

BRING OUT YOUR **ANIMAL!**

HOW TO BE A FIERCE COMPETITOR

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You walk out on to the competition floor, you are ready. Everyone is amazed at how aggressive you are. You jump, you fly, you flip with the strength and grace of a lion. Your vault is sky high. Your tumbling is out of this world. The crowd cheers, amazed by your power and confidence. Then you wake up. It was only a dream and you realize you are a little nervous about the competition next weekend. Want to be more aggressive in competition? Have the confidence to compete all out without the “what if’s” plaguing your mind? This article will give you four tips to help you become a fierce competitor. Follow these steps and bring out the best or should I say, the beast, in you!

STEP ONE: CREATE FEROCIOUS SELF-TALK

Your outside performance is always a reflection of your internal self-talk. Strong mind leads to strong body. Weak mind leads to weak body. Fearful mind leads to fearful body. It’s essential that you have self-talk that fills you with confidence, power, and belief. How do you talk to yourself during practice and competition? You want your self-talk to be positive, motivating, and intense. You want it to pick you up when you’re down and push you when you feel like you can’t do one more routine. Your internal dialogue should be like the perfect coach inside your head. Every practice, fill your mind with thoughts like, “I can do this,” “this will make me stronger,” and “keep on trying.” During routines have cue words that keep your

mind on track. Make sure you are mostly saying the same words every time. Just like your coach sitting on your shoulder, your words should be corrections, positive statements, and reminders that keep your mind focused and intense. Do walk-throughs and arm sets saying your words out loud. Make sure your key words or mental choreography is aggressive, and activates the type of mindset you’d like to have in competition. Remember: weak mind equals weak body, and inconsistent mind equals inconsistent performance. If you are having a lack of intensity on the floor, let that be a sign to you that there is a lack of intensity inside your head. Be sure to have mental choreography that is sharp, precise and naturally rhythmic to the element you are performing. If you can perform well in practice but fall



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apart in competition, you have a mental issue. Derail an off-track mind by writing out your routines and your mental choreography. Saying your words every day in practice will strengthen your mind helping you be fierce on the competition floor.

STEP TWO: BLAST OUT DOUBT: WHICH WOLF DO YOU FEED?

There is a wonderful parable in which a grandfather from the Cherokee Nation talked with his grandson. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “A terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil and ugly: He is self-doubt, fear, and negativity. The other wolf is beautiful and good: He is confidence, belief and perseverance. This same fight is going on inside you,” he counseled, “and inside every other human as well.” The grandson paused in deep reflection of his grandfather’s words. Finally he cried out, “Oyee! Grandfather, which wolf will win?” The elder Cherokee replied, “The wolf that you feed.” Once you become



aware of your negative thoughts about you as an athlete and a competitor, it is up to you to have the strength, courage and discipline to not feed those doubtful thoughts and emotions. No gymnast can compete aggressively when he or she believes they are not a good competitor, or they HAVE to hit and if they don't they will disappoint everyone. It's important to understand your thoughts as a competitor. Do you feel like you can go all out and still be OK if you fail? Are you afraid to disappoint parents or coaches? Are you a perfectionist who freaks out if things aren't "just so"? These are the beliefs that need to change in order to compete your best. The most aggressive competitors on the floor are those who have high self-esteem and know that no matter what happens, they will be fine as a person and an athlete.

STEP THREE: KEEP THE FIERCE FIRE BURNING

Be sure you set goals that can fuel you to be an animal on the competition floor. There is nothing more motivating than a goal that comes from the heart. Goals help give your training purpose and direction. Research has shown that gymnasts who set goals are far more successful than those who don't. Put your goals somewhere you can see them every day. Make a vision board collage, or write them in dry erase markers on your bedroom mirror. Seeing your goals helps provide fuel for days your energy feels low. Fierce practice leads to a fierce competitor. Use your goals to remind you of what you are working towards in every practice.

STEP FOUR: SIMULATE COMPETITION IN PRACTICE

Your mental choreography key words are precise and intense. You change every negative thought to the opposite. Your goals are written on every notebook in the house. Now it's time to take your animal instinct into practice. If you don't attack training, how can you expect to attack at the meet? Be sure you practice being an animal on your routines in practice. Get used to competition pressure by putting extra pressure on yourself and training aggressively. Pick one routine on every event each workout to be your "attack routine." Pretend this routine is the exact one you will do in the biggest competition of your season. Imagine you are there. Use all of your senses. See the meet, the judges, the spectators. Imagine a high pressure situation where you have to make this routine in order to win, or qualify to the next meet. Try and create excitement and nervous energy in your body and then...perform the routine with a fierce mind and body. Get comfortable with aggressive gymnastics. Once you are comfortable, you will pounce every time. Begin today to create the fierce gymnast within you, he or she is just waiting to come out and attack the competition. ☒

Alison Arnold Ph.D. has been a mental toughness trainer to USA Gymnastics since 1997. For more information on her athlete/coach/parent seminars, workbooks, DVD's, CD's, and LIVE on-line mental toughness training program, see www.headgames.ws