The Integration of Psychological Skills Training Into Practice Sessions*

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How can practice sessions be made more effective to maximize the use of limited practice time? This question concerns gymnastic coaches because well-structured practice sessions do not necessarily result in well-motivated gymnasts (Pate, Rotella & McClanaghan, 1984). Lapses in concentration, commitment, poor execution of the basics, and sometimes even injuries, may be the result of low levels of motivation for practice. This article examines how psychological skills can be implemented during practice to increase the quality of practice time. As gymnasts learn to handle adversity in practice, confidence can be developed to use similar techniques to manage the stress of meet situations. Although coaches believe psychological skills training is important for enhanced gymnastics performance, the problem is to find additional time during practice for the necessary psychological skills training. This paper will discuss the implementation of psychological skills into existing practice procedures. Often psychological skills training is conducted separately from physical training; the paper will discuss five ways of integrating the development of physical and psychological skills during practice: 1) mental preparation for practice; 2) stretching as a means of developing concentration; 3) taking control of your "self" in practice; 4) the use of stress management techniques in practice; and 5) the simulation of pressure situation in practice.

Mental Preparation for Practice

The gymnast's primary responsibility is taking care of his/her overall well-being. This requires the appropriate amount of rest, relaxation, proper nutrition and most importantly, taking care of one's personal life. The gymnast must manage daily pressures so that these pressures do not interfere with performance goals. Further, gymnastics must be kept in perspective to the athlete's total life. The gymnast is an individual and by developing additional interests and concerns, it broadens the person's identity beyond narrow performance objectives. By having a broader view of one's identity, the gymnast is able to take constructive criticism better and not perceive it as a personal threat. This perspective reduces the amount of
perceived stress, since the gymnast is better prepared for keeping performance in a more realistic perspective.

Gymnasts of all ages are with a multitude of daily pressures such as school, family, and personal problems. These pressures may interfere with the quality of workouts; the gymnast must learn how to leave problems outside the gym. Coaches encourage athletes to focus on practice but seldom provide specific methods that develop this ability.

Coaches and gymnasts must recognize that the adolescent athlete's greatest feelings of control, freedom and independence occur during sport participation (workouts especially) since expertise has been established. Sports participation often functions as the most stable, consistent and solid component of an adolescent's often turbulent life. The coach should reinforce this reality by emphasizing that when the gymnast enters the gym, it is an area where a "comfort zone" exists, no matter what goes on outside the gym.

Mental preparation for practice begins before practice. Gymnasts are taught to develop a routine to help decompartmentalize or separate events outside the gym from practice. As the gymnasts remove street clothes, they symbolically separate themselves from the pressures of the day. For example, the blouse represents a difficult math exam, the pants, an argument with their friend, etc. After these distractions are acknowledged, the gymnast's uniform is put on. And as the gymnastic uniform is donned, it is an if the ultimate gymnast had arrived.

This technique takes advantage of getting dressed for practice and carries over for each event during practice. In gymnastics, each event has certain equipment that is worn: grips, shoes, tape, etc. and putting that equipment on becomes an opportunity to focus on that apparatus. Thus, the appropriate uniform and equipment for each apparatus is put on with awareness and intention to get the most out of that day's workout. The gymnast puts on the grips only when attention is ready to be directed on the rings or bars. The gymnast is encouraged to only take the grips or clothing off when the event is mentally and physically completed. This method aids in having the gymnast develop an association between putting on equipment and clothing and being mentally prepared for that event.

A common problem for gymnasts is the effect a poor performance on one apparatus, or part of a routine, has on another apparatus of remainder of a routine. The gymnast recognizes the need to "let go" of negative performance. By quietly saying to oneself, I need to "let go" often serves to create more stress. For this reason, if the athlete can physically do something to trigger "letting go", this often serves to create more stress. For this reason, if the
athlete can physically do something to trigger "letting go" it will supplement the thought. For example, when a coach observes a tense gymnast, the typical response is to tell the gymnast to "Just relax". Yet, these comments frequently highlight the gymnast's tension, because the coach clearly recognizes he or she is uptight. Instead, the coach should provide the gymnast with something specific to do, like "Inhale ... exhale". Done correctly, the gymnast is more relaxed because they have a specific task which results in relaxation.

The ability to focus on the present during practice can be applied to meet situations where it is critical to remain immersed in the present moment (Harris & Harris, 1984; Uneståhl, 1983). The "mentally tough" gymnast knows how to clear the mind and redirect attention as need be. Poor performance in one event or during one part of a routine cannot be allowed to affect another event or the remainder of a routine. As the athlete becomes conscious of doing this in practice, the self-confidence will carry over to meet situations. It is the coach's responsibility to positively reinforce the athlete when this type of "mental toughness" is displayed, and to point out during practice when the opportunity to use these psychological skills arises.

