CONCENTRATION: ITS RELATIONSHIP TO GYMNASTICS AND HATHA YOGA

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Editor's Note
Dr. Ravizza’s work is well known in the United States and Europe and he is associated with the specialities of philosophy of sport and sport psychology. He has been a recent Chairperson for the Philosophy Academy of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education and has presented papers on the peak experience in sport. Most recently, he has had an opportunity to function as a sport psychologist with both the men’s and women’s gymnastics teams at California State University at Fullerton. He acknowledges the cooperation of Coach Lynn Rogers and the Fullerton team as well as his Hatha Yoga students who allowed him to use excerpts from their journals. Dr. Ravizza provides his insights into the gymnastic experience based upon his work at Fullerton and his insightful paper presented to the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport held in Karlsruhe, Germany in 1980. He has also been a presenter at the Congress of the USGF.

During the past three years, I have worked with the California State University at Fullerton’s Women’s Gymnastic Team which won the 1979 Women’s Intercollegiate National Championship and finished third in 1980 and 1981. The members of this team have been involved in gymnastics for at least ten years, for the last five years they have been practicing five hours a day, six days a week, 48 weeks a year. The prolonged, rigorous training, total lifestyle commitment and discipline has fascinated me.

These gymnasts have developed a vast amount of experiential knowledge in their pursuit of excellence. This paper is an attempt to solicit the informal techniques that the gymnasts have contrived to concentrate on their performance. Concentration means the gymnast’s ability to focus totally on the task at hand and not allow external distractions or non-relevant stimuli (such as the crowd, teammates, etc.) to interfere with performance. It is my premise that the subjective knowledge that develops from experience can complement the objective scientific research to provide the gymnastics community with a more complete understanding of the nature of concentration (Nideffer, 1976; Selinmel et. al., 1980).

Gymnastics is a “closed” skill in that the performance is free from most external variables. Tennis, on the other hand, is an “open” skill. The player’s movements are affected by the opponent’s actions, and the execution of the skill is different each time due to external variables. The “closed” nature of gymnastics, creates a rich environment to explore the more subtle aspects of performance and concentration specifically.

The small size of the California State University at Fullerton squad has allowed me an opportunity to conduct interviews and work with the eight team members on an individual basis. None of the gymnasts had previously undergone a serious exploration of their consciousness during a performance. For many of them, it brought new meaning and motivation to their understanding of concentration.

From my discussion with the gymnasts, it became apparent that the gymnast’s ability to concentrate was often incredible. Sue Archer personified this when she explained the relationship she shared with the balance beam:

“I allow the movement to move me, I don’t think about the routine, I let it happen. I block everything out. It is just me and the beam. Once I start, the beam and I form a rhythm and we move as one.” (Archer, 1979)

As I interviewed the gymnasts, I became aware of the similarities between the gymnasts’ experiences and that of the students in my Hatha yoga classes. Since both of these activities are “closed” movement skills which require intense concentration, it appeared that Hatha yoga might be of some benefit to the gymnasts. These insights encouraged me to begin to implement selected Hatha yoga concentration techniques to aid the gymnasts in their ability to focus their attention during performance.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the similarities of the subjective experience in high level women’s gymnastics and Hatha yoga. In addition to the similarities of these two movement disciplines, I will discuss several Hatha yoga theories and techniques that I have incorporated in working with elite gymnasts in order to enhance their ability to concentrate during their movement experiences. This integration will be examined throughout the paper.

The analysis will require a threefold approach: First, a basic explanation of the essential components of Hatha yoga will be developed; second, a discussion of the similarities between the lived experience in gymnastics and Hatha yoga will be addressed and third, a presentation of yoga student journal accounts will be used in a comparison of Hatha yoga concentration techniques and the focused attention of gymnasts during specific movements of their routine.

Essential Aspects of Hatha Yoga

Hatha yoga is one of the oldest and subtlest forms of human movement disciplines. It is generally believed to have originated in India three thousand years ago, although the first written record wasn’t printed until 400 B.C. by the Indian teacher Patanjali. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root-verb “yuj” meaning to bind, join, unite and control. The word denotes a balanced union of mind-body-spirit within the individual as well as a union with the larger scope of universal energy. Although there are various forms of yoga such as Karma, Bhakti, Raja, etc., the essential feature of each is a focusing on some aspect of human experience. The yoga under discussion in this paper is Hatha yoga, where the focus is on the body and movement (Ellade, 1969).

