

# Zen and the Art of Gymnastics II

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In Part One of this article, Alison discussed how Eastern Philosophy and Martial Arts principles could be integrated in American Gymnastics. She discussed five of the ten characteristics of the Athlete Warrior and gave coaching tips for implementing each characteristic. In this article, she discusses the last five principles of the Athlete Warrior and how to build these qualities in your athletes.

In the first article in this series we looked at how the principles of intention, awareness, belief, being present, and discipline can be easily implemented in the gym. This second part will look at the last five principles of the Athlete Warrior and ways to build these qualities in yourself or your athletes.

The move toward Eastern philosophy has been fueled by our Western desire to be more. As we strive to increase difficulty, increase consistency, and increase our joy in gymnastics, we look to new philosophies to fuel our old ways of thinking. The teachings of eastern and martial arts philosophy give us new glasses to look at old ways. They answer questions like, "How can I demand excellence from my athletes and still be a compassionate person?", "How can I help my athletes control their minds as well as their bodies?", and most importantly, "What is my big picture purpose as I coach gymnastics everyday?" Teaching your athletes the principles of the Athlete Warrior teaches them how to live as well as how to succeed in gymnastics. Isn't that why you do this anyway? Let's continue with principle number six, trust.

## Trust

### *Principle Number Six: Trust*

Trust is one of the most important elements in gymnastics. The gymnast must trust their training,

trust their coach, and most importantly, trust themselves to get the job done. When they are ready for a new skill, they must trust their bodies. When they compete, they must trust the numbers that have been put in during training. Ultimately, trusting life is the most important lesson of the Athlete Warrior. The Athlete Warrior believes that everything is evolving exactly as it should be. Sometimes life is hard to understand. It is full of curveballs, questions, and situations that appear as setbacks. The trusting warrior is not a victim. They see the gift in adversity and face challenges aggressively. Trust is a difficult skill. Many of us question and doubt training, decisions, and ultimately, the course of life. Look at your life. Everything that has ever happened to you has brought you to this moment. Even the seemingly "bad" events have taught you valuable lessons and have made you stronger. Every occurrence in life has a lesson. Everything is your teacher. The Athlete Warrior sees the value of each situation. They find the gift amidst the pain and disappointment and use it to fuel them toward the future.

Coaching tips for Principle Six:

- Teach your athletes to see the gifts in adversity.
- Have confidence in your athletes in competition when they have trained well. Teach them to rest on their numbers.
- Develop their trust by making good coaching decisions, and keeping your word.
- Use statements that develop trust. Say sentences like, "I trust all the hard work you've put in", or "I trust the direction you are going. Even though it doesn't make sense right now, I'm trusting we are moving to a good place."

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## Joy

### *Principle Number Seven: Joy*

The best performances come when a gymnast is having fun. Being frustrated, or feeling burned out at times is a normal experience for any high level gymnast. The Athlete Warrior knows that burnout is temporary. He or she focuses on what's good in his sport and keeps a positive attitude even during difficult periods. Think about the beginners in gymnastics. They are lost and entranced simply with the experience of doing it. Be it the feeling of flying through the air, or flipping upside down, the beginners love to do gymnastics because they love the feeling of doing gymnastics. Most of the time, the magic is lost when one focuses too much on outcome. Scores, awards, placements, take away from the sheer joy of the sport. Focusing too much on future goals also takes some of the joy away from simply being in the moment. This moment is so precious. There will never be another like it. You will never again be in this day of practice, with these people. Don't miss the moment by forgetting the beauty and joy of it. Remember, joy is not just about goofing around. The most joy in sports can come from times when the athlete is working his/her hardest.

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Coaching tips for Principle Seven:

- Don't forget to have fun in the gym, especially during the height of the competitive season.
- Keep your athletes excited by making challenging, new assignments often. Doing the same thing day in day out makes "Jack a dull boy."
- Don't freak out over bad days. Work with it, get what you can out of it, and move on.
- Don't mirror your athlete's mood on bad days. You will simply continue to drag each other down. Lead them to the mood you want them to have by modeling it.

