

THE BENEFIT OF A DOUBT

The story you are about to read is exaggerated, but still holds much more than an inkling of truth.

The names have been changed to protect the "health" of the author.

By Jeff Gothard

Head Coach- Southern Indiana Gymnastics

My hands were joined in a sweaty clasp behind my back, as I nervously paced the perimeter of the floor exercise area. My best gymnast, Thelma, was up next, and with her rested the ominous responsibility of performing the first double back ever competed by one of my kids. She had to make it. This was a big meet, with big teams, doing big skills, and I was tired of being little.

Thelma and I shared some sentiments, minutes after warm-ups had ended. "Thelma, if you don't stick that double back," I said, taking her gently by the hand, and looking warmly into her eyes, "You'll walk home." Tact has always been one of my stronger suits.

Thelma's turn finally arrived, ending my pacing marathon. As Thelma strutted to her position on the floor, my breathing halted in tense anticipation. She posed, ready to begin. The music started. My breathing didn't. The double back was her first pass.

She danced fluidly to the corner, paused, and sprinted down the diagonal to meet her fate and my future. Round-off, flip flop, (stretch, Thelma, stretch!) set, (lift!) double back, (great, great!) land, (Yes! Yes!) Sit. (No! No!) Roll. (I'm finished!)

Thelma had not only over-rotated and fallen on the double, she had also managed to go so far out of bounds she was next in line for vault. How could she do this to me? I was stunned and bewildered, not unlike the survivors of an airline crash you see on television. This was only momentary, however, as my ego soon regained its usual control over my nerve-racked body. A cascade of comments concerning malevolent irresponsible juveniles erupted from my mouth in a steady stream, periodically punctuated with displays of my faultless maturity.

I kicked a chair, punched a wall, and heaved my half empty soda across the auditorium. I was so mad, I couldn't watch what remained of Thelma's routine. I stormed out of the gym, the picture of stoic behavior.

Thelma found me later, in the concessions area sobbing in my nachos, and tending to my sore knuckles.

"I'm sorry. I tried," she said.

"Well," I snorted, wiping my tears away, "You didn't try hard enough. You made me look stupid!"

Upon spitting out that last word, I noticed several people staring at me. I chose to ignore them, figuring them to be coaching fans, awestruck by my mastery of child psychology. As I turned back to Thelma, she was shuffling away, head hanging. "Get ready for bars!" I shouted after her. "And you better not miss that Tkatchev!"

Well as you may have guessed, the Tkatchev fell prey to what I perceived to be Thelma's "immaturity", as did various other skills, most of which were totally alien to this rampage of inconsistency. This fueled my fire of intolerance even higher. As I seethed, the "coaching" I gave Thelma that day varied only in insult and magnitude of accompanying arm gesticulations.

While traveling home with a disheartened group and a sore ego, I was unaware that enlightenment would find me the following day in my gym, and arrive in a most unlikely package.

Thelma stood in the corner of the floor exercise mat, poised to initiate her umpteenth attempt to rectify her mistake of the previous day's competition. We were well into the second hour of these attempts, and as Thelma tired, so did my patience.

"If you try hard enough, you'll stick it!" I screamed, emphasizing my point by vigorously shaking my nearly healed knuckles in her direction. Thelma tried harder, only to once again plant her gluteus on the worn carpet. Maybe mom was right. Maybe I should have been a dentist.

Just as thoughts of molar extractions and pretty nurses began to fill my wandering mind, I felt a hand tug at my arm. The hand was attached to Judy, one of Thelma's younger teammates.

"Y'know, coach," she said, "it seems like if Thelma would tuck faster, she might stick that double."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, glaring menacingly down at her. "Well who made you the coach?"

"Nobody," she said quietly and walked back to her group.

I took Judy's comment only as a nuisance at first, yet it partially awakened some rusty awareness of what my responsibilities truly were. Upon Thelma's next attempt, I observed two things:

1. Judy was right.
2. I was an idiot.

These realizations quickly pummeled my ego into quiet submission. As Thelma trekked back to begin another pass, I offered my counterfeit advice. "Uh, y'know, Thelma, if you tucked faster, you might be able to stick that double." Thelma gazed at me in wonderment. (She was, after all, totally unaccustomed to dialogue containing technical merit.) The wonderment, however, soon gave

way to ambition. Her eyes lit up, she nodded her head enthusiastically, and jogged back to the corner.

