

“Suffer not to teach the child, for learning acquired under compulsion has no bearing upon the mind. Rather, find the natural bent so the child may learn.”

Plato
(Ancient Greek Philosopher, 428 – 347 B.C.E.)

Last month I had planned to write an article on Measuring Results in Gymnastics. A few incidents during these past few weeks prompted me to change topics. Watching coaches berate young athletes and resort to “old school” coaching techniques in the name of “winning” is no longer acceptable. It is time to teach the teachers a new way of doing business that will produce happy, healthy and successful children...

Positive Coaching a Competitive Gymnast

You may have found yourself in a position of trying to get a gymnast to perform a particular skill or drill and have that gymnast unable to complete the assignment or maybe simply refuse to try. How did you respond? Many coaches end up treating that gymnast as they were treated by their coaches back when they were athletes – often with threats and punishment. Back in the “old days” coaches were typically dictatorial disciplinarians in control of all aspects of practices and competitions with no room for anything but complete compliance with their directions. I remember being ordered to do 100 back handsprings before I was allowed to go home from a high school freshman gymnastics camp, simply for messing up on a single tumbling pass. What was accomplished by this method of coaching? The coach exerted his authority over me, I exercised self restraint by not telling the coach to flip off, but did my tumbling get any better? NO.

The time for such negative coaching is past. It may take more effort and planning to be a positive coach but it does not necessarily take more time to produce upper level gymnasts. Successful coaches will lay out the plan for athletic excellence and articulate the plan to the gymnasts. Coaches must accept that an athlete will ultimately set the pace and that there are no shortcuts and resist trying to accelerate the learning curve. Regardless of the age of the competitive gymnast, coaches must engage the athlete to take responsibility for their own improvement and achievement. Too often, coaches live vicariously through the success of their gymnast and don’t allow the athlete to make choices and accept the responsibility for their actions. Coaches need to learn to check their ego at the door. There must be natural consequences for misbehavior but coaches need to create an environment that allows mistakes. If an athlete deliberately violates an established training rule, there should be a logical consequence; for example, arriving late for practice may result in staying late to make up the missed work; failure to attempt or complete assignments may result in being withdrawn from the next meet. Mistakes, however, should be an accepted part of work-outs. Mistakes need to be addressed and corrected but there should not be “punishment” included in the response to an error. Gymnasts must be allowed to learn from mistakes and helped (coached) to recognize and understand the mistake and the method to correct it. Gymnastics is certainly a difficult enough sport; most gymnasts do not intentionally make mistakes while performing. A gymnast that believes they will be punished or criticized no matter how hard they try will simply stop trying whereas an athlete that is relaxed and not performing under fear of retaliation by the coach for making a mistake will perform at an optimal level.

Coaches that use a young gymnast’s age as an excuse to dominate and dictate are simply not developing the type of athlete that is self-reliant and self-motivated. Provided with positive choices and direction, even the youngest competitive gymnast can learn to take charge of themselves and coaches will end up with motivated, goal oriented athletes. Like trying to put toothpaste back in a tube, you cannot take back negative comments once they are exclaimed.

I still see far too many coaches that discipline their athletes with “If you don’t do it right this time, you’ll have to do another 60 sit-ups.” What can be gained by assigning “extra” conditioning as a

punishment for mistakes? Using exercise as a punishment is counter-productive in that we should be trying to teach our athletes to appreciate conditioning rather than equate exercise to a negative. What can be accomplished by assigning meaningless repetitions in the name of discipline? Skills repeated for the sake of repetition often lead to repetitive use injuries and little if any improvement is made in the skill. If an athlete balks or refuses to attempt an assigned skill, what benefit is there to send the child home as punishment for failing to try? A positive coach realizes that there is a reason for the problem and will try to find an explanation in order to find the solution. If the gymnast is afraid, help the child recognize, address and overcome the fear.

Remember the parable of the argument between the Sun and the Wind? Both thought they were the strongest. To settle their argument, they selected a traveler walking on a road below them. The Wind said, "Watch, I'm so strong that I can blow the coat right off that person." The Wind blew and blew, and blew some more. The traveler simply wrapped his arms tighter and turned his back to prevent the coat from flying away. Finally, the Wind gave up and said, "It can't be done." The Sun smiled and said, "Perhaps there is another way." And the Sun began to beam down on the traveler. Soon the traveler loosened his tight hold on the coat as the air warmed him. As the Sun continued to radiate its warmth, the traveler relaxed, smiled, and began to look around, enjoying the scenery and the road ahead. And took off his coat!

When an athlete comes into your gym, how does it feel and what will they hear from you? Do they wrap their arms around themselves as protection from the negative environment and the words they hear? Or do your athletes feel comfortable to learn from their mistakes in a warm, positive setting without fear of retribution and public embarrassment?

Just as every athlete has physical differences in size, flexibility, strength and power, they also have psychological differences in personality and behavior. The challenge of positive coaching is recognizing the individual differences in each athlete and learning what motivates each to succeed. Coaches must look at their duty as developing strong character rather than creating athletic machines that perform to their bidding. The strong individual is in control of their emotions and able to make wise decisions for themselves while willing to take responsibility for their actions. An athlete that is confident and self-motivated is much more apt to work harder and longer at an assignment. Take the challenge; be a positive coach.

Next Month – *“Parent Involvement”*

About the Author:

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“Under optimal conditions of safety and challenge, human beings are intrinsically motivated and self-directed learners.”

- author unknown, from the Albert W. Daw Collection