Recently, increased standards of performance and degrees of difficulty have evolved in competitive gymnastics. Likewise, the prestige and publicity accorded to successful performances has also increased. As a result, the levels of stress and anxiety with which competitors must effectively cope have also risen.

Currently, much interest is being directed to the study of the psychological strategies employed by athletes to mentally prepare and condition themselves for competition. A number of cognitive-behavior rehearsal packages have been specifically designed for helping athletes perform up to their potential.

This paper is based on psychological training programs developed and implemented with gymnasts ranging in age from 10-24 years representing the California State University at Fullerton Gymnastic Team and the Richmond Olympiad Gymnastic Club, Richmond, Virginia. The training programs are specifically designed for gymnasts of varying ability levels.

The program was designed and implemented at the request of and in cooperation with coaches who felt that excessive anxiety and tension were interfering with performance. The program utilizes strategies based on cognitive somatic behavioral intervention. These strategies are clearly useful to athletes in other sports but will need to be modified to meet the needs of the particular sport.

Our approach in working with student athletes is rooted in a humanistic phenomenological orientation. Thus, the individual athlete's direct movement experience is the focal point in enhancing performance. We work from the gymnast's experiential base to make the necessary changes in their gymnastic experience. The importance of individualizing the program to meet each gymnast's own experiential base cannot be overemphasized. It is, however, impossible to completely do so within the constraints of this paper.

In our approach we also emphasize that within each gymnast there is an inner athlete or an ultimate gymnast that needs to be discovered and allowed to grow. The fears, anxieties, and doubts that cloud this inner gymnast must be removed so that optimal performance can move from within.

Another key principle to our approach is that gymnasts have limited control of their external environment, but total control of their response to it. This implies two points: gymnasts should strive to anticipate and prepare as well as possible in order to gain as much control as possible of their external world; gymnasts can change their response to the pressure of performance.

Through effective anticipation and prepara-
tion, athletes can learn to prevent a stress response from occurring. For example, by anticipat-
ing an occasional fall off a beam during a performance and preparing an effective re-
sponse, it is possible to prevent a stress response from ever occurring; but, all situations
cannot be anticipated and prepared for in advance. In such situations athletes must have
stress management skills which will allow them to totally change or control their re-
sponse to these situations. For example, a gymnast initially responds to a situation with
increased shoulder tension which could hinder or destroy performance. Through skill in
stress management the athlete is able to rec-
ognize and loosen the tension to an appropri-
ate level. This later point is basic and so essen-
tial to coping with stress in sport. There will be
times when all athletes will get tense and an-
xious. Even the very best athletes experience
excessive tension and anxiety. So it is how
well gymnasts are able to cope with the an-
xiety and control the resulting tension level that
is most crucial to maximal performance.

All of the techniques addressed in this
paper complement the gymnasts’ rigorous
and disciplined training programs. It should
not be assumed that they are intended to or
could replace the physical training. It had
been previously assumed that when gymnasts
fail to perform up to their ability that more
repetition is necessary. The approach detailed
here argues that mental training plays a cru-
cial role in maximizing performance for most
gymnasts. Indeed it is the quality of practice
rather than quantity or repetition alone that is
crucial to optimal performance. To improve
quality, athletes must become increasingly
aware of the impact of their minds and bodies
and be skilled at self-management.

The detailed approach will utilize cognitive
and somatic approaches to behavioral self-
control. Gymnasts will learn to listen to and
respond to the subtle messages of their bodies
and minds in an appropriate manner. Early
emphasis will be placed on increasing aware-
ness, sensitivity, and recognition of anxiety,
arousal, and tension in response to potentially
stressful situations. Gymnasts will be helped
to clearly understand the role of self-
perception in defining situations as stressful or
non-stressful. Gymnasts will then learn a vari-
ety of cognitive and somatic skills including

cognitive restructuring (thought stoppage, cou-
ter arguments, self-talk, imagery, etc.),
relaxation training, conscious stretching,
breath control, and concentration improve-
ment techniques. These strategies have been
found to be most suitable to the closed nature
of gymnastic performance.

