you down while fast-paced rock or rap can pump you up. You can use music by actually listening to some or by simply putting a tune in your head. Oftentimes music will be more effective in raising or lowering your arousal levels if you have picked it out ahead of time and have used it frequently. If you always play the same soft music in the background while you are doing any of the above relaxation techniques, that music by itself will very quickly calm you down under stress.

Coping Strategy #8 Visualization

Many gymnasts use their imagination to help them manage the negative effects of stress. They mentally leave the stressful environment and “go” to a relaxing place in their mind’s eye. For example, one gymnast will spend the tension filled premeet time “at the beach” in her mind’s eye. This is where she feels safe and relaxed. Another gymnast will mentally go to a special “relaxation room” just before he does his floor routine and P-Bars. In his “room” he’s able to mentally shut the door to any distractions or attempts to psych him out. A third gymnast takes himself to his home gym which is empty and where there is no tension.

By mentally leaving the stressful environment and mentally going to a FAMILIAR and COMFORTABLE place, you can effectively calm yourself down at practice, premeet or in between events. What’s critical here is that you REGULARLY spend time PRACTICING going to these relaxing places. This is the ONLY way that they will work for you when you need them.

PREPARATION:

Find a quiet place that's free from distractions where you will be undisturbed for 10-15 minutes. Sit or lie comfortably making sure that your arms and legs are uncrossed. Close your eyes and using your imagination and/or memory, mentally take yourself to a relaxing place. SEE, HEAR and FEEL in as much detail as possible, what it's like to be in this "resource" place. What familiar things can you see? Are there colors or movement that you can make out? What's the lighting like? What kinds of sounds if any are a part of this place? Are they loud or soft? Close to you or far away? What kind of feelings are you aware of in this place? Can you feel the warmth of the sun on part of your body, or maybe a gentle breeze blowing against your skin? You may even want to "construct" a door or passageway to this relaxing place that you can close off to everyone and everything else.

Spend time nightly for 10 – 15 minutes going to this mental resource place of yours and experiencing in as much detail as possible, being there and feeling calm and confident. This practice will lay the groundwork for your resource place to be "open" to you when you need it the most, when you're feeling anxious!

Premeet/Preperformance Coping Strategies

The above exercises will help you develop the master skill of relaxation. With sufficient practice you will soon be able to keep yourself calm and composed regardless of the pressure of the moment. For these techniques to consistently work for you it is critical that you practice them regularly, long BEFORE you find yourself in that stressful meet situation. Pick any two of these to really develop as your own.

#1 Focus on What You Want to Have Happen Not What You are Afraid Will Happen

Keep your practice and meet focus on exactly WHAT you want to do and HOW you want to do it! If you focus on what you are afraid might happen then you'll not only distract yourself, but you'll also stress yourself out more. Gymnasts who get stuck and blocked do so because, more often than not, before they go, all they think about is what they are afraid might happen. In getting ready to do a tumbling pass, your focus should be on what you're doing and what you have to do with your body to execute properly, NOT on what if you get lost in the middle and land on your back!

#2 Concentrate on Performing Your Best, Not on Your Score or Winning

If you want to perform to your potential and perhaps win, you must be sure that you DO NOT concentrate on winning. Your competition focus of attention should never be on how important the meet is or what's at stake, but on what you have to DO to perform well. Your focus should ALWAYS be on the PROCESS of the meet, NOT on the OUTCOME. The process is what is going on at any given moment as you perform. If you are waiting for the judges to signal their readiness, your focus should be on staying loose, centered and what you have to do to execute well, NOT on missing your dismount or what score you NEED! If you concentrate on the second by second, skill by skill process of your performance, then you'll ALWAYS maximize your chances of having a peak performance.

#3 Control the Controllables

Related to #2, be sure that you keep your focus on what you CAN control. If your floor score is questionable and you're convinced that the judges are blind or totally unfair, forget it! You can't control them! If your opponents seem to resemble Olympic gymnasts in skill and strength level, FORGET them and shift your focus back to what you can control, YOUR OWN PERFORMANCE. Remember, trying to control ANY uncontrollable will only get you more up-tight, undermine your confidence and spoil your meet.

#4 Let Your Mistakes Go Quickly

Dwelling on mistakes, which is a HUGE uncontrollable, will stress you out of the practice or meet. When you mess up, your job is to mentally let it go quickly and get yourself back into the practice or meet. If you have a bad warm-up let it go. It doesn't necessarily have to negatively affect your meet. If you slip in the middle of one of your routines, mentally get back quickly! Dwelling on the past and your mistakes will NOT get you to perform better. Learn from your mistakes and then quickly let them go.

#5 Tighten and Release

This is a quick version of the PMR exercise above. If you can feel tension in your arms, legs or back before an event, a quick way to let this tension go is to deliberately tighten those tense muscles even more, hold the tension for 10-15 seconds, focus on the tension there and then let it go. Repeating this 2-3 times with any tight muscles will usually help you let go of the tension before it's too late.

#6 Stretch

If you're mentally uptight before a practice or meet, physically stretch. Stretching will help you release a great deal of tension from your body and therefore will help you get back in control mentally. Many gymnasts work in stretching to their preperformance rituals to help them stay calm and focused pre-event. However what is critical here is that you don't just stretch, but you stretch with awareness! This means that while you stretch physically, you want your entire focus of concentration on what you are DOING and NOT on what you are THINKING! You want to feel the stretch in your body and completely get absorbed in that rather than what your thoughts might be about what's coming up or who's around you.

#7 Have Fun

If you want to become the best gymnast that you are capable of, the one word that will help you do just that is FUN. You will ALWAYS perform your best when you're having fun. If you make the meet or practice SO important and SO scary that you get too serious, then your performance will suffer. GUARANTEED! This is one of the main reasons that so many gymnasts fall apart under the pressure of important meets. Whether you are practicing in the gym or competing in a major championship, having fun will insure that you stay loose and perform your best. Winners go into their meets knowing this. DON'T WAIT UNTIL YOU PERFORM WELL BEFORE YOU HAVE FUN. HAVE FUN FIRST AND THEN YOU'LL PERFORM WELL.

For many gymnasts, joking around or laughing with friends before the meet or event helps them stay loose. Thinking about the importance of the meet and what will happen if they fail or perform poorly gets them uptight. If you are this kind of gymnast, let yourself really enjoy the meet, your teammates AND the competition! Having fun and laughing (as long as it doesn't distract you from your routines) premeet and pre-event will help you consistently do your best.

Coping With "Not Enough Nervous"

If you or your teammates go into a meet under-aroused, that is you are TOO confident, TOO cocky, or just don't care, then chances are you could be heading for a huge fall (no pun intended). The OVER confident gymnast is a vulnerable athlete and rarely will he/she perform to his/her potential. Bad performances in the gym will frequently happen when the stronger gymnast or team goes into the meet on the wrong side of the curve, in "not enough nervous."

This is similar to the gymnast who does NOT have enough fear in the gym. FEAR IS HEALTHY (to a degree). It keeps you alert, focused and insures that you use the right amount of caution as you attempt particular skills. Without fear or the proper amount of arousal, there is a good chance that you will not pay enough attention to what you're doing, and thus be vulnerable to injury.

Go into a performance too calm and at best your routines will be totally lifeless and uninspired, at worst you'll bomb and possibly get hurt in the process! If you recognize that you are into "not enough nervous" before a meet there are some things that you can do to get yourself back up on the curve:

Psych-Up Strategies

#1 Change Your Self-Talk

If you are unlike most gymnasts and your poor performances are a result of being in "not enough nervous" then it's important for you to find a way to increase the importance of the competition. One way to do this is by changing the things that you say to yourself about the meet. Inner comments like: "this will be a cake walk" and "here comes a real no-brainer" will not exactly get you nervous or pumped. Instead you need to challenge yourself: "These are the kinds of meets that can easily get away from you mentally," "Last year we got upset by a team just like this one", etc. Your task here is very clear: Make yourself or your athletes more anxious! Increase the pressure!

#2 Change Your Goals for the Meet

If the outcome of the meet is obvious before it starts, then DON'T have winning as a goal. Challenge yourself with other performance related individual and/or team goals. i.e. achieving a certain personal score; competing more difficult tricks; qualifying for your next level; having clean routines, etc. Set up ahead of time a way to challenge and stretch your yourself and your performance that is totally unrelated to the outcome of the meet.

#3 Build Up the Mental Importance of the Meet

You may have your competition beat on paper. Your athletes may be the physically and technically superior ones. There may be little to no real physical challenge for you or your teammates in this meet. Your challenge, instead is a MENTAL one. These are the very hardest meets to get up for mentally. Performing against weaker teams makes you vulnerable to lapses in intensity and concentration. You may not respect the physical challenge presented by your competition. Respect the mental one! Go into the meet and keep your focus

here. Remember, your toughest opponent in this sport ALWAYS lies within. This is an opportunity to work on your own mental toughness!

#4 Use Simulation to Change the Meet and Increase the Challenge

One way to get yourself “up” for a lop-sided contest is to view it as a rehearsal for a much bigger meet. You have to use your imagination here and see this meet as a warm-up against a much tougher opponent. View every meet situation that evolves as a test. Challenge yourself the way you know you will be challenged by other more talented gymnasts. Keep your intensity up for every event. Imagine how stronger opponents would compete against you. “Forget” who you are actually performing against and instead compete against that much tougher opponent.