After the gymnast is dressed for practice, the final preparation involves a three-step approach: relaxation, setting goals for the day, and mental rehearsal. First, the gymnast goes through a brief five-minute relaxation session to release any excess tension. Second, once relaxation is achieved, specific goals are established for the day's practice. This provides direction and each apparatus is worked with a purpose. During workout, the gymnast is questioned about goals for the day. The third and final step is to mentally rehearse the skills that need to be worked on that day. These three steps allow the gymnast to make a final separation from events of the day to the day's practice. This separation clears the mind of inappropriate thoughts so that the attention can be totally focused on practice.

**Stretching as a Means to Develop Concentration**

After the mental preparation for practice is completed, the gymnast engages in "awareness stretching". Stretching is something every gymnast does to warm-up for practice; often it is viewed only as stretching the body. This is a period when concentration skills can be developed by incorporation of the mental aspects of one's development in the stretching movements. The stretch needs to be held 8 to 20 seconds to gain the flexibility benefits. So it will not take extra time, but instead, it is a more productive use of the time. This method requires that the gymnast
focus on and feel the stretch. The gymnast is taught to feel the
tension in the muscle group and concentration upon that "sweet
tension" by breathing into that tense area and gradually releasing the
tension with each exhalation. This provides an opportunity to
develop breathing techniques.

For example: As you are sitting, try twisting exercises. Sit up in
your chair with spine straight. Inhale, take a breath, and as you
exhale, turn your abdominal and chest area to the left as far as
comfortable (you can tell how far comfortable is by your ability to
maintain your breathing). Now inhale . . . (think "up in the spine" and
as you breathing). Now twist the shoulder area as far as comfortable
to the left. Next, inhale and now as you exhale, turn the head as far
as comfortable. Then inhale . . . and as you exhale, roll the eyes as far
as possible to the left. At this point, focus on the sweet tension and
breathe into the stretch for eight seconds. Now, gradually come out
of the stretch by progressively releasing the eyes, neck, shoulders,
chest and abdominal area. Thus, the concentration is focused as you
go into the stretch, work with the stretch and come out the stretch.

Concentration is developed by focusing on the ingredients of
the stretch. When distracted, the distraction needs to be
acknowledged and then pull the attention back to the stretch. This
teaches the gymnast to concentrate on the breath with the stretches
rather than just physically stretching the body. It also provides an
opportunity to experience that subtle relaxation that accompanies
the exhalation (Ravizza, 1982).

This ability to concentrate on the ingredients of a stretch is similar
to the ability to concentrate on the ingredients in the execution of a
performance. Like the stretch, the routine is approached by putting
on the appropriate dress and equipment, walking to the apparatus,
executing a set pre-performance focusing on the ingredients of the
routine, and then coming out of the routine. The gymnast is focused
on the ingredients of the routine and does not get distracted by an
end result such as hitting the "big" trick or by mentally finishing a
routine before one actually is off the apparatus. This concentration
before and during a routine must be emphasized by the coach in
practice.

Taking Control of Yourself in Practice

Gymnastics is a sport that demands a high level of self-control.
Before control over a routine can be established, the gymnast must
be in control of his / her self. The key of gaining control is to be more
aware of the direct experience in the gym. I find many gymnasts just
"do it," or "go for it" with little, if any, awareness of the process. They
focus on the end result (hitting tricks) and neglect execution of the
This emphasis upon hitting tricks and "going for it" results in what I have labeled the "All or None Syndrome" which often ends in frustration. The gymnast is so focused on the result that the compensations and adjustments which must be made in the process go unnoticed until it is too late. With all the attention directed on the end result, all of the subtle progressions that occur in the process go unnoticed.

Awareness is also important in terms of the gymnast recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and thoroughly understanding personal practice habits. Without awareness of practice habits, behavioral change cannot be made. The gymnast must first be aware of what needs to be changed before attention can be directed at making the needed change.

When the gymnast experiences fear in the workout, it is important to acknowledge that fear and deal with it directly. When fear strikes, the gymnast is often focusing on the end result, the crash. Yet, focusing on the ingredients in the process of the routine is where one can make the adjustments and compensations in executing the routine.

