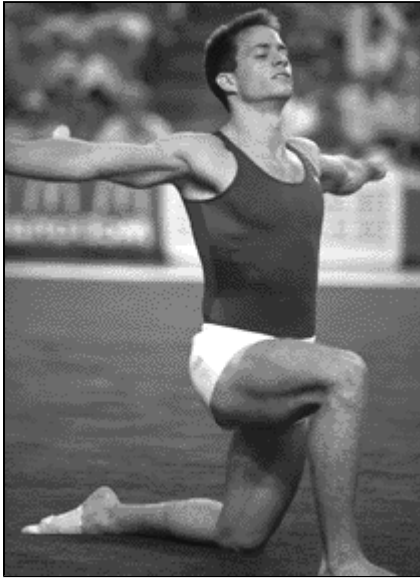


What's Happened to the "Free" in Floor Exercise?



by Toby Towson

When I used to compete in gymnastics, the floor exercise event was also known as "free exercise." It had a nice ring to it. In Spanish it was called "manos libres," or "free hand." Unencumbered by apparatus and the need to grip an object, the gymnast was "free" to move on a plain surface, to explore and play with gravity, and to test his balance, strength, flexibility, and acrobatics. Nearly everyone had a particular movement, pose, or rhythm which distinguished him from other gymnasts. My hero, when I started competitive gymnastics, was Franco Menichelli, world champion in free exercise from Italy, and he gave meaning to the word "free." His routines were well constructed compositions of confident tumbling and fluid moving transitions which exhibited his high energy and enthusiasm for

performing. Franco inspired many of us to find our own freedom in the floor exercise event.

One hardly ever hears the term free exercise ("free ex") anymore, and I suppose it's not a coincidence. Where is the freedom in today's men's floor exercise? For the most part one routine looks pretty much like the next. Most male gymnasts have adopted a stiff, stick-figure like approach to the event, expressionless except for the energy of the tumbling or the flair handstand. Rather than acknowledge the audience and the reality of the artistic performance experience, the gymnasts close themselves in a bubble of inner focus which leaves little opening for the observers to share in the experience.

I think this lack of freedom of expression started when floor exercise lost the purity of a single gymnast alone on the floor with gravity. Originally there were no mats, just the hard floor, and basic tumbling was just one of the requirements. With the development of modern mats, spring floors, and carpets, the gymnasts and coaches became fixated with the tumbling aspect of floor exercise to the exclusion of the other qualities that used to make the event unique: balance, flexibility, strength, rhythm and the fluidity and presentation of creative movements to connect the tumbling skills.

There have been several gymnasts who have broken the mold and created memorable floor exercise routines in the last thirty years, and frequently the judges rewarded them for their efforts. Peter Kormann, Kurt Thomas, and Mike Racanelli for the United States, Tong Fei for China, Neil Thomas for Great Britain, Jesus Rivera for Cuba, and Ioannis Melissanidis for Greece have all achieved exceptional international results with their innovations and mastery. But these creative and expressive gymnasts and others who have distinguished themselves (you know who you are, and I applaud you) are a distinct minority and at odds with the mainstream approach which many of us find uninspiring and short-sighted.

Please don't mistake my viewpoint: I am happy with the changes in technology and the breakthroughs in tumbling that are possible with modern floor apparatus, but at the same time I am saddened by the loss of creativity and individual expression which we find in the vast majority of men's floor exercises.

Besides the development of spring floors, some of the blame for today's uninteresting (unfree) floor exercises must fall on the old Soviet system. I say this because the Soviets were on top of the sport and, in many ways, were pushing the envelope, but in floor exercise their progress was limited to tumbling. Although the Soviet men had years of rhythmic ballet barre training to help them build the strong, flexible bodies and awareness of rhythm and movement which helped them succeed, most neglected to expand their floor exercises beyond more difficult tumbling skills. At their best (such as Vladimir Artemov), some of these Soviet routines were marvels to behold in terms of technique, but most were weak in creativity, limited in composition, and personal expression seemed consciously inhibited. And the rest of the world followed, trying to play catch up in tumbling while moving less and less in between tumbling passes.