#5 Get Yourself Physically “Up”

One way to increase your level of arousal is by increasing your physical movements premeet. When you’re not up for a competition there is a tendency to get physically lethargic, to sit or lie around before you perform, to move slowly, etc. Counteract this by acting “hyper”. Stand-up, jump around, get physically “hyper”. In warm-ups push yourself hard. Don’t let your mental lethargy get into you physically. If you can get physically up, your level of emotional arousal will also rise.

CHAPTER 8

DEVELOPING CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION

Your ability to FOCUS in on what's important and LET GO of every thing else is absolutely essential to your reaching your potential as a gymnast. If you can't handle the pressure of performance or if you concentrate on the wrong things at the wrong time, then you'll never become a winner!

CONCENTRATION is one of THE key mental skills responsible for athletic excellence. A mentally tough gymnast is someone who knows HOW to concentrate and can do it under pressure. Most any time a gymnast struggles performance wise, especially when they're under pressure, the main cause of their struggles is having a faulty focus either before and during their event! Show me a gymnast who is paralyzed by fears and blocks and I'll show you an athlete who has the wrong focus of concentration. Show me a gymnast who seems to always fall apart during those big meets or who easily gets intimidated or psyched out and I'll show you someone whose focus of concentration DIRECTLY causes their problems!

Like every other skill area in this workbook, concentration can be learned and fine tuned with sufficient and proper practice. Remember, in order to develop any skill area, your very first step is to become aware of what you are doing RIGHT NOW that may be getting you into trouble. This is where we'll start. But first, let's find out what concentration is all about:

CONCENTRATION IS A TWO PART SKILL: #1 - YOU MUST FIRST BE AWARE AND CATCH YOURSELF WHEN YOU ARE MENTALLY LOSING YOUR FOCUS. #2 - YOU MUST QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO WHAT'S IMPORTANT!

STICKING IT

CONCENTRATION IS A PARADOXICAL SKILL. You learn to concentrate by catching yourself when you are NOT concentrating and then immediately bringing yourself back.

CONCENTRATION IS A PASSIVE, LET-IT-HAPPEN SKILL. You concentrate with “effortless effort”. When you are concentrating well, you are NOT thinking about it, you are just doing it. When you sit for two hours through a great movie, you are concentrating intently the entire time. You don't leave the theatre soaking wet with sweat and exhausted from your mental efforts to stay focused! It was easy and effortless. You can't force or make yourself concentrate anymore than you can force or make yourself fall asleep at night.

THE BIGGEST MENTAL MISTAKE MADE BY GYMNASTS AND HOW YOU CAN AVOID IT!

This one section of the workbook can make you a much better gymnast, competition wise! Poor performance is very often caused by faulty concentration. The biggest cause of choking, blocks, balking, psych-outs and intimidation is when a gymnast violates the HERE AND NOW RULE for peak performance.

THE HERE AND NOW RULE FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

This rule states that: YOU WANT TO DO WHAT YOU ARE DOING MENTALLY WHILE YOU ARE DOING IT PHYSICALLY.

Very simply, this means that while you are stretching out or warming up premeet, you want to be mentally focused on this, rather than your thoughts about the imagined skill of your opponents, the last bad meet you had, or the fact that that unfair blind lady will be judging you yet AGAIN! This means that as you get set to do your vault physically, you want to be focusing in mentally on it as well. Thinking about the last time you ran straight into the vault table or landed on your head is NOT doing mentally what you are doing physically!

More simply, the HERE and NOW RULE means that you want to MENTALLY be in the HERE and NOW as you perform. In this way, concentration has two dimensions: TIME and PLACE

Mental Time

Whenever you perform physically you can always be in one of three mental TIME ZONES. You can be in the PAST, focused on what just happened, the last time you competed in this particular gym, an upsetting incident that took

place before the meet, or an injury you suffered two months ago. You can be in the NOW focused on what you are doing at that very moment. Or, you can be in the FUTURE, thinking or worrying about what WILL happen. "What if I fall off beam?", "What if I don't qualify?", "What if I get lost in the middle of that pass again?" etc.

Mental Place

Whenever you perform physically, you can either be in one of two general places MENTALLY: You can be focused on what YOU are doing or you can be focused on OTHERS! For example, if you are focusing on how good your opponents are and the level of their skill, then you are mentally in the wrong place. You are focusing on THEM and not on YOU! If you are worried that if you don't have a good meet, your coach or parents will be disappointed, then you are mentally in the wrong place. You are focusing on your COACH or PARENTS and NOT on YOU! If you are worried about what the college coaches may think about your recruitment chances if you don't perform well, then you are mentally in the wrong place! You're focusing on the COLLEGE COACHES and not on YOU! Being in the "HERE" means that you are totally focusing on WHAT YOU ARE DOING and on no-one else.

If you violate the HERE and NOW rule for peak performance whenever you practice and compete, then you will be sabotaging yourself BIG TIME! You won't get as much out of practice and you'll perform poorly when it counts. Your first job is to quickly recognize whenever you leave the HERE (and what YOU are doing) and/or NOW and then quickly bring your focus back to what's important. Remember, AWARENESS IS THE KEY!

Recognizing A Past Focus

When you use phrases on yourself like "here we go again", "I knew this was going to happen", "This ALWAYS happens", and "I just CAN'T ever seem to do a double back," they all reflect a past focus. If you slip on beam on your mount and you're still thinking about how stupid such a mistake was throughout the entire routine, then you are in the past and will be sure to screw up a lot more! You've got to let your mistake go and get back to your routine. If your vault is terrible and as you get ready for floor you can't seem to rid your mind of those bad vaults, then you're in the past and headed for more trouble on the floor. LET THE PAST GO AND GET QUICKLY BACK IN THE NOW! Champions do this well. Whenever they make mistakes, they quickly rebound from them and refocus on the NOW of the situation.

Let's say that you did blow your vault and you just CAN'T BELIVE HOW AWFUL IT IS! You're getting ready for floor and you're still beating on yourself about vault. STOP! Close your eyes for a second. Now, just imagine that the vault springboard is smack dab in the middle of the floor and the judges have just signaled you to begin your routine. Are you going to take off full speed for your first tumbling pass with the spring board sitting in the middle of the floor? I hope not!

What's my point? If you have the vault on your mind and therefore in your way MENTALLY, then it will have the same effect AS IF it were actually in your way in reality, PHYSICALLY. Remember, you can't do any event well if you have any part of the LAST routine still on your mind!

Recognizing A Future Focus

You know that you're mentally "time traveling" when you hear yourself get into the "what if's", (i.e. "What if I choke, what if I fall off, what if I get hurt again," etc.). Any thoughts about the meet's outcome, your scoring or whether you'll medal or qualify are all FUTURE focused. How you'll do on the next event, after the meet or in the next meet are all FUTURE focused. You can't control the FUTURE any more than you can get the PAST back. They are BOTH uncontrollables and your focus on them will always take you right out of the meet, FIRST MENTALLY, and then PHYSICALLY!

Recognizing A "There" or Other Focus

Have you ever been psyched-out or intimidated before? Who hasn't! The major cause of these stress reactions is your focus of concentration on SOMEONE or SOMETHING ELSE. A few years ago I was watching a young team warm up before a multi-team invitational meet. They seemed to be doing just fine until the doors to the gym flew opened and "THE TEAM" appeared! Now, THE TEAM had quite the reputation in the region and as they marched in, they were all in step, wearing matching warm-ups, carrying matching travel bags and looking poised and confident. As they watched, the mouths on every one of those young gymnasts dropped and they began murmuring to themselves, "THEY'RE here, look there SHE is!", etc. Needless to say, each and every member of that young team totally lost their composure, started messing up in their warm-ups and had a sub par meet.

To perform your very best, you need to STAY WITHIN YOURSELF. You need to keep your focus on what YOU are doing and on NO ONE else! You need to

stay CENTERED. Thinking about the judges, the crowd, your coach, parents, or an opponent WHILE you are suppose to be warming up, or competing P-bars or floor is being in the wrong mental place. There is NO way another gymnast or team can intimidate you unless you CHOOSE to pay attention to THEM and how awesome you THINK they are! You can only get psyched out if you mentally leave the “here” and focus “there”, on someone else!

Control Your Eyes and Ears for Championship Concentration

If you CONTROL what you LOOK AT and LISTEN TO before and during the meet, you will ALWAYS PERFORM much better. CONTROLLING YOUR EYES premeet/pre-event means: Only look at those things that keep you calm, composed and confident. If watching your opponents warm up or compete makes you anxious, control your eyes by looking somewhere else. Focus on your stretching, look at your hands, or pick a spot in front of you or anywhere in the gym to look at. Keep your visual focus AWAY from those things that have a tendency to get you anxious and uptight.

CONTROLLING YOUR EARS premeet/pre-event means: Only listen to things (outside or inside) that keep you calm, composed and confident. If another gymnast is distracting or upsetting you with what he/she is saying, tune them out by listening to something else. Put a tune in your head. Focus on a positive internal dialogue. If YOU are picking on yourself with negative self-talk, go talk to someone else on the team, change the negative to positive, or otherwise distract yourself from that nasty chatter. A lot of gymnasts plug themselves into their music before the meet to help them CONTROL YOUR EARS.