Gymnasts must develop awareness related to controlling emotional states during practice. The gymnast may have to deal with low energy or an emotional state manifested by weak concentration, low intensity, "spacey" thinking, indecisive skill execution, and/or lethargic execution. Periodically, a fleeting sense of panic, frantic thinking, poor concentration and anger also occur. The gymnast must learn to cope with these experiences in practice and during meets (Ravizza & Rotella, 1982). When adversity presents itself in practice, it is an opportunity to develop that mental toughness that is required for competition.

**Stress Management for Practice**

**Dealing with Adversity**

The Chinese symbol for crisis incorporates the symbols of danger and opportunity. Any adversity presents danger -- one may fail, or get hurt. Yet the same situation presents the opportunity to go beyond previously established limitations. During practice, the gymnast has to recognize when intensity and focus require adjustment so that changes can be made before self-control is lost. Many gymnasts deny adversity, pretend everything is "fine," and then suddenly find themselves unable to cope with a relatively minor obstacle.

The gymnast has to become aware of the warning signs of inappropriate stress, such as tightening up, self-doubt, becoming cautious, feeling overwhelmed or getting irritable. This recognition
equips the athlete with an awareness of the need to intervene. Appropriate adjustments can be made before the pressure is too intense.

**A Six-Step Approach to Deal With Adversity in Practice**

I have developed a six-step approach to cope more effectively with the pressures in gymnastics: 1) recognize the stressful situation; 2) acknowledge the fear or anger; 3) release or discharge the negative feelings (allow the gymnast a brief period of time to be upset but don't let it go); 4) regroup and center oneself (the gymnast may have to walk away from the apparatus or in extreme cases, leave the gym for a few minutes); 5) adjust the posture (stand tall and focus the attention on executing the ingredients of the routine); and 6) have the gymnast evaluate how well he/she did at taking charge of the situation.

When the gymnast demonstrates self-control, a critical step has been achieved. The coach must recognize the importance of validating the athlete for accomplishing this in practice. The gymnast may not come back and hit the trick but the chances for success are increased by controlling one's emotional self before one tries to control a set. As the gymnast learns to handle this in practice, the more competent the athlete will become in handling adversity during a meet.

**The Two-Minute Drill**

In practice, we supplement this six-stage procedure with a "2-minute drill." When the gymnast is having a difficult time getting into practice, ask him/her to turn it around for just two minutes. A good example is when the gymnast is obviously overwhelmed and frustrated after ten minutes of practice. The gymnast can turn this attitude around by executing the six-step procedure for two minutes. Coaches often demand a turn around for the whole practice session; this is unrealistic when the athlete has become overwhelmed. However, two minutes is manageable and realistic for any situation. Further, once the athlete has experienced a shift in attitude, valuable experiential knowledge is gained about that athlete's unique ability to regroup. The "turn around" produces valuable information for the coach in understanding each gymnast's methods in dealing with adversity. Every time the gymnast consciously turns it around in practice, self-control is developed as evidenced by the self-discipline which is required.

**Simulating Meet-like Conditions in Practice**

There comes a point in physical preparation where the gymnast can hit the routine on a consistent basis in practice. The issue is no
longer, "Will I hit my set?" but, "How well will I hit it". Once the gymnast can hit it in practice, the goal is to induce stress at certain points in practice so that the gymnast experiences working with tension in the gym. One method is to simulate distractions: bring people in the gym to watch, have teammates try to verbally distract the performers, make loud noises, play tapes of crowd applause and other distractions that may negatively influence the athlete's concentration. The gymnast should be encouraged to approach the routine just like a meet and focus on the routine with a level of intensity that eliminates environmental distractions. The gymnast practices this in the gym so that when they are in competition, they are accustomed to dealing with distractions (Orlick, 1980; Salmela, Petiot, Hallé & Régnier, 1980).

At this final phase of training, the issue is no longer grinding out large numbers of routines but instead the focus becomes achieving "quality" sets with precision and intensity in the midst of a multitude of distractions.

Conclusions

The athlete needs to increase the quality of daily practices by using psychological skills to cope with the adversities that arise in practice. It is important to develop a set mental procedures to prepare for practice so that the gymnast's attention is focused on the workout. As the gymnast learns to manage stress in practice, the pressure of meets will be easier to manage. The simulation of competitive situations in practice, with an opportunity to discuss and work on handling stress, provides a "safe" environment to develop the necessary psychological skills and provides the coach with an opportunity to observe the gymnast's coping skills. Most importantly, coaches can incorporate psychological skills into established practice procedures by encouraging their athletes to be aware of the pressures they confront daily, and by having the gymnasts learn to cope effectively on a daily basis. By implementing these procedures with existing procedures, it does not require an abundance of additional practice time for psychological skills training.

References