The results of the Soviet coaching philosophy are still with us today: backing up into a corner before tumbling back down the same diagonal, or simply tumbling back with no pretense of a connecting move; lack of focus as though it's not a performance at all; and/or tiny irrelevant steps and an obvious inhibition to move with grace and freedom, let alone creative individuality and confidence. One major exception to this trend was Valentine Mogilny, whose creativity and elegance were not matched by most of his countrymen.

Many male coaches and gymnasts like to argue that, with all the demands of the new *Code of Points*, men's floor exercise really is just a contest of tumblers. From this point of view any attempt at creative transition moves or performance quality is simply a misguided waste of time and doomed to fail. The philosophy, which seems to predominate, is to move as little as possible between tumbling passes which makes the gymnasts look stuck and inhibited. Trying not to move actually drains energy by interrupting the flow of the routine. Many gymnasts drop quickly to the stomach or roll out of most tumbling trying to avoid a penalty for not sticking the tumbling landings, i.e., not having control out of their tumbling pass.

Unfortunately this short-sighted viewpoint is holding back the evolution of our sport and causing us to lose points in competition at the same time. Men's floor is in danger of becoming the new compulsory event since too many gymnasts think they have to do the same basic routine as everyone else. These cookie-cutter routines have no individual identity and limited appeal to the judges and audience. Is it any wonder that television coverage of men's gymnastics in the last twenty years (with the exception of the 1996 Olympics) has rarely shown a complete men's floor exercise routine? Floor exercise should allow each gymnast the most room for creative expression, not the least.

Come on America; this is "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Let's see some of it in your floor exercise presentations. Don't follow the Russians or anybody else unless they display a style that opens your minds and encourages you to be creative. Remember to think about the definition of the name of our sport, Artistic Gymnastics. Turn into your corners; don't back up looking nervously to see where the corner markings are. Make a lunge like you mean it and open your heart to the audience.

Don't shy away from the performance. Find an arm position, movement, or rhythm that no one else uses. When you jump or leap, hold your face up with the focus out rather than drop your head and look at the floor. Show some enjoyment when you demonstrate mastery of a move. Look out at your audience and allow them to share your excitement and confidence. Build up a rapport with your audience (including the judges) that feeds you energy and helps you perform your best.

I promise: you will not lose energy by moving with grace and creativity. On the contrary, by working within the framework of a well constructed and creative routine, and artistic composition, you will increase your energy and tumble with more precision and confidence. You don't need to look like anyone but yourself; find your own style and develop from there.

And please, give up the cheap tricks like dropping (falling) quickly to your stomach or turning and stepping immediately out of a tumbling landing. Train hard to land the tumbling correctly and show your landing recovery before the next move. So you're not always perfect; don't give up the attempt at perfection with a cover up move which becomes the rule rather than the exception.

I have one more suggestion. Don't let the quest for a super high start value trick you into difficulty which you have little chance of performing well. Hint: if you can't make it more often than not in the context of a full routine in practice, don't put it in competition. A confident routine with a start value in the low or mid-nines and few or no deductions will usually beat a more difficult routine which has a fall or several extra steps. This is especially true when considering a whole team's approach, and I've heard recently that the Americans put this philosophy to good use at World Championships, a great step in the right direction.

I encourage the American men's coaches and gymnasts to lead the world gymnastics community back to artistic and creative men's floor exercise. I feel certain, many judges will applaud and reward your efforts. I urge the judges to look for creativity and excellence of presentation which complements difficulty and to let the gymnasts know when their efforts are appreciated. Also, when considering the future of the *Code of Points*, perhaps American judges and administrators can help persuade the FIG to think progressively when forming the rules. Why not encourage more jumps, give some credit for interesting balances and flexibility moves, and reward the gymnasts when they show artistry, virtuosity, and creative compositions?

We have the talent in this country to produce the best, not just chase other countries' gymnasts. But we must succeed through intelligent and creative routines that allow our gymnasts to be unique and express an individual approach with each performance. Then, we will be leaders and open the door for others to be creative in their own right. Let's help the sport evolve as it is destined to do, and men's floor exercise will once again be free.

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