Don't wait until a tense situation before you start looking around for things to LOOK at or LISTEN to. BE PREPARED! Figure out ahead of time the things that you can use to keep your eyes away from tension producing stimuli. Do the same in relation to your auditory focus. Have a premeet or pre-event plan that you can use to help yourself stay focused and composed. REMEMBER, YOU ARE IN CONTROL!

Using Focal Points to Control Your Eyes

One technique that you can use to help you stay in control during pressured meets is to develop specific focal points whenever you have to compete. Long BEFORE the meet starts, preferably before anyone else has even filed into the gym or arena where you're competing, pick out 2-3 specific FOCAL POINTS that you can use to LOOK AT when things get tough later on. These

focal points can be anywhere around the gym, but should be easily spotted by you regardless of what's going on in the gym or how many people are there. i.e. a poster or mark on one of the walls, part of the bleachers, something on the ceiling, a mark or spot on one of the apparatus, etc.

You might even want to start to think about ASSIGNING A SPECIAL MEANING to that focal point, so that when you look at it, you can be reminded of that meaning. For example, your focal point can remind you that: "YOU'VE PAID YOUR PHYSICAL DUES AND ARE READY", "YOU BELONG ON THIS TEAM AND CAN COMPETE WITH THE BEST OF THEM", "YOU'RE A MENTALLY TOUGH GYMNAST AND STAY WITHIN YOURSELF", etc.

If you are about to compete in a big championship meet and have never been in front of such a huge crowd before, you can use your focal points to help you stay calm for this competition. Pick several focal points out before the crowd arrives and you are still relatively calm. Once the gym or bleachers begin to fill and the tension/excitement builds, you can then keep yourself composed by controlling your eyes and concentrating on your focal points.

Letting Go of the Past- Dealing with Mistakes and Bad Breaks

You are only as good as your ability to MENTALLY perform your routines in the HERE and NOW. If you are mentally in the PAST or FUTURE while you perform, your routines will suffer, GUARANTEED! One of the hardest things for a gymnast to learn to do is to mentally let go of the PAST. You slip, fall, make a mistake, blow a skill or have an awful showing on one of your best events and it just eats at you! If you hang onto ANY mistake or BAD routine, I promise you that more will follow. Mistakes are an IMPORTANT part of this sport and learning. EVERYONE makes them. You have to learn to FORGIVE yourself and then FORGET! Here's a technique or two that you can use to help you leave your mistakes where they belong, IN THE PAST!

Developing a Mistake Ritual

The following ritual is to be learned FOR and used AFTER bad routines, NEVER DURING them! If you are a perfectionist and have no tolerance for your mistakes, then you may find this very useful. So let's say that you blow a routine or make what you consider to be an unbelievably stupid mistake and you feel really angry and upset with yourself. How effective will beating yourself up be at this point? NOT VERY! It certainly will not inspire you on to greatness nor help you stick your next routine! So what is your mental task here?

To LEAVE THE MISTAKE BEHIND AND GET YOURSELF MENTALLY BACK INTO THE MEET! If you practice the following little ritual (you can change it in any way that you like) it will help you let go of your frustration and anger so that you won't blow the rest of the meet:

So you've just blown an event. You salute the judges, force a fake smile and walk off the floor. Let's assign a little meaning to your walking off the floor. What you're doing here (symbolically) is turning your back on that bad routine and walking away from it. (Remember, that's your task MENTALLY!) Next, find that MISTAKE FOCAL POINT that you picked out long before the meet started (one for every event or the same one for all of your events). The focal point will serve as your "mistake wastebasket." After every mistake that you make, you have 3 mental tasks necessary to help you get back into the meet:

1. SWITCH YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE MISTAKE - Usually when a gymnast makes a mistake, they keep thinking about it and carry it around with them for the rest of their routine or meet. This focus will undermine your confidence, raise your anxiety to a performance inhibiting level, tighten you up physically and distract your concentration from the meet. You are going to use your "mistake wastebasket" as a distraction to look at to help keep you from focusing on the mistake in a negative way
2. CHANGE YOUR NEGATIVE SELF-TALK - After you screw up, there's a good chance that you'll do what most gymnasts do, begin to trash yourself. This does absolutely nothing for your confidence and only makes you more uptight and distracted. What's important here is that you replace those negative messages with more positive ones. "Let it go," "stay in the now," "You'll do better next event," etc.
3. GET CONTROL OF YOUR ACTIVATION LEVEL - When you make a mistake, you get more nervous and physically tight. You can't perform well when you're tense, so it's crucial that you get control of your level of activation or nervousness/upset after you mess up.

While you are looking at your mistake focal point, the "wastebasket" (task 1 - distracting yourself from the mistake with a visual focus), you want to begin to change your negative self-talk (task 2), i.e. "let it go...stay calm, you're a good gymnast," etc. While you are changing the negative self-talk, you also want to begin to take several, slow deep (diaphragmatic) breaths (task 3 - calming yourself down).

As part of this ritual, you might even want to then mentally go back through your routine EXACTLY the way that you'd like it to be, seeing, hearing and feeling the perfect execution. When you have finished this imagery and the ritual, you want to imagine that you can then throw away the mistake or bad routine and WALK AWAY FROM IT, leaving it in the past. Imagine that you could take your mistake, crumble it up as if it were a piece of paper, and throw it in that "mistake wastebasket".

LETTING GO OF MISTAKES - DURING ROUTINE - MISTAKE CUE Unfortunately you can't really stop in the middle of a routine and make the judges and everyone wait while you go through your little mistake ritual. However, mentally you must very quickly let your mistake go and IMMEDIATELY get your focus of attention onto the very next move in your routine! You have to quickly leave your mistakes behind you. One way to remind yourself of this is to DEVELOP A MISTAKE CUE, something that will help you let go of the mistake or accompanying emotions. Saying things to yourself like "let go", "cancel", "erase", "now", "focus" etc. can serve as your split second mistake ritual. If you practice, IN PRACTICE letting go of mistakes with ONE of these cues, ultimately it will work for you in a meet.

Fist Squeeze

There is a physical feeling that you can recognize in your body that represents the feeling of letting go. Crumple up a piece of paper and put it in your hand or hold some other soft object like a sock, sponge or rubber ball. Stand with your arms by your sides and the paper or object in one hand. Close your eyes and squeeze your hand as tightly as possible around that soft object. Hold the tension for 10 seconds and then say "let go" (or the cue word that you will use to represent letting go) to yourself, and as you do, ever so slowly allow your fingers to relax around the object until you let it fall to the floor. REPEAT this process several times, focusing carefully on the feelings in your arm and hand of "letting go." NEXT, think of something that you messed up that day, either at school, work or in the gym. As you focus on the PAST images of your mistake, squeeze the object and imagine that you are holding onto that mistake or upset very tightly. Then, repeat your "let go" cue to yourself and as you feel those familiar physical feelings of "letting go" up and down your arm, let go of those mistake images and thoughts. Regular practice of this fist squeeze technique and you may be surprised to find that you can use it effectively DURING practice and at meets.

CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION - PREMEET AND PRE-EVENT If you are concentrating on the **WRONG** things before a meet or as you get set to begin a routine, then you will be unknowingly setting yourself up for failure. As I mentioned, your job in these situations is to mentally stay in the **HERE** and **NOW**. But what does that really mean? How do you do that? The main way that you stay in the here and now is by controlling your eyes and ears, by having specific things that you **DO** or **FOCUS ON** which you use to deliberately **DISTRACT YOU FROM ALL THE OTHER DISTRACTIONS** when you're under pressure. Let me explain.

Your concentration is limited. That is, at any given time, you can only concentrate on a small number of things. Actually, **YOU CAN REALLY ONLY FOCUS ON ONE THING WELL AT A TIME**. If you are concentrating on the wrong things, ("my warm-up was terrible", "what if I fall off", "this is my weakest event"), then you have less room in your head to focus on the things that will be important and insure that you perform well. Therefore it is critical that what you focus on helps you stay calm and insures that you will perform well. How do you do this premeet/pre-event?

Using Rituals to Develop Winning Concentration - Premeeet Preperformance Concentration

Figure 2

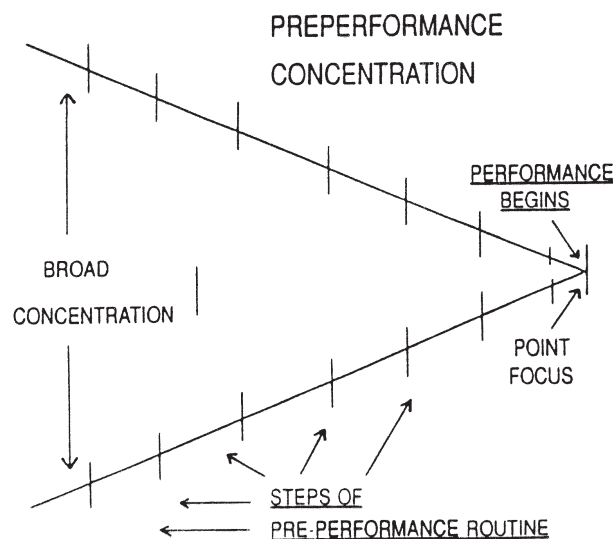


Figure #2 represents your premeet or pre-event concentration and how it must change as the time for your performance approaches. The left side of the chart represents the time before the meet or your actual event. 15-30 minutes before the meet, or even 10 minutes before your event, your concentration can be broad. You can be thinking about a lot of different things. i.e.

pizza, swimming, going on a date, etc. However, as the time of the meet's start or your event approaches, you must begin to NARROW your concentration (moving left to right on the chart) until you have a one point focus as the competition begins and you start your first event. The way that you can stay in the HERE and NOW, and progressively narrow your focus of attention is by going through a set premeet or pre-event ritual. Every great athlete in every sport goes through the SAME routine before every performance.

