

TALENT OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM

USA Gymnastics – Women

TOPS TESTING MANUAL



There are many conditions necessary for success in modern sport. One of these is an inherent talent or aptitude. Early identification of talent is one of the most important concerns in contemporary sport (Bompa, 1990; Bompa, 1985; Harre, 1982). The basic premise underlying Talent Opportunity Programs is that the

development of the youthful athlete can be best served if the athlete trains in a sport of discipline for which he/she is best suited (Harre, 1982). Two corollaries to this premise are: (a) if an athlete starts at a higher level of ability or performance then he/she ultimately ends up at a higher level of performance, and (b) if you start with a greater aptitude for a particular activity, then the athlete will progress faster than an athlete with a lower initial aptitude.

Unfortunately, these premises have not been conclusively proven, and may succumb to wide individual variability. However, one can pragmatically assume that because of the requirement of five or more years of training to reach a level of proficiency in a sport (Bompa, 1990), and a rather narrow window of age that the athlete can expect peak performance (Bompa, 1990; Hadjiev,

1989; Sands & Henschen, 1992), it is important that athletic talent is discovered early, and monitored continuously to help the athlete reach high levels of performance (Bompa, 1990).

Talent identification is not a new idea, but very little has been done in the West to implement programs on a consistent basis (Bompa, 1990; Bompa, 1985). The West has largely relied on “natural selection” rather than scientific selection (Bompa, 1990; Bompa, 1985). It has been reported that during the late 1960s and early 1970s most Eastern European countries established specific methods for identifying gifted athletes (Bompa, 1990; Gilbert, 1980; Jerome, 1980). The competition results were dramatic (Harre, 1982). It was reported that 80% of the Bulgarian medallists were selected by a scientific identification process (Bompa, 1990). Some Characteristics relevant to athletic performance are heritable and could logically be selected early in the life of the athlete (Londeree, 1990).

The detection and selection of talented youths for sport participation has several assumed advantages for both the sport and the athlete (Bompa, 1990):

1. The time required to reach a high performance by selecting initially gifted individuals is reduced.
2. The amount of work required to elevate an athlete to high-level performance is reduced.
3. The effectiveness of the coach’s time is enhanced by training primarily these athletes of superior ability.
4. The number of athletes competing at the higher levels of the sport is increased.

5. The national team will have more homogeneous characteristics.
6. There can be an increase in the athlete's self confidence because the athlete knows that he/she is among an elite group of athletes.
7. The application of the sports sciences to training programs can be enhanced indirectly by involving sport scientists in the selection process.
8. The heritability of some sport qualities is high, and selecting those qualities, in advance, that are less amenable to training may ultimately enhance performance.
9. The athlete can be channeled to a sport where he/she has the highest probability of success.
10. Potential individual limiting factors to performance can be identified early and steps taken to reduce and/or eliminate them.
11. In sports with a stature component, such as gymnastics, the athlete can be spared from spending years training for a sport that he/she will ultimately outgrow or never develop the physique necessary to participate at a high level.
12. By identifying talent early the athlete can begin the training process with enough time to prepare for the age at which he/ she will reach a physical peak with less haste during the developmental process. This usually results in a more thorough and well-designed approach to training, ultimately resulting in a safer and sounder approach for the athlete.

The identification of talent is difficult, time consuming, and ongoing. Because of the specificity of the effects of training on performance, in the final analysis, the only way to precisely determine if the athlete is suitable for gymnastic training and performance is actually doing it! (Harre, 1982)

Nearly all Talent Opportunity Programs for sport use the "pyramid" model, which is starting with a relatively large number of potential athletes and then nurturing (providing opportunities for) those athletes who continue to demonstrate the requisite abilities for the sport. This results in a gradual "weeding-out" or selection process. Therefore, talent identification and opportunity programs must be looked upon as a *process* and not an event. The training process will allow the athlete to further enhance and develop his/her abilities, and usually the "talent" of an athlete will become obvious. Interest in a sport is developed by training and will also become apparent. Personality traits are also developed and become visible in the athlete's attitude toward training and competition.

