



By Mark Gibson
 Author of *Going for It 1*, *Going For It 2* and *The Gym Bag Companions For Living Our Dreams*

There is only one reason any of us get involved in a sport like gymnastics or any other challenging pursuit for that matter. The reason? Because you can't do stuff! That's it, plain and simple. Are your gymnasts throwing hissy fits because they can't do certain skills?

Read on.

Jenny gymnast is walking down the beach one warm summer evening hand in hand with the new hunk in her life. Violins playing, big orange sunset, very romantic. Then she trips! Looking back she notices a small bottle sticking out of the sand. She bends down, picks it up and begins to brush away the sand. Out whooshes a 30-foot tall, bronzed, bald headed, buff looking genie. "I may grant you one wish," he proclaims. Without a second thought Jenny replies, "I want to be able to perform any gymnastics skill I can imagine." "Consider it so," says the genie, and promptly disappears into the clouds like a mini-tornado.

"Wow!" she thinks. "This is going to be so cool." Her next workout is unbelievable. Double layout on floor? No problem. How about a triple twisting double layout? She's got it. Okay, next turn up, a quadruple layout with six twists and a rebound double front out? Stuck! This sort of thing goes on for a month. At the end of the month she gathers all her friends together and makes a big announcement, "I want you all to know, I am quitting gymnastics." **"What? Quitting? Are you nuts?"** her teammates all ask. "I have to," she replies, "gymnastics is boring. There is nothing left to learn."

Jenny has learned a tough lesson. There is only one reason any of us get involved in a sport like gymnastics, or any other challenging pursuit for that matter. The reason? Because you can't do stuff! That's it, plain and simple.

When I lead **Going For It!** workshops in gyms around the country, I often ask the gymnasts how many of them have ever heard a coach use the expression, "There is no such word as can't?" Every hand in the room goes up. We say it all the time, don't we? I know I used to. One day one of my 10-



year-old boys came in and said,
"Mr. Gibson, I went home last night and I looked it up in the dictionary.

You are wrong. There is such a word as can't." Okay wise guy, so now I have to admit there is such a word as can't. Now when my gymnasts come to me saying "I can't do a giant." I simply ask them to complete the sentence. In other words I want to hear, "**I can't do a giant YET!**" I can't do a giant, means I can't be bothered to learn. I can't do a giant yet, means, I will be doing a giant in a year, I just can't do it right now. Winners will then ask the key question that true winners ask themselves all the time. "Why can't I do this right now?"



At this point there is a split between your winners and your whiners. The winners will create a long list of things they must do to learn the skill they want. "I must learn to cast to handstand correctly. I must develop an efficient tap swing through the bottom. I must form a tight kick over the bar." Your whiners, on the other hand, will get busy creating a long list of excuses to justify their self-doubt. "I'm a lousy caster. I can't tap swing. I get scared when I'm upside-down." In other words your winners are forming a plan of action while the whiners are driving their roots of mediocrity deeper and deeper.

The big difference between the I can'ts and the I can't yet's is one of self-image. The I can'ts are stuck in the present. They feel they are not good enough. They see themselves as a lousy gymnast who can't do a giant. The I can't yet's have a vision. They know they are improving. They see themselves as a gymnast learning how to do giants. The I can'ts are motivated into action by a desire to achieve their vision.

What can we do about this?

Ten action steps for turning **CAN'Ts** into **CAN'T YETs**:

1. **Put the big dream on the back burner.** Break big (seemingly impossible) goals down into realistic achievable steps. Instead of learning a giant, learn how to take a tight tap swing 5% higher.
2. **Be process oriented.** Get gymnasts excited about the day to day process of excellence, not just the end result.
3. **Encourage mistakes.** If your gymnasts are afraid to make mistakes they will quickly learn to work well inside their abilities thus insuring they never make mistakes. Of course they will never improve either.
4. **Redefine failure.** A failure is an undesired result not an undesirable person. In the words of basketball coach John Wooden, "Failure is rarely fatal, but failure to change might be." Failure doesn't have to mean the gymnast is a failure. It simply means they failed to prepare for this challenge adequately. Get tough on what they do, not on who they are.
5. **Change *I have to* to *I want to*.** Do your gymnasts have to do conditioning, or do they want to do conditioning? I guarantee you this, if your gymnasts

are doing conditioning because they have to, they are wasting their time. They are reluctantly struggling through it to avoid getting you, the coach, upset. Their time would be better spent doing homework. However, if they are doing conditioning because they want to, they have made the connection between conditioning and their dreams; between price and pay off. They can still hate conditioning if they so choose, but they do it willingly and effectively because it will move them faster towards their dreams.

6. **Choose your heroes carefully.** Do you have framed color photographs of every graduated senior that ever came through your program hanging where your team can see them every day? Good! Big color posters of Olympians make nice decorations but they do little to inspire 99% of your gymnasts. In fact, they leave most gymnasts with a feeling of "What's the point, I'll never be that good." They need heroes they can relate to. Someone they can look to and say "If they can do it so can I."
7. **No more fearless gymnasts.** If you encourage your gymnasts to be fearless, you are telling them they should never be scared. My research to date has uncovered only two kinds of people that never get scared. People too stupid to be scared and people too lazy to push themselves to a point where they would experience fear. So if you are telling your gymnasts to be fearless, you are asking them to be stupid or lazy. The stupid ones will injure themselves out of the sport and the lazy ones will drag the rest of your team down.
8. **More courageous gymnasts.** A courageous gymnast has a bundle of fears. Why? Because they know that fear only exists on the edges of their abilities. When they push themselves to the edge, fear will be there to greet them, every time. They are courageous not because they have no fear, they are courageous because they handle their fears.
9. **WIN... occasionally.** Does your team win every meet they go to? Then start shipping them out of state once in a while. Has your team never won a thing, ever? How on earth do you keep them motivated? Nothing inspires a gymnast more than a recent success. It feels good to win. However, winning can be like Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Eat it every night and after a while it's not so special anymore. It's not the win that inspires our gymnasts, it's the pride associated with the win. If winning is easy, there is very little pride. Very little pride generates very little motivation.
10. **Train attitude.** How many times during your coaching career have you said, if they would just change their attitude they could be so good? We all recognize that attitude is important, yet all but a handful of teams actually do something about it. That makes as much sense as acknowledging your team needs to be physically stronger, but insisting you don't have the time to do strength conditioning. If attitude problems are holding your team back, they need to be addressed.

And, finally, if you want a snappy comeback to I can't, try this:

"Of course you can't do it! Isn't that exciting? That's why you are here. To learn how to do all the incredible things you can't do. This place exists for one reason and one reason only. To teach you how to do all that cool stuff you can't do... YET!"

Mark Gibson is the author of the new gymnastics motivational book *Going For It! "2"* -- the second in his series of motivational books for gymnasts. Mark has also conducted more than 400 Going For It! Winner's Workshops in gyms across the U.S. and Canada to an audience of more than 30,000 gymnasts, parents and coaches. To order a signed copy of either *Going For It! "1"* or *Going For It! "2"* (\$16.95 each + \$3 shipping) or to inquire about bringing his live workshops to your gym, call Mark at 215-257-4584.

This article is reprinted from the May/June 1999 *USA Gymnastics* magazine.