Your pre-meet ritual can include a special premeet meal, the night before or day of (or not), getting dressed for the meet, listening to special music, etc. or can simply start 5-10 minutes before your first event. It may involve a set way of stretching, taking off your warm-ups in a certain way, cracking all the knuckles in your fingers and toes, executing specific warm-up skills to loosen your body, It really doesn't matter WHAT is in your premeet ritual as long as these are things that YOU can control and that you do them the "right" way.

Sometimes athletes develop superstitions and rituals that they can't always control. For example, a gymnast always had to chew her favorite brand of sugar free gum before she competed each event. Before a big meet, her little brother got into her gym bag, carefully unwrapped all of her gum, removed the sticks and then just as carefully, rewrapped the paper so that it appeared that all the gum was still in place. Before this gymnast left for her meet, a quick inspection of her bag revealed that she was all set. When she got to the meet and went looking for her gum before her first event, she totally freaked out when she discovered that she had none. She became so upset that she was unable to perform the way she usually did.

You want to be sure that your premeet or pre-event ritual involve things and actions that you can control and that you know you can always do, (i.e. chalking up a certain way, stretching just so, cracking knuckles, listening to certain music, etc.) Further, it is critical that as you do the rituals, you mentally stay in the HERE and the NOW. This is what I was referring to when I said you have to do the ritual the "right" way.

Remember, the purpose of the ritual is to help you stay centered, calm and focused. The ritual is a way that you can distract yourself from all of the pressures and distractions that surround you. If you are stretching premeet (as part of your ritual), but mentally you are thinking about how you fell off three times in your warm-up, you are NOT doing the ritual the right way. You must do your ritual with awareness, focusing on it mentally while you are going through

it physically. In this example, your ritual is NOT serving its focusing function. Whenever you catch this happening, remember to recognize that you are in the wrong mental place or time, and then quickly bring yourself back.

Using Rituals to Develop Winning Concentration - Pre-Event

When any decent gymnast misses basic skills in competition, it's mainly a MENTAL thing. Specifically, the gymnast has made a concentration mistake. He/she has failed to stay in the HERE and NOW of the performance situation. He/she has gotten distracted by the judges, crowd or their own past ("last time I...") or future ("what if...") thoughts. Having a set pre-event ritual is a must for success here. Without a good ritual you have no way to effectively narrow your concentration the way it needs to be for you to maximize your chances of a good routine.

As a gymnast, you must have the ability to gradually narrow your concentration until you have a one point focus as you compete on the apparatus. At this point you must have a NARROW EXTERNAL FOCUS which takes in the apparatus and where you are on it. Further, you must have the ability to quickly shift this concentration to a NARROW INTERNAL FOCUS as you pay attention to the internal kinesthetics (muscle feelings) of what you're doing. It is this internal focus on the "just right feelings" that allows you to KNOW when to come out of a tuck or how to stick a double back. Understand that this "knowing" is something that you NEVER need to think about.

This is why having a set pre-event ritual is so critical for you as a gymnast. It helps you to narrow your concentration and block out any distractions from the crowd or from anywhere else. Keep in mind, however, you MUST be in the here and now AS you go through these rituals. If you are thinking about what your parents might think of your performance as you engage in your pre-event ritual, then you are mentally "with them" in the stands, in the wrong mental place. You must quickly recognize this and then bring yourself back to your ritual.

Exercises to Develop Winning Concentration

PREPARATION:

For all exercises begin by sitting comfortably in a place where you will not be distracted. After gaining proficiency in your ability to concentrate you can progressively add distractions. Allow 5 minutes for each exercise unless otherwise indicated.

#1 Object Stare

Place a medal, trophy or any other object directly in front of you and focus your attention on it. Study it carefully examining the shape, colors and how the light reflects off of it, etc. As you watch it, slowly repeat to yourself the word "gold" (if it's a medal), "now," "you" or any cue word you would like to use. Quickly bring your focus back to the object each and every time you find yourself drifting. Next, close your eyes and try to get a visual image of that object. Continue to repeat "gold" or whatever word you've chosen to yourself as you do this. Finally, pick the medal or object up and study it with your hands. Feel the texture of the surfaces, the corners and points, the temperature of it, the feel of the raised writing if any, etc., and as you do this continue to repeat "medal" to yourself. Repeat this sequence (looking, imaging and feeling) for 5 minutes.

#2 Blocking Distractions

Sit up close to your TV screen with the set on and no volume. Hold your thumb out against the screen and focus only on the center of your thumbnail for about 10 seconds. When you can do this without being distracted by the pictures, increase your time up to 20 seconds. When you can go a whole minute, turn the volume up and try to focus only on your thumb for 10 seconds without being distracted by the sound or pictures. Continue to increase your time until you can go 1-2 minutes without losing your focus.

#3 Bring Yourself Back - The Heart of Championship Concentration

Focus your attention on your breathing as you inhale. With each exhalation switch your focus to the number "1" (you can repeat the sound to yourself or "see" a number one in your mind's eye). Inhale, focus on your breathing; exhale, focus on the number 1. When you first find your mind distracted or wandering, gently return to your focus in the following way: Concentrate on the feeling of the inhale. As you exhale, now focus on the number "2". With each distraction, recognize you are drifting, bring yourself back and increase the number you focus on by one.

CHAPTER 9

DEVELOPING SELF CONFIDENCE AND A WINNING ATTITUDE

If you want to become a winner in the gym, you have to first learn to THINK like one! The great gymnasts have a different way of thinking than everyone else. They maintain a different attitude. They look at obstacles and problems in a way that builds their confidence and inspires their performances. Very simply, they THINK like winners.

How do YOU develop winning thinking? What if you're the kind of athlete who's incredibly negative...is there any hope for you? YES!

Like every other topic in this training manual, winning thinking is a LEARNED skill. With regular practice and persistence, even YOU can turn that negative attitude around and start to use your head to perform better. But you must be patient! Anything worth learning does NOT happen overnight!

The heart of winning thinking is being positive. Winners know that NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! When you are negative or down on yourself, your teammates, your coach or anything else about your sport, you are sapping your energy, eroding your confidence and setting yourself up for failure. When one member of your team is negative, he or she can bring the whole group down with them. Negativity goes hand in hand with failure. If you REALLY want to become a champion, then you have to understand that there is ABSOLUTELY NO ROOM in your training for a negative attitude.

Negativity will NOT help you come back and win a meet that you are losing. Positive thinking is the stuff of comebacks! Negativity won't help you recover from a tough loss or injury. Positive thinking will get you back on track fast! Negativity will NOT make you a popular person in the gym. A positive attitude will win friends and help create a cohesive winning unit. When you're injured, negativity will slow your rehabilitation and turn you into a tentative gymnast when you do return. Maintaining a positive attitude will not only help you make the best of that physical setback, but will get you back to your old form much quicker. Negativity will NEVER help you get over fears and blocks. It will keep you stuck like glue for the rest of your life! (well, I'm exaggerating just a bit). A positive attitude is the ONLY way to go when you're dealing with fears and blocks.

LOSERS ARE NEGATIVE, WINNERS ARE POSITIVE! YOU CHOOSE THE ATTITUDE, THE ATTITUDE CREATES THE RESULTS!

So HOW can you begin to practice and develop winning thinking? Let's start by reviewing what I called "the uncontrollables" in gymnastics, the factors, situations and things that are totally out of your direct control. The uncontrollables are: meet conditions, judges, type and size of crowd, opponents, winning, losing, past, future, coach, teammates, etc. The only thing in all of these factors that is controllable is YOUR reaction to all of them. This is where winning thinking comes in.

There are basically two ways you can look at these uncontrollables when they occur. (1 You can look at them negatively. You can use them to UNDERCUT your confidence and as an excuse for why you won't perform well. Negative people are ALWAYS making excuses for their failures and they are REAL good at that! (2 You can look at them positively. You can use them to ENHANCE your confidence and give yourself the competitive edge. Positive people NEVER stop looking for ways to get better.

Having a positive winning attitude means that when adversity looks you straight in the eye, you smile and say "thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity"! This is the mental skill of REFRAMING. Reframing is a way of viewing the uncontrollables. Reframing means "when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade out of them!" WHEN OBSTACLES GET THROWN IN YOUR PATH, YOU FIND A WAY TO USE THEM TO HELP YOU IMPROVE AND GET STRONGER.

