
The Basics of Our Sport

By Muriel Grossfeld

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Basics are the primary foundation of all gymnastics, much like a proper foundation is to a skyscraper. When good basics are absent, our gymnastics building cannot rise very high. Gymnasts will have limited skill and combination acquisition if they have not mastered the basics. When basics are poor, the gymnastics building falls down or becomes unsafe. The gymnast falls, gets deductions, and shows unreliable and/ or unsafe work. When basics are limited in scope, excellent work usually happens sporadically. For example the gymnast may have one good event, or parts of events are good, or one day the skill is here, the next two days it is not.

Basics are vitally important to success in all levels of gymnastics. Basics should be a major part (time and effort) of a recreational as well as an elite program. Basics are critical to body and shape development; to action/movement development and habits (hollow to straight arm coordination into hurdles, jumps and turns, the opening of a salto, etc.); and to mind/concentration/confidence development, as well as providing the primary building blocks for the ability to train efficiently and enjoy doing it.

What

Some examples:

- Posture- general and specific
- Locomotion skills- walk, run, skip, gallop, etc.
- Basics dance skills- some are weight transfers, plies, points, battements, swings, brushes, port de bras, turns, relevés, etc.
- Rebounding
- Flexibility
- Skills- rolls, handstands, pirouettes, jump and hop turns, backbends, limbers, walkovers, handsprings, roundoffs, saltos, supports, hangs, swings, swings with turns, circles, basket swings, kips, etc.; are some of the whats. For higher level gymnasts, skills like giants of all types, double tucks, and Tsukahara or Yurchenko layouts are basics.

When

Basics must also be practiced in varied combinations, during the general and events warm-up periods, conditioning, dance class, as well as other specific sessions. For program Levels 1-7, since time is limited per week, coaches must be more creative, efficient and inspirational to provide an adequate basics foundation program.

Where

Basics can be practiced outside on the grass or track, floor, mat, tumble strip or trak, trampoline, bars, low bar, parallettes, beam, dance area or room, or at special stations.

Some of the most Common Objections We hear:

- Gymnasts are bored with basics.
- Practicing basics is no fun.
- Basics are unnecessary.
- There is no time.

Some Answers:

- Give specific information with very clear and progressively detailed goals within each basic skill or task.
- Correct the errors and praise the improvements with passion and energy. Inspire concentration and accomplishment with energy.
- “Break down” various aspects of the skill and “live with” and “up to” your requests. An example:

The gymnast finally moves forward with stretch into her handstand forward roll, but she forgets or is unable to roll. Praise, not just the accomplishment, but also comment on the mistake, so that she is motivated to make changes more often.

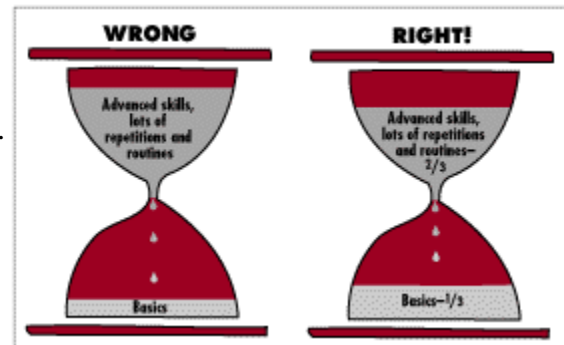
- Gradually “build” the excellence of the basics and try to make changes which are most helpful to the group or to each athlete's best, most consistent, and quickest progress.
- Always call for improvements. Basics should always get better in some way.

If coaching time is not ideal in your program, choose to coach the basics and supervise the warm-ups and conditioning exercises very closely instead of choosing to see all of the routines.

Short On Time

Reduce the number of routines and/or element repetitions to “make time” for the basics.

For example:



- The gymnast does flip flop step-out, layout step-out, on the beam.
- Instead of telling her to make 10 without a miss, work gradually up to 3, 4, then 6 repetitions.
- Use the time gained for basics on the split action, hip lift/placement, flip flop alone, finish plie, centering of weight on the forward foot, hip “squareness,” focus, timing and total completion of the arm swing, posture, etc.

Believe

Believe, because it is true. If the foundation for skills is mastered, or, at least adequate, the skills are learned successfully. The “slow way” is usually the “fastest and most efficient way.” Work hard to instill this belief in your athletes.

Courage

Have the courage to commit to basics and proper preparation.

Sad Facts

Good athletes, the best athletes, are the most harmed by coaching that ignores the importance of good, varied, and always-improving basics. The compensatory methods these athletes adopt and use to succeed- improper posture, timing, muscle groups, flexibility (lack of) and focus etc.- become habits and physical imbalances that are usually impossible to change, even with hours of work. And the improper development inevitably produces an unhappy and unfulfilled gymnast, rather than a happy and confident one.



Stress

For many reasons, working on the basics should continue throughout the competition season. Certainly one good reason is the alleviation of stress. Basics settle down and lead gymnasts into good meet training workouts.

Conclusion

The basics of gymnastics- their identification, ideal technique, and explanation- should fill many volumes, not a single article. However, I hope these few paragraphs will serve as some inspiration for choosing to coach the basics. After all, a roll is as challenging to coach as a double-twisting double back. A great coach is a coach who does it all, and who is thorough when the basics are taught. This is the true measure of a successful coach.

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