In the broadest sense, Hatha yoga can be a yoking of the “physical,” “mental,” and “spiritual” dimensions of the person; these components are experienced as an integrated whole as they execute the various positions or asanas. An asana is the Sanskrit term to denote the specific body positions held in a static state. The first component of Hatha yoga is the “mental” aspect which is reflected in the concentration and awareness of the asanas. This awareness is facilitated by having the student focus attention on the present movement, moving very slowly, and initially, with the eyes closed, so that external distractions may be filtered out. The student is encouraged to be non-judgemental and to accept the self as it is at that moment because one’s constant analysis of (or thoughts about) experience can pull the in-
Individual out of total non-judgemental perspec-
tive of yoga. As a student succinctly reported:
"I'm beginning to understand that you have to love the
posture, and if you're going to 'push it,' 'push it' lovingly,
tenderly. You must feel and experience what it is doing for you
and go with the feeling, savor it, encompass it." [Gottheib,
1979]

This idea of savoring the movement in the
present moment allows the person an opportu-
nity to experience completely its rhythm, harmony
and flow.

The "physical" dimension of Hatha yoga is
reflected in the precision of the postures or
asanas and are demonstrated in detail so
that the student learns the benefits of the
posture, as well as the specific muscles in-
volved, and where to focus concentration. From
the start, the person is instructed that the active
phase, or "Ha" (the Sanskrit term meaning the
sun), involves entering into the asana, holding the
asana, and moving out of the asana. The
passive phase of "Tha" (the Sanskrit for
moon), which is the relaxed or 'letting go'
aspect of the movement, is stressed equally,
thus, every position has its active and passive
phase. Gymnastic routines also have their active
and passive aspects and the gymnast has to
blend these together in a performance.

The "emotional" component of Hatha yoga is
integrated into the asana through the breath, or,
in Sanskrit, "pranayama." The student learns that
certain tensions in the body may be emo-
tionally related and that the breath can help
release that tension. Some students in Hatha
yoga experience many different feelings; with
the muscular stretch there is often an accompa-
nying emotional release. As one student stated:
"All I could do was feel a sense of relief flow over my
whole being; tears kept rolling down my cheeks. I wasn't crying
but this seemed to be a new awareness and feeling of total relief.
I had to keep wiping away the tears. It seemed so strange as
I was not sad, it just seemed as though my body was releasing emo-
tional energies in this manner." [Klemmer, 1978]

As the student begins to work the breath in
aiding both stretch, there is a creation of an
opening of inner space as well. The student
begins to feel comfortable with that experiential
feeling of openness in the body. There is an in-
ner choreography that the yoga student begins
to explore. The openness allows the individual
to move with this feeling.

The "spiritual" aspect is realized when the
mental, physical, and emotional components are
integrated through the breath. The individual no
longer talks about the execution; the
breath is used to breathe slowly into the stretch.
In meditation, the breath functions as a vehicle
to pull oneself into the present and to establish
contact with a deeper part of oneself. In the pre-
sent, the student experiences her directed
movements without judgements and biases that
often color experiential perception. The breath
becomes the vehicle that aids the gymnast in
transcending her usual relationship with the
movement. The movements become integrated
to the point where the gymnast is no longer
directing movements or breath; the breath is
moving the person.

Similarities Between Gymnastics and Hatha Yoga

The total involvement of both the gymnast
and the yoga student provides the foundation for
examining the similarities between the two move-
ment forms. In the following section, the con-
cepts of "playing the edge," the solitary nature
of activities, the mastery of the basics, the be-
ing in the present and total immersion in the ac-
tivity will be examined.

Playing The Edge With The Movements

I was confronted with the gymnasts' incred-
ible discipline during a practice session where
three women missed routines and smashed
themselves on the beam. With tears in
their eyes, they got right up and continued the
routine with a stoic dedication. These women
are constantly confronting that part of
themselves that wants to say "enough,"
however, they have the ability to push beyond
their perceived psycho-biological limits.
If the student seriously pursues yoga, the ex-
perience is psychologically similar to gym-
nastics although risk is not a factor. In the
yoga postures, one is encouraged to "play the
dodge." This means that when one reaches that
point where the pain just begins, one
continues the pain and watches all of the distractions
of the mind such as "you stretched enough" or "I
don't need this today!" one must stay with it to
open new spaces in the body. Like the gymnast,
the yoga student is encouraged to work with
pain; the essential differences is that the risk
of injury is not as serious in yoga.

