

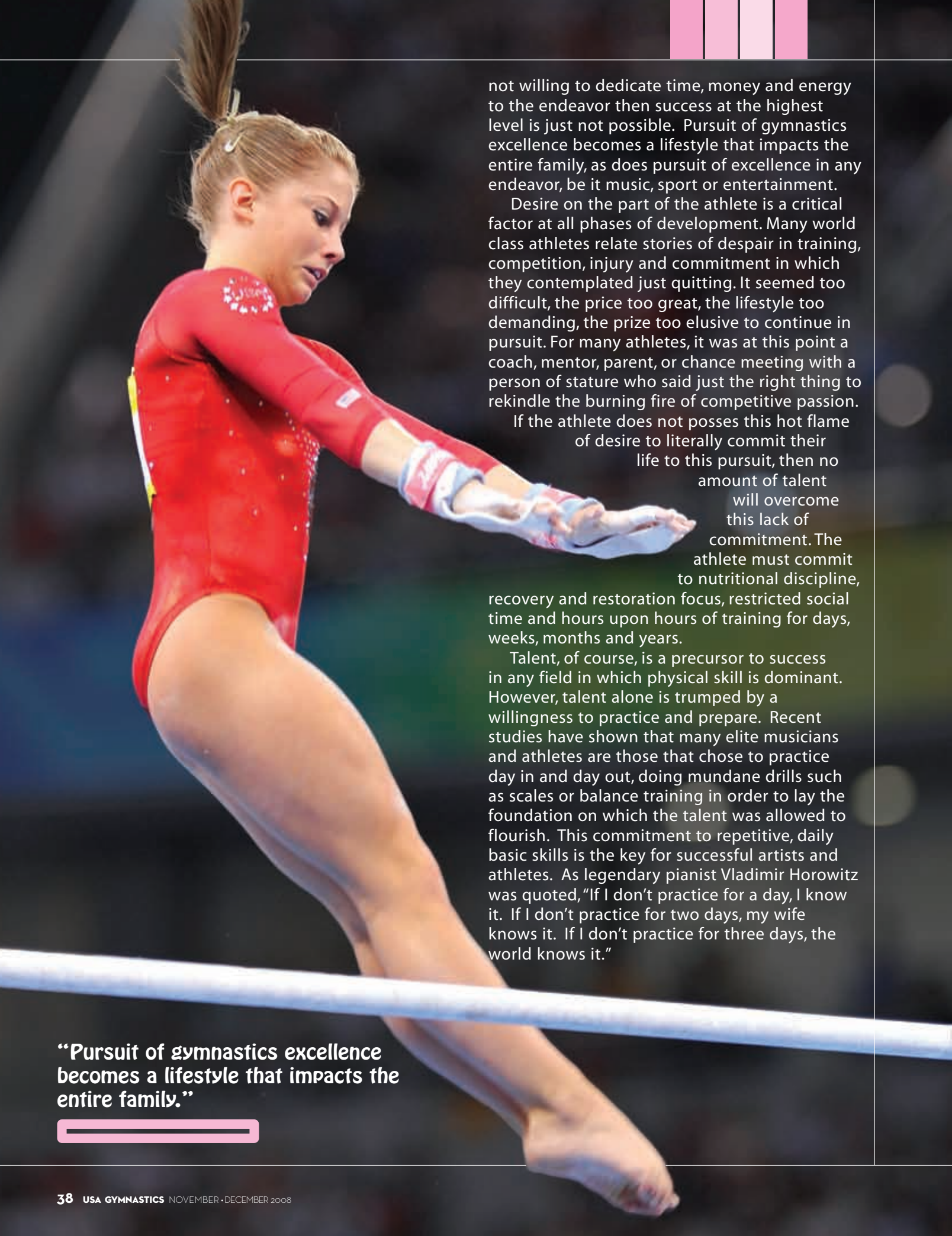


# TRAINING A WORLD CLASS ATHLETE

By Robb Rogers, M.Ed., CSCS, MSCC

**W**hat goes into training a world class athlete? When does it start? How much time is involved? How do you manage the schedule and lifestyle during those formative elementary, transitional middle school and demanding high school years? What are the pitfalls and obstructions that may be encountered along the way? Literally hundreds of thousands of youngsters are part of our gymnast pool as they are exposed to training in gyms all over the United States. Three obstacles separate those on the path to national and international competition and those that get lost. Two challenges relate directly to the athlete and one to the parents. First and foremost is desire on the part of the parent, singular, as one parent will be tasked with orchestrating the schedule and managing the budding young athlete. If the parent is

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not willing to dedicate time, money and energy to the endeavor then success at the highest level is just not possible. Pursuit of gymnastics excellence becomes a lifestyle that impacts the entire family, as does pursuit of excellence in any endeavor, be it music, sport or entertainment.


Desire on the part of the athlete is a critical factor at all phases of development. Many world class athletes relate stories of despair in training, competition, injury and commitment in which they contemplated just quitting. It seemed too difficult, the price too great, the lifestyle too demanding, the prize too elusive to continue in pursuit. For many athletes, it was at this point a coach, mentor, parent, or chance meeting with a person of stature who said just the right thing to rekindle the burning fire of competitive passion.

If the athlete does not possess this hot flame of desire to literally commit their life to this pursuit, then no amount of talent will overcome this lack of commitment. The athlete must commit to nutritional discipline,

recovery and restoration focus, restricted social time and hours upon hours of training for days, weeks, months and years.

Talent, of course, is a precursor to success in any field in which physical skill is dominant. However, talent alone is trumped by a willingness to practice and prepare. Recent studies have shown that many elite musicians and athletes are those that chose to practice day in and day out, doing mundane drills such as scales or balance training in order to lay the foundation on which the talent was allowed to flourish. This commitment to repetitive, daily basic skills is the key for successful artists and athletes. As legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz was quoted, "If I don't practice for a day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, my wife knows it. If I don't practice for three days, the world knows it."

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To become accomplished in any endeavor, practice is critical. But how much is enough? It has been determined that it takes 10,000 hours of focused, deliberate practice effort to become an accomplished expert. Whether or not you are world class in sport is a function of genetics, opportunity and timing. Several studies in piano, swimming, violin, diving, weightlifting and other sports have found that 10,000 hours of practice over 10 years is the minimum time required to achieve international levels of expertise. National levels were 7500 hours of deliberate practice and lower levels were 5000 hours over 10 years. Upon closer examination, a world class athlete needs 1,000 hours per year, 20 hours per week (assuming 50 weeks of training) and 3-4 hours per day (assuming 6 practice days per week). This does not include competition! This is focused, deliberate practice executed in order to build layer upon layer of skill, one quality repetition at a time in order to make seemingly impossible skills look effortless. Practice does not make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect.

Another challenge in our culture is to find recovery time. Many athletes studied regularly engaged in a full eight hours of sleep each night as well as a 30-minute nap each day in order to stay sharp, focused and recovered for the demands of training. This means shutting down the laptop and phone and resting. Nutrition is also a challenge in order to fuel the body with quality choices at the proper intervals in order to recover as well as provide the energy needed to prepare. When the stress of the culture/environment, intense training, lack of recovery and poor nutrition collide, that is when illness and injury enter the picture and can put the whole process off course.

In order to become a world class athlete it takes a lifestyle commitment by a family and at least a decade of over 10,000 hours of focused, deliberate preparation. This must be accomplished without loss of desire on the part of the family or athlete as well as some luck in regards to the injury bug. It is a wonderful journey for those that undertake it and will forever impact all involved, regardless of their level of achievement or success. ❏

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