

Making the Best use of Time and Space in the Gym

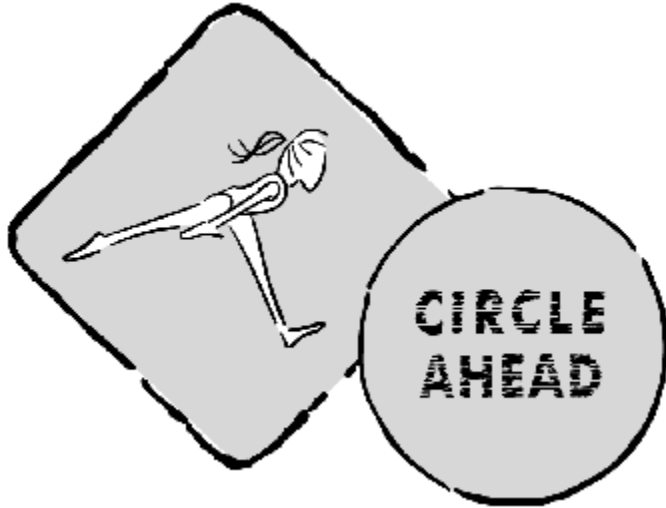
The P.O.P. Principal - *Plan our Path*

by Betsy Sprague

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Stated very simply, one of the most important principles of teaching that I know is what I call the *P.O.P. Principle (Plan Our Path)*. This principle is valuable for every level of gymnast: It is urgent for the preschool class, but also of great importance to the highest level gymnast. For the sake of discipline, time efficiency and traffic flow, I strongly encourage all teachers and program directors to carefully examine the path planning procedures in your gym.



The gym that has standard general paths at every station tends to function very smoothly.

Space Organization

If there are specific paths at each event, squads can function in close proximity without interference. In particularly busy gyms there may even be a need to establish "right of way" at an intersection, but I personally would steer away from paths that cross, because many a first grader can find himself in the wrong squad after taking a wrong turn at the intersection.

Discipline

Doing something is better than doing nothing, and besides, there are very few gymnasts who will stand in line doing nothing. From the busiest class kid to the most serious team gymnast, a path that you have given them decides, in advance, how they will focus their attention.

If a six year old boy is following arrows that lead him from the pommels to the mushroom, to a push up position and then back to the "on deck" position, he will not have as much time to "pommel" the guy in front of him. If a level six gymnast is coached at cable bar "A", repeats the skill at cable bar "B", does a drill on the rebounder, takes a drink of water, does ten dips on the single bar, and then gets back "on deck" she does not have time to be getting into a conversation about the fight she had with her boyfriend. For the first gymnast, the path helped the coach keep the body where it needed to be. For the second gymnast the path helped keep the mind on track.

Effective Use of Time

No matter what the level of the gymnasts, there is almost always something that they could be "practicing" while they wait for their next turn. I am often amazed when I visit a gym and watch upper level gymnasts sitting in a cluster waiting their turn. When the coach says, "who's next?" half the time everyone looks around at each other for a few minutes. Some gyms take a step in the right direction by putting a few girls at the single bar to take turns doing something, but the problem still exists that everyone is waiting too long. A path that they are accustomed to following gives them a system by which they can get effective practices in while they wait for their next turn with the coach or instructor. It even can make it possible for a fairly beginner group to go to the event and "get started" if the teacher needs to go get something or answer a question. Learning "the path" at each event should be a requirement for completing the first level of the curriculum. Skills practiced along the path can progress as the gymnast progresses.

Getting Started

Because "the path" will make everything function more efficiently, it is my recommendation that an instructor should teach gymnasts what the path is before even starting to warm up the event. For a preschool class this might mean every new lesson plan. For the level 8 squad, this may simply mean a quick explanation of the day's plan while everyone is putting on their grips.

For Preschool

I incorporate a lesson plan that is designed to help little ones learn how to follow a path as a very important part of the curriculum. An example of this is to make a large circle of hoops on the floor exercise area. Outside the hoops (ready to be "inserted" into the circuit) are two floor beams and two wedges. First, each child stands in a hoop and if the hoop next to them is empty they may jump to it. After the children seem comfortable with the idea, insert the two balance beams. The gymnast walks or crawls across the balance beam to the next hoop. Finally, insert the wedges. It may be that you help children with a forward roll on one and the walk down the other until you feel they should try the forward roll by themselves.

Each new lesson plan should include a path that children can move around without skills.

If the teacher's first priority is to get the children moving around the path, then she or he can teach more effectively because the children have something to do. It is of very little value to have a wonderful circuit, and make six children sit and wait each turn while one child does the whole circuit. The best circuit will include spaces where children wait until the child ahead of them finishes what he is doing. Hoops, carpet rectangles or even letters written on the floor with chalk all make great "be ready" positions.

Here is an example of a circuit that can be done "without skill":

At the uneven bars arrows are drawn for the children to stand on one side of the bar. The children go under the bar, then follow more arrows to a floor beam. After walking across the floor beam they jump from carpet rectangle to carpet rectangle using four rectangles. Next they walk down a wedge and jump from hoop to hoop in three hoops. Finally they crawl under a jr. swing bar which leads them back to the arrows they first stood on. A teacher can easily lead the whole class around the circuit two or three times without stopping to do a skill. Then he or she can introduce skills in different places while the children continue following the path around.

For Developmental Classes

I personally recommend that each gym have standard paths at each event. Learning the standard

path should be built into the beginner class curriculum.

For Team Levels

I suggest that coaches use different "systems" to keep the action going. For example, if the beam practice is devoted to drilling, and the beams are parallel, four lines (one at each beam) and lines rotating away from the coach can be an effective system. On another day or when the practice switches to skills, the same parallel beams arranged lowest to highest can be used with the gymnasts following a zig zag pattern from beam to beam, doing the skill first in front of the instructor, and gradually moving away. If the systems have become standard, the coach simply has to say...

"line up at beam for parallel drills."