



Mary Lee Tracy on Coaching Elite Gymnastics

Mary Lee Tracy has served as part the Olympic coaching staff at last two Olympic Games in 1996 and 2000. In fact, she was the assistant coach to the 1996 Olympic Team which won the first Olympic Gold medal. She was also the assistant coach in 2000 but withdrew her position when her athlete on the competitive team was injured and could not compete. Mary Lee has coached numerous World and Olympic Team members including her first elite gymnast Amanda Borden plus Jaycie Phelps, Morgan White, Alyssa Beckerman, and Jennie Thompson, just to name a few.

Mary Lee owns and operates Cincinnati Gymnastics Academy in Fairfield, Ohio. We were able to talk to Mary Lee about some of her experiences she's learned along the way. Here's what she had to say.

Q: *When did you begin coaching elite gymnastics?*

A: I began coaching elite gymnastics in 1990. Amanda Borden was my first elite.

Q: *Has it been what you expected?*

A: Coaching elite gymnastics has been more challenging and more time consuming than I had ever imagined. Coaching at this level has forced me to grow in every area of my life. Because of the time commitments with the athletes, the deep relationships that have formed have been a very fun and rewarding part for me.

Q: *What are the pros and cons of coaching elite women's gymnastics and being in the spotlight?*

A: PROS:

1. Very Challenging
2. Make a difference in an athlete's life
3. Respect from gymnastics community for hard work and commitment
4. Public recognition and fan mail

CONS:

1. Extremely time consuming
2. Careful of every word. Controlling intensity during competitive season
3. Under constant critique and criticism
4. Takes time

Q: *What was it like to be a part of the 1996 Olympic Team success?*

A: The 1996 Gold Medal in Atlanta was definitely a moment in time. Everything came together, all the chemistry was right and it was an experience of a lifetime.

Q: *In your opinion what were the factors that contributed to the team's success?*

A: The desire to work together for the betterment of the entire USA team was so dominant. The athletes and coaches were very experienced and completely believed we could do it and were willing to do whatever it took. The level of excellence and the level of commitment were in balance!

Q: *In your opinion what was missing in 1999 and/or 2000 if anything?*

A: What I listed above in 1996 lacked a little in each area in 2000. This added up to an USA team that wasn't able to maximize its total capabilities.



Q: *I know some of your gymnasts participate in the TOP's program and Morgan White was a member of the TOP's National Team. Do you think this contributed to her success in making the 2000 Olympic Team?*

A: The conditioning in the TOP's program combined with the National Team Physical Abilities Testing both accelerated Morgan's strength development.

Q: *Would you discuss the centralized training camps—have they contributed to the success of the USA elite program and if yes, how?*

A: The camps were a great check up for all of us. It was helpful to see where everyone was at the point of each verification process. The athletes were more self-motivated after they saw their competition. The physical abilities testing and ranking really pushed my athletes to maximize their strength development.

Q: *What do you think of Bela's decision to step aside as the National Team Coordinator?*

A: I have mixed feelings, but when someone in his position has too much controversy from his peers it is hard to create team unity.

Q: *In your opinion, can the USA keep up with other countries who live, train, eat, sleep and study together year round in a centralized training program? (such as Russia, Romania and China)*

A: Yes, we can! With a strong team coordinator to facilitate personal coaches efforts, USA Gymnastics interaction, media, sports psychologists and national staff, etc. we can be very competitive. The USA has the tools to get the job done. We are creating a "training system" that will keep all of us more connected while training in our own gyms. Go USA!



Q: *Comment on some of the things you've learned about coaching elite gymnasts along your journey that may help others.*

A: Technical information and training is important but the mental and emotional training and development is what will bring you and your athletes across the final finish line. Organization, short and long term planning is imperative. There are too many pieces of the big puzzle to wing it. Always remember the value and the power of keeping the triangle connected: Parents, Athletes & Coaches.

Q: *Things you wish you would have done differently?*

A: *I wish I would have kept myself a little more balanced so I would have handled certain situations better.*

Q: *Things you're glad you did?*

A: I am glad I could do it and never gave up on my athletes or myself.

Q: *How's the new Code? Pros/Cons?*

A: The new Code will be fine. It adds some challenges yet certain elements and principles are easier. The scores will definitely be lower which I feel is bad for media. I wish the start value would have stayed at a 9.0.

Q: *What about the new vaulting table that has been developed by the FIG for both men and women to use? I know you had one in your gym - how was it?*

A: The new horse will make is easier at competitions where men and women compete together. It was in our gym for a short time and it was different but certainly not impossible to get used to with time. I really feel it is too short of a training period to expect athletes to be comfortable and competitive for the 2001 World Championships. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have changed vault; it has been challenging enough. My hope is that it will make vaulting easier in time.

Q: *How do you handle running your business when you're gone for an extended period of time at the Olympic Games or the World Championships?*

A: My business runs on systems that have been established and tweaked over the years. These systems empower my staff to make decisions and feel confident because of our Purpose Statement and our systems. I also have a wonderful and committed staff!

Q: *What was it like for your family/relationships when you were gone for so long?*

A: My family is very used to the lifestyle elite gymnastics puts on your life. This has been my choice based on my talent and passions. Rachael, my 14-year-old daughter, has traveled with me and, in many ways, has been my assistant and inspiration when I have felt like quitting. My family has been great, too! All five brothers and sisters, along with my parents, are in Cincinnati.

Q: *How do you keep it all together?*

A: I am a very organized thinker. I don't know if I could do this if I weren't. I find it to be a fun challenge to see if I can keep it all together and grow as a person at the same time. I read a LOT to educate myself on parenting (which is coaching), management, leadership and self-awareness. I love to learn.

Q: *Is there a huge letdown when you return from a long trip like the Olympic Games and Tour?*

A: Yes, there is a little bit of a letdown because it is back to reality! But, that is also the part that makes you happy when it all comes to an end. For me, seeing my daughter, my dog, my house, sleeping in my bed, and using my shower was a huge incentive to return. I also like some consistency in my day to day life that you don't have on the road.

Q: *What's it like living on the road for a long period of time?*

A: Touring is an opportunity of a lifetime. I love being with the athletes, meeting new people, seeing the country, and helping make the show come together. It is a nice break from the day to day merry-go-round of life, yet knowing you'll come back to that comfort zone in just two months. It is so much fun! I feel like it is the best reward for all of the hard work and dedication leading up to World and Olympic Games.

Q: *What are your future plans?*

A: Keep on coaching! I still have a love and passion for the day-to-day training of elite athletes. I have committed to our elite program for another quadrennium, my daughter has said "Go for it

mom" so I am! I'm going to learn from my past experiences so I can do it even better in the years to come. Refueling and getting back in balance is my first priority. I am doing some speaking, auditing the brevet judges' course and doing some fun painting with Rachael in my free time. I still love gymnastics!