In short, training steers the process of athletic talent identification and development (Harre, 1982). This does not rule out the possibility of determining an athlete's potential for a sport, even before actually training in the sport, but it sets the stage for the interpretation of the talent identification and opportunity program results as a means rather than an end. This is so overwhelmingly important that it cannot be



overemphasized. Talent identification is a process, requiring constant updating and maintenance. This is particularly important in a sport such as women's gymnastics due to the very young and steadily declining initial training age of the athletes (Hadjiev, 1989).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goals and objectives of the Talent Opportunity Program are broad and varied.

The following list is offered as the author's ideas of what a Talent Opportunity Program should do.



The list is not designed to be all-inclusive.

Goals

- 1 Identify talented young gymnasts between 7 to 11 years old that are not currently seeking or training for elite or international level competition.
- 2 Identify deficiencies in fitness and skill factors that can be determined by scientific testing and interaction with regional and national staff coaches. These deficiencies will be communicated to both the athlete and the coach for remedial work.
- 3 Enhance the information flow and educational opportunities to talented athletes, their parents or guardians, and their coaches to help improve the athlete's training.

Objectives

1. Identify and notify young athletes and parents or guardians of the inherent talent possessed by a young gymnast. This will help the young athlete and family make more intelligent choices on the selection and serious pursuit of their gymnastics opportunities.
2. Identify and notify the coaches of young athletes with inherent talent of the children they coach. Then assist the coaches in the development of these young athletes by enhanced access to the best gymnastics authorities available along with other training and performance opportunities.

3. To serve as a conduit or "fast-track" for young athletes from the early years of training to the international level.
4. To enhance early preparation of skills and abilities that will be needed for international level competition four or more years in the future.
5. To provide for the identification of deficiencies in training and health that can be remedied by early and expert intervention.

TALENT OPPORTUNITY CRITERIA

General Health



First and foremost the athlete must be healthy. The athlete should be free of physical or organic malfunctions. The level of health of the athlete must be determined by qualified personnel including, but not limited to, the athlete's personal

physician, a sports medicine orthopedist, a sports medicine physical therapist, an athletic trainer, and/or a sports psychologist (Bompa, 1990; Bompa, 1985; Harre, 1982; Bajin, 1986; Salmela & Regnier, 1983). A preparticipation physical must be performed to determine if there are any medical problems that would be potentially limiting to training and performance.

Physiological Characteristics

The physiological variables are less predictable or stable than the physique variables. Studies have been done with advanced athletes, but often less than elite athletes (Feigley, 1987). The predictive

ability of such studies is questionable when seeking the ultra-talented athlete. This is likely to be due to the enormous impact that training can have on the physiological variables and relatively small effect that training can have on physique variables. Bajin (1986) determined that active flexibility had the highest correlation with performance results in the long term testing program undertaken in Canada. Tests of children to predict adult performance is probably highest in those sports where there is a single dominant performance characteristic such as endurance running or shot putting. There is a problem in gymnastics with talent identification using physiological variables because of the enormous impact of training on most of them, the large number of different physiological characteristics that a gymnast needs at high levels, and the relative instability of these variables to predict young adult performance.

Psychological Characteristics

There is little psychological information regarding children and sport performance and the heritability and /or predictability of psychological variables on future performance. It is doubtful that any coach would deny that psychological characteristics may set the razor's edge of competitive effectiveness in later years, but it is practically impossible to predict future performance based on childhood psychological assessments at the current time. Considerable literature has been devoted to how children can best receive sport psychology services, but little predictive work has been done (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Weiss, 1991; Henschen, Sands Gordin, & Martinez, 1990; Crain, 1991; Henschen & Gordin, 1983; Feigley, 1987).

