



COMMITMENT

Among Competitive Female Gymnasts:

What does it look like and how can we enhance it?

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As a former gymnast, and now as a coach and judge, I have seen great variation in the motivation and commitment of young, talented gymnasts. My interest in sport commitment to gymnastics stems from the desire to help coaches and parents create the most rewarding environment and atmosphere for these young athletes. Therefore, through a series of studies I have examined commitment to gymnastics in hopes of finding what predicts high levels of sport commitment, what are the outcomes associated with commitment, and ultimately, how can we help enhance commitment.

Here's what we know about gymnasts and sport commitment:

1 DIFFERENT TYPES OF SPORT COMMITMENT EXIST FOR HIGH LEVEL GYMNASTS.

Weiss and Weiss (2003) found that among Level 9, 10, and Elite gymnasts ($N = 124$), the majority of gymnasts ($n = 66$) were continuing because they "wanted to." That is, these gymnasts still enjoyed

gymnastics, felt they were gaining positive benefits from participation, perceived very few negatives associated with gymnastics, and had few other activities that seemed as attractive as gymnastics. In contrast, a small percentage of gymnasts ($n = 14$) at this level were continuing competitive gymnastics because they felt they "had to." This group of gymnasts was no longer happy with gymnastics, felt the downsides associated with gymnastics far outweighed the positives, and felt that other activities might be more fun or interesting than gymnastics. Lastly, a third group ($n = 44$) emerged that was a hybrid of the other two types of commitment, labeled "vulnerable." These gymnasts were similar to the "want to" continue gymnasts in terms of experiencing higher enjoyment and benefits, but were similar to the "have to" continue group in terms of experiencing greater negatives and attractive alternatives.

2 COMMITMENT TYPE CHANGES OVER TIME.

Weiss and Weiss (2004) did a one year follow-up with the same gymnasts from their first study to see if the gymnasts' sport commitment type changed over time. For about half of the gymnasts, their type of commitment was different one year later, with the gymnasts in the "vulnerable" commitment group being more likely to have changed. This makes sense considering they were experiencing sort of a "tug-

of-war” between both the positive and negative aspects of high level gymnastics. Additionally, the strongest predictor of change in commitment was a change in gymnastics enjoyment.

3 SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PRESSURE FROM PARENTS, COACHES, AND TEAMMATES FURTHER DIFFERENTIATED THESE TYPES OF COMMITMENT.

In general, Weiss and Weiss (2003, 2004) found that those gymnasts who were competing for more positive reasons also reported experiencing greater social support (unconditional positive regard) from their parents and coaches, than did those gymnasts who felt they “had to” continue participation. In contrast, gymnasts who felt obligated to continue high level competitive gymnastics reported higher perceptions of pressure and obligation to continue from their parents and coaches. Interestingly, the “vulnerable” gymnasts reported they felt more obligated to their teammates to continue gymnastics. These findings point out the important role that parents, coaches, and teammates play in young gymnasts’ sport commitment.

So, what do all of these findings mean? Results from these studies suggest that high level competitive gymnasts do experience different types of commitment. Gymnasts were continuing participation for different reasons with some experiencing attraction towards gymnastics whereas others experienced obligation and still others were “vulnerable” to both positive and negative influences. These results point to several practical implications.

What can we do to enhance “want to” sport commitment with high level gymnasts?

1 MAXIMIZE SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MINIMIZE FEELINGS OF OBLIGATION TO PARENTS, COACHES, AND TEAMMATES

Those gymnasts who felt the most attracted towards gymnastics or had a “want to” type of commitment also felt they received the most social support from coaches and parents, and they felt very little obligation or pressure from parents and coaches to continue gymnastics. Based on these findings, coaches can implement several strategies that may foster greater social support in and out of the gym, as well as decreased perceptions of pressure and obligation to parents, coaches, and teammates.

- Coaches can create a positive social environment by providing positive constructive and contingent feedback to all athletes, treating each gymnast as an individual and valued person, considering each athletes’ feelings and thoughts, and providing equal attention, energy, and time to all athletes.
- Coaches can educate parents about how to provide support for their gymnasts (rather than pressure) through coach-parent conferences, monthly parent meetings, and informal discussions following practices and competitions. For example, teaching parents how to encourage improvement rather than winning and placement at competitions, and providing information to parents as to how to discuss potential problems their gymnast may be having in the gym will maximize showing support rather than discouraging the gymnast’s progress.

