"But coach, I hit that routine all week in practice... My concentration was just not there today." This illustrative comment produces great frustration for both the coach and gymnast. When a skill which is consistently executed in practice is missed in competition, the problem is often a result of mental errors due to the pressure of competition. Frequently, the coach or gymnast has a sense before the routine begins that there will be problems in the performance. The gymnast may experience various distractions, such as excessive nervous energy, muscle tension, and a lack of concentration and intensity.

This chapter examines mental training skills which aid the gymnast in maintaining appropriate concentration levels during the stress of competitive performance. These techniques encourage familiarization with the external environment through specific concentration skills. A brief outline of peak performance states and basic stress management skills is presented in order to facilitate implementation of concentration techniques. (Mahoney, M., & Avener, M., 1977; McAulley, E. 1980; Ravizza, K., Rotella, R., 1982).

Research on the nature of peak performance has revealed that there is a total involvement, intense focus of attention, present orientation and feelings of harmony with the activity. (Ravizza, K., 1977). When the gymnast experiences these characteristics, they are accompanied by an intense but relaxed concentration. The athlete feels in total control of the situation. The attention is focused entirely on the appropriate points necessary for peak performance.

The peak experience acts as the gymnast’s reference point for enhanced concentration. The intensity of concentration and positive feelings should be examined thoughtfully and held up as an individual pleasurable goal to be sought after. An athlete’s examination of excellent past performance serves the dual purpose of increasing the gymnast’s awareness of the...
quality of concentration needed for performance as well as a supportive cumulative review of the athlete's progress over time. (Kauss, D., 1980; Ravizza, K., 1977).

The development of concentration skills must be practiced, and valued by the coaching staff, to the same extent as physical skills. Athletes recognize that the coaching staff values concentration skills when they are made a regular part of practice. There are many different ways to demonstrate this support. At California State University Fullerton, Men's Gymnastics Coach Dick Wolfe, allows 30 minutes to an hour at the beginning of one practice each week. Women's Coach, Lynn Rogers, prefers a similar time frame but includes the mental training at the end of practice. Both coaches reinforce the training with individual athletes during practice by encouraging them to center themselves, focus their attention and reminding them of key instructions developed during mental training sessions. The training program I have developed for CSUF gymnastics teams over the last four years has included goal-setting, team cohesion activities, relaxation, and body awareness training, as well as the concentration and stress management skills discussed in this paper. (Ravizza, K., & Rotella, R., 1982)

The primary goal of the mental training program is to equip the gymnast with skills that enhance the likelihood that peak performance states will be experienced. Peak performance research makes clear that athletes gain inherent satisfaction and a greater depth of motivation from peak experiences. However, the current assumption is that there is no conscious method that ensures this state of consciousness. Thus, the mental training program seeks to use concentration skills both as a method of improving performance while encouraging the gymnasts to take a more active role in assessing and developing their gymnastic potential.

Effectively managing competitive stress

Previous chapters have presented a broad range of stress management techniques. However, the gymnast can only utilize these approaches if they possess basic relaxation and arousal skills. Simply put, the gymnast must have enough emotional control to implement specific concentration skills. The gymnast must be able to recognize problems before the arousal level becomes excessive. (Singer, R., 1982) When the gymnast is under- or over-aroused there may be an accompanying 1. excessive amount of muscular and nervous tension, 2. self-doubts or lack of confidence, 3. inappropriate focus on the technical; explain:

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4. A variety of individual distractions that interfere with performance. The over-aroused gymnast may not even remember the technical task involved for specific concentration techniques. Dick Wolfe explains from a coach’s perspective:

“If the gymnast can just listen to me in the pressure situation I know that I can help. However, when the gymnast perceives the situation as frightening then it is difficult for him to understand me. Although he will nod his head and say ‘yes coach’, his performance reflects that he has not processed what I said.”