I once had a discussion with a coach who demonstrated use of this technique with her team. Whenever her gymnasts had to do their worst event first, she taught them how to reframe this uncontrollable by saying to themselves, "Great, I can get my weakest event out of the way early so I can relax and really enjoy the rest of the meet! Besides, the judges will probably be a lot more lenient early on than they would be in the later stages of the meet!"

If their weakest event was last, then she taught them to focus on, "Great, my worst event is last and now I can really go out there and impress the judges. I don't have anything to worry about now, and by the time I get to my last event, they will have already formed a favorable opinion of me and will probably score me higher!"

This kind of reasoning may seem stupid, but reframing the uncontrollables in a positive way will help you maintain your composure and increase the likelihood that you will perform to your potential. Being negative about the event order, your position in each event, the lighting or apparatus in the gym, etc. will only bring you down!

Reframing is a skill in which you practice taking the negative, potentially confidence eroding things that happen to you, and turning them into a positive. The uncontrollables affect BOTH you and everyone else at the meet. Give yourself the competitive edge by PRACTICING using adversity in your favor.

Reframing takes practice and may not come very naturally at first. However, every disADVANTAGE has an advantage within it. Every problem presents you with an opportunity. This is what reframing is all about and this is the heart of winning thinking. Start right now to train yourself to look for the positive. Being negative is easy. It takes no particular skills or energy and it's what losers do best. NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! Be a winner! Make reframing an integral part of your gymnastics.

Exercise

Take 15-20 minutes at home to do the following: Think about all the uncontrollables in practice or meet situations that, in the past you have used negatively to undermine your confidence or provide you with an excuse to not go for it. Write each of these down. Next, think about how you could have REFRAMED each of these as a positive. For example, right in the beginning of a meet you get a fall in one of your best events. A reframe of this mistake would be: "No problem... everyone here makes mistakes, and I am mentally

and physically tough enough to handle these mess ups better than any of my opponents..."

In the beginning it may be difficult for you to reframe a negative right in the middle of a practice or meet. However, if you go through this exercise several times a week you'll soon develop this habit. One of the very best times to work on this is right AFTER a practice or meet. Review what happened and think about which situations you could have reframed in your favor.

If you want to reach your potential as a gymnast and go as far as you can in this sport, then you need self-confidence to help you get there. Physical talent, strength, coordination and endurance are not enough. You have to believe in your self and abilities. You have to develop that inner "knowing" that self-confidence is all about. It's what you see and hear in every great gymnast. Inside they KNOW that they are good. They feel it, believe it, walk it and sometimes talk it.

Most people think that self-confidence is something that comes from success. First you have success, then naturally your self-confidence will follow. This is NOT how it works. Yes, experiencing successes is an important part of developing self-confidence. It is difficult to feel good about yourself and believe in your abilities if you experience nothing but failure. However, I have seen too many gymnasts who have had tremendous successes, yet they felt little confidence. On paper you'd think these gymnasts would feel on top of the world. Instead, they claim that they are plagued by self-doubts and do not think that they are that good.

How is self-confidence is developed? You learn to feel good or bad about yourself depending on how you INTERPRET your successes and failures. An objective success does not necessarily mean that your self-confidence will rise. You can have a great meet and fantastic performances and still come away from that competition feeling badly about yourself. HOW?

If you succeed at something and afterwards, because of your perfectionism, explain your success away, i.e. "I was lucky", "they didn't have their best gymnasts competing", "the judges were blind in my favor", etc. then you will end up robbing yourself of the good feelings that go into developing self-confidence. Gymnasts who are perfectionists do this regularly. They downplay or minimize their good performances because they are always finding things that were "wrong" with what they had done! They never give themselves full credit for

the things they did well. Where others see a success in their performance, the perfectionistic gymnast either ignores it or finds a failure. And if for some reason they feel they've done well, they do not allow themselves to hang onto those good feelings. They quickly forget them and begin to think, "so you were successful, BUT what about next time".

Let's say that in addition to being a perfectionist and regularly explaining away your successes, you also have a tendency to greatly exaggerate or over-focus on your perceived failures. You do a good routine but for some reason the judges give you a low score. Your coach reassures you that your routine was tight and strong. He's pleased. You're NOT! Instead of being satisfied, you look for things that you did wrong to explain your bad score. You'll always "find" some when you do this! Then you blow them out of proportion and really make yourself feel bad. You hang onto these "failures" for days, continually reliving them and torturing yourself. How do you think that you would then end up feeling? Awful!

These are the things that I found going on inside the heads of athletes that lacked confidence. Even though they had the ability and successes, they still felt badly about themselves BECAUSE of their perfectionism and what they did with their successes and failures. Minimize, ignore or explain away your good performances and you'll always feel badly. Exaggerate or blow out of proportion your failures and you'll feel even worse.

If you want to start to GROW self-confidence inside, you must first learn to change these inner explanations. You have to start to give yourself credit where credit was due. You have to begin to act like your own best fan. A good sports fan is one who believes in and supports the team, NO MATTER WHAT (NMW). When the team goes through a hard luck streak, a good fan does not yell from the stands, "throw the bums out". Instead, they give the support that's needed.

In an earlier part of this workbook, I discussed the GIGO factor. GARBAGE IN = GARBAGE OUT. Program garbage into a computer and the computer will give you garbage back, i.e. it won't do what you would like it to. Think the wrong thoughts before a practice, event or meet, (garbage in) and you'll get garbage back out in terms of your performance. The GIGO factor works in relation to developing self-confidence. To feel good about yourself you have to "feed" yourself good stuff. If you are in the habit of explaining away your successes and highlighting your failures, (garbage in), then you will have little to no self-confidence, (garbage out).

Developing self-confidence is a lot like advertising. What sells a product on TV is the commercial. When you see young, physically fit, attractive, actors or actresses drinking a product on location in a beautiful place, it makes you want to go out and get some of that good stuff for yourself. Advertising like that leads you to believe that if you consume their product you too will get everything shown on the screen.

As a consumer you would never buy something that was advertised negatively. If you were told in a TV commercial, for example, that a soft drink rotted your teeth and gave you high blood pressure, and the actors and actresses shown on the screen were unattractive and grossly out of shape, it wouldn't make you want to run out and buy a case of the drink. On the contrary! Good advertising always sells a product.

As a gymnast you can use this concept to help build your self-confidence. You need to learn to advertise your most important product, YOU, to your most important customer, YOU! Proving to others that you are good will NOT necessarily raise your confidence level. Proving it to yourself WILL!

IMPORTANT:

It's critical to understand that "being confident" is NOT something that you can just do! Confidence is NOT a verb! Your coach or parents can tell you to "just be confident," and then you can repeat those same words to yourself, but they will do nothing for how you actually end up feeling! This is because you can't consciously talk yourself into being confident. Confidence is a by-product of doing the right things mentally. Primarily, your level of self-confidence is directly related to what you concentrate on both before and during your practices and before and during your meets! When you focus on the right things, then you will stay calm and confident. However, if you focus on the wrong things, for example comparing yourself with teammates or opponents, then you will get nervous and lose your confidence.

This means that you must learn to both become aware of where you tend to put your concentration before and during practice, before and during meets, and then how to control your focus. At this point I'd recommend that you go back and review Chapter 8 on concentration.

CHAPTER 10

BIG MEET PREPARATION – USING MENTAL REHEARSAL FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

Winners See What They Want to Have Happen Losers See What They are Afraid Will Happen

Gymnastics, like many other sports is a very physical one. There's absolutely no question that unless you train your body, your physical skills, strength coordination and endurance, you'll never become a champion. You must, in addition, train your mind. That's been the purpose of this workbook. To be a consistent winner, you have to develop the MIND of a champion.

One critical area of mental training and preparation that needs to be addressed has to do with visualization or mental rehearsal. In other words, what kind of pictures do you make in your mind's eye before you perform in practice or at meets? Do you see yourself performing well and sticking your tricks or tripping over your own feet and getting totally humiliated?

Now whether you're aware of it or not, EVERYONE produces images in their mind in relation to an upcoming performance. If you have a big meet in three weeks and you've been thinking about it every day, then EVERY day you have been making images in your mind's eye. Without you knowing it, you've been mentally rehearsing for that meet. This is because mental pictures always accompany the thoughts we have.

So what is so important about that?

IMAGERY PROGRAMS YOUR PERFORMANCES. The pictures that you make in your mind's eye DIRECTLY affect HOW well you'll perform. If you are worried about messing up, WATCH OUT! You may be inadvertently program-

ming yourself to do just that! In other words, to be as successful as possible in the gym, you must learn to monitor and control the kinds of images that you produce in your head.

Remember having a dream so vivid that after you first awoke there was a split second or two when you weren't sure whether you were dreaming or not. Or perhaps you've had the experience of being bored in school or at a meeting and then suddenly found yourself drifting off in a day dream, where you went to the beach, the gym or somewhere else. In these experiences, your mind is able to produce such life-like images, that the line between reality and fantasy gets blurry for a short time.

MENTAL REHEARSAL IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MENTAL SKILLS THAT YOU CAN USE AS A GYMNAST TO OVERCOME SETBACKS AND FEARS, EFFECTIVELY HANDLE PRESSURE AND LIFT THE LEVEL OF YOUR PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE SEVERAL NOTCHES.

