

"It's so frustrating"

By Dr. Joe Massimo

It's pretty certain that almost every boy or girl who has taken an interest in gymnastics and trained seriously in the sport has felt "frustrated" in the gym from time to time and probably said so to you as coach, or to his/her fellow gymnasts and/ or parents. The dictionary tells us that to be frustrated means to feel defeat, discouragement, and that one is working at something very hard without good results. Very often an insecure feeling goes along with frustration. Thinking about gymnastics, which we all know is a very difficult sport, feelings of frustration are to be expected and are a natural part of the whole training experience.



There are some things that coaches can do to help frustrated gymnasts deal with their feelings and even reduce the problem in the future. First of all, gymnasts need to understand that frustration is a natural part of all learning in and out of the gym. Surely in school many young people have had the same kind of feelings about certain subjects, teachers, or homework assignments. Some psychologists believe that frustration is the basic reason that learning begins in the first place. When a baby cries it is a first expression of frustration. The crying is usually happening when the baby has a need that isn't being met and, because it has no language in the early years, the crying is how it makes its feelings known. Child development specialists believe that infants begin to form a mental picture of the person (mother) or thing (bottle) that is usually seen as meeting the need. This "imaging" allows the baby to put off getting what it wants right away. These beginning "thoughts" are really brought on by the frustration that the infant feels.

Some people get upset when frustrated and can display very bad tempers or bursts of anger. When this happens they usually lose their ability to think clearly and things often get worse. Other people get down in the dumps when frustration comes their way and this depression makes it hard for them to continue in the activity they are doing with much success. Still other individuals find that frustration helps them work even harder and spurs them on with an increased effort. As with most things in life, it's an individual matter and depends in part on how such frustrating situations were handled when they were growing up. What is important for coaches is to validate the gymnast's feelings and to remind them that frustration is as natural in life as breathing itself. Gymnasts can, however, have some control in the matter as well as some choice as to when and how much frustration they are going to meet in their training. In our sport most frustration occurs around learning a new skill and/or building a competitive routine. Of course, there are different frustrations such as trouble with coaching style and scores they receive, but the frustration of learning new

moves is most common and fundamental in gymnastics.

No matter how good a gymnast is, a certain amount of difficulty or blocked desire is always going to take place during the learning process. However, gymnasts who are willing to face considerable frustration early in their careers can reduce the amount they have to face when it comes to dealing with high level tricks and exercises later on. Many times we have stated the importance of the fifth event for girls and the seventh event for boys, namely general conditioning. Those gymnasts willing to face considerable frustration during this "basic training" part of their gymnastics from the very beginning of their careers can minimize the amount of a different kind of frustration they will have to deal with as they progress through the sport. Hard, long, and faithful conditioning is not as much fun as doing back somersaults on the floor or kips on the bars but, in the long run, it's probably more important. It's through conditioning that the body and mind are made ready for specific training on the events. It provides the foundation upon which gymnasts build their collection of tricks and eventually their routines.

It is in this area of conditioning that gymnasts need to be reminded that they have some choice and an opportunity to gain some control over frustration. One is to decide to skip certain building blocks (or cheat on them when you're not watching) and try to force the body into things it's not prepared to manage. This choice may leave more time for "fun things" but will eventually create high frustration when things don't come easily because of a lack of good preparation. A second option is to spend the large amount of necessary and often grueling time needed to get the mind and body ready. This choice requires a lot of self-discipline and patience as well as coach direction. It can also be frustrating because it's often repetitious and rarely exciting. Since either choice has built-in unavoidable frustrations, gymnasts need to ask themselves if they want to have the frustrating experience at a beginning point in their training or later when, having neglected to prepare properly, they find themselves progressing very slowly.

It doesn't take a great deal of wisdom to figure out which is the most sensible choice. The kind of frustration that goes along with stretching, strength training, endurance building, and overall conditioning is very real but also quite different than that felt later when trying to learn a new skill with little success.

