

Zen and the Art of Gymnastics

By Alison Arnold Ph.D.

I'm coming out of the closet. For a while it wasn't okay to say, so I hid it under the guise of simple sport psychology training. But now, the times are a changin' and it's become fashionable to admit what's been true all along. I am a closet Eastern Philosophy junkie. It all started growing up with Kung fu, moving to the Karate Kid and the Dalai Lama. Although I learned a lot in my graduate programs, the truth is, most of my drills, workbooks, and presentations are based on the wisdom from the East. The Eastern philosophers are the masters of the mind, and in gymnastics, controlling the mind is just as important as controlling the body.

Thanks Phil

Phil Jackson let the cat out of the bag with his book "Sacred Hoops." In this book, the former coach of the Chicago Bulls and current coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, shared how much of his coaching style and techniques are grounded in Native American and Eastern philosophy. This best seller ignited the curiosity of athletes and coaches all over the United States. People began to ask, "Is there something we can learn from these guys?"

Why Now?

Where is the sudden interest in Eastern philosophy coming from? Why are the Dalai Lama's books becoming best sellers? Have you noticed there is a new yoga studio popping up every other day? With the increased demands in Western athletics to produce more, be more, earn more, and do it faster and farther, many people are wondering, "is this all there is?" People are wondering if they can be successful, and happy. What Western philosophy does beautifully is teach us how to be successful. It teaches us how to win, achieve, and be the best we can be. Eastern philosophy teaches us how

to live. How to enjoy the moment, experience gratitude, connect with others, and be compassionate people. Can we integrate the best of both? The rest of this article consists of the first five of the 10 principles of the Athlete Warrior. It is based upon 15 years of research and a 12-week study in the monasteries of Nepal.

What is the Athlete Warrior?

What is the Athlete Warrior? The Athlete Warrior is someone fully committed to sport and life. Someone willing to face every day and every workout with eyes open, heart open, and ready to push their body to the maximum. It is an athlete ready to do his/her sport with no regrets. An Athlete Warrior practices fearlessness. Fearlessness in facing adversity, pushing themselves, and being a team leader. The Athlete Warrior does not back away from difficult situations. They are ready to face their sport and life with a big, full hearted, "Come on!"

Intention

Principle Number One: Intention

Setting intention as an athlete and coach is extremely important. Without setting intention, your life wanders around aimlessly without goal or direction. Intention is the motor that starts everything in motion. It is the all-important decision. It is the decision that you are going to be the best athlete or coach you can be every time you walk out on the floor. Remember to set a specific intention. Think of it like the laser beam for your life. The wider and unfocused your laser is, the less likely you are to hit your target. Laser-like intention helps you create a direct hit on your goals. Remember, the Warrior doesn't settle or make excuses. They make the commitment and decision to be all they

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can, and do what it takes to make that manifest.

Coaching tips for Principle One:

- Ask your athletes what their goals are for this training session.
- Have your athletes create a list of words describing the gymnast they want to be this season.
- Ask your athletes to visualize or repeat verbally the correction they want to implement before the next tum.
- Review intentions throughout the season.

Belief

Principle Number Two: Belief

We know how important belief is. Think of two gymnasts walking out onto the floor for a competition. One believes she is able to hit four for four, the other questions her ability. You can tell the difference in these gymnasts simply by the way they look. One has her head down, looks nervous, and performs with hesitation. The other is confident, aggressive, and relaxed. The only difference is belief. The mind is the creator of all things. Negative thoughts are the destroyers of belief. Help your athletes become aware of the way they talk to themselves and how that affects their minds and bodies. Provide them with the drills, pressure sets, and numbers that are required to build belief. Teach them to act with confidence, even in times they don't believe it 100%. The old saying "fake it until you make it" is very applicable here. Sometimes "acting" the part, can create confidence in a gymnast who is doubtful.

Coaching tips for Principle Two:

- Help your athletes notice negative self-talk. Ask them to tell you what they are saying to themselves.
- Help them to practice "actor skills." Teach them to change their face, body, and energy level to create confidence.
- Express belief in your athletes. Remember what a powerful figure you are in their lives and build upon that.

