

Coaching to Overcome FEAR

Out of Control Thinking Leads to Out of Control Performance

By by Alison Arnold, Ph.D., Head Games Sport Psychology

You've been through this many, many times before. She would do them perfectly yesterday and now she just won't go. Then there's the other one. The one who has decided, all of a sudden, not to do the straddle back that she has competed for the last three seasons.

At times, gymnastics can be a scary sport. Dealing with a fearful gymnast can be scary for the coach. How do you do it? Whether it is a new skill or a skill a gymnast has competed for years, there are things coaches can do to help their gymnasts work through fear.

Humiliation, throwing a gymnast out of workout, and yelling are not tactics that teach your athletes good coping skills. This article will explore one of the ways you can help your athletes cope with fear and work through it successfully.

Where Does Fear Come From?

Fear can arise from many sources. Sometimes it is a result of a past fall, injury, or trauma. Other times, it arises out of low self-confidence. Whatever the source, one major cause of fear in gymnasts is out of control thinking. Out of control thinking leads to out of control performance. The root of most fear and balking are thoughts that are negative and catastrophic. So this means helping your athletes create disciplined, positive, thinking patterns that will lead to disciplined, positive, performance. What are our athletes thinking as they stand on the beam for 15 minutes trying to work up the courage to throw a series? Most likely, their thoughts are about crashing, falling, or other fantasies of what **MAY** happen. This out of control, negative thinking is a major cause of the fear/balking cycle.

How to Create Disciplined Thinking

If out of control thinking leads to out of control performance, then the most important intervention coaches can do with their athletes is help them create disciplined thinking patterns. When gymnasts have ritualized thoughts before skills or competition, negative thought patterns are less likely to intrude. I call the creating of ritualized thoughts before skills, during routines, or during competition, mental choreography. In gymnastics we choreograph everything, floor routines, beam routines, even bar routines have some sort of choreography. Why is it then that our athletes' thoughts are negative and scattered? Choreographing what gymnasts say to themselves is extremely important. It is a way for coaches to "get in their gymnasts' heads," helping them create positive images for themselves.

Developing Mental Choreography

There are three types of statements used in creating mental choreography. These statements are technical statements, energy statements and self-esteem statements. Technical statements include corrections and mechanical reminders which the gymnast focuses on before or during routines. Examples of technical statements include, "lift and twist," "block," and "tight legs." Energy statements either help give the gymnast an energy boost or

decrease anxiety. Energy statements that bring the gymnast's energy up can be used at the end of a floor routine, "Push!" or right before a bar mount, "Go!" Statements like "relax" and "breathe" help bring fear and anxiety levels down to a more manageable level. Finally, self-esteem statements help the gymnast feel more confident. Statements like "I can do this," "I've done it before," and "I'm ready," give the gymnast the power and confidence she needs to go for a skill or hit in competition.

Teaching a gymnast to combine these three types of statements and choreograph each of her routines is essential to developing disciplined thinking. Every routine should be choreographed, including the waiting time before the judge raises her hand, the mount, and during the routine. Many gymnasts may feel that vault and bars are too fast to choreograph. In that case, be sure they choreograph any key corrections and the seconds before their mount or run. An example of mental choreography before a bars mount may sound like, "Breathe, I can do this, tight legs." An example before a beam series may sound like, "Straight, over the top, Go!" It is especially important to have the entire beam and floor routine mentally choreographed, not simply difficult skills or passes. This keeps the gymnast focused on her routine without distraction or space for entering negative thoughts.

Mental choreography is something that is done consistently, in workouts, during visualization, and in competition. Establishing the connection between a word and perfect performance is a valuable tool. For example, if a gymnast does 10 perfect beam series on the floor and before each one she says, "Legs, square, Go!" the chances of her doing a perfect series on beam using the same words increases. This is identical in competition. If a gymnast performs the same ritual over and over the opportunities for success increase and anxiety decreases.

How to Use Mental Choreography in Your Gym

Mental choreography is not difficult to implement in normal workouts. Once gymnasts understand the concept, they can write out their mental choreography at home so as not to take up gym time. Gymnasts should write out each event, what skills they are doing on that event, and what words they are pairing up with each skill. For beam and floor, have them write out their entire routine or floor pattern. Then, instruct them to write their mental choreography on top of the beam they have drawn or on their floor pattern. After mental choreography is written out, have your athletes do mental "walk-throughs" that you can watch and monitor. Instruct them to say their mental choreography out loud. Be sure they are fully committed to the mental choreography and are not sloppy. Stress the importance of disciplined thinking. Check in with mental choreography throughout the season. For example, ask your gymnasts what they are thinking before their bar routine, their series, or their vault. When dealing with a fearful gymnast, ask her what she is thinking about before performing her skills. If she does not have mental choreography, help her create strong, powerful, words. Instruct fearful gymnasts to visualize their skills with their key words. This builds the connection between the words and the skill. If a gymnast is in the middle of a fear cycle, balking, and frustrated, instruct her to go over to the side and visualize or practice on the floor either the skill or a drill using her mental choreography. After she has completed a number of drills, have her then return to the event to try the skill again.

Implementing mental choreography is an essential tool for a fearful gymnast. Negative, catastrophizing, and undisciplined thoughts are the key cause of balking and anxiety. Adding mental choreography to a training regimen will decrease fear and balking in the

gym. It will also increase consistency with gymnasts with a tendency to be over-anxious in competition. Remember, out of control thinking leads to out of control gymnastics. Helping athletes become more disciplined in their thinking will increase consistency and confidence.

Note: The next part of this series will focus on additional tools to use with the fearful gymnast.

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