The presented program consists of five spe-
cific but interrelated phases. The first phase
consisted of interviewing the gymnasts to as-
certain their present methods of coping. The
second phase entailed providing the gymnasts
with an overview of the total approach to be
utilized and the rationale for it. This step is
crucial to the ultimate goal of self-control. It is
time-consuming but time well-spent in the
early phase of the program. The third phase
was to determine each gymnast’s anxiety
level and to discover the way in which anxiety
is typically manifested. In this phase gymnasts
attempted to understand their own ideal level
of arousal for maximal performance in differ-
ent events. Gymnasts were made aware of
extreme situations where they might be too
aroused and anxious as well as situations
where they might be so confident they could
be bored and underaroused. The fourth phase
was to teach the gymnasts various techniques
for coping with anxiety at differing situations
and at various stages of performance: pre-
meeet; warm-up; pre-event; during perfor-
mance; following performance. The fifth and
final phase was designed to facilitate transfer
of the skills taught to life experiences outside
of the sport world. The intent was to provide
strategies for coping effectively with stress and
anxiety throughout one’s life.

The Initial Interview

Some of the gymnasts had already had eight
years of intense participation in gymnastics.
Many had previously competed at the interna-
tional level. This firm foundation provided a
solid foundation from which to work. Others
had very little experience.

A first task was to interview each gymnast to
help grasp an understanding of their experi-
ence, to attempt to discover methods already
being utilized to cope with stress, and to es-
tablsh a trusting and open relationship with each athlete. Interview strategies varied from highly formalized to quite informal depend-
ing upon characteristics of each gymnast. The general format for the interview is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Initial interview—gymnastics.

A. Establish rapport—make athlete feel comfortable.

B. Experiential base.

1. Athlete describes his/her own experiential base.
   - How long have you been compelling?
   - What have been your experiences? Success? Failure? Mixed?
   - How do you explain your consistent or inconsistent results?
   - Are there situations or events that you tend to perform well or poorly?
   - Do you feel confident that you are mentally and physically preparing yourself as well as possible?
   - How does your body usually feel when you perform well?
   - How does your body usually feel when you perform poorly?
   - Have you ever thought much about the role that your thoughts, emotions, and feelings play in your performance?

2. Athlete describes past problems.
   - When you have performance problems what do you think is interfering with your ability to perform maximally? (Probe and help athlete accurately analyze the problem.)
   - Do you really have a problem?
   - Is the problem imagined?
   - Do you really have the physical skills down?
   - Do you perfectly execute in practice and then fall apart in competition? All competitions or just real important meets?

   - How serious is the problem as far as you are concerned?
   - Does it only surface in certain situations or is it quite general?
   - Do you have any idea as to the cause of the problem?
   - Are there certain people that cause you to get uptight (coaches, teammates, parents, peers, girlfriend, boyfriend)?
   - Do you only have problems when you compete away from home and your own equipment and surroundings?
   - Are there certain competitors that upset and distract you?
   - Do you ever fear getting injured? If so, does it distract you while competing?

4. Athlete describes past peak performances.
   - When you perform real well do you have any explanation of why? (Probe and help athlete understand self.) Describe your feelings and thoughts in these situations.
   - How are they different from when you perform poorly?
   - What were you thinking and feeling prior to, during, and following these peak experiences?
   - How does it differ from your thoughts and feelings when you perform poorly?
   - Are there certain gymnasiums, kinds of equipment, or meets that help you give a better performance?
   - Do you have any idea as to why you perform so well in certain situations?
   - Are there certain people that help you to concentrate and perform well?
   - Are there particular competitors that you tend to compete real well against?

5. Evaluation of antecedent causes.
   - When was the first time you can remember performing really well?
   - Can you recall anything about that day?
   - When was the first time that you can recall feeling nervous and uptight?
   - Can you think of anything that may have caused you to feel this way?
   - What do you think is the best way to prepare for competition?

