

How We Must Develop the Sport of Gymnastics for the Future

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I graduated from Tokyo University of Physical Education in 1964. After retiring from competition, I began my coaching career at that University in 1966 and continued as assistant coach for 10 years. Sawao Kato was a student of the University at that time and one of the developing gymnasts that I coached. He became the individual all-around champion at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. He also won the gold medal at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. In all, he captured eight gold medals at three Olympic Games from 1968 to 1976.

I have been a coach of Japanese teams, as well as a judge for several international gymnastics competitions. I have also been involved in research in the field of motor learning and have become particularly interested in the techniques involved in gymnastics skill elements. Today, I am most interested in the current trend of our sport and the future of men's artistic gymnastics.

I wrote a book with Sawao Kato entitled "The Secret of Gymnastic Training in East Germany" published in 1991. We discovered a number of interesting things including how Silvio Kroll perfected his new element, the Stretched Cuervo, in vaulting, with which he won the gold at the World Championships at Rotterdam in 1987.

Since arriving in the United States in March of 2000, I have gone to see the NCAA Championships in Iowa and the Junior National Championships in Austin, Texas. I enjoyed watching the NCAA Championships, but was quite surprised by the intensity of team competitions and the excitement that was created by the gymnasts and by the fans that cheered loudly in support of the gymnasts and their teams. I have not seen anything like this in Japan or anywhere else in the world.

I also enjoyed watching the Junior National Championships noticing, in particular, the way the competition was organized and administered. I liked the fact that there was no warm up on the competition floor. Gymnasts used a separate area for a warm up instead. It was a brilliant idea to provide two sets of equipment for each event so that Class I and II performed simultaneously and the gymnasts were judged by two different sets of judges.

The only drawback was that the competition took a long time to accommodate the huge number of competitors. I also noticed and enjoyed the announcements of running scores for teams and individuals. This made it easier for the fans to follow the progress of the meet and created more drama for the competition. Many meets around the world today are organized this way. Americans have also made significant contributions in the design and manufacturing of the many types of quality equipment that are used in international competitions, such as the vaulting board, spring floor etc. Each of these innovations has led almost immediately to the performance of more difficult and advanced skill elements among competitors. These advances have certainly revolutionized the sport of gymnastics.

I have been impressed with how popular gymnastics is in the United States. I understand that there are more than 5000 gymnastics clubs in the U.S. and more than 80,000 children are competing in the sport. I am also amazed to see how many people came to watch the NCAA championships at Iowa, and I understand the women's competition drew even larger crowds, particularly for the NCAA Championships.

Because of the popularity of the sport, there has been a strong demand for coaches here in the United States. There are many coaches from other countries coaching here, such as the former USSR, the Republic of China, Japan, and other European countries. Many have come to coach at

clubs and at colleges and universities. Americans have been increasingly successful in international competitions and have developed some wonderful gymnastics elements, such as the Thomas, Gaylord, and Shurlock. Today, more than ever before, due to the expertise of the coaches and the development of the sport here, American gymnastics is noticed and respected around the world.

I have been coaching for 30 years now, and have been a judge and gymnastics event officer throughout that time. During these years, I have participated in the successes of Japanese men's gymnastics including that moment when they became world champions for the first time in 1960 at the Rome Olympics. I have also experienced the struggles of Japanese men's gymnastics in the 1980's. In its earlier stages gymnastics was symbolized by the expression of grace, elegance, and originality. Its purpose was to make a simple skill look more exciting and appealing. Japanese gymnastics has always sought to develop the kind of presentation that is most appealing to judges and spectators. At the same time, many original elements have been created: Such skills as the Endo, Yamashita, Tsukahara, Kasamatsu, Kato, Honma, and Yamawaki, and many others. Japan maintained its standing as World Champions in men's gymnastics until Fort Worth, Texas in 1979. For almost 20 years, Japan was invincible. Then came the Soviets who introduced pure stability and strength in their gymnastics performances, which eventually overtook the Japanese and the rest of the world. However, in the process of taking over the top of the world ranking for more than 10 years, the Soviet Union has also concentrated a great deal of time and effort in developmental training of its juniors. The vision of this fundamental training was to create a foundation which would enable its athletes to perform not only steadily and smoothly, but introduce new and more difficult elements. The development of just a few new elements in the beginning soon led to creation of many more within the training structure. Their system of training and development seemed to provide its own momentum for continual improvement and innovation.

Today, we can see that the Republic of China has built upon and refined the gymnastics training of the Soviet Union and Japan and has taken it beyond even those impressive levels of not very long ago. However, as impressive as these developments are, I am disturbed by some of what I see.

