

Bagging the Butterflies

You enter the unfamiliar gym, your brain still a bit groggy from waking at 5:30 in the morning. You approach your coach, who is juggling a cup of coffee in one hand and a vaulting board in the other.

The smell of his coffee reminds you of the breakfast you skipped. You just hadn't had time to eat while you were nervously running around getting ready. Your coach instructs you to begin warming up with the team.

The gym is full of colored leotards, and you hunt for your teammates among the mass of gymnasts assembled on the floor exercise mat. Nodding to various acquaintances as you traverse the floor, you join your team and start to stretch. Your stomach feels queasy. You wish you had eaten something. As you look around the gym you notice that this club doesn't have the same type of bars your gym has. You begin to feel more nervous.

"Timed warm-ups will begin in 15 minutes," the meet director announces through the P.A. system.

As you go check out the bars, you realize your grips are not in your gym bag. Suddenly, you're a nervous wreck. This is the State Championships! How could you forget your grips?

Does the above illustration sound familiar? Instead of concentrating on the proper mind set for the meet, many young gymnasts spend their time worrying about details that could have been taken care of before the competition.

Anxiety over competition needs to be dealt with in advance. Anxiety or worrying is actually the inability to make a decision regarding a certain situation. Making a conscious choice in advance for each situation will relax your mind and allow you to concentrate on your gymnastics routines.

Following are solutions to a series of situations that every gymnast faces prior to competition.

1. **Travel and timing:** Often the gymnast is expected to obtain meet information and give it to her parents (hopefully before the meet). This system is fine as long as the information is complete and concise. Asking a young gymnast who can't even drive directions to a meet can cause a good bit of stress for the young athlete, who may not be familiar with names of roads or freeways.

Before each meet you should obtain a clear map to the meet site, as well as warm-up and competition times. Don't wait until the morning of the meet. In addition, plan to arrive an hour in advance in case you get lost.

2. Preparation: The night before the meet the gymnast should place all the appropriate items in her gym bag. Coaches should provide a list of necessities. Also, an extra pair of socks or grips might come in handy, especially if someone else forgets theirs.

3. Waking up: Research has shown that your body does not fully "wake up" for 3-4 hours after rising in the morning, so be sure you are up and around well in advance of your meet.

4. Nutrition: A gymnast should eat far enough in advance of a meet that her food is digested. Any special nutritional preparation should be done only under the supervision of the coach and the appropriate medical personnel. If the competition is long, and hunger pangs develop, fruits and juices are quickly assimilated by the body. Don't eat a candy bar!

5. Warming up: Be sure you have all the appropriate settings for parallel or uneven bars, vaulting, etc. Also, double check all personal equipment such as grips, shoes, etc. Take advantage of your warm-up turns, since there may be several other gymnasts waiting in line. If you miss a skill, don't jump off and pout. Quickly remount and finish your turn. Remember, warm-ups don't necessarily predict what will happen in the meet, so don't get "psyched out" beforehand. If you spend most of your warm-up watching others perform, that means you aren't thinking about your own routines. Forget about everyone else.

6. Competition: Follow all the rules of the competition and stay with your rotation. Refrain from any visual or verbal contact with your parents or other spectators. Concentrate on your coach's instructions. Keep all