6. Comparison of problem and peak performances.
   - What do you think are the differences between problem and peak performances?
   - Is your explanation logical?
   - Is it consistent with your experiences?
• Try to recall the last time you performed poorly.
• What were you saying or thinking to yourself prior to, during, and following competition?
• Try to recall how your body felt in those situations.
• Compare these to your thoughts and feelings prior to, during, and following a great performance. Do you notice anything here?
• Do you realize that you can control your thoughts and feelings?
• Do you realize that your thoughts and feelings can and do either help you or hinder your performance? (It possible get a film of a great performance and a poor performance and while viewing it ask the gymnast to verbalize out loud his/her thoughts and feelings during each and note the differences.)
• Why do you think that you have failed to control your thoughts in the past?
• Are you beginning to realize their importance to your performance?

7. Intervention.
• Today was an important first step in helping yourself.
• Are you ready to work to improve yourself?
• What do you think might be done to improve yourself?
• Are you ready to take self-responsibility for your performances?
• I want you to talk to your coach about what we did today and see if he/she has any suggestions. Next week we will begin to outline a program to help you.
• Is there anything else I should find out about you before we get started? I feel we will really make some progress. Your openness and honesty are very important. It will help you know yourself better and it will help me help you help yourself better.

The interview is an essential part of the stress management program. It provides pertinent information for individualizing the program. The interview gives the opportunity to fully recognize the importance of athlete input and to assure each gymnast that his/her input is highly valued. These factors are crucial to the establishment of a trusting and effective relationship. This trusting relationship is essential to exploring the experiential aspects of the gymnast’s experience.

In general it was quite obvious that our gymnasts had no prior formal training in stress management. Most had been given instructions by a coach or friend to “relax” or “concentrate.”

After the interviews, a team meeting was held to discuss the program that we would use in working with them. Initially, a summary of the research on anxiety and coping and its relationship to gymnastic performance was presented. A key point was to emphasize that anxiety need not be viewed as something to overcome, but that it could function as an ally to aid one in achieving peak performance. Another essential point was to explain that each person’s anxiety level may be different. Each athlete was encouraged to increase his/her awareness and sensitivity to determine individual levels. Thus, the athletes were informed that they would have to know themselves as gymnasts and that they would have to take the responsibility of coping. This session also provided the gymnasts with a personal understanding of anxiety. During the ensuing group discussion they shared various ways in which they each had previously coped. This discussion provided them with new options to consider and aided in creating team unity at a heightened level. All gymnasts now had an overview of our program and had shared their own coping strategies.

Determining Individual Anxiety Levels

Our initial task in the third phase of our program was to determine each athlete’s anxiety level and the way in which it was manifested. This was accomplished by first administering objective tests to measure anxiety. A variety of relevant measures including the Sport Competition Anxiety Test, Spielberger’s Anxiety Test, and Nideffer’s Attentional Test were administered and scored by a sport psychologist. The second strategy was to talk with the coach to get his perception of how each gymnast manifested anxiety, e.g., nail biting, sleeplessness, yawning, edginess, stomach tension in shoulders, giddiness, etc. It was interesting to observe that the coach’s observations were similar to the outcome of the objective measures. A third technique was to
obtain the gymnasts' perspective of the way they experienced anxiety. The final method was our observation of the way they coped in simulated meet situations, and in meets of the season.

These four methods provided us with an in-depth perspective of the way that each gymnast manifested anxiety and attempted to cope. It served as a base from which we could work.

Recognition and Awareness of Anxiety

Anxiety begins gradually and continues to intensify to the point where it inhibits performance. To control anxiety the gymnast must recognize it early and intervene to stop the learned response to stress. Prompt intervention is important because we have found that anxiety can often be contagious. It can spread from the coach to athletes or from one athlete to the next.

