By Windee M. Weiss, Ph.D.

As a former gymnast and coach, and now a sport psychology consultant, I have seen young gymnasts who develop the “fear of going backwards.” The causes of this phenomenon are not always clear: sometimes the gymnast is just not performing a particular skill, whereas other times this “fear” appears seemingly out of nowhere. In many instances, this fear seems to be isolated to one particular skill or to one event, but in other cases this fear begins with the situation as if the gymnast is trying to do this on purpose to drive the coach crazy. Nine times out of ten, this is definitely not the case. Using a skill or being afraid of something can be incredibly stressful and upsetting to any gymnast resulting in potentially serious health compromising behaviors: loss of sleep, loss of appetite, depression, and disorientation. As coaches, it is our responsibility to help the gymnast through this difficult time as quickly and easily as possible.

First, why do gymnasts develop a fear of going backwards?

1. A scary fall or injury sustained while performing a backwards element.
   In both instances as described above, the gymnast and I created a “ladder” with 10 rungs, thinking that if you can make yourself do one thing (that is being scared of going backwards), you can make yourself do something else. One of the best things we can do for our gymnasts is to keep them going backwards as much as possible in order to prevent losing any more skills. So, because Heather was having so many difficulties with tumbling and multiple backwards skills, every day she began her practices with 10 backward rolls, 25 backflips, 20 standing back tucks, and 20 standing back tacks. As she felt more comfortable and less stressed, we added connections of two back handsprings, then three back handsprings, and so on. Eventually we were able to add the back tuck back after one back handspring. Even though she still was not performing her high level backwards skills, each day that she was able to “add” a skill or make the pass more difficult, she felt like she was accomplishing something. Thus, she came to workouts the following day more motivated to do better than the day before.

2. A break in concentration while performing a backwards element.
   In addition to setting goals, I also have my gymnasts keep a “scrapbook.” These statements were chosen to get the gymnast thinking or saying to him/herself something very positive and self-talk. The gymnast may still execute the skill successfully however at some point during the skill the gymnast may have felt “out of control” or been “lost” in the air. This can be frightening for many gymnasts, especially if they are not aware of what caused them to feel this way. To make matters worse, many gymnasts then begin to “re-live” the experience while they wait their turn to go again, and/or by telling their teammates about how “awful” the past performance felt.

3. The gymnast is experiencing stress in some aspect of his/her life.
   The following two case studies are true stories about gymnasts I have worked with that developed a fear of going backwards. I refer to these two cases as examples of strategies used.

   CASE 1: Julia was a 12-year-old, Level 6 gymnast. She had successfully been competing for about two months when she developed a fear of her backwalkover on high beam. She did not fail or crash, rather just one day quit performing her backwalkover. She still had not qualified to state meet so we were very concerned about getting her ready for her last meet of the season. As a result of her fear developing at this point, we had them make a “scrapbook.”

   CASE 2: Heather was a 10-year-old, Level 8 gymnast. This was her first year competing as a Level 8 and previously as a Level 7 won state meet. Heather developed a fear of going backwards on nearly every element she was working on while tumbling. She “balled” during a tumbling pass, which led to her no longer tumbling backwards on floor. Within a month, she could no longer perform her two backhandspring series on beam and had to break up her routine to have problems with her flyaway dismount on bars. Later, based on conversations with both Heather and her coach, we realized she had just had a personal life crisis. Follow-up with the gymnast during the next four months showed she had just had a personal life crisis.

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   Second, what can coaches do to help minimize the effects of this fear?

1. Try to reduce the amount of stress and negative emotions associated with performing a backwards element.
   As a coach, I hated to find “alternative” skills that a gymnast was willing to perform. However, in the instance when an individual is so scared of going backwards that workouts have become a stagnant, uphill battle, it may be worthwhile to have them try an alternative skill.

2. Keep the gymnast going backwards at some point in the routine.
   Determining what skills the gymnast was willing to perform.

   Initially, I wanted to keep Heath backwards at some point in the routine. We worked on one of her skills which was a low beam routine. Within a month, Heather was back on high beam, competing her Level 6 routine and qualified to state meet. For Heath, the overall progression probably took about 6 weeks, but she had not been tumbling backwards for at least 2 months. By allowing Heath to compete or perform other skills that fulfilled special requirements, this decreased the stress she was experiencing. With lower stress levels and her borther skills, Heather just had the courage to try backwards tumbling backwards more positively. Eventually, Heath began to tumble backwards again. That is, she performed a lot of power forward passes, but tumble forward and then go backwards. Eventually, she was able to GmbH backwards. This strategy was very helpful to Heath and provided a path back.

   As a coach, I would remind the gymnast to “think” about performing this skill. This allowed her to think about performing this skill. This allowed her to think about performing this skill.

   In terms of these strategies will be better gymnastics. The gymnasts brought their scrapbooks to each workout and we would discuss these two examples as ways of illustrating the strategies used.

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