Thus, the challenge is to develop a program that teaches the athlete to intervene with a range of concentration skills that maintain control over performance. A three-stage process allows the athlete to gain control:
1. Identification of specific stressors,
2. Recognition of stress manifestations,
3. Selection of appropriate intervention technique.

Gymnasts must seriously examine which situations, or stressors, result in inappropriate levels of arousal. Each gymnast’s stressors are unique. Common categories of stressors include the coach, family members in attendance, level of competition, facilities, and unfamiliar equipment. The gymnast who has a clear understanding of his/her individual stressors is better able to anticipate potential distractions. Armed with this information, the athlete is prepared to choose an appropriate intervention technique, as discussed below, when and if the particular situation occurs.

The second phase involves a recognition of how the individual gymnast experiences tension under pressure. Some athletes manifest tension by tightening the jaw and shoulders; others invariably experience an upset stomach and still others experience alternating periods of laughter and crying. These stress responses function as a signal for the athlete that specific intervention techniques are needed to regain control.

Coaches recognize very quickly when a gymnast needs to regain control; however, simply telling an athlete to "concentrate" or "just relax" has very little practical meaning. To prepare elite athletes for the level of concentration required in performance, we must provide them with the appropriate tools to do so.

The ability to provide these mental tools lies in the area of teaching various intervention techniques. Specific techniques such as imagery, monitoring self-talk, and relaxation training have all been discussed in other chapters of this book. These techniques provide the athlete with specific things that can be implemented to stay in control. It must be repeated that the gymnast must have the ability to effectively manage the stress of competition before it is possible to fully utilize the concentration and familiarization techniques discussed below.
Familiarization with the competitive environment

Gymnasts, who perform well, consistently adjust to the environment and situation they perform in. (Mahoney, M. & Avener, M., 1977). Coaches should bring the team to the performance site prior to competition for the purpose of aiding adjustment to the external environment (weather conditions, altitude, etc.) and the specific gymnasium and equipment.

At Cal State Fullerton, gymnasts follow specific procedures designed to familiarize them with the competitive environment. Upon arrival at the meet location the gymnasts sit in the stands and observe the arena. Any unusual features, and all the usual features such as the ceiling, lighting, drinking fountains, rest room locations, and judges tables are observed. This process is done in a quiet relaxed atmosphere and allows the athlete to get "the feel" of the gym in much the same way that the home gymnasium has its own individual quirks. Once established, athletes move to the competitive floor, survey the area, follow up by checking each specific apparatus and observing the immediate area (i.e. color of mats, lighting, type of equipment, etc.). Finally, they move to the actual apparatus to observe any unique aspects. It is as if there is a period where they make "friends" with the apparatus.

At this juncture specific focal points are selected on each apparatus. The focal points should be similar, if not the same as those used in practice. During competition, attention is focused on these specific points. The emphasis is on the positive rather than trying to block out distractions or thoughts that will certainly occur. Thus, external distractors become irrelevant because the gymnast is totally focused on the focal points.

Gymnasts are taught that focal points are variables over which they can gain in additional measure of control. This is accomplished by incorporating these points into the performance routine which has the effect of improving concentration.

The examination of equipment should be as focused as possible; for example, for a mount from the end of the balance beam a particular staple or a spot on the end of the beam is selected. This may sound extreme but in the midst of competition a gymnast’s perception can become very distorted. When concentration starts to slip, focusing on a constant prevents anxiety from interfering. The final phase is to work out on the equipment to establish direct familiarity with the equipment.

In short, the familiarization procedure moves the gymnast from a broad examination of the total environment and proceeds in an orderly process until the gymnast identifies several very narrow focal points. The distractions of the external environment have been acknowledged and techniques are used to lessen the influence of these external factors.
Warm up preparation format

The plan that follows reflects the warm up routine currently in use for Cal State Fullerton gymnastics teams. The primary purpose of this structured warm up period is to provide the gymnast with an effective warm up period. The details presented have been developed over several years. The program has gone through minor modifications when feedback indicates that particular techniques need improvement.