Each individual experiences the anxiety in a unique way. It may be manifested physically (tense jaw, shoulders, neck or muscle tension, shallow breathing, sweaty palms). Since the gymnasts have a highly developed kinesthetic awareness of their bodies they can learn to readily recognize the physical level if encouraged to be conscious of it. The tension can also be observed at the behavioral level (laughing, fatigue, nail biting, etc.). Videotaping is a tool that can be used to enhance the recognition on this level. On the cognitive level one must talk with the athletes to determine the type of imagery and self-talk that occurs: self-doubt; negativity; scattered thoughts (positive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating).

Each of the gymnasts were asked to observe their anxiety manifestations and report their experiences after each meet. Of course, as the season progressed the gymnasts needed to focus their attention on the performance and could not give undue emphasis to tension recognition.

Enhancing Awareness of Stress

Awareness is the first step to changing any behavior. In our program we have incorporated two methods to aid in this recognition: development of a centered present focus; using the body as a reference point to determine the level of tension. The gymnasts must have their attention focused on what they are experiencing at the present moment. Each gymnast was encouraged to observe what was being experienced—not judge it, but just observe it. This orientation is essential because much anxiety develops from what occurred in the past (poor previous event) or expectations of the future (a difficult event ahead). When focused in the present time orientation, gymnasts can be aware and in control of their anxiety level. This present orientation is also where the gymnast's consciousness needs to remain during performance because, breaks often occur due to anticipation of future moves or being relieved at completing previous moves (getting too far ahead of oneself or behind). Bonnie Jordan, a gymnast, stated:

It is just me and the routine; there is a complete silence. I forget time and just totally get into it. . . . It is strange it is just me and the beam. I am so into it that I do not notice anything else.

By having the gymnasts use simple breathing techniques they can pull their consciousness to the present, then observe how they are manifesting tension and determine if it is at their appropriate level. If their anxiety level is too low they can raise it, or if too high, lower it.

By having the gymnasts develop this present focus it aided them in becoming sensitive to subtle messages of the body. All gymnasts worked on developing a feeling of being centered in the body and this provided a reference point from which each athlete could evolve. Initial training time was spent developing this sensitivity by working with general relaxation and then maintaining that relaxed consciousness in a standing position and eventually in a walking position. One technique utilized at this point in the program was to use a dark and quiet room and have the gymnasts slowly walk, feeling the subtle aspects of this usual non-attentive activity. This was done for ten minutes with them slowly becoming aware of the finer aspects of their
walking. They learned to move from this centered perspective. By developing this relaxed state of awareness it can serve as a reference point for reaching the desired anxiety level. By the time they got to the nationals or major competitions this sensitivity to an inner awareness provided a centered perspective where they could confront the anxiety of important competition.

The Importance of General Relaxation

Coaches can tell when an athlete is too tight or not properly focused and often all they can say is “relax” or “concentrate.” For this reason much time was given to teaching all gymnasts how to develop specific skills to relax and concentrate. Early in the season they received training in progressive relaxation, autogenics, and imagery for the purpose of gaining self-control. Once they got control in a quiet environment, distractions were added in a graduated fashion so they could refine their skills. The premise was that an athlete needs to know how to relax in general before they can expect to relax on a balance beam in national level competition.

The general relaxation serves three major functions: it provides a reference point for managing anxiety; prepares one for enhanced imagery and visualization, procedures; aids in giving the person the overall benefits of relaxation (physiological and psychological nurturing). We believe that the final rationale alone is worth the time spent because of the rigorous training schedules in which the gymnasts were engaged.

Intervention Strategies

Various intervention strategies were presented early in the season so that each gymnast could determine which methods function best for them. The information relevant to anxiety and tension manifestation, obtained by interview and questionnaire, was particularly useful for individualizing the program. For example, a gymnast who manifested tension
in the shoulders might benefit more from stretching or relaxation training than from imagery or cognitive restructuring. The essential point was to determine which avenue worked best for each gymnast's particular needs. However, emphasis was always placed on the fact that all of the techniques whether cognitive, somatic, or behavioral, have a simultaneous effect on the mind and body.

