

A Coach's Perspective on the Talent Opportunity Program

By Ray Schumacher from Gymnastics Village in Amherst, New Hampshire

This year's National Testing marks the ninth year of the Talent Opportunity Program or TOP's for short. As always, a special thanks to the national staff and all the TOP's personnel. Also a big thanks to the terrific host sites, DeVeau's School of Gymnastics in Fishers, Indiana, and Arizona Sunrays of Phoenix, Arizona, for a great job.

If your gym is not currently involved in the TOP's program, it is not readily apparent how pervasive the TOP's program has become in the past eight years. It has grown from a relatively "elite" aura into mainstream gymnastics culture. TOP's has become an excellent SUPPLEMENT to the Junior Olympic Program by providing additional motivation to gymnasts who aspire to higher fitness levels (through competitions in strength and flexibility), through added dance training and a focus on BASIC skill training. TOP's also supplements the JO program by providing all levels of coaches with hands-on opportunities to work with our national staff. Finally, the TOP's program still serves as the vehicle for the exceptionally talented athletes to "rub shoulders" with the elite mystique - both through exposure to the elite coaching staff and through participation at elite level competition.

Why bother with a program like TOP's?

Simply, because it will make your athletes more competitive! As stated, the TOP's program is an excellent supplement to the JO program. We all know the effect an upcoming competition has on coaches and athletes to "get it in gear." We all struggle with keeping our athletes motivated to condition CORRECTLY and improve on flexibility. Most of us would like our athletes to aspire to a higher level of perfection in their basic skills, body shapes and dance positions. So why not be involved in a program that requires all that?

One way to a successful TOP's program is not to create a separate program, but to integrate the TOP's program into your current JO system. Then you will have a national set of standards you can show to your parents and you will have physically more adept athletes.

As for the basics, whether it's body position, a ballet turnout, a coupé in relevé, a kip cast, a step kick, a flip-flop series or a vault run-the stronger the basics, the better the ultimate product. So, for all you coaches who moan and groan because your athletes only want to work skills, here's your chance. For all those gym owners who say their coaches don't spend enough time on basics, here's YOUR chance. For those coaches who can teach a full-in but not a coupé; for those coaches who think they can develop an elite by themselves; for those coaches who know they can't develop an elite athlete by themselves; and especially for those of us who care about providing the best instruction for our athletes by challenging ourselves to become better coaches-here's our chance. GO FOR IT!

To learn more about the TOP's program, simply go to the USA Gymnastics [TOPS Home Page](#), to your [regional website](#), or contact your regional TOP's chair, located in the *Rules and Policies*. He or she will be more than happy to assist you in starting or resurrecting a TOP's program! You can also contact Gary Warren, USA Gymnastics TOP's Director at 317-237-5050 ext. 227, email gwarren@usa-gymnastics.org