The direction that we are heading in the sport of gymnastics at this time does disturb me. I am going to suggest that it should cause all of us to pause and reflect. Gymnastics today has become a sport that focuses primarily on the difficulty of the skills and the routines to the exclusion of other considerations which used to be paramount - or at least extremely important. Why? Because the *Code of Points* requires gymnasts to perform that way. With the Code as it is today, all of the gymnasts in the world must key their training and strategies to seek bonus points in order to be competitive - in order to achieve a score which will allow them to be competitive. There is an advantage to this method. It enables judges to evaluate a routine objectively. However, it has become a topic of increasingly frequent discussion that subjectivity in judging has resulted in instances of clearly unfair outcomes among competitors. When this occurs, it damages the reputation of the sport as well as the reputations of some countries and judges. There emerged a need for political intervention to avoid a growing tendency toward inadequate judging education, which produced unqualified judges. Some media and other sports organizations have engaged in "gymnastics bashing" because of the frequency of these occurrences. In order to address and, hopefully, erase this negative reputation, the FIG technical committee went in the direction of seeking a more rational and objective way to judge gymnastics. The first target was to eliminate certain articles that may have caused confusion or uncertainty in judging such as eliminating bonus awards for virtuosity and originality. In the past, some judges gave bonus awards to most of the top gymnasts in the world simply because they were from the Soviet Union or Japan. Some of these judges seemed not to understand the true concept of virtuosity. The definition of virtuosity in the code is as follows:

**VIRTUOSITY is the highest demonstration of athletic ability.
Virtuosity may be given for individual element and connections but
also for the total exercise.**

Further in the Article 25 of this code there is as follows:

Another limit is reached with Virtuosity—the limit of the quality of the technical execution, demonstrating special athletic ability, because all moves are executed to their maximum height angle etc. and this can result in technical failure on the part of the gymnast.

Virtuosity therefore is an execution factor and may appear anywhere, regardless of the degree of difficulty, and may be seen in the most simple or the most difficult movement.

Virtuosity points should only be given to performances, which show extraordinary virtue in their skills or their routines. Inadequate education of judges has also resulted in instances of some of them being unable to identify elements, or separate performances adequately. One of the unreasonable occurrences in judgements about originality is that some judges have given or withheld bonus points by using their own broad interpretation of the concept of originality. Many curious and different elements and connections were given originality bonus points regardless of how valuable the elements were for the overall impression of the individual performance or for the development of gymnastics. Some judges gave points for originality, for scarcity and difficulty of the elements. That is a mistake. The definition is as follows:

ORIGINALITY is the realization of the NEW, the RARE and the UNUSUAL and setting oneself apart from the traditional. It encompasses new and rare exercise part, unusual connections throughout the entire exercise but also the personal technical style which produces the highest quality of execution.

Further in Article 25 of this Code there is as follows:

Originality must be addressed in depth in order to ensure proper application of the rules in the *Code of Points*, so that the rare, but more importantly, the originality factor is properly evaluated.

Whenever a gymnast demonstrates something New or Unusual or something that causes "Special Enthusiasm" it is justified to award Bonus Points for originality. This also applies if rare elements are executed leaving a surprising effect. Finally, known elements are considered original, if they are executed impressively and in unusual combination. Therefore, we cannot adhere to the general categorization of originality in the realm of combination.

Originality may appear in difficulty and even in execution and the judges must be able to recognize and acknowledge originality in those areas. As opposed to risk, originality is not strictly subject to difficulty and it also cannot be found on lists or charts, because the essential criteria for this Bonus Point factor—surprise and its effect—would thereby be lessened.

Furthermore, the development goes on and new elements and connections are constantly created.

It would seem that, in practice, the *Code of Points* has moved in the direction of making difficulty the only judgement criteria - almost as if judges are not allowed to judge subjectively at all. Since then, the difficulty of elements changed from C to D, E and super E. It may add elements of F and G in the future.

Where, then, is the sport going?

Are we to sacrifice all other components of gymnastics performances in a quest for every possible skill, which we may be able to invent as long as they are "difficult?" Will difficulty alone emerge as the sole or dominant criteria in presenting our sport and determining our champions?

In my opinion, gymnastics development in the future should include three important components.

- The first is the performance of the element;
- the second is difficulty of the element;
- and the third is consideration of originality of the element including connections and construction of the routine.

It is important that a good balance of these three groups be presented. Without such a balance, it is not too farfetched to say that gymnastics as a sport may not be destined for a healthy future either in acceptance among the public or in development of future competitors.

It is easy to observe that the difficulty of the elements has been developed to a far greater extent than the other two components over the past 10 years, due to the abolition of compulsory exercises and the demands of the new code. Certainly it is true that many gymnasts can perform more difficult elements than ever before. We can see that all of the top competitors in the world today make sometimes astonishing efforts to earn bonus points for their performances by adding difficulty to the greatest extreme they are capable of. We have also seen that, all too often, many gymnasts will perform the same D, E skills and same connections as well as similar routines. The performances have become increasingly similar, uninteresting, and mechanical (actually have used the term monotonous). It is my contention that this should be avoided, not encouraged. I believe it is past time for a different balance to be sought and encouraged.

Wouldn't you like to see more skills such as back toss to handstands executed with the magnificent technique of Kasamatsu? How about a great scissors like Cerraar once performed? How about a high and dynamic Yaeger and Tkachev like Charles Lakes once showed us? Or the elegant and graceful performances of Sawao Kato? Wouldn't you like to see them again? Shouldn't this kind of virtuosity be encouraged and rewarded? Where has it gone?