Anticipation and Preparation

An important psychological strategy utilized in our program employed a combination of cognitive restructuring and stress inoculation. The intent of this part of the program was to anticipate emotionally distracting situations and prepare gymnasts to respond with control and concentration. Input received from gymnasts having experience in different competitive situations was crucial to the success of this part of the program.

The first step was to develop a list of situations that could occur prior to, during, and following gymnastic competition which could cause an emotional response. Typically this list was comprised of situations that really did cause particular problems for gymnasts in the past (see Table 2).

Once this list is drawn up the gymnasts practiced utilizing the strategies of thought stoppage and self-statements modification. Self-statements are determinants of emotional

Table 2. Anticipation of potentially emotion-arousing events.

Prior to Competitive Performance

Having to perform worst event first.
Competitor just before me just gives the best performance of his/her career.
Teammate just before me performs poorly.
Find out what judges are the same ones that underscored me last time I competed.
In the locker room discover that I brought the wrong uniform.
On the morning of competition the alarm fails to go off and I have five minutes to get a ride.
Today is my last chance to qualify for states or nationals.
Today my parents will see me compete for the first time in 3 years.
I will be trying a new move for the first time in competition today. I blew 2 out of 4 tries yesterday in practice.
Just before competing a coach or teammate reminds me I'm long overdue.

During Competitive Performance

I just blew my opening move.
I can feel my leotards riding up and feel uncomfortable.
Falling off the balance beam or bars in the middle of my routine.
Getting real excited about a great start.
Dwelling on a difficult move at the end of my routine.
Thinking about how embarrassed I am about my mediocre performance.
I hear the crowd booing someone else's scores while I'm performing.
Worrying that my hands are getting sweaty and slippery and I'm sure to slip off the bars.

Following Competitive Performance

Today is not going to be my day. I totally blew my first event. I'll probably blow them all.
I can't believe it—I just got beat by someone who has never beaten me.
The judges were terrible. They favored the performers with reputations.
Gosh, how can I face my parents. They have spent so much money trying to help me.
Table 3. Cognitive restructuring and thought stoppage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to Competition</th>
<th>During Competition</th>
<th>Following Competition</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;My beam routine isn’t as good as my teammates. I don’t have any confidence. I know I’ll embarrass myself.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Gosh, I feel awful. I bet I look terrible. I bet everyone is laughing at me.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;That felt O.K. but I’m just not very happy.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Stop&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Stop&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Stop&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Relax&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Relax&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Relax&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Think rationally&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Take your time&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Think rationally&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Concentrate&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Breath&quot;</td>
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"This is my favorite event. I have done my routine perfectly thousands of times. I stay calm, and visually rehearse the routine perfectly in my head. I am prepared. I have nothing to fear. I have a great routine. I will do my best and be happy. Take my time and concentrate on what I am doing."

"O.K., great mount. Breathe slowly and now focus attention on the next move and let it flow. Concentrate on each trick as it comes."

"I did great. Look at the scores. I performed well and I scored well. I slightly missed a couple of moves. But I don’t have them down in practice yet either. I must practice more. When I get them down I’ll be able to compete with anyone. I’m getting there. I feel proud."

responses and they influence the efficiency of behavior in performance situations. Indeed, Meichenbaum has postulated that behaviors are determined and influenced by what people say or think to themselves prior to, during, and following an event.

Athletes were asked to imagine themselves in the anticipated situations, and feel themselves thinking and feeling an inappropriate emotional response. Then they were taught to repeat the word "stop" and to take a "breath" whenever they became aware that they were thinking in a self-defeating manner or feeling an emotional response (see Table 3). They were prepared to substitute a positive self-enhancing statement that they could repeat to themselves whenever they ever found themselves in the anxious situation.

More Somatic-oriented Strategies

Several more somatic-oriented strategies were utilized in our program. Abdominal breathing was one technique all the gymnasts were trained to use, because it is so basic and is the body’s natural tranquilizer. The breathing techniques were learned in conjunction with relaxation early in the season. The gymnasts were taught to associate the abdominal breathing with relaxation so that the behavior was habitual. Conscious stretching is another way to release tension. From the beginning of the season it was emphasized that when stretching one is doing more than just stretching muscles, but releasing tension as well. Massage also complements this physical release. Athletic trainers can assist with this aspect of the program. The advantages of these three methods are that they are basic and easy for most gymnasts to execute. These strategies were not used in isolation. They were combined with a variety of other coping strategies.