A common technique used to ensure a present focus is the development of standing positions where the gymnast is required to keep attention centered and focused on the present event. The gymnast’s attention is kept in the routine and avoids unnecessary distractions. The ability to maintain a present focus allows the gymnast to make the best adjustments and compensations necessary for superior performance. To achieve this concentrated focus, the coach incorporates techniques to maintain this present focus orientation.

The third factor that is inherent in gymnastics is that each event puts different demands on the gymnast and requires an adjustment. The mental training program presents the gymnast and requires an adjustment. The gymnast’s attention is kept in the routine and avoids unnecessary distractions. The ability to maintain a present focus allows the gymnast to make the best adjustments and compensations necessary for superior performance. To achieve this concentrated focus, the coach incorporates techniques to maintain this present focus orientation.

Creating a warm-up concentration program

When time constraints are a factor, the next stage of the program occurs approximately three hours before the meet. The Cal State Fullerton program uses a structured warm-up period designed to achieve a quality warm-up. Before discussing a specific format, it is important to discuss three factors specific to gymnastics: 1. present focus, 2. standing points, and 3. event appropriate concentration. Dwelling on past mistakes or anticipating future obstacles cannot help the gymnast’s performance. The gymnast’s total involvement in the present moment is essential to taking control of the situation. The ability to maintain a present focus allows the gymnast to make the best adjustments and compensations necessary for superior performance. To achieve this concentrated focus, the coach incorporates techniques to maintain this present focus orientation.

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improvements are possible. At the beginning of the season, all gymnasts are required to participate in the program but after a reasonable length of time has elapsed, the coach should waive the requirement if a gymnast presents an alternative method of mental preparation more suitable for that individual.

The warm up is composed of two components: 1. an imagery session and 2. physical preparation. Relaxation training is a prerequisite to the imagery but practice of relaxation skills will reduce the time needed to reach a relaxed state to about 5 minutes. At this point the mind is cleared of inappropriate thoughts and the imagery session can begin (see other chapters related to specific relaxation and imagery techniques).

The imagery session provides the gymnast a formal opportunity to get mentally focused on the meet, to review the upcoming meet from a relaxed perspective and functions as a final reminder to make specific adjustments required for this particular competition. The session usually includes imagery of stretching out, apparatus warm up, opening ceremonies, pre-performance warm ups, and actual performance. The total time for the imagery session is 20–30 minutes.

Physical preparation follows the imagery session. This begins with a double check of all equipment (grips, clothing, etc.) and completion of taping. Gymnasts then begin their usual stretching exercises and simultaneously direct their attention to specific areas of tightness in the body. The goal of the stretching period is to reach that centered balance perspective within, before warming up on the apparatus. It is impossible to establish a comfortable feeling with the apparatus when the shoulders are knotted with emotional tension. Body tightness generally varies from meet to meet, and in some athletes this will depend upon the importance of the meet. For example, more stretching time may be required before nationals than for a regular conference meet.

The apparatus warm up period is the time for gymnasts to establish their "feel" for the equipment. The emphasis is on gaining an individual advantage through discovery of quirks in the equipment. Any equipment characteristic that varies significantly from the gymnast’s experience functions as factual information that may necessitate slight modification of the routine steadying points. A secondary benefit is that there is no time to be concerned with the psychological games that opponents may play in warm-up.