Sport psychology in the form of mental training has been advocated and used with favorable results (Unestahl, 1983b; Ravizza, 1983; Mohoney, Averno, & Averno, 1983;

Rotella, 1983; Unestahl, 1983a), and investigations into profiling the current elite gymnast have been performed (Feigley, 1987; Henschen, Sands, & Schultz, 1989; Henschen, Sands, Gordin, & Martinez, 1990; Henschen & Gordin, 1983). The results of the investigations lead to some common-sense applications of psychological characteristics to elite performers. The ability to confidently detect and nurture talent in the psychological area is far from concrete. The potential benefits from increasing efforts in this area should not be underestimated. Tests of visualization as proposed by Beier (Henschen, 1991) could open many doors to increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of gymnastics training. Talent identification from psychological variables is still in its infancy. In this area, the first approach is to continue to research psychological variables with regard to future performance by repeated testing and development of an extensive database of psychological and other performance information. The second approach is to rely on the experience and intuition of accomplished coaches in detecting the subtle nuances of behavior that are indicative to them of good psychological potential in the athlete.

Motor Educability and Motor/Gymnastic Skill Performance

Although this area could be included as a subset of psychological evaluation, it is vitally important in gymnastics and therefore, has developed its own category. This area encompasses the athlete's ability to balance, spatially orient, and translate visual and verbal ideas into movement. Simply, this category deals with the ability to learn gymnastics skills. These evaluations are commonly called motor performance tests. This area can encompass testing certain root gymnastics skills or categories of skills.



The Talent Opportunity Program seeks to identify talented children who may or may not already be in the current competitive system and to offer them opportunities to develop into an elite or international level athlete. Based on

experience, NO LIST OF “STANDARD” SKILLS WILL EVER BE ENOUGH TO TRAIN A YOUNG GYMNAST FULLY. The complete development of the gymnast can only be assured with large multilateral development in gymnastics related skills with a gradual and systematic progression from basic to more difficult. These skills must be carefully selected and learned as the athlete matures in his/her sport mastery. It appears that the soundest way to evaluate motor skills and performance is with a few of simple performance tests and by asking the athletes to perform skills on each event from set skill categories. The categories should be sufficiently narrow to guarantee a good representation of the ability of the athlete, and broad enough that the athlete/coach can meet the categories in a variety of ways.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A TALENT IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM

Sources of Information

The first area of concern in the implementation of a Talent Opportunity Program is to identify the sources of information that can assist in the talent identification process. The following sources of information can be used to gather important information regarding talent identification:

1. Physiological test batteries of performance capabilities.
2. Motor performance test batteries to determine the motor educability and spatial orientation capabilities of the young athlete.
3. Psychological test batteries to gather important information and begin the development of predictive information regarding gymnastics talent.
4. Health and nutrition assessments made by sports medicine and nutrition professionals.
5. Information provided by regional and/or national coaching staffs while working with and testing the athletes.

Commonly Asked Questions

Can you practice prior to the Regional and National Testings?

It is encouraged that TOPs be implemented within your program, however, it must be noted that TOPs is not designed to be the sole method of training a young athlete.

Can you practice during the actual tests?

All athletes will be given an amount of time prior to the testing for general stretch and practicing. Once the test has begun, there should be no more practicing. The exception being at National Testing where

there will be touch warm-up prior to each skills testing station.

How are ages determined, and is membership required?

The ages of the athletes are determined as of December 31st of the year of the test. For example, an athlete who is 8 years old by December 31st must test with the 8-year-old age group. In addition, the athlete must **turn 7 during the current testing year** before she is eligible to test, and an athlete **may not be 12 years of age any time during the testing year**. All athletes **MUST** also be a registered USA Gymnastics Athlete Member.

What athletes are qualified?

Children are qualified for participation in TOPs if:

- a. They will be 7 to 11 years of age anytime during the current testing year.
- b. They have a **CURRENT USA Gymnastics Athlete membership**.
- c. Their medical and accompanying forms have been completed. Forms can be found in Appendix B.
- d. They are not a currently qualified Elite Level athlete.

What are the benefits of TOPS?

ATHLETES benefit by seeing clearly how their physical abilities and skills compare to other athletes of the same age from across the United States.

The athletes get access to some of the leading authorities in gymnastics via the regional and national clinics.