Creating a Relationship with the Apparatus

Another method used to help the gymnasts manage their anxiety levels was to take more of a philosophical orientation to their performance. The gymnasts were encouraged to move in the direction of an "I-thou" type of relationship with the event. The I-thou relationship is a concept that was developed by Martin Buber to describe those meaningful moments in a person’s life where they are in union with another person. These moments have a presentness, intensity, and total involvement.
bring the physical body and thought process to the centered state with which they were familiar. Achieving this centered state was a gradual process and each gymnast with time learned how to attain it prior to competition. Susan Archer explained this procedure:

I find out where I am sore (there is a difference between muscle soreness and tightness from tension). I determine how flexible I am that day and stretch out accordingly. I then go through my routine to feel where I am tight and loose so that I can get my body the way I want it.14

The warm-up also gives the gymnasts a final opportunity to familiarize themselves with the apparatus and to adjust to the crowd.

Competition

The gymnasts did what was necessary to finely tune their concentration. That included imagining routines, talking oneself through the routines, executing actual physical movements on the floor, practicing breathing techniques, and prayer or meditation. As previously mentioned, these choices had been determined earlier in the season. For example, one gymnast felt she needed to go through many routines to establish the confidence she needed. So she would see herself going through six routines. Others attained the same mental state by going through one routine.

Immediately before the beam routine each gymnast narrowed her focus of attention. This was fostered by having a specific point on the apparatus on which to focus, e.g., a mark on the beam. Then, the gymnast and apparatus move in the direction of the 'I-thou' relationship. Bonnie Jordan, a gymnast, explained:

Right before I start, I totally block out various distractions. It's as if external things are melting away and then silence surrounds me.15

Not every gymnast has this type of ability to concentrate but in the future it will be necessary for this type of concentration.

Actual Performance of Beam Routine

The first task was to finely tune the 'I-thou' relationship; it is at this point that the ambiance was created and the "ultimate gymnast" began to emerge. The routine was almost automatic for the gymnast because it had been done thousands of times. Once the routine began, the gymnast focused on one part at a time. As mentioned earlier, this present awareness was essential because it was in the present time orientation that they make the subtle compensations in their movements to make it appear perfect. At various points in the routine there were internal focus points upon which to concentrate in order to stay "centered." For example, when a woman gymnast is doing a "flip-flop" on the beam, fear is a definite factor. Immediately before the move, the gymnast focused upon a point of concentration, e.g., pulling the thighs together. This point was usually associated with a mechanical aspect of the movement. The key factor was to make the point as specific as possible, i.e., focus upon a specific spot where she will experience the tightening of the thighs. The assumption was that if she was focused on that spot she could not be conscious of the fear as well. The specific focal point will vary among gymnasts.

Some gymnasts used sounds to focus their attention. Bonnie Jordan revealed:

I use key words like "Yam Go, Yam Go"; I have all these words that focus me in. I will just think of the first trick and then it follows. I think of my routine as a whole and at key points I think of a sound that goes with each trick.16

Another gymnast focused on her breathing as she went through her event. Whatever worked best for that person was implemented. The strategy chosen was established early in the season so that the gymnast would be conscious of it as she worked the routines throughout the season. These techniques were developed by the coach and the applied sport psychologist who worked with the gymnasts in practice to determine where they placed their consciousness during the routine. The focal points were determined through
communication and trial and error. They were not left to chance. Thus, the gymnasts were taught specific techniques on which to concentrate, to relax and to intervene on distractions at various stages of meet preparation and the actual performance. The concepts of stress management can be presented to all the team members at the same time, but the applied sport psychologist must work with each gymnast to determine which strategies work best for each individual.