The gymnasts are constantly confronted with
reaching new potentials through their dedica-
tion. As they work with the constant repetition
of movements, they go deeper into the movement
experience and contact the vast wealth of
knowledge that the experience holds. Discuss-
ing these insights fosters a learning atmosphere
which is essential for keeping the athlete
motivated. When a person is learning, motiva-
tion is not a problem. The movements may look
the same to the observer but the gymnast's con-
sciousness is playing with the subtle aspects.
This is where the gymnast must be the artist.

Solitary Nature of Both Activities

Gymnastics extends to the participant
unlimited opportunities to reach new states
of consciousness by providing an environment
in which one is dependent on one's own abilities;
an environment where individual actions must
be taken into account. It doesn't matter what
the gymnast wants to do with a performance;
the action is in the present and the gymnast's
accountable for it. Bonnie Jordan, a gymnast,
expressed this when she stated:
"It is me and the routine; there is a complete silence. I forgot
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.

I think one of the major reasons why people
participate in Hatha yoga is that it gives them
the opportunity to use their energy and attention
to relieve the tension of today's rapid-paced life.
The yoga student quickly learns a personal
responsibility for tension in the body. The in-
dividual is the one who tenses the muscles,
often to the point of the onset of a headache;
by accepting that responsibility, the person
then faces the choice of letting go of it, if one so
chooses. Yoga definitely provides an opportuni-
ty to be alone and work with the body to achieve
a desired outcome. Like the gymnast, the yoga
student observes reactions to various
movements.

Basic Skills Are Essential

In order for the gymnast to master a routine,
specific procedures must be followed. At first,
the gymnast is like a choreographer thinking out
the progressions and the rhythmic flow of the
routine. Difficult movements must be inter-
spersed with the easier ones to balance a
routine. During this stage, one can observe the
gymnast thinking through, and feeling all the
components of the routine. One must know the
advantages of each movement and how it relate
to the routine as a whole. Once the routine
developed, it is repeated thousands of times,
each time chipping away at the totality like a
sculptor, until the various parts become totally
integrated. It appears that there are always
some key points where the gymnast pulls the
concentration back to the actual movements.
Carol Johnson, a gymnast, explained this distinc-
tively:
"My mind is not preoccupied with the routine; it already cost
ed what it needs to do. It is at this point that I can quickly focus
on him crowd and then I just pull my attention back
when the more complex moves are to be executed, I use my
leap to pull me back to the routine." [Johnson, 1979]

Repetition, then, is a major theme in the life
of the gymnast who must continually confront
the resulting boredom and solitude. The gym-
nast must demonstrate incredible patience to
keep working toward a goal. If pushing towards
the goal is excessive, it won't work. The gym-
nast works with the precision of the clock
maker. Sue Archer summarized this progress-
ion:
"The routine comes to a stage where it is natural. I no longer
have to think, it is finished being formed; it is a whole form. At
this point it is my routine. I will continue to polish it up." [Ar-
cher, 1979]

In yoga, a very similar progression is fol-
lowed. The student must first understand the
posture, the benefits, concentration points a
proper alignment. Once this is achieved,
student must then learn to differentially relax in
the posture. This entails knowing what specific
muscles to keep tight and which ones to relax.
The next phase is to make each asana flow
smoothly from one to the next. The final phase
is to give oneself to the movement and to let the
movement and breath move you. It is almost as
though you are watching yourself being moved.
Larry Wright, a yoga student, discussed this
use of the breath when he stated:
"I thought of my breath as creating a balance between the
physical exercise and the mental concentration. Through the
breath I had achieved a balance between the world of action
and the world of creative contemplation and realized that this
balance can be arrived at from either direction by meditation
or by the breath." [Wright, 1979]

Like the gymnast, the student of yoga must
confront boredom and discipline the mind to be
one-pointed on the task at hand. Many athletes
today are using yoga and meditation to develop
this mindfulness.