The athlete's problem areas are identified and noted for more in-depth analysis and remediation. The athletes



begin a tracking that will allow them to see how they have progressed from year to year.

The 9-11 YEAR OLD AGE GROUP is invited to participate in a national test where they are evaluated by the USA Gymnastics national staff. They are then ranked with other gymnasts their age from across the nation. Those who qualify and pass the national testing will be invited to attend a training camp at USA Gymnastics expense. The training camp will include training, evaluations of the athlete's current performance status, and suggestions for improvement.



The individual athlete's personal COACH will have an opportunity to see how his/her coaching efforts compare to the rest of the nation. The feedback from the TOPs testing can be invaluable in determining where the coach's methods stand relative to the rest of the nation. The coaches of all TOP age groups are eligible to attend to the national testing and the national TOPs training camp, an opportunity that has been almost exclusively reserved for elite level coaches in the past. The TOPs training camp and other educational materials will be provided as part of the informational feedback to TOPs coaches.

Is there information on TOPs on the Internet?

Yes, information on the TOPs program can be found on USA Gymnastics' Web Page. This information may be found at the following web address:

[URL:http://www.usa-gymnastics.org](http://www.usa-gymnastics.org)

www.usa-gymnastics.org/women/tops/tops.html

How much does TOPs it cost?

There are several costs involved. The first is the cost of the physical examination by a physician. We cannot control a physician's fees, but we have tried to remove any tests that have proven to be of great expense and dubious value. There is a \$35 entry fee for regional and national testing. The transportation, lodging, meals, and other related expenses to attend the regional national tests are at the athlete's expense. The national TOPs training camp is completely funded by USA Gymnastics for qualified athletes ONLY. Personal coaches pay their own expenses. *NOTE: Pending budget.

Can a TOP athlete skip a Junior Olympic level of competition?

Current National TOP Team Members may enter directly into Elite Regional Competitions.

Is selection into TOPs a guarantee for gymnastics success?

TOPs is an educational process designed to find "potentially" talented athletes and educate these athletes along with their coaches and parents. There are several factors involved in the development of an elite athlete; therefore, TOPs cannot be a guarantee predictor of gymnastics success or failure.

What is the advantage of TOPs to the club owner?



Education is the key to any successful program. TOPs provides valuable information for the development of

Elite athletes through interaction with the National Coaching Staff and National Sports Science Staff at National TOP Testings and the National TOP Training Camp.

Is there a video available of the Physical Abilities and the National Testing Skills?



A TOP Video of the Physical Abilities and the National Testing Skills is available through USA Gymnastics Member Services. Call Member Services at 1-800-345-4719 and ask for the TOP Video. The approximate cost is

\$10.00. Please remember that the video is only to be used for a helpful tool. The TOP Manual and Text is the only “official” version of the TOP Program.

What is the awards program for TOPs?

Based upon the results from regional testing:

7-8 year olds

Diamond Level - Qualifies a coach from the club that tested the gymnast to attend the National TOP Training Camp. The gymnast will receive the National TOP Team Apparel. Her name will be posted on the USA Gymnastics’ Website and her name will be listed in the USA Gymnastics Magazine.

Gold Level - The gymnast will receive the National TOP T-shirt and will receive a TOP Certificate of Accomplishment. Her name will be posted on USA Gymnastics’ Website.

Silver and Bronze Level - The gymnast will receive a TOP Certificate of Accomplishment.

9-11 year olds

Gold Level - The gymnast will be invited to attend the National TOP Testing and will receive a National TOP T-shirt at the testing. She will also receive a TOP Certificate of Accomplishment along with her name

posted on USA Gymnasts’ Website and in the USA Gymnastics Magazine.

Silver and Bronze Level - The gymnast will receive a TOP Certificate of Accomplishment.

9-11 year old athletes that are accepted onto the National TOP Team will be invited to attend the National TOP Training Camp at USA Gymnastics’ expense. The gymnast will receive the National TOP Team apparel and her name will be posted on the USA Gymnastics’ Website and in the USA Gymnastics Magazine.