MENTAL REHEARSAL is the systematic creation (or recreation) of images (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) in your mind's eye directly aimed at enhancing performance. Very simply, it is mental practice! It is based on the idea that if you want to perform like a champion in the gym, you must first perform like one in your mind. You must first perform flawlessly mentally before you can do the same in reality. When practiced correctly and mastered, the SKILL of mental rehearsal will make you a mentally tough gymnast and help you make the very best use of your physical talents and abilities.

The power of MENTAL REHEARSAL is based on the fact that images from your brain serve as blueprints for your actions and behaviors. Think about that vivid dream again. For a brief period, your body responded to that dream as if it were real, increasing your heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension. In a similar way, your body will respond to images that you produce whenever you mentally rehearse a performance, if those images being played in your mind are vivid enough to seem real.

The nerves that connect up to the particular muscle groups involved in the action that you are imagining begin to fire, and the muscles are stimulated to a degree just below actual movement. In this way, the body and muscles can actually be programmed to respond to situations and function in a particular way. It's as though every time the mind creates an image of the action, (doing a back walkover for example), grooves are cut into a record in the brain,

grooves that will be followed again later, when that move is actually performed.

Therefore it is absolutely critical that you know what “movies” you’re playing in your mind’s eye. All too often athletes will feature such nightmares as, “DON’T FALL OFF THAT BEAM”, “THE LAST TIME I COMPETED IN THIS MEET I WAS TOTALLY HUMILIATED” or “I WILL GET REALLY HURT IF I ATTEMPT IT”. Understand that the accompanying imagery with these worrisome thoughts is entirely negative!

Mental Rehearsal Guidelines

If you want to really get those images working FOR, not AGAINST you follow these guidelines when you practice the exercises at the end of this section:

1. All Imagery Should be Preceded by Relaxation

- If you want your practice sessions to be as useful as possible, you must start them with a brief (5 minutes) period of relaxation. Stress makes the production of constructive imagery nearly impossible. Being relaxed will increase the vividness of your images and thus make them more effective. You can use any arousal control exercise we discussed to help you achieve this relaxed state. This means that, at least until you master the skill, your sessions should always be held in an environment that is free from distractions.

2. All Imagery Should Be as Vivid or Life-Like as Possible

- Try to make the images that you produce in your mind’s eye as vivid and detailed as possible. For visual images, you want to try to “see” color, movement, lighting (dark or bright), shapes, etc. For sound images you want to “hear” volume (loud or soft), tones, pitch, etc. For kinesthetic or feeling images you want to “feel” yourself moving through the air, “feel” your feet punch the floor, “feel” yourself swinging on the bar, experience the wind in your face as you run towards the vault, “feel” all the emotions of confidence or excitement after a great routine, etc.

3. Are You Inside or Outside the Action?

- There are two perspectives that you can have whenever you practice mental rehearsal. First, you can be OUTSIDE the action and “see, feel and hear” what you would if you were a spectator watching yourself. Second, you can be INSIDE the action and “see, hear and feel” what you would if you were on the apparatus actually competing. INTERNAL imagery, or being inside the action

is said to be most effective in enhancing overall performance. EXTERNAL imagery or being outside the action is said to be useful whenever you are working on learning new skills. Experiment with both perspectives, BUT be sure that you master the INTERNAL one, especially the kinesthetic or muscle feeling dimension. Most gymnasts mentally rehearse by feeling themselves going through the motions. If you do not yet have the skills to do this, practice trying to isolate this dimension.

4. Have an Imagery Goal in Mind for Every Session

Physical practice is ALWAYS more effective when you have a clear goal in mind and work towards its accomplishment. Mental practice is the same. If you have trouble staying in emotional control whenever you perform, then focus on this in your mental practice sessions. Mentally rehearse yourself staying calm and composed no matter what happens at the meet. If you have trouble with a specific skill, practice it in your mind's eye. If you just can't seem to get the feel of a technique, focus on trying to "feel" it as you mentally rehearse.

5. Have a Beginning, Middle and End for Your Sessions

If you are using mental rehearsal to prepare for an upcoming meet be sure that your session starts with premeet imagery (getting dressed, warming up, the opening minutes of the meet, etc.), has imagery from the middle of the competition, and ends with imagery of your last events and the meet's end. Use this format when ever you are doing premeet preparation. If you are merely working on strengthening a particular skill (rebounding quickly from mistakes, staying focused, using the proper technique) then this format is not necessary.

6. Make Your Practice Sessions Short (10 - 15 Minutes)

If you try to spend too much time mentally rehearsing, then you will have difficulty concentrating and will probably bore yourself to sleep. More frequent, shorter sessions are always much more effective than fewer, longer ones. If you are totally into a mental rehearsal session, then you can choose to extend its length. However, short is the best rule of thumb.

7. Be Patient and Practice

Imagery is a skill and mastery takes consistent practice. In the beginning you may find that you can't even "see" or "feel" anything in your mind's eye. This is normal. Think yourself through your routines and be patient! With practice you

will learn to produce clearer and more life-like images. Understand that you may also not be able to CONTROL the images in the beginning. You may start your mental practice by excellently beginning your floor routine, when suddenly your pictures turn nightmarish! You see yourself losing control and crashing! Learning to CONTROL YOUR IMAGES comes with time. Whenever your images come up the wrong way, simply “rewind” the pictures and action, and then play it again. If it comes up negative a second or third time, patiently do the same. Put the action in “slow motion” if you have to in order to get it right. Be patient! The pictures will soon come around.

Imagery Note

If you continue to have difficulty mentally rehearsing a particular skill or event, try watching video clips of yourself or someone else who has perfect execution. Sit quietly and repeatedly review these images, then close your eyes and try to repeat them. Continue to alternate watching and mentally rehearsing and soon your imagery skills will improve.

Mental Rehearsal Exercises

1. Developing a Peak Performance Cue - Replaying a Great Performance

Think about the last time you had a GREAT meet! The more emotional the experience was for you, the better. Remember what made that meet so special. Close your eyes, and spend 5 minutes allowing yourself to relax. Next, travel back in time to this great performance and begin to “replay” it in your mind’s eye, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you did back then. Go back to that same gym, see the same people who were there, hear the same sounds and feel the same feelings. Do all this in as much detail as possible.

Once you’ve gone through the meet and your individual performances, find the one point in that meet that really captured your “winning feelings”. Focus in on that one event or two when you really felt on top of the world, unstoppable, totally confident. Replay this event over and over again in your mind’s eye paying close attention to all of the accompanying emotions (confidence, excitement, etc.) and physical sensations.

Next, think of a PEAK PERFORMANCE CUE, a symbol that you can use to remind yourself of these winning feelings. Your symbol can be a word, (“stick”, “tight”, “clean”, “awesome”, “power”), a phrase, (“I’m the cat’s meow”, “no one can touch me”), a color (red, black), an image, (a cat, coiled spring, locomotive) or a muscle movement (clenched fist).

Now, as you review the scene where you felt your winning feelings most intensely, repeat your peak performance cue to yourself. Feel those feelings, repeat your cue. Pair these two (peak performance imagery/feelings with your cue) at least 10 times with each practice session. If you have chosen a meet or individual performance that has a lot of “juice” (emotion) attached to it, then you will soon find that just by using your cue premeet/pre-event, all of those winning emotions will come back.

REMEMBER: YOU HAVE TO FEEL LIKE A WINNER FIRST, BEFORE YOU CAN THEN PERFORM LIKE ONE. Developing and using a peak performance cue can help you recapture those past winning feelings and bring them to your next meet.

2. Preparing For a Big Meet - Mastery Imagery

One of the best ways to prepare yourself for an upcoming meet is by regularly “practicing” your routines in your head the weeks and days leading up to it. See, feel and hear EXACTLY what you’d like to have happen in this meet. Focus in on the details and process of the meet and each event, NOT just on achieving a particular score. Experience yourself performing and executing JUST the way you’d like to. Feel strong, confident, powerful, with perfect timing, performing to the upper limits of your abilities. Imagine and experience the emotions that accompany all these images. Use the imagery guidelines to help you.

3. Handling Psych-Outs, Overcoming Obstacles, Rebounding from Setbacks - Coping Imagery (A)

It’s the unexpected that will easily knock you off center and spoil your performance. It’s the negative emotional response that can mentally takes you out of a meet. Mental rehearsal can help you prepare for these so that when someone or something “pushes your buttons” before or during the meet, you’ll respond to this intrusion like a champion.

Step #1 Make a list of your “hot buttons”, (the things that get you upset, angry or emotional, i.e. making mistakes, getting a low score, another competitor saying something to you, the event order, etc.)

Step #2 Next to each “hot button” think of 1 or 2 IDEAL COPING RESPONSES (ICR), or the perfect way to respond to that hot button. For example, hanging onto a mistake in the early part of a routine is NOT an ICR. If you don’t let that mistake go and get your head back into your routine, you’ll blow the

rest of that performance. Rebounding quickly, refocusing properly and even smiling and acting AS IF nothing happened IS an ICR. That kind of response will definitely keep you centered.

Step #3 Mentally practice being in a competitive situation when your hot buttons gets pushed and respond with your ICR's. Sufficient mental rehearsal of ICR's will get you responding with them whenever your buttons get pushed under pressure in the actual meet situation.

If you regularly prepare for the upsetting and unexpected, when it happens you will never get knocked off center.