We rarely witness such wonderful performances and virtuosity in the competitions anymore. And when we see them, they are not rewarded by the higher scores given to other performers who exhibit difficulty above beauty, smoothness, and continuity. It is sad and disappointing to me—and it is apparent to me that our audiences are often confused and disappointed by the scores given. We simply cannot judge the virtuosity of performances adequately with the current Code. By today's standards, a performance with no deduction is the most superior routine, provided difficulty requirements are fulfilled. How, then, will we judge the gymnast who does the same routine but with superior virtuosity? Are the scores to be the same? Yes, in today's judging they will be. I am not convinced the makers of the code intended this outcome that has become all too common in today's gymnastics competitions. I am not convinced that the present code is encouraging our beloved sport to move and progress in the direction we should all want to see—and that our growing international audience will understand, enjoy, and respond to.

Can gymnastics continue to be an admired and popular sport in the future? Can coaches, judges, gymnasts, and the growing number of gymnastics fans continue to enjoy and love the sport if its development continues in its present direction?

I feel we have come to a very critical point in the sport of gymnastics. The development of new elements and connections has slowed in the past 10 years. The current Code does not encourage their development or performance. How many new elements have been performed in the world in the past 14 years? The list of new elements performed from 1987 to 1999 is as follows:

List of Main Elements on Floor, Parallel Bars and Horizontal Bar from 1987-1999

	FLOOR
1987	Triple salto bwd. tucked
1988	3/2 salto fwd. tucked to roll fwd.
1988	Double salto bwd. stretched with 1/1 turn
1989	Salto fwd. stretched with 2/1 turn
1989	Double salto fwd. tucked
1992	3/2 salto fwd. piked to roll fwd.
1993	Double salto bwd. stretched with 2/1 turn
	PARALLEL BARS
1987	Giant swing bwd. double salto to up. arm hang
1988	Double salto fwd. tucked to up. arm hang
1989	Giant swing bwd. et salto with 1/2 turn tucked to up. arm hang
1990	Giant swing bwd. with 1/2 to up. handstand
1990	Double salto fwd. piked to up. arm hang
1991	Basket with salto bwd. to up. arm hang
1991	Morisue piked
1992	Double salto bwd. tucked with 1/1 turn
1993	From hang on end double salto tucked with 1/1 turn
1994	Giant swing bwd. to up. with 1/1 turn to handstand
1995	Belle piked
1996	Double salto fwd. tucked with 1/2 turn
	HORIZONTAL BAR
1987	From el-grip, Yeager stretched with 1/1 turn
1987	Tkatchev stretched with 1/1 turn
1988	Swing fwd. and counter salto fwd. stred. to hang
1989	Gaylord piked
1990	Gaylord 2
1991	Tkatchev stretched with 1/1 turn
1992	From el-grip, Gaylord piked
1993	Gaylord with 1/2 turn
1995	Double salto fwd. tucked with 3/2 turn

It should be clear to all of us that the number of new elements performed between 1994 to 1999 is considerably less than it was in the preceding period between 1987 to 1993. I think the new elements are very valuable, no matter how simple or difficult they are, because with study and

innovation, they may lead to more and better inventions and combinations which may not be apparent in the beginning. They always have. It is almost the very nature of innovation if it is allowed and encouraged. Whatever happened to the wonderful originality of connection elements, such as the Tkachev stretched, Tkachev, and the Gienger or other unique connections of floor routines and the versatile connections of support, arm hang, and hanging elements on parallel bars? Where did the triple summersault on the floor go?

The following is the chart of the development of the dismounts from giant backward swing on high bar.

The Chart
on HIGH BAR
of the DEVELOPMENT OF THE Sommersault from Giant Backward

	Did	Do	Don't
TUCKED	2/1 (1940?)	3/1. (1974)	4/1
	2/1w.1/1T. (1971)	2/1w.2/1T. (1976)	2/1w.3/1T.
		3/1w.1/1T. (1987)	3/1w.2/1T.
PIKED	2/1 (1965)	3/1 (1996)	
	2/1w.1/1T. (1977)	2/1w.2/1T. (1979)	
STRETCHED	1/1w.1/1T. • 1/1w.2/1T. (1966) (1967)	1/1w.3/1T. (1976)	1/1w.4/1T.
		2/1 (1974)	3/1
	2/1w.1/1T. • 2/1w.2/1T. (1979) (1987)	2/1w.3/1T. (1989)	2/1 w.4/1T.

¶ w.=with * T.=Twist

It is clear that no new dismounts tucked or stretched from a backward giant swing have been developed in 10 years. The reason is also clear: It is because of the new Code. We have simply stopped developing and creating new elements because our gymnasts and coaches, quite rightfully, see no benefit for any effort in that direction. I believe our sport needs a new direction. We have arrived at a critical juncture. If we choose, we can move our unique and magnificent sport of gymnastics into a future which will be better for performers, coaches, and fans and more sensible and logical for judges. The opportunity is here, now, and calls out to be acknowledged and acted upon. The time has come to revive virtuosity and originality in performances by rewarding them appropriately in the new *Code of Points*.