This ability to transcend the need to think
about the various parts allows the gymnast and
yoga student to gain both control and freedom
with their movement. There is no longer a part
of oneself that must be constantly viewing the
performance. At this point the gymnast can be
totally immersed in the movement, no longer
moving sequentially, but moving in a totally in-
tegrated fashion. One's whole being is involved in
the movement.

Being In The Present

The total involvement that is essential to the
gymnast necessitates a concentration of the
present moment. In Hatha yoga, sounds or man-

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Bonnie Jordan discussed how she moves to this level of concentration before she does her beam routine:

"Right before I start, I totally blank out various distractions...I can think of me doing it. When I start thinking of me doing it I blow it. I think of me off-line, it is just there and I am doing it." (Jordan, 1979)

The gymnast must begin to realize "the instant" because this is the place where the movement is created and where compensations are made. The gymnast's body awareness takes place in the present moment. One must feel and experience the movement from within. A set routine is followed in becoming aware of one's movement. During warm-ups, equipment is checked out to get a "feel" for it. Sue Archer described the body awareness that she utilizes during warm-ups:

"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 my muscles are tight and loose so that I can get them the way I want." (Archer, 1979)

The yoga student follows a similar procedure in feeling the body to see where it has blocks, and tension on a given day. Like the gymnast, such a student can distinguish between muscular soreness and emotional tension in the body. This awareness allows one the opportunity to work with the tension so that it can be consciously released thus moving into a more harmonious state of consciousness.

Total Immersion

The "playing the edge", solitary nature, control of the basics, and being in the present provide an atmosphere in which participants of Hatha yoga and gymnastics can totally immerse themselves. This immersion sweeps the individual from an ordinary mind-set and creates a magical world. One's usual world is temporarily transcended. For the gymnast to be really focused on a routine, there must be a change of consciousness. As Sue Archer stated: "Gymnastics is another world. I can go to this world and do what I need to." (Archer, 1979)

Bonnie Jordan discussed the beautiful silence that often surrounds her when she is competing on the beam. She revealed:

"There are days on the beam that I do not hear or see anything around me. I am just totally into myself on the beam. There is a silence that surrounds me." (Jordan, 1979)

Sport functions as a vehicle to transport the gymnast to this level of consciousness where the athlete is no longer separated from herself and the movement. If it is at this point that there is so much involvement the the gymnast becomes the motion. There is no longer any dichotomy between the self and the movement. It is this ability to blend with the movement that contributes to gymnastic artistry. (Buber, 1957)

In Hatha yoga, there is that similar detachment from one's usual self to the union and openness of the movement. It is at this point that the movements become a whole, as if the students were being moved or "breathed through" the various asanas. It is also the time when the movements become effortless.

From the discussion thus far, it is evident that the sport environment, like that of Hatha yoga, provides an ambience in which the person can be totally immersed in the activity and reach for actualizing fullest potential. The austere, rigorous training and total commitment allows the gymnast an opportunity to master specific movements and to reach that experience where the mover and movement become one unified whole. This union is encouraged by having the gymnast view the environment as a "friend." We spend time sitting on the apparatus, smelling the equipment. ROUTINES are not viewed as a struggle but as a "dance." The gymnasts are encouraged to allow their performance to flow through them.

I am fortunate to be in a position to work with gymnasts who are at a level where basic skills are no longer the primary issue. The coach, the gymnasts and I are discussing and exploring the experiential and subjective aspects of human movement to enhance performance. We are no longer leaving concentration to chance but are attempting to bring a consciousness to the gymnast's experience so that she can begin to discover and play with the lived-experience knowledge that she has from her years of dedicated performance. I definitely view these women as "yogis" in their specialized area and as T.S. Eliot expressed in his poem the Four Quartets:

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know that place for the first time." (Eliot, 1942)

The gymnast does not have to do anything different as far as physical performance; she just needs to be alive aware of what it is that she is doing in the present moment. As this paper has indicated, there is much to be gained by having the gymnast develop consciousness of her movement experience. Reflection upon and communication about the experience can provide new insights and meanings for the gymnast. The gymnast can gain a deeper understanding of the movement experience, and most importantly, learn about oneself as a human being.

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