Making Mastery And Coping Recordings

One of the best ways to enhance the effectiveness of your mental rehearsal sessions is to use specific recordings. You can develop your own mastery or coping recordings and use them in preparation for an upcoming big meet. The FIRST step is writing a script in the first person (through your own eyes) describing the sights, sounds, atmosphere, feelings and emotions associated with the particular performance outcome that you want. For example, you might describe winning a State Championship meet including all the details of the place, the people there, the opponents you faced, the exaltation, satisfaction, etc. Make that meet experience so vivid that you can even feel the chalk on your hands. Select background music that will help bring you into the meet experience. The dialogue and music combined should elicit strong sensory and emotional images for you.

Personally designed and narrated mastery and coping recordings are particularly powerful tools because they stimulate your own powers of visualization, often more intensely than a commercially made version. The detailed script helps structure your imagery sessions, leading you deeply into the meet experience. Replaying these imagery recordings prepares you mentally and emotionally for recreating these images in reality. Directions for creating your own recordings are included in the following pages.

Since coping imagery involves correcting or rebounding from mistakes, or controlling run-away emotions, you may want to begin working with these experiences first. NOTE: COPING RECORDINGS SHOULD BE REPLACED BY MASTERY RECORDINGS IN THE LAST WEEK OR TWO BEFORE A BIG MEET. You don't want the negative images from the coping imagery to interfere with your performance. So days before that big meet, switch to the

mastery recording and let all your energy go into visualizing strong and successful performances.

The basic sequence in this coping exercise (note: this is a 2nd strategy for coping. The 1st strategy above involved developing an Ideal Coping Response (ICR) and mentally rehearsing it) involves imagining yourself in a stressful situation and beginning to see, feel and hear things that upset you. When you feel yourself losing control, you immediately do the following: First you say, "Stop." Then you take one or two slow deep breaths and use key words or phrases to slow yourself down. ("relax," calm" "easy" etc.). Third, you reframe the thought or emotion. For example, if the negative thought was, "what if I fall off beam or blow my dismount," you reframe your reaction and think, "stick it and stay calm". Fourth, and finally, you refocus your attention and concentrate on the task at hand.

Making A Coping Recording

Have a pencil/pen and a supply of paper handy for taking notes. Anticipate a stressful situation that might occur prior to, during or following a meet.

PROCEDURE

1. Write down a list of images - sights, sounds, smells, feelings associated with that situation.
2. Write down the negative, self-defeating, inappropriate thoughts that might occur to you in this situation.
3. Think of things you could say to yourself that would help you stop the negative thoughts and regain control. Write these down on a separate page.
4. Rephrase your negative thoughts into positive, confidence- building statements. Write down these new, helpful messages.
5. Using your notes, create a script and record it on any device. If you wish, choose relaxing background music to set the mood. Speaking slowly and distinctly, guide yourself through the coping experience. Remember these 5 steps for "thought stopping":

#1 Recognize the negative thought.

#2 Tell yourself, "Stop".

#3 Let go of the thought with a slow deep breath.

#4 Rephrase the thought into a positive.

#5 Refocus your concentration.

Making A Mastery Recording

Pick a big meet later in the competitive season that you want to mentally prepare for. Use this recording to help you use your mastery mental rehearsal. Have a pencil/pen and a supply of paper handy for taking notes.

Procedure

1. Imagine an upcoming meet. Keeping it as realistic as possible, write down the details of the situation. Set the stage for the meet by describing its' location, the trip over to it, the inside of the gym/arena, the crowd, the judges, all the sounds associated with the meet, your body sensations and emotions.
2. Write down your thoughts about the meet, before, during and after each of your events. Describe your emotions and the body sensations that you experience in this peak performance.
3. Using your notes, write out a script that guides you through the meet (starting either the night before or day of) and helps you experience it vividly. Keep it realistic and focus on HOW well you perform.
4. Record the script, talking very slowly to allow you the time to mentally rehearse. Use different background music that helps you relax (in the beginning) and get pumped and focused (just before and during the meet).
5. Like all imagery sessions, use relaxation exercises to prepare yourself, then turn on the mastery recording to help you see and experience that perfect meet performance in your mind's eye.

CHAPTER 11

USING A CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN

Performing Your Best When it Counts the Most

So as you get ready to compete in that all important meet, I'd like to share with you what I've learned from great athletes all over the world that helps them perform at their very best when it counts the most! You can call this my "recipe" for peak performance in the gym because it has all the ingredients that you need to "cook up" a really GREAT PERFORMANCE, the kind of performance that you know you're capable of and would be truly proud of! I call this recipe a CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN and what it really is, is a series of little goals that if you focus on and execute both before and during your meet, will increase the chances that you will perform to your capabilities!

What separates the best gymnasts from all of the rest is what's going on between their ears as they go into a high pressured meet! The better gymnasts have the mental skills to handle the pressure, let go of mistakes, stay focused and maintain their confidence while their less consistent counterparts haven't yet figured out how to get the mental thing working consistently.

Once you get to the gym for that all important meet or practice, all the physical work has been done. Your Hind Brain and muscle memory have been trained and know exactly what to do. Whether you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys depends entirely on your mental game. To perform your best, you need to be able to correctly "execute mentally" and the CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN will help you do just that!

What does it mean to EXECUTE MENTALLY?

Far too many gymnasts go into their important practices and meets carrying the wrong goals with them. What are the WRONG GOALS? They want to

produce, stick their routine, get a certain score, qualify for Regionals, win All Around or beat another competitor!

As we've discussed before, these "outcome goals" and EXPECTATIONS are the wrong things to bring into any performance with you because they will make your routines and specific skills TOO important. These goals will create a sense of urgency inside of you that will distract you from the task at hand, drive your nervousness into the "red zone" and tie your muscles in knots! Remember, your "outcome goals" (getting a specific score, qualifying, getting to Regionals, making the National Team, or getting a college scholarship) have a single purpose. They are to motivate you to work hard in practice. IN PRACTICE! They give you a reason to continuously push yourself outside of your comfort zone whenever you train.

However, when you bring your outcome goals or expectations into an important meet with you, they will totally and completely backfire on you! They will weigh you down and put far too much pressure on you for you to stay loose and relaxed enough to perform your best. Bringing your goals into meets with you is a HUGE MENTAL MISTAKE! Instead, you want to have a different set of goals to focus on whenever you compete under pressure. You want goals that you can control and that will keep you loose and relaxed. That's what the goals are of this CHAMPIONSHIP MEET PLAN.

It's a set of specific directions that you can follow before and during the meet to help you perform at your best! When you follow it closely and include ALL of the ingredients, what you end up with looks and feels exactly like you wanted it to. When you omit certain, important ingredients, then what you end up with performance-wise will be what you don't want!

Each goal of the Championship Meet Plan is MEASURABLE. That is, you will be able to tell, after an event or the meet, how well you did or did not execute a particular goal. The goals are always framed in a POSITIVE manner. That is, they tell you what to do, NOT what NOT to do! Lastly, each of these steps/goals of the meet plan is CONTROLLABLE. That is, you should have total and complete control over being able to execute them.

Each of these goals and the meet plan as a whole gives you something constructive and performance enhancing to focus on BOTH BEFORE AND DURING YOUR EVENTS to help distract you from your outcome goals. I would never tell you, NOR SHOULD YOU TELL YOURSELF, to go into an

event and say to yourself, “don’t worry about your dismount” or “Don’t think about falling!” What I would tell you to do instead is to execute the goal that says “Stay focused in the NOW!”

So here’s what I want you to do. As we go through the ingredients that make up a championship meet plan, I’d like you to take a piece of paper and write down these mini goals that make it up. Some of these will make more sense to you than others, some will be much more important to you than others. Once you’ve written them down I would like you to post this list in your room where you’ll be sure to see it the weeks and days leading up to that big meet!

When you actually get to the meet, be sure to take a copy of your meet plan with you, put it in your changing bag and remind yourself that your primary job at this meet is NOT to WIN VAULT, or RINGS, IMPRESS THE COACHES, PROVE YOURSELF OR GET A CERTAIN SCORE, IT’S TO EXECUTE MENTALLY! IT’S TO FOCUS ON ACCOMPLISHING THE FOLLOWING GOALS.... and if you do, you’ll increase the chances that you’ll accomplish all of those outcome goals that you really want!

Using A Championship Meet Plan

1. Stay Calm, Relaxed and Loose – Performing your best when it counts the most is all about you staying loose and relaxed. This does not mean that you can’t have butterflies coursing around your belly before the meet starts or your floor routine. These are nothing more than a sign of GOOD NERVOUS! What it does mean is that you have to be excited about the meet and all of its’ challenges, but still remain physically loose. This ingredient is the most important one because staying loose is the secret to performing to your ability. The key question here is HOW do you stay calm and loose under BIG MEET pressure? What are some specific things that you can do to help you stay in “Good Nervous?” Well in this book we’ve covered several strategies to help you do just this. If you need to, review CHAPTER #7 which focuses on HOW you learn to stay calm under pressure. In addition, remember what we’ve said about using your pre-meet and pre-performance rituals correctly TO STAY CALM. For example, stretching pre-event WITH AWARENESS, focusing on the feel of the stretching as you do it! And of course, remembering that listening to music pre-meet might keep you loose, talking with teammates about non-gymnastics related things and laughing and joking around.