As Thelma stood motionless, focusing for one last attempt, my heart was hammering. She surged forward, arms pumping and her face a mask of determination. Round-off flip flop (Stretch, Thelma!) Set, (Good!) Double back, (Great!) Land. Stick! No steps, no falls.

I finally realized something that experience had been unable to hammer through my fortress of self interest — coaching was not an avenue for ego gratification and forceful ultimatums, but a chance to develop skills and relationships that would not only accelerate progress, but just might make the gymnast feel good about herself!

Amid the cheers and congratulatory hugs that followed Thelma's pass, I managed to thank both Judy and Thelma, one for her insight, the other for her toleration.

Since that humbling experience, I've grown to realize how much I love these kids, and appreciate their unceasing desire to energetically pursue the goals I set for them. These days, I always try to give the gymnast the benefit of a doubt, despite what my pride suggests. Consequently, the kids have improved faster, and coaching has become much more enjoyable. I figure that's what really matters anyway. Besides, I hear dental school is expensive!

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THE BENEFIT OF A DOUBT POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT KEY TO SUCCESS

Dr. Keith Henschen is the chairman of the sports psychology subcommittee of the United States Gymnastics Federation and also the Director of the Doctoral Program of Sports Psychology at the University of Utah. Dr. Henschen has studied coaching behaviors in depth and wrote his reactions to Gothard's article "The Benefit of a Doubt."

My initial reaction to Gothard's article, "The Benefit of a Doubt," is a giant thank you. He was very candid with his comments and expressed his sensitive feelings very succinctly. The article illustrated what recent articles concerning coaching have attempted to communicate. Gothard put things in very simple terms that anyone could understand.

Articles by Henschen, Sands, and Gordin (1988) and Gordin, Sands, and

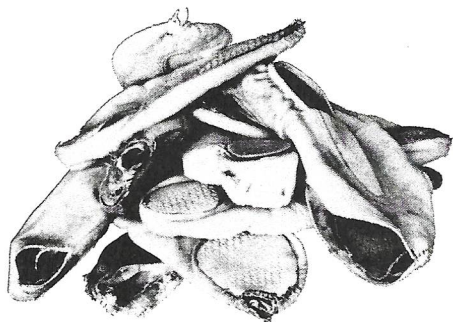
Henschen (1988) reported that athletes respond best to positive reinforcement rather than screaming, yelling and general harassment. The athletes said they wanted specific information from the coaches instead of emotional, degrading outbursts. It is obvious from the article that the young gymnast was trying extremely hard (probably too hard) to do what the coach wanted. The harder she tried, the less successful she was. Finally, the coach realized that his methods were not getting through and, therefore, attempted a different approach. Fear, intimidation, threats and immature emotional actions only serve to make most people tentative instead of confident in their abilities.

The most impressive message from the article was the illustration of how most coaches behave because of their

own ego involvement at the expense of the athletes' feelings. The steady stream of belittling and discouraging comments coming from the coach are simply ego defense mechanisms. Kicking chairs, jumping tables, and throwing sodas are all nonverbal displays of immaturity, that any adult (let alone a coach) should be ashamed to do. These actions bring attention to the coach and further accentuate the athlete's previous mistake. This is absolute negative reinforcement. Possibly the most significant statement in this article was, "Coaching was not an avenue for ego gratification and forceful ultimatums, but a chance to develop skills and relationships that would not only accelerate progress, but just might make the gymnast feel good about herself!"

This says it all!

Problem?



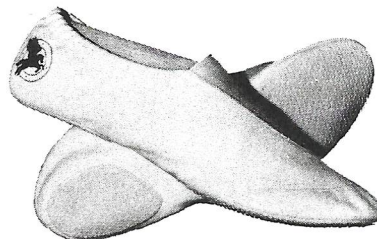
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