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INTRODUCTION: IS SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY RIGHT FOR US?

The purpose of this report is to investigate new ways that we as coaches can help our gymnasts overcome their fears.

Here in the Gymnastics Department of the Lake Norman YMCA, we have had some recent struggles with gymnasts who have become paralyzed by fear. Not only are these gymnasts afraid of trying new things, but some of them have become terrified of skills they had once been able to perform effortlessly. There have been many instances in which I, along with several of our other coaches, have attempted to use our own methods in dealing with this issue, but we have yet to have any long term successes.

When the gymnasts who have fears are in the middle of an episode, our other gymnasts are often deeply affected by it. Recently it seems as though when one gymnast becomes fearful, that fear spreads through her teammates and in no time we may have an entire group affected by the same fear. This causes everyone to reach a level of frustration, creating a very negative environment for our gymnasts as well as our coaches.

The parents of some of these children have approached us on multiple occasions asking why it is that their children are having these problems and how we can help them through their difficulties. After informing these parents that what their gymnast is experiencing is completely natural, we have not been able to answer the question of 'why?'

After discussing this issue at our last few meetings, the director of our gymnastics program asked that I do research and inform her of what the best possible solution for this growing problem could be. Through this research I have come to the conclusion that we should implement a short sports psychology session into our team practices. I feel that this will be the best way to identify why our gymnasts experience fear. It will also teach them how to overcome their mental obstacles, become more positive during practices, and reach their true potential both as gymnasts, and as people.

THE BENEFITS OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

DISCOVERING WHY OUR GYMNASTS ARE FEARFUL

In order for us to be successful in ridding our gymnasts of their fears, we must first discover where these fears have come from. Dr. Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist, states that “gymnastics is one of the very few [sports] where fear is an integral part of the process of participation” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 3). Goldberg goes on to say that a gymnast’s “fear can be traced to two inherent elements” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 3). One being that fear is a natural reaction when a gymnast forces their body to constantly defy gravity. And the second is the very real possibility of sustaining serious injury that every gymnast must deal with (Goldberg, 2009, p. 3).

According to Alison Arnold Ph.D., author of countless articles published in USAG magazine, “All fears... come from out of control thinking” (Arnold, 2007, p. 1). Arnold believes that the body is essentially controlled by the mind. She states that if “athletes are not feeling confident or are thinking negative thoughts, their bodies respond with fear...” (Arnold, 2007, p. 8). Arnold points out that a gymnast’s thoughts can mentally tear her down and she refers to the negative voice in a gymnast’s mind as “the fear beast” (Arnold, 2007, p. 6). This beast is usually the reason a gymnast loses confidence.

OVERCOMING MENTAL OBSTACLES

Through my research I have found that there are an extensive number of ways that we can help our gymnasts overcome their mental obstacles. However, building confidence seems to be an underlying theme in each of these techniques. According to Weinberg and Gould “one of the most effective methods of helping people control their stress and anxiety is to assist them in developing their confidence...” (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 97). Gymnasts who have a high level of confidence and a belief that they can perform their best every time will experience less anxiety (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 97).

In Arnold’s article *Zen and the Art of Gymnastics* she outlines how to practice fearlessness. She stresses the importance of having confidence and how a lack of confidence can be detrimental to a gymnast’s performance (Arnold, 2007, p. 2). What we are looking for, of course, is a level of fearlessness and without confidence it is essentially impossible to be fearless.

BECOMING MORE POSITIVE IN PRACTICE

According to Goldberg “persistent fears in a gymnast exhaust a coach’s teaching bag of tricks and ultimately make that coach feel inadequate, incompetent and ineffective on some level” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 5). When we as coaches feel incompetent and ineffective it is virtually impossible to maintain a positive attitude; not only towards the gymnast who is causing the frustration, but to her teammates, and the other coaches as well. There has been a substantial amount of research done which shows that “athletes who play for positive-oriented coaches like their teammates better, enjoy their athletic experience more, like their coaches more, and experience greater team cohesion” (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 127).

Once we have identified our gymnasts’ reasons for being fearful, and have begun to walk them through the processes of getting rid of these fears, they will begin to enjoy gymnastics more than ever; thus creating a more positive environment for everyone. According to Arnold “the best performances come when a gymnast is having fun” (Arnold, 2007, p. 4). Arnold goes on to say how easy it is for a gymnast to lose their love of the sport during frustrating times when all they see is the negative. However, when fear is no longer a factor, our gymnasts will remember what it’s like to do gymnastics for no other reason than simply because they love it (Arnold, 2007, p. 4).

HELPING OUR GYMNASTS REACH THEIR TRUE POTENTIAL

Overcoming their fears and being able to push themselves through frustrations will help our gymnasts reach their true potential, not only as athletes, but as people. When our girls begin to see that they can truly do anything they set their minds to they will become the gymnasts they’ve always desired to be. It’s no secret that many gymnasts quit because of fears they feel they can’t overcome, but learning to push through those fears will teach our gymnasts that just because something is difficult, doesn’t mean they shouldn’t try it.

Research has shown that involvement in sport activities has the potential to create positive, well adjusted youth. According to Weinberg and Gould, this is for several reasons. The first of these reasons is that sports can be extremely motivating for many adolescents. The second, “it involves sustained efforts on the part of the participant directed toward a goal over time. And third, it requires a youth to experience setbacks, make adjustments, and learn to overcome challenges” (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 558).

RECOMMENDATION: A SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAM FOR OUR TEAM MEMBERS

Based on this research, I feel that implementing a short sports psychology program into our team practices will solve many of the problems we have been facing with our gymnasts. Through this we will be able to understand why our gymnasts experience fear, and perhaps be able to prevent this from happening in the future. Our girls will no longer have negative attitudes about themselves or their gymnastics, and will see once more why it is that they love this sport.

All it would take is fifteen minutes, once a week, in which one of our coaches could read one of Arnold's articles, or perhaps something from a sports psychology book, and attempt to teach our gymnasts how important goal setting and positive attitudes really are. We could then come up with activities based on the articles or book excerpts in order to get the girls involved and help them remember what they have just learned. I believe that our girls would benefit tremendously from this - not only that, but I feel that their parents would appreciate the effort we're putting forth to solve the problems their children are having in the gym.

References

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