So the more important this meet, routine or skill is to you....the more important it is for you to really do your absolute best, then the more you need to make it important to keep yourself loose and calm before and during the meet/practice!

2. Stay In the Now - One of the things that generates out of control nerves that can sabotage performance and feed balking is an outcome or FUTURE focus. Too many gymnasts get caught up in past falls/bad routines and future ones. You know, the "I need to get a certain score," and the "I need to perform a clean routine!" To counteract this, work on keeping your meet/practice concentration in the NOW, both BEFORE and DURING your routines. Staying in the NOW will keep you loose and confident. Staying in the NOW will increase the chances that you will perform to your potential. The NOW is the only time zone where you have access to your training! A PAST or FUTURE focus before a tumbling pass or vault will make you up-tight and slow your reflexes. A PAST or FUTURE focus while you perform will kill your confidence and sabotage your execution! Take that big meet, one routine at a time, and each routine, one skill at a time! The most important routine in any meet, the most important skill is THIS ONE, the one you're doing RIGHT NOW!

3. Recognize When You "Time Travel" and Quickly & Gently Return Your Focus to the Now - As you already know, staying in the NOW is far easier said than done. Things will always happen that will distract you and send your focus off into the future or back into the past. An unexpected fall, a silly mistake, a low score on your best event, or something that the coach says to you right before or after an event. Drifting is NORMAL and won't hurt you as long as you quickly become aware that your focus has left the NOW and then quickly, bring yourself back to it. Keep in mind it doesn't really matter how many times your focus "time travels" during a meet or practice. What REALLY matters is that you're on top of this time traveling each and every time and that you bring yourself back to the NOW, EACH AND EVERY TIME!

4. Focus On Seeing and Reacting - Performing your best in the clutch is all about keeping your concentration IN THE MEET/PRACTICE on what is happening in your body, on the apparatus versus what is happening IN YOUR HEAD with your THOUGHTS. That is, your focus always needs to be on SEEING what's in front of you and FEELING your body go through the skills that you've trained, allowing your instincts and muscle memory

to take over. You do not ever have to think your way through your event. You want to just focus on the feel of the skills, one at a time. Remember, you perform your best when your concentration is OUTSIDE on what you're DOING, rather than INSIDE, on what you're THINKING.

5. Focus on You or Stay Within Yourself – Focusing on who's watching and what they may be thinking about you will get you into trouble. Focusing on what your coaches or teammates are thinking and/or doing will do the same. Worrying about your coaches or parents being disappointed in you will also get you into hot water performance wise! Instead, your concentration needs to be on what YOU are doing in the moment, on the apparatus, in your routine and on no-one else. This means that comparing yourself to or focusing on other gymnasts is out! You want to keep your concentration on YOU and what you USUALLY DO. This is staying within yourself.

6. Recognize When Your Focus Drifts to Others and Quickly Bring Yourself Back – Like staying in the NOW, keeping your concentration on YOU and not focusing on other gymnasts, coaches, your parents or who may be watching is a whole lot easier said than done. You will frequently find that your focus drifts to others before and during the meet. When this happens, NOT TO WORRY! This is normal! However, what's important here is that you have to quickly catch yourself and return your focus back to YOU and what YOU are doing. Lose the COMPARISON habit! FOCUS ON YOU! AND EVERY TIME YOU FIND YOUR THOUGHTS AND FOCUS SLIPPING TO SOMEONE ELSE, JUST QUICKLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK!

7. Keep Track of the "Uncontrollables" – Focusing on things that you can't DIRECTLY control, The UCs or "UNCONTROLLABLES" either before and/or during your meets/routines, will make you nervous, tighten your muscles up, kill your confidence and make it impossible for you to perform to your potential. You must maintain an awareness of the UCs. You must know what UCs usually get to you and when you find yourself entertaining them, your job is to quickly return your focus to what you're doing in the moment that you CAN CONTROL! The UCs are mental traps and they're lying in wait for you and every other gymnast at that meet. Your job is to know what these traps are and use that awareness to help you avoid them. KEEP IN MIND, THE ONE THING THAT YOU CAN ALWAYS LEARN TO CONTROL IS HOW YOU REACT TO ALL OF THESE UNCONTROLLABLES!

8. Trust and Let it Happen – Once you get to that big meet , performing to your potential is already inside of you. In fact, if your big meet is tomorrow or the next day, then RIGHT NOW, you have everything that you need to nail your routines, just the way you'd want to! If you've paid your physical dues and done the training to the best of your abilities, then that great meet performance is already inside of you just waiting to come out. How do you get it out? Well you can't get it out by hoping! And you can't force it out by trying too hard and muscling things! You have to relax, trust yourself, trust your training and coaching and just let it happen. Performing your best is always a let-it-happen proposition. Put yourself on automatic, TRUST THAT HIND BRAIN OF YOURS and let the performance happen!

9. Use Last Minute Negative Thinking and Self-Doubts as a Neutral Signal to Relax and Refocus – Remember, last minute doubts and negativity are a natural and normal occurrence for ALL gymnasts. When they happen in your head, even if right after you salute the judges, stay calm and relaxed. Try not to engage them. Try not to fight with them! You don't have to replace them with more positive thoughts! Thinking, whether positive or negative is nothing more than brain wave activity. Your negative thoughts do NOT predict the future. The key here is your reaction. When last minute doubts and negativity pop up, notice them, accept them and then quickly refocus on whatever you're doing in the moment. You can still perform at a high level even after being flooded with all of these doubts AS LONG AS YOU STAY CALM AND REFOCUS YOURSELF!

10. Don't Think, Just Perform – Peak gymnastics performance happens when you're focused on what you're doing, NOT on what you're thinking. Thinking slows you down because it takes too long to do it, plus thinking distracts your focus from what's important! When you hear that monologue starting up in your head before or during a routine, let it be.....DON'T TRY TO STOP IT! DON'T TRY TO CONTROL IT! DON'T TRY TO PUSH IT ASIDE! Instead, quickly refocus your concentration on what's in front of you in the action, in the NOW!

11. Forgive Yourself for Your Mistakes, Falls, Disappointing Routines and Fears and Leave Them in the Past – Beating yourself up for a bad performance won't inspire you to become a better gymnast, especially if you're doing it in the middle of practice or that big meet! Being hard on yourself won't motivate you to work harder. It won't build your confidence. It won't help you keep on keeping on! Everyone fails. It's a normal and expected

part of the process of getting better in anything! When you have a disappointing meet, learn what you did wrong and then let it go. Deal with your failures after the meet, in practice and when chatting later with your coach! Don't work on your failures during that all important meet! Mentally hanging onto your last disappointing event, while you're trying to do THIS ONE, for example, is like trying to compete two events at once! It will totally distract you and fry your brain!

12. Have Fun – The final ingredient to performing your best is pretty basic and simple. If you really want to perform your best when it counts the most, then you have to have FUN. Far too many gymnasts have the attitude, let me stick my routines, win All Around, qualify for Nationals and THEN I'll have fun! Unfortunately this is totally backwards. You can't perform your best unless you have fun first! Fun is one of the most important ingredients in championship gymnastics. If you're having fun, you'll stay loose and relaxed. If you're having fun you will handle the pressure of that big meet! If you're having fun, then it will be far easier to keep your focus on what's important!

Getting too serious about this meet, practice or any routine is a great way to sabotage yourself and your performance! Change your headset RIGHT NOW and get into enjoying the practice or meet, the challenge of the competition and your routine/skills and the exciting unknown of putting it all on the line! That's what competitive sports are all about anyway. The results of a meet do not define you as a person. They do NOT define your self-worth. This is just one meet and you'll probably have a ton more before your gymnastics career is over. So you want to enjoy the dance so-to-speak....You want to enjoy the process. You have to have fun! FUN always equals GREAT performances. You have to love what you're doing because If it's not fun, it will be impossible for you to do well. So do things before and during the meet/practice that would make it fun for you. Talk to teammates, laugh and joke around, smile and enjoy yourself. Don't make this meet/practice too serious.

CONCLUSION

There is a mental toughness myth that exists in many sports. This myth claims that you are either born with a “good head” or not. That is, that there is very little that you can do about improving your ability to handle pressure, deal with fear or control your emotions because this is just how you are. This myth means that if you are a “head case” now, you will ALWAYS be a head case. This myth, like most, is also false.

With patience, a little hard work and consistent practice, you can train yourself to develop the mind of a champion. Mental toughness can be learned! You can do it! This workbook provides you with all of the strategies that you need to become a mentally tough gymnast and a more effective coach.

Remember, if you have a dream to go as far as possible in this sport, you have to train your mind as well as your body. Great gymnasts do not leave the mental side of their performance to chance. This is why they always seem to come through regardless of the odds against them or the pressure of the moment.

Start right now to train yourself to systematically think and act like a champion! Use this workbook as a tool. Mental training, like physical training, is an ON-GOING PROCESS. You have to continually work at all aspects of your sport to establish and maintain the competitive advantage.

How many of the exercises and ideas in this book worked for you is really NOT important. What IS important is finding those strategies that fit you as an individual and USING them. Some of these you may have developed on your own without any conscious awareness. Others you can take an active role in developing.

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