The frustration felt when conditioning can be reduced as the gymnast realizes that the effort has benefits and a payoff in their non-conditioning time on the events. There are also things that can be done to make the "extra" event more enjoyable and challenging. Personal accomplishment journals, schedules with goals, self vs. self contests, and encouraging personal slogans are some examples. On the other hand, the frustration felt at a later point in the gymnast's career and training is much more difficult to cope with since it's unlikely that any amount of effort or repetition will be successful if the basic readiness has been skipped or neglected. There is little that can be done to make those frustrating experiences less painful because the unprepared gymnast is simply not ready to master what is required. In most cases it is necessary to go back and fill in the gaps. Few gymnasts enjoy that kind of chore. Keeping a personal log of failed attempts is surely a lot less rewarding in the long run than keeping a record of push-ups done, laps completed, or leg lifts finished.

It takes real staying power to follow a tough daily conditioning program in gymnastics. Some gymnasts are tempted to slack off on the conditioning schedule and need to be helped to keep on target. I have heard young gymnasts complain to their coaches that they are not "up" for their drills or could they skip it "just for today?" The answer must be a firm and

definite NO! The only exceptions to the rules are determined by coaches and would need to involve the limiting nature of injuries or the highly specialized work that is done prior to competitions by those gymnasts who are getting ready to compete.

This type of training program can't be left to chance but needs to be planned in advance including all participants right down to tiny tots on very beginning teams. The major responsibility for seeing that this conditioning takes place rests with the coach. Some gymnasts are so inspired and dedicated that they hardly ever need to be reminded about the importance of these exercises but they are usually the minority. If you ask a very good gymnast how he/she managed the self-discipline needed to work on this part of his/her overall gymnastics, you will discover that many feel it is due to the fact that early in his/her career the importance of this activity was stressed by a coach who really felt it was important. These coaches motivate their gymnasts by stressing how the physical readiness affects mental readiness and therefore, makes the learning of gymnastics skills easier and less frustrating.

Gymnasts who don't take this part of their training seriously and try to bug out and avoid the frustration of hard conditioning may seem to be having more "fun" at times but they are short-changing themselves and setting the stage for real disappointment later on. The smart choice should be clear-it's rarely too late to get on the right track.

In closing our discussion of frustration, the following suggestions are made to coaches:

1. A number one recommendation is to focus on preparation and more preparation. Encourage your gymnasts not to shortcut their conditioning efforts. Make it clear that this is not acceptable. This includes all flexibility, strength, and endurance training as well as any other conditioning you have developed.
2. Set the example. Think of conditioning as an actual event. Give it as much attention and hard work as you do the apparatus training. Make it a part of the everyday schedule. Remind your gymnasts that, in the long run, the payoff will outweigh the frustration of the daily conditioning regime.
3. When your athlete hits a snag in getting a skill, go over the demands of the move with the gymnast and determine if there is something special that can be done to help get the trick in terms of further conditioning. Avoid making your gymnast feel that backing up for some additional work is a negative thing. Make it a positive action.
4. Remember that your gymnasts will experience frustration no matter how hard they work on preparation for skill acquisition. It's a matter of degree that counts. Encourage them to be patient and stick with it because most things worthwhile involve periods of insecurity and dissatisfaction and take time to master. Monitor your own frustration as a coach and practice what you preach.
5. Help your gymnasts control their reactions to frustration. This is often easier said than done. Keeping emotions under control is an individual matter. Everyone has a different threshold for managing frustration, just as they do for tension and pain. Blowing one's top is usually not productive although for some kids that's exactly what needs to happen in order to clear the air and go on. In any event, never allow emotional displays (crying, etc.) to become an acceptable habit, especially in a public

setting.

6. Make an effort as the coach to separate those things that your gymnasts are really ready and "can do" but aren't, from those things that you "want them to do" but in reality are simply not physically ready for. It can't always be on your time schedule. Delayed success does not make one a "bad gymnast" or "chicken." With time and persistence, in most cases, they will eventually succeed. If you have an athlete who is clearly ready for a skill from a physical point of view but won't go for it, you need to work with that individual on psychological preparation and self-confidence. You might be able to "shame" them into success but that is not the way to go if you have their overall wellness in mind. Physical and mental readiness are related, but each takes a little different tactic or strategy to manage.
7. Encourage your gymnasts to challenge themselves just one small step at a time beyond their endurance while working on conditioning. Effort as well as success should be recognized and re-enforced. This is a good way to help each gymnast to establish new goals and get a feel for their mental "attitude." This process can also reduce frustration associated with this activity.
8. When appropriate, talk openly with your gymnasts about frustration if it isn't clearly apparent. It helps everyone to realize that they are not alone in this regard and talking about it can lead to some new ways to learn and apply themselves!