

# I'm Scared to Go Backwards

## Helpful strategies for coaches to stop this strange phenomenon

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

### 1. A scary fall or injury sustained while performing a backwards element.

Probably the most obvious (and easiest for coaches to understand) cause of developing a fear is when the gymnast has a fall or crash that may or may not cause injury, but definitely scares the gymnast.

### 2. A break in concentration while performing a backwards element.

Another common cause for developing a fear about a particular skill or going backwards is when the gymnast experiences a lapse in concentration while performing the skill. 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 sensation can be fairly 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 (could be gymnastics related, but this stress could also stem from family, school, etc.).

Probably the most difficult potential cause to detect for developing a fear, especially for coaches, is the amount of stress the gymnast is experiencing. That is, if a gymnast is experiencing high amounts of stress, and if he/she does not have adequate coping skills to deal with this increased stress, then many times the only observed behavior or outcome related to this stress that we see is development of a fear. Some causes of stress for a gymnast could be doing poorly in a class at school, arguing with their best friend or teammates, traveling demands during the competitive season, and distracting conflicts at home between parents. Potentially, this stress could lead to a break in concentration which then causes the gymnast to fear a skill. Many times even the gymnast does not understand why this is happening or even what he/she is afraid of. Bottom line, if an individual is under stress, it will reveal itself in a change in personality, energy level, health, and sometimes, in the gym through development of a fear.

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 that particular skill or backward element.

If a gymnast seems to be experiencing a fairly "chronic case" of fear about a particular skill or going backwards, one of the best things a coach can do is help minimize the amount of negative feelings and stress associated with a particular skill. In my coaching days, I readily admit using various types of punishment to get a gymnast to "just go" such as doubling the number of skills they had to perform, giving them strength conditioning, making them stay on that event until the assignment was complete, or even making the gymnast leave practice early. Sometimes, these strategies worked. However, for those instances where we were truly dealing with a chronic case of fear, these strategies just made the problem worse. I was increasing the stress and negative thoughts associated with that particular skill. I was making our "uphill battle" into the "climbing of Mt. Everest." Thus, I suggest trying a more positive approach to dealing with this situation. Providing encouragement, helping with problem-solving strategies, developing positive self-talk, and implementing goal-setting can all help to increase the gymnast's confidence.

### 2. Remember, the gymnast is not "trying to do this on purpose" and this is probably more upsetting for him/her than it is for you.

On more than one occasion, when I was coaching and now when I observe coaches in the gym, I have noticed some coaches (including myself) seem to take the "lost skill" issue personally. That is, some coaches behave and react to the situation as if the gymnast is trying to do this on purpose to drive the coach crazy. Nine times of out ten, this is definitely not the case. Losing a skill or being afraid of something can be incredibly stressful and upsetting to any gymnast resulting in several potentially health compromising behaviors: loss of sleep, loss of appetite, depression, and high anxiety. As coaches, it is our responsibility to help the gymnast through this difficult time as quickly and easily as possible.

Third, here are some "tricks" or strategies that you may want to implement with your gymnast who seems to be having problems overcoming his/her fear of a particular skill or moving backwards.

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 examples as ways of illustrating the 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 fall 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 two competitions prior to state meet.

**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 event. Her fear began on floor while tumbling. She "balked" 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 was beginning to have problems with her flyaway dismount on bars. Later, based on conversations with both Heather and her coaches, it was revealed that Heather's parents had just divorced about 4 months prior to her problems in the gym.

### 1. Create a goal-setting "ladder" or path with the gymnast.

Goal-setting can be incredibly motivational for both the coach and the gymnast. By creating a list of goals or a "pathway" for the gymnast to follow in order to perform a skill again, we can help show the gymnast how much they have achieved, how far they have left to go, and provide them with "little successes" along the way.

In both instances as described above, the gymnast and I created a "ladder" with 10 rungs. On each rung was a goal concerning that particular skill. At the top of the ladder was the "ultimate goal," in the instance of Julia, the ultimate goal was to compete her backwalkover on high beam by the next invitational. So, we started out with Julia trying 10 backwalkovers on the low beam for two workouts, the following rung was stick 8 backwalkovers on a low beam and try 5 on the medium beam for two workouts. Every two workouts Julia was challenged to "move up" her backwalkover to a higher beam. The key to moving up with Julia was that her "attempts" had to count for something. We found that if she was required to "stick" a certain number of backwalkovers on the new height, she "froze up" and actually regressed. When she achieved each goal, she would receive a "cool sticker" next to that goal as a sign of her achievement.

