

The Week Before

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The week prior to the competition is an important and challenging management issue for coaches and athletes. The last week prior to the competition sets the stage both physically and psychologically for the competition. Seldom can the status of the athlete be improved so late in the preparation of the athlete, but a great deal of harm can be done.

Past experience has shown that gymnastics coaches tend to delay specific competition preparation until just before the competition (3-6). The result of such a practice is increased fatigue, increased irritability, and instability of performance. Sadly, a gymnast may perform well from time to time under such an approach, but the performances will be unstable--meaning that the gymnast will be inconsistent from one competition to the next or even one event to the next. This phenomena is often responsible for the frustrating and mysterious lack of consistency shown by inexperienced gymnasts (2).

Prepare Early

Gymnasts should perform their competitive routines for some weeks prior to a specific competition. As a rule of thumb, the gymnast needs to perform routines at least six weeks prior to the competition (2). This gives the gymnast time to stabilize the performance and achieve a certain level of familiarity that nothing but sheer repetition will accomplish. As the Code of Points has evolved, the use of "brute-force" repetitions has become more difficult and perhaps increasingly dangerous due to the increased use of high difficulty elements and combinations. Thus, it is even more important that the gymnast begin routine preparations early so that a longer and more "gentle" progression of routine-specific fitness can be acquired. It has been shown that a longer development period results in more stable and more durable performances later (7).

Ideally, the gymnast should perform routines that are well learned and well within the abilities of the gymnast. If the gymnast is performing skills and combinations too close to the edge of his/her performance envelope, the more likely the gymnast will falter due to anxiety and the associated distraction. Moreover, the gymnast who is not confident of his/her routines often becomes easily distracted due to an apparent need to find anything to think about other than the fear evoked from routines perceived more as a threat than an opportunity. There have been numerous anecdotal reports of observations of foreign gymnasts using the same routines for several years, and of gymnasts being capable of doing skills considerably more difficult than the skills they actually competed. As an example, if the gymnast was required to perform routines with elementary skills (for that gymnast), then would the gymnast feel as threatened by the routine performance as compared to routines that are chocked full of difficulty forcing the athlete to rely partially on luck to perform the routine well? Perhaps the biggest asset to self-confidence is performing skills that the gymnast perceives as easy.

The foremost goal of the final week of training is to avoid injuring the athlete physically and/or psychologically. Often, as the competition approaches, the coach begins to portray as

much or more anxiety than the gymnast. The coach should portray an image of calm readiness. Gymnasts can sense the anxiety of the coach and begin to assume that anxiety themselves. Over-coaching by increasing training loads inappropriately, making unreasonable demands, long and boring lectures, and so forth can deflate the enhanced self-confidence of the gymnast by making the gymnast doubt his/her ability. One way of using the last several days prior to a competition productively is to rehearse various aspects of the competition.

Assuming the athlete's routines are adequately prepared and the athlete is fit enough to perform the routines without much anxiety, then the final week prior to the competition can be used to make last minute adjustments and prepare the athlete for any contingencies present at the specific competition. The tasks of the final week prior to the competition consist of perfecting skills and routines, and preparing for the specific demands of the competition. The coach and athlete should attempt to model some aspects of the specific competition so that the athlete is merely familiar with the specific tasks to be accomplished. For example, using a timed warm up prior to routine practice is a good way of getting the athlete accustomed to the constrained time that is available for skill rehearsal and preparation. If athlete-numbers will be used, the athlete should wear a number during training. If the competition takes place during the morning, then one or more practices should also take place in the morning. Because these tasks may not be familiar to the athlete, he/she may falter during these simulations. However, it is still valuable to experience them. If the gymnast falters in practice when experiencing the new tasks for the first time, he/she will almost always perform these tasks better and more confidently the second time around. Experience has shown that the performance during these tasks is not very predictive of the performance in the actual competition, but failure to practice these tasks usually creates undue stress and fear during the competition.

Training Load

Figure 1 shows an example of the training load distribution for the final week before an important competition. The importance of the approach diagramed in Figure 1 lies in the placement of the training loads so that the athlete experiences the highest loads several days prior to the important contest. In addition, the athlete has an opportunity to rest/recover prior to the specific competition. Finally, the athlete does not approach the competition too rested, or too fatigued. As depicted, the training load is increasing as one approaches the competition, but the load is not maximal.

It is generally obvious that the athlete should not be overly fatigued leading up to the competition. On the other hand, coaches seldom appreciate that the athlete should also not be too rested prior to the competition so that he/she is faced with a high level of unfamiliar excess energy. One should strive to achieve a state of preparedness immediately prior to the meet which is similar to the athlete's typical state during a high achieving practice session. Rarely are the best practice sessions seen when the athlete has been rested for a long period. Usually the athlete returns from a rest/recovery period with either excess energy, or a sort of sluggish inertia that prevents the athlete from performing sharply. Both of these conditions result in an unfamiliar "feeling" for the gymnast and a distraction that is unsettling. In short, experience has shown that athletes should be increasing their training load prior to the competition without invoking too much fatigue.

One can control the training load of the last moment preparation by constraining training

time. Because the athlete should avoid fatigue without reducing training intensity, the practice session should be shortened to ensure that high quality work is performed without incorporating a large volume of work. Because the gymnast and coach are anxious for the upcoming competition, it seems natural that they will tend to overwork in an attempt to fix the rough edges of skills. While some "perfecting" should occur, it is a mistake to increase training volume during the immediate competition preparation because of the fatigue that such an approach will cause. Injuries have been shown to increase during the final weeks prior to an important competition (1). Therefore, it is wise to err on the side of too little work, rather than too much.

Successful gymnastics performance relies on optimization of the athlete's fitness, skills, and psychological state. All of these factors are interactive, with each influencing the other. The astute coach understands and appreciates the role of the final preparations for a competition, and takes steps to ensure that the athlete is optimally prepared.

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