

## Mental Conditioning

By Nancy Marshall

—Nancy Marshall is a consultant to USA Gymnastics as the developer and manager of the Athlete Wellness Program. She and her husband have three children and live in Salem, Oregon. She is a four-time national team member and 1972 Olympian.

Birds fly...Fish swim...Gymnasts think!

Gymnastics is a sport for thinkers. It takes a great deal of mental discipline to execute routines well, maintain composure during competition, set and attain goals, and overcome mental blocks such as fear or anxiety. As sport psychologists and coaches tell us, mental conditioning is just as valuable as strength or flexibility training.



Hopefully your coach has some sort of mental training exercises incorporated into your workouts. Visualizing a good beam performance, setting yearly goals, practicing relaxation techniques are all examples of effective training tools that help gymnasts rise above competitive pressure and achieve excellence.

While you may have specific mental conditioning exercises you do in the gym, there are lots of creative activities you can do at home and throughout everyday life, to sharpen your ability to concentrate. Following are some suggestions from sport psychologist Dr. Alison Arnold and others for ways to reinforce the six main mental skills being practiced in the gym.

### Concentration Training

- Play "concentration" the card game.
- Practice memorization. (i.e. poems, songs, inspirational sayings, state capitols, presidents, etc.)
- Put a puzzle together. Stick with it until it is completed.

### Imagery

- Talk about a favorite place you've been (vacation spot, grandparents house, favorite room in your house.) Close your eyes and try to describe it in detail.
- Do the same with a memorable event. (being a flower girl in a wedding, guest of honor at a birthday party, playing a role in the school play.)

### Stress Management

- Look for ways to simplify life.
- As you lie in bed at night, work on deep breathing.
- Maintain an adequate diet and sleep schedule.
- In conversation and action, focus on what is controllable.
- Use your commitments (school, workouts, competitions) as an exercise in time management.
- Spend a day "playing" with your family.
- Set aside time for meditation and renewal.

## **Goal Setting**

- Set goals that are realistic, specific, and attainable.
- Be sure goals are controllable not externally based.
- Work on attitude goals that build character...not simply getting a new skill, or qualifying to a certain meet.
- Periodically, ask what your goal is for the workout or competition. Evaluate if you are reaching those goals. Remember, hard work, tenacity, and overcoming obstacles are all victories worth celebrating.

## **Negative Thought Stopping**

- Avoid cutting yourself and/or others down in your speech. Try to be positive and forgiving.
- If you find yourself being critical in your speech-stop-breathe-then figure out how to change the message to be positive or neutral.
- Replace statements like, "I'm stupid," "I can't do that," "I'll never get it," with statements like, "How do I figure this out?" "I can't do this...yet."

## **Positive Self-Talk**

- Try to give compliments not criticism.
- Have members of the family share what they appreciate about the other members of the family.
- Tell success stories. Talk about achieving past goals. Remember past victories.