

## LEVELS of Knowledge:

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### AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF COACHES DEVELOPMENT

(The seed of this "Levels of Knowledge" outlook was actually a discussion on "value" in one of the late Robert Heinlein's books. He used the "cook vs. pastry chef" idea first, and his analogy has great insight for our sport. - JW)

**How do we learn to do things? Where do we go to learn something that isn't really taught in detail at a school? How do we improve our knowledge of something?**

If you or I went to bake an apple pie, we would simply follow the directions in a cookbook, and with a little luck, would get it right. If we followed this procedure enough times, we would know the recipe by heart and not need the cookbook. We may even decide to try to "spice it up" a little - add some raisins to it, maybe a little more cinnamon. We may also start reading other cookbooks for ideas, or different ways of doing it ("How do you make that cross-hatch pie? Does it make the pie taste better or bake differently?"). We get pretty good at baking - maybe we try other things as well. Now we get into being a pastry chef - an "elite" baker. (They train people for that) We can create our own specialties.

Using this example, we can see a standard pattern that occurs in any process of learning. This does not mean there is a "cookbook" to be a 4-star pastry chef. It is a knowledge and ability that is acquired over time, with discipline\* and patience. (*Note: This is also the point expounded by the "Malcolm" character in Michael Crichton's "Jurassic Park." See pp. 306. - JW.*) This leads to another observation that may seem a bit off the wall, but I think has some points to be considered. To my knowledge, there are few, if any, college or university programs where you can go to learn to COACH gymnastics—Physical Education, yes, but few specifically for gymnastics. Gymnastics as it presently exists, at least in the U.S., is effectively a guild system.

\* (From Webster's: **discipline**—from the Latin *disciplina*, meaning teaching, learning.)

Let's look at some background. Historically, the sport had always been the domain of big multi-sport organizations like the AAU, "Y" programs, some multi-sport private clubs, and of small, local "mom and pop" clubs. These local clubs started out renting a high school gym for three to five days a week, setting up and breaking down equipment every day. These were individuals who loved the sport; it was a "hobby." However, they were also highly competitive, and after a while realized that they needed better training situations for their teams. Throughout the late 70's into the present, they expanded into their own little gyms in warehouses where they could leave equipment up, set up the gym in a way to fit in more equipment, etc. Now they had overhead, and needed to run more class students through to pay the bills. Physical Education teachers were available, but you likely would have to teach them the sport. Where do you find instructors on short notice? From your own "ranks." Ex-gymnasts know the skills of the sport, and probably more than a few still had the "bug" and would work for lower pay than the professional Physical Education instructor might (with some notable exceptions).

Since these are ex-gymnasts, they have some solid knowledge of the sport. So, often they start teaching recreational classes, and occasionally work with the beginner level teams, building a greater foundation of basic knowledge of the sport. This aspect of our sport is very common. It fits the economics and "reality" of the common club situation.



This is a critical point in the "apprenticeship" of the beginner coaches, and critical for a successful program. If we are to avoid correcting errors and "bad habits" from recreational and "pre-team" groups, the instructors at those levels need to be educated by our best and most knowledgeable staff. Ideally, we would like beginners to be taught by the best coaches in the gym. This is not always feasible for a number of reasons, chief among them is the level of difficulty of the higher level gymnasts - they need that expertise even more. So the job of developing the beginners usually falls on the "junior staff."

In their off season, the elite and advanced level coaches need to take the time to teach all their staff proper technique and progressions for the skills they are teaching. This investment in education will save much time later, correcting errors in technique learned by less technically knowledgeable instructors/coaches. Now you have an "apprentice" coach, working under the direction and tutoring of a (hopefully) more experienced head coach. Now those individuals really improve their coaching ability, and they start assisting the optional teams. They may even be in charge of their own compulsory group as well.

