

The Industry of

Recreational Gymnastics

How the Activity Differs From the Sport

By Jeff Lulla, Founder and President of Fun & Fit Gymnastics

I remember hearing "You can't make a living teaching gymnastics," and when I heard it, it was true. A lot has changed since then. An industry born of entrepreneurs opening small businesses serving millions of children in every city across the USA now exists where once it was rare.

What was once a sport for the talented few has evolved into an activity in which all children can participate and benefit. But I believe, as an industry, we are still struggling due to old beliefs, unclear values, inaccurate perceptions, and a few gym clubs still living in the past.

It's no secret that many gym club owners are former coaches who opened their gyms so they could better coach their champions. Most of them did so with little business education, background or experience. But they knew how to coach so they were sustained by their success at competitions. Needless to say, winning at meets was very important to these club owners – it could mean the success or failure of their business and their livelihood.

These early gym clubs quickly learned that they couldn't exist without recreational classes to help pay the bills. So, they offered recreational classes but focused on providing the best equipment and teachers to the few on the team. They marketed their classes, but often (because what mattered most to the owner was winning medals) the competitive team and coaching accomplishments highlighted their advertising.

Successful gymnastics clubs today are run differently. They are in the business of recreational gymnastics for the masses, focusing on the benefits gymnastics education provides children, creating fun and success for all children, and making lots of money in the process. Because their students are happy and learning, they stay enrolled for years. Many clubs today offer competitive teams while a growing number do not. Those clubs with competitive teams and profitable recreational programs are usually more

successful at competitions because they have the resources to provide for the needs of the team members.

As our industry has emerged, it has distinguished itself from the sport. Parents used to think enrolling their child in a gymnastics program necessitated a desire to eventually compete in the sport of gymnastics (if the child was talented and/or lucky enough). It was that kind of thinking that kept our industry small. After years of educating parents on the many benefits gymnastics education provides to children, we are only now beginning to experience the fruits of that effort.

Think about it! Why do parents teach their children to swim? To eventually join a swim team and participate in the competitive sport of swimming? Clearly, most parents teach their children to swim to be safe in the water and enjoy the activity. While there are MILLIONS of children that learn to swim, there are far fewer in the sport.

As parents learn that gymnastics is an activity that they need to participate in to have fun and be safe with movement, and that gymnastics education results in better performance in all sports (as well as improved cognitive ability and better grades in school), enrollment in gymnastics schools increases.

However, because the media often portrays gymnastics as a competitive sport for the very talented few, many parents still perceive gymnastics as inappropriate for their child. Changing this perception and educating parents to understand and appreciate the many benefits of recreational gymnastics, I believe, is our first and most important duty if we are to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number and grow our industry. If we do it well, bringing millions of children into our gyms, the sport will benefit as a result.