Awareness

Principle Number Three: Awareness

Awareness is about waking up. It's essential that the Athlete Warrior is aware at all times. Aware, alert and ready for action. No sleepwalking allowed here. Athlete Warriors know and understand what's happening both on the outside and the inside of their being. They know who they are, what they stand for, and what they are

capable of. When gymnasts are aware, they can respond to all situations with efficiency, grace, speed, and skill. Without awareness, change is virtually impossible. Think about it in terms of a simple correction. If athletes cannot feel the difference, they cannot make the change. Athlete Warriors are aware of both their body and their mind. They are aware of thoughts, so they are able to change them. They are aware of their body, so they can improve technique. They are aware of how they come across to others, so they can build character. Awareness is also essential for the coach. Who are you out on the floor? Are you aware of how you come across? Are you being who you want to be?

Coaching tips for Principle Three:

- Help your athletes become more aware of who they are and what they do.
- Teach them how to notice their thoughts and feelings by asking questions.
- Take into account that each athlete learns differently. Some may need you to put them into proper body position, whereas others may understand with a simple verbal correction.
- Ask your athletes, "What are you aware of in your body on this skill?"

The Present

The Athlete Warrior Principle Four: The Present

What is that mystical place called "The Zone?" Some say it's magic, some say it's the place of total trust and non-thinking. One thing for certain, being in the Zone is being totally in the Present. One of the most destructive patterns of any gymnast is focusing too much attention in the past or the future. Focusing on the past keeps a gymnast in the land of "what happened." "I can't believe that happened," "Why did that happen to me?" "Last time I did that, it was a disaster." The past is over, there is nothing we can do to change it now. Gymnasts who stay in the past over-think and paralyze themselves from getting into the Zone. A gymnast focusing too much in the future, finds themselves stuck in "what if." "What if I make a mistake?" "What if I do the wrong thing?" "What if I don't win." These are all thoughts of the future. No one knows what is going to happen in the future. A gymnast living in the land of "what if" is filled with worry and doubt. They may have a tendency to hold back or be over-cautious in their performance.

The Athlete Warrior trusts the Present. They know that the past is over and the future is theirs to create however they want. They keep their mind focused on each element they are performing only using the past or the future for information and planning. They have heightened awareness, noticing what is going on around them and responding in each moment appropriately. They are accurate in their perceptions,

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not clouded by the illusions of the past or fears of the future. Without the worries of past or future, the Athlete Warrior performs with effortless confidence.

Coaching tips for Principle Four:

- Teach your athletes about the mind/body connector: the breath.
- Help your athletes identify when they are stuck in past or future thinking.
- Teach them drills to pull their mind back to the present.
- Stay in the present as a coach. Let go of the past, don't hold grudges and don't pigeon-hole into the future.

Strength

The Athlete Warrior Principle Number Five: Discipline

力量 The mind is a thought factory. Running around like a crazy monkey, it creates thought after thought after thought. Taming the monkey-mind is essential to the Athlete Warrior. Are your athletes victims of their thoughts? Do their thoughts control them, or is it the other way around? Disciplining the mind is one of the

most important lessons in becoming an Athlete Warrior. Disciplining the mind is not an easy task. It takes commitment, patience, and perseverance. Just as you help athletes pull their bodies back into proper alignment, they must work hard in order to pull their minds back into position for success. Many gymnasts allow themselves to become victims of their mind's irrational behavior. The Athlete Warrior is awake, aware, and in control of the stormy waves of the monkey-mind. They are ruthlessly committed to reigning in negative thoughts, thereby, retrieving the mind from an out of control abyss.

Coaching tips for Principle Five:

- Teach your athletes to differentiate between "tight mind" and "loose mind."
- Give them key words to anchor the mind during routines and skills.
- Teach them how to observe their thoughts without getting emotionally caught up in them.
- Show your athletes how to find the lesson in every situation. Help them find the opportunity in the struggle.

In a Future article, I will give you five more training tools in the development of the Athlete Warrior. In order to implement these techniques, set aside a week for each one. Focus on it, practice it. Not only as a coach, but as a warrior yourself. ■