Here is where the similarity with the "guild" system changes a bit. Traditionally, the apprentice leaves his first "shop" and becomes a "journeyman," going out working at other shops, learning from many different "masters" in his area. (The historical pre-cursor to "club-hopping!") However, in our system, clinics and symposiums have replaced this to a great extent. It is possible for a coach to learn from many other coaches without "hopping" around to other clubs. (While this happens, it usually has little to do with advancing coaching knowledge.) Even now, the increase and improvement of "professional" publications and programs (Athlete Wellness, PDP, Safety Certification) are improving this educational situation for the "journeyman" part.

This is still an important point in the development of a "journeyman" coach in the gym as well. They are increasing their knowledge and abilities through sessions with the head coaches, clinics and symposiums. They are allowed freedom to develop their groups - write up the training schedules, the competition schedule, strength and conditioning, etc. However, they still need to be guided at certain points. They have to "stay on the same page" as the head coaches guidelines for the program. Sometimes these "journeyman" coaches see this as restrictive. It may be, but it is of necessity. The program must follow a set of "progressions" as much as the learning of a skill might.

Conversely, the head coach must also let the creativity and excitement of his junior staff have an outlet. If there are some good ideas, he must let the junior staff try them. If there are some poor ones, he must clearly explain why they are not to be tried or implemented in the program. This is a fine line to walk - their enthusiasm versus sound judgement. The head coach must also continue their staff's training into higher level skills as they are ready.

After a time, and with some luck, some of these coaches may go on to open their own gyms or, become the head coaches in their "home" gym. They begin to develop their own programs, becoming "masters," and in turn start training their own staff and starting the cycle again. From this perspective, it is obvious that USA Gymnastics, as well as its' member associations, needs to continue on its course of coaches education not only at the "grass roots" levels, but at the highest levels of the "master" coaches as well, including them in the education process.

<b>LEVEL:</b>	<b>BEGINNER</b>	<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>	<b>ADVANCED</b>
<b>Teaching Style</b>	<b>Command</b>	<b>Guided Discovery</b>	<b>Cooperative</b>
<b>Reference:</b>	"Cookbook" Follow the directions Compulsories and basic optional skills.	Several cookbooks, as well as being able to come up with a few "recipes" of his/her own. Intermediate difficulty skills.	Doesn't need cookbook except as a reference, can create many new "recipes" from "scratch."

			Advanced level skills.
<b>Coach:</b>	Leans basics and discipline of training regimens and how to apply these to beginner level gymnasts. Gives exact assignments for the beginner gymnasts to follow.	Still learning, but can apply basics and training regimens to more complicated situations. Has a fairly strong knowledge of basics, and is learning to apply these to higher level skills. Gives exact assignments but gives the gymnasts some freedom in how the assignments are completed.	Still learning, but has a comprehensive and intuitive grasp of the intricacies of the sport. Works with gymnasts to prepare and execute assignments for training and competition.
<b>Gymnast:</b>	Needs to learn the basic discipline necessary for successful training, but also needs to have fun in doing so. Needs a lot of guidance.	Reinforcing the basic discipline to train successfully, has some more freedom as to how assignments are completed. Still needs to be guided in her/his choices and part of his/her training.	Should have a strong base of discipline for training, able to work with coaches to develop a more specific, personal training program. Can make good judgements with regard to individual needs with little guidance.
<b>Errors:</b>	Coach is either too strict or too "loose" in training. Gymnasts are not developing basics or not enjoying it enough.	Coach has not developed a strong base of understanding of technique or the discipline to apply it. Either too strict or too "loose" in practice. Gymnasts do not have discipline to train well. Or make good decisions regarding their assignments.	Coach is still trying to control development of gymnasts without their input, often because the gymnasts have not learned "how" to make good choices with regard to their training.

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### Acknowledgements:

The need for staff education in our sport is certainly not a new one. Staff education is an important part of all the successful programs, and a good portion of this article came in part from my own experiences and discussions with many friends and coaches throughout the years. This is as much their article as mine. - JW