



Staying On Purpose

It's been said that to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And in the absence of a hammer, very often the heaviest tool becomes a hammer. Sometimes in the gym we make the same mistakes. We need to make an obstacle course and a pommel horse makes a fine obstacle. We need to be higher to spot on bars, and we turn an octagon on its end and it makes a fine spotting block. As gym owners and coaches, we are taught to be very creative, and we are.

Unfortunately, what we don't always consider at the time of use is how an alternate use might affect the original purpose. This is most common in the use of foam filled mats and shapes. Not to get overly technical about foams, but there are two basic foams used in gymnastics – Polyethylene (PE) (hard or firm) foam, and Polyurethane (PU) (soft) foam. PE is designed to be resilient and spread out the impact of small footprint landings or take offs. It's used on the top of landing mats, tumbling mats, and firm mats meant for standing on. PU is softer and is made for absorption of landing when the impact is spread out over larger areas like landing on your back or stomach. PU foams are used in skill cushions, the bottom layer of landing mats, foam pits, and skill shapes used for preschool or progression training on handsprings etc. Issues arise when we intentionally or unintentionally start using mats for an unintended purpose.



A foam pit (loose foam or "resi-style") is made of softer urethane foam and is ideal for learning when most landings are overturned or under turned and the gymnast is landing flat. It provides a great and safe landing area. The problem comes in as the gymnasts get better, develop more aerial awareness and are able to land a higher percentage on their feet. This same mat is not ideal for a two-foot landing and that type of impact is not ideal for the mat (foam). The two-foot landing puts more concentrated stress than the mat was designed for so we start to see the mat developing bad spots or ripped foam sections.



Ideally you would purpose a landing mat in place any time that a two-foot landing is highly likely and use a skill cushion or softer mat whenever flat landings are a distinct possibility. Stacking two 4' landing mats is not the equivalent of one 8" skill cushion. Keeping mats "on purpose" probably requires a little more time in moving mats or training sessions, but it's the best way to keep the athlete safe and the mat lasting longer.



Knowing the differences and applications of foam will help you select the proper mat for the proper purpose. Some inclines are better for teaching back handsprings and others are more appropriate for beginner rolls. I will get into more details on foam in a future article, but it's always a good idea to know what's in your mats and what the intended purpose is. The two factors that you always want to know when selecting a mat is firmness (IFD) and density. They are not the same. More thoughts on foam coming soon. Thanks.

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