### 2. Make a "scrapbook" to help increase positive thoughts and self-talk.

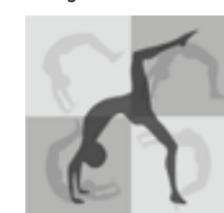
One of the major issues we are dealing with when it comes to fear is what the gymnast is thinking or saying to him/herself about the skill. Many times our own minds and thoughts are our own worst enemy. Thus, in order to get both Julia and Heather to change what they thought about these skills, we had them make a "scrapbook."

Each day, 10 times a day, at random times, the gymnasts had to

write down on a scrap of paper: the date, the time, and a positive affirmation statement. For Julia, the first week she had to write "I look forward to working on backwalkovers on beam" and Heather wrote, "I enjoy doing backhandsprings." These statements were chosen to get the gymnasts to at least think 10 times per day something positive about performing these skills. The gymnasts brought their scraps to workouts each day (or whenever they had practice), we then taped/glued the scraps to fun construction paper decorated with stamps and stickers for each day. Thus, we began building their book made of scraps.

After the first week, the statement for Julia was changed to "I am good at backwalkovers on high beam" even though she still was not performing the skill yet at that height. For Heather, we changed her statement to "I'm good at tumbling backwards."

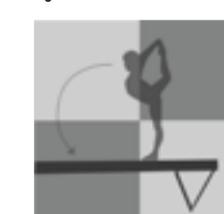
Eventually, both gymnasts actually began "believing themselves" in terms of these statements. This will not necessarily fix the overall problem, but at least we are not fighting against their negative thoughts and attitudes toward the skill.



### 3. Keep the gymnast going backwards at something—even if you must resort to very beginner level skills.

One of the best things we can do for our gymnasts is to keep them going backwards or performing the skill somewhere—even if it is just the low beam or a line on the floor. For those who are afraid of going backwards, it is important 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 backward skills, every day she began her practices with 10 backward rolls, 15 backwalkovers, 20 standing backhandsprings, and 20 standing back tucks. 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 after one back handspring. Even though she still was not performing her high level tumbling 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.



### 4. As a last resort, find temporary solutions or alternative skills for that gymnast.

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 worth it for you to reconsider your gym rules. This becomes a little trickier with your compulsory level gymnasts where you can not modify without serious deductions, however with your optional level gymnasts you have some room to play with. For Heather's upcoming competition we modified her tumbling passes on floor to go forwards, and changed her beam series to frontwalkover-round off. Heather understood that these were only "temporary" changes, and she was allowed to compete as long as she kept up her end of the bargain in terms of her "scrapbook" and reaching the goals on her goal-ladder.

Overall, the combination of these strategies helped Julia and Heather. Within one month, Julia was back up on high beam, competing her Level 6 routine and qualified to state meet. For Heather, the overall progression probably took about 6 weeks, but she had not been tumbling backwards for at least two months prior. By allowing Heather to compete or perform other skills that fulfilled special requirements, this decreased the stress she was experiencing. With lower stress levels, Heather was able to control her thoughts and approach her backwards tumbling more positively. Eventually, Heather began to tumble backwards again. That is, she performed a lot of power hurdle tumbling passes because if we added the run before the round-off too soon, she seemed to get scared again. However, with patience Heather competed and performed beautifully at state meet. ✘

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As a former gymnast and coach, and now a sport psychologist, on numerous occasions I have seen young gymnasts who develop the "fear of going backwards." The causes of this phenomenon are not always clear: sometimes the gymnast crashes while 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 one skill and eventually spreads like an unwanted virus to all events and skills that require the gymnast to go backwards. This is incredibly stressful for not only the gymnast, but also his/her coach and parents. The strategies or "tricks" I am suggesting have worked well in the past with several gymnasts of varying ages and competitive levels in terms of reducing the amount of time "lost" dealing with this fear as well as helping gymnasts "lose their fear of going backwards." My hope is that the following information and strategies may help decrease the amount of time and anguish spent dealing with this all too common fear.