

Lainy Carslaw
Assistant Head Coach for the Pittsburgh Northstars 15 years
Team coordinator, event planner, writer.



Searching for Safety in the Foam Pit

A few months ago club owners and coaches were delivered some pretty heavy information that has been difficult to know how to digest. This information could have a huge impact on our industry and an even bigger one on our lives. Some blocks in our foam pits might be covered with a flame-retardant chemical that may be toxic and possibly have hazardous affects to our health. That by complying with insurance companies and filling our pits with the flame retardant blocks that were supposed to make our gyms safer, we may have done the opposite.

Many of us have spent our entire lives in the gym, as gymnasts ourselves, and now as coaches. Many of our own children have also grown up in the gym. We have all believed we were working in a safe environment, under safe conditions. Granted, we are fully aware that our jobs as coaches involves an inherent risk, like getting kicked in the face by a straddle-legged back handspring, or our fingers pinched setting the p-bars, but we didn't expect it would be coming from the pit. And now, we are faced with a lot of questions: How will this new research affect our health? How will it affect the health of our children? How will it affect our business? Getting the research out about flame-retardants may have been hard, but here comes the even harder part: *What do we do now?*

Gymnastics is an innovative sport. Over the last thirty years we have adapted to keep our athletes more healthy and reduce injuries. The beams are more padded, the vault table is a

larger target, the uneven bars are thinner and bouncier—we even made vault tables and p-bars safer to set, saving countless hands from stitches everywhere! Now, it seems we are being faced with a new kind of risk and it is time, once again, to innovate.

What companies are going to step up and usher in the new wave of environmentally friendly products for our gyms? What solutions will be brought to the fore-front in terms of keeping our training/work environment safe? Who will take the lead in telling gymnastics schools what they should be doing with this new information? After all, we are not health professionals, or scientists. We are coaches. We know cartwheels and back-flips. We need to trust our governing bodies to use their resources and their power to collect all necessary research and then guide us in the right direction. Just as USAG created a more rigorous safety certification process, just as they instated U100 so we would be better educated, and just as they have updated and innovated our equipment for the safety of our athletes and risk management of our businesses—we need them to take the lead now.

Foam pits are a lot of things. They are to gymnastics schools what ball-pits are to *Chuckie-E-Cheese*. They provide smiles to the young kids who play in them and safety to the eager gymnasts who flip into them. Yes, they are also magnets for band-aids and great hiding places for socks (maybe even more so than your dryer) but they are perhaps, the most integral piece of equipment in our gyms.

They are also expensive. And most gym owners do not have \$10-\$20,000 (or more) just laying around, ready to spend on new foam.

After the publication of the *Technique* article, our gym took some small, immediate steps. First, we informed our parents right away. We told them about the research coming out and our

goals in how we planned to address it. As per the article, we told them to have their kids shower and wash their hands after practice.

Next, we cleaned out our pit and got rid of all shedding, ripped blocks—over \$5,000 worth. And for the first time ever, the coaches cleaned the pit out without the help of the gymnasts. Recently, we have spent less time in the pit and more time landing on the mats on top of it.

What else have we done? We have eagerly awaited word from our governing bodies on what necessary action we should be taking. Is there an urgency here? Is there time for gyms to save up to replace their blocks or should we not worry about replacing them at all? Is there time for long term planning or should we look into short term plans like block covers? Do we have time to wait for a company to fill this hole in the market and provide us with a recyclable, biodegradable, cost-effective alternative that is free from the hazardous chemicals? Perhaps, most importantly, was the *Technique* article just a warning or was it a call to action?

Let's be honest. Toxic chemicals are everywhere. They are in air-freshners, toilet bowl cleaners, anti-bacterial soaps, and the fragrance in our shampoos. They are lurking in our water bottles and in the lining of our canned goods. They are seeping into our skin with the touch of every receipt. They are even used in the rubber that goes into our baby's duckies. But, we are in an awakening. With more and more research coming to light about what is in our products and what we surround ourselves with everyday, we can make better, more informed decisions on the food we buy, the toys we let our kids play with, and even our gymnastics equipment.

Ben Franklin famously said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Hopefully, we can dig our way toward this prevention, one foam block at a time.