When warm ups are completed, a final check of equipment, attention to personal appearance, and a change into performance uniforms are the final tasks to be completed. Opening ceremonies are an opportunity to set the appropriate level of concentration and utilize stress management skills
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(relaxation, arousal in direction, breathing and imagery) to maintain an appropriate point of balance.
A set performance routine allows the gymnast to take command of the apparatus and simultaneously screen out inappropriate distractions by focusing on those aspects over which the gymnast has control. Coach Dick Wolfe illustrates the potential advantages of a set routine for a specific event:
"The floor exercise mat is a forty two foot area regardless of the gymnasium. When the gymnast steps into that area it is like returning to the usual space at the home gymnasium. The awareness is directed to the pre-set process and when this is done, the goal takes care of itself. Do not worry about the landing because if the technique is executed properly, the landing will be there. The gymnast who worries about the scoring or beating an opponent only pulls himself away from the process." (Wolfe, D., 1980).
As the gymnast moves to the first apparatus, concentration begins to narrow to that specific area. Already totally familiar with the area, execution of the specific routine is the only task to be completed. An added advantage to the set routine is that the coach who observes behavior which is not part of the routine, can definitely point out to the gymnast that the level of concentration needs correction. In the early meets, the coach may be able to assist the gymnast in focusing properly, but the goal is for the athlete to execute the performance routine independently.
While the gymnast is "on deck" specific aspects of the routine can be rehearsed until everything is ready. (Salmela, J., Petiot, B., Halle, M., & Requier, G., 1980). Teammates or coaches should be setting the mats and boards in a relaxed manner. The gymnast is in control of the tempo and does not allow the excitement of the situation to control the tempo. As the gymnast prepares to salute the judges, there is a balanced present position where the arousal is just where it needs to be. The attention is focused on the steadying points used for this particular apparatus and event. Thus, there is a bond between the gymnast and the apparatus and nothing but the routine matters as the gymnast begins the actual performance.

Actual performance
For the gymnast to perform at the optimal performance level it is essential that the athlete be able to execute the routine without having to consciously think through all the details of the learning phase. The compensations
that are made occur at a kinesthetic level because it is impossible to analyze the routine while one is doing it. Concentration is essential at this stage and "steadying points" are used so that there are established points throughout the routine that can be attended to. For example, in doing a back walk-over on the beam the coach and athlete should work together in establishing set steadying points that can function as concentration points during the performance.

The purpose for the performance steadying point is to keep the athlete's concentration focused appropriately. If the attention begins to wander there is a specific point to get back on track. For example, when the fear is that of missing a certain segment of routine, the worst response is to dwell on that segment because the attention will not be focused in the present movement. Last year at nationals we had one gymnast who perfectly executed her most difficult routine and was certain to score well just by completing the routine. However, immediately after the difficult trick she fell off on a basic transition move. Her split-second self-congratulation caused here to lose her focus.

The steadying points correspond to the specific technical points of the routine. For example, if attention is focused on lifting the chest, a specific point on the sternum is selected to feel the lift. If the gymnast feels that more appropriate steadying points can be established this is discussed with the coaches. For example, one gymnast had her routine so automatic that she just focused on her breathing as she did her routine. These steadying points are developed and attended to in practice for weeks before the competition so that they become an integral part of the routine. All athletes will not reach the point where it is automatic, and the athlete must always be prepared to "work through" routines. In the early stages steadying points are not prominently emphasized because the gymnast is too busy getting through my routine. But when optimal performance is desired, the steadying points must be an intricate point of the routine.

After the performance
Feedback from coaches and reflection by the gymnast, after each performance, function as a learning experience that can be used to further refine the performance. Mistakes during the performance can be discussed to provide positive feedback for future performance refinements.

At the same time, it is also vital for the gymnast to reflect on the positive aspects of the performance. Too often, the gymnast only dwells on the
mistakes and neglects the positive aspects of the performance. When the gymnast really "hits" a routine this experience should be cherished because it serves as a model for future performance and imagery sessions.

All gymnasts can relate to the endless hard work and the difficulty of maintaining their motivation over extended periods of time. So, when the gymnast pushes individual limits and performs to his or her fullest capabilities, it is important to recognize that moment. After all the hard work, the ultimate performances add meaning and significance to the elite gymnast's choice to participate in gymnastics.