The Benefit of Stress-management Skills in Later Life

Throughout the program, it was explained that the skills taught were not just limited to gymnastics, but could be used in all aspects of life where one needs to cope with stress, e.g., test taking, job interviews, childbirth, injuries, or emotional trauma. Thus the gymnast leaves the program knowing not only gymnastic movements but also coping skills that can be used throughout life.

In summary, many of the techniques and theories we have incorporated in our program were things many of the gymnasts already did. A systematic framework was added wherein the performers would be understood as a whole. Furthermore the gymnasts were taught to bring a consciousness to their performances so that they could be better prepared when meeting specific needs.

FOOTNOTES

8Suinn, R. M. "Behavioral Methods at the Winter Olympic Games." Behavior Therapy, 8: 283-4.
14Jordan, B. CSU-Fullerton gymnast, personal interview, April, 1979.
17Ellis.
19McAuley, E., 1981.
20Buber, M. 1965.

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Gymnasts can move in the direction of this I-thou perspective by familiarizing themselves with the apparatus (touching it, smelling it, feeling it, almost as if it were viewed as a friend). Nancy Jones, a gymnast stated that:

I was surprised that previously I never really felt the soft quality of the balance beam. In my routine I begin with a mount where my hands are in contact with the beam. Once I touch that beam it is like the final concentration switch is turned on.  

No matter where one performs, the balance beam is uniformly the same. This familiarity can be used as a tool to control excessive anxiety and arousal. Dick Wolfe, a gymnastics coach explained: "The floor exercise area is a 42 foot square no matter where you are competing and it is your area to command." He at times has told his gymnasts to bring an apple for the pommel horse. The point is that the athlete cannot fight the routine but must merge into it.

This I-thou relationship is stimulated in the pre-meet preparation. For example, at nationals last year the team arrived three days before the meet to become familiar with the environment. We fostered this by having the gymnasts sit in the stands and look at the apparatus and then view it from different locations and finally move to the apparatus and walk around it and experience it as more than just an object. The emphasis was to have the gymnast experience what was different about it (texture, smell, etc). They were then to look at the external factors (televisions cameras, color of the walls, ceiling, etc.). This was all done consciously, not haphazardly. The purpose was to become desensitized to the intensity of finals by associating with the friendly safe environment. Some team members reported that this appeared to help in managing anxiety.

The technique apparently facilitated habituation to the environment for those who chose to use it. It must be emphasized that within our program the gymnasts were presented with many methods to manage their anxiety, but it was their decision to determine which strategies worked for them. This flexibility is essential.

Actual National Level Competition

A variety of specific methods were incorporated into the program to help the gymnasts cope with the stress of national competition. By way of example we will focus on the balance beam (a women’s event). This will be discussed in terms of managing anxiety in the following stages: pre-meet (three hours prior to competition); warm-up; pre-event; actual performance. An essential point is that the coach must take care of all coaching responsibilities, such as making certain that transportation is arranged, taking care of pre-meet eating plans and tending to other varied details. These technical factors when not properly executed can create unnecessary stress.

Pre-meet

Three hours before the meet those gymnasts that tend to be higher in anxiety, participate in a group relaxation and imagery session. The gymnast has the final choice in determining whether or not this is appropriate for his/her individual needs. To attempt to force a person to relax is impossible and potentially even stress-provoking. In the early meets they were, however, encouraged to at least try it. Often this session was found to aid the gymnasts by beginning the mental preparation that is needed in competition. It gives the gymnast a conscious method to make the adjustment from the day’s events and the actual gymnastic meet. The imagery techniques (mastery rehearsal) aided the gymnasts in getting their bodies ready for the warmup period. Susan Archer, a gymnast, explained her experience with the pre-meet session:

For me I was able to get into the state I needed to compete. I could create that feeling that I needed to perform. The imagery helped my performance because I felt like I had already done the routine once."

Warm-up

The warmup period was used as an opportunity to determine the gymnasts’ state of total being with respect to performance. For example, the gymnast focused on muscles that were excessively tight. Stretching was used to