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2 ENSURE THAT GYMNASTICS IS ENJOYABLE AND REWARDING ON TOP OF THE INTENSE PHYSICAL TRAINING

There are numerous sources of sport enjoyment and an array of potential benefits that gymnasts can gain from participation. For example, some sources of enjoyment include feelings of success, being with friends and teammates, and overcoming challenges. Coaches can help enhance enjoyment by creating a positive context in which gymnasts feel they are accomplishing their goals and meeting new challenges. Having fun does not mean playing more games and having easier practices, but rather creating a positive environment in which learning is fun, working hard is enjoyable, and sharing experiences with friends is meaningful. For example, rather than merely assigning “stick 10 beam routines” a coach can create a board game where gymnasts advance in the game by sticking one routine or by mastering a particular skill with “no wobblers.” In the end, the same amount of work is achieved by the gymnasts but the process may be much more exciting for the gymnasts. Additionally, coaches and parents can enhance the benefits that competitive gymnastics has to offer:

- Traveling to competitions could be arranged so that the gymnasts travel and room with their teammates, thus providing a greater opportunity for relationships to build “outside of the gym.” Additionally, by leaving for the competition a day earlier or staying a day later as a “play day” may increase enjoyment and the benefits of traveling to various competitions.
- Teaching gymnasts how to set goals and develop successful strategies to achieving those goals will not only help demonstrate each gymnast’s improvement, but also give them skills to use in other facets of their lives, such as persistence and the value of hard work.
- Providing public recognition for improvement rather than winning will also increase enjoyment and benefits. For example, making a bulletin board that has the picture and name of each gymnast who has “caught her release move 3x in a row on bars.” Or rather than having the “9.0 Club”, coaches could make posters for the “Stick Beam Club” or “Most Improved All-Around” club.

3 ENSURE THAT REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION STEM MORE FROM INTRINSIC RATHER THAN EXTRINSIC REASONS

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation will play a role in any athlete’s participation. However, the greater the intrinsic motivation the more likely an athlete will “want to” continue. The context of sport is one that tends to emphasize extrinsic factors such as trophies, public recognition, and college scholarships. These “perks” are a given but coaches can emphasize the intrinsic reasons for continuing involvement in gymnastics and thus maximize gymnasts’ love for the sport for its own sake.

- Coaches can teach gymnasts how to value the “process” of learning rather than just the outcome of competition. Coaches can lead by example to help gymnasts emphasize improvement, set challenging goals, and enjoy overcoming obstacles.

- Coaches can help facilitate intrinsic motivation by allowing gymnasts to “explore in gymnastics.” By allowing the gymnasts to try new challenging skills, teach a teammate a skill or routine, help coach a lower level gymnast, or ask questions about gymnastics or technique of a skill, coaches can help foster the intrinsic desire to know more about the sport, to feel a greater kinesthetic appreciation for performing certain skills, and to gain insight on other aspects of the sport.

4 ATTEMPT TO MINIMIZE THE POTENTIAL "COSTS" OR DOWNSIDES ASSOCIATED WITH HIGH LEVEL COMPETITIVE GYMNASTICS

The potential downsides that may exist for adolescent gymnasts in relation to their continued involvement could include: missing out on social and school events, inability to participate in other activities, conflicts with coaches and/or teammates, or pressures associated with high level competition. Coaches and parents can work together to help alleviate some these potential negative outcomes:

- Training schedules could be modified depending on the time of season. For example, once the competitive season is over coaches could modify practice sessions by shortening those practices that might interfere with school functions (e.g., Friday night basketball games). This would allow gymnasts to not only continue training but also give them some freedom with their time to experience school-related and social activities.
- During the competitive season, coaches could offer a “make up” practice one day a week or a few days each month that allow gymnasts to “make up” practices they may have missed because of conflicting activities. Allowing the gymnasts some flexibility in terms of training to participate in other activities they find of interest could help alleviate the feeling that they are “missing out” on something. Potentially, this could prevent some gymnasts from deciding to discontinue because they want to do “other things.”

References

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