## Compassion

### *Principle Number Eight: Compassion*

The Athlete Warrior is incredibly strong. He or she is awake, alive, and in touch with both the joy and sorrows of the world. The Athlete Warrior is strong enough to feel the struggles of others and ease their suffering. They are not afraid of pain, but invite pain in order to live fully. The Athlete Warrior stands with strength, courage and a tear of compassion running down his/her cheek. The Athlete Warrior knows that supporting and confronting can both be forms of compassion. Sometimes a teammate needs a pat on the back and sometimes a teammate needs a kick in the butt. A superior gymnast has the wisdom to know when each is needed, and has the ability to confront with skill and kindness. The Athlete Warrior is compassionate

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yet disciplined with themselves. They understand the difference between motivation and deflation. They are patient, yet disciplined, with themselves and others. They don't take things personally or hold grudges. They don't label and judge, but rather understand human nature and the ways we all struggle in the world.

Coaching tips for Principle Eight:

- Teach your athletes to be disciplined yet compassionate with themselves. Notice when they are being motivational to themselves, or when they are simply beating themselves up.
- Teach them to be compassionate with others. Encourage understanding and non-judgment.
- Don't connect with your athletes through bad mouthing or making fun of another athlete.
- Model gracious behavior with other gyms, ex-athletes, or ex-coaches.

## Change

### *Principle Number Nine: Impermanence (everything changes)*

The only guarantee in life is that everything changes. Especially in the world of sports. The Athlete Warrior is ready for change and adapts in ways that fuel performance. Life is full of ups and downs. It is rarely steady. The Athlete Warrior handles the ups and downs of life gracefully, without getting frustrated, angry, or discouraged. How can you help your athletes use turbulent times as motivation to take them to the next level? Being able to adapt and use frustration as fuel divides the mentally weak from the mentally strong. Albert Einstein said, "In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity." Every moment of training and competition is an opportunity. The power to seize that opportunity lies within every athlete and coach. What if you taught your athletes that nothing "bad" ever happened to them? That everything that happened in their life was simply an opportunity for you to grow as a gymnast and a person. Using everything as fuel means seeing and acting on the opportunity presented in every situation. Seeing each situation in the best possible light. Finding the positive amidst the negative. Searching for the gift inside the gloom.

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Coaching tips for Principle Eight:

- Help your athletes understand that everything changes.
- Help them use adversity as fuel.
- Teach them how to overcome obstacles with grace and determination.
- Encourage them to enjoy each moment, recognizing it will never be the same again.

# Purpose

## *Principle Number Ten: Purpose*

When you know your purpose, everything seems to make more sense. Why do you coach gymnastics? What is your gift to give? We all are involved in this sport because we love it, that is for sure. But what's the bigger picture? Why do you sacrifice so much day in and day out? You do it because gymnastics is simply a metaphor for life. All the lessons you are teaching your athletes are life lessons. Many times coaches spend more time with their athletes than their parents do. That is an incredible responsibility. Being clear of purpose means taking that responsibility seriously. What are you teaching your athletes? Are you helping them become better people? Teach your athletes about purpose as well. Teach them about goal setting and how every workout, every turn, has a purpose. Teach them about their own gifts and how they can give these gifts in their lives. Help them define who they are. Are they the hardest worker you've ever seen? Or a team leader? Help them see their value as people as well as gymnasts.

Coaching tips for Principle Ten:

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- Help your athletes see the purpose in everyday training. Help them take advantage of every turn.
- Be a mirror of their positive qualities. Remind them of the gifts they have and can share.
- Teach them the life-lessons of gymnastics. Praise them for overcoming obstacles, leadership, pushing through fears, staying positive, compassion, and determination.

Living the life of the Warrior means living a life awake, open, with purpose, and with no regrets.

The ten characteristics in part one and part two of this series will help you coach and live you life in a much fuller way. I invite you to practice one a week for the next ten weeks and watch your coaching, the atmosphere in your gym, and your life change. Break the pattern of walking through your life like a robot on high speed. Commit to living a life as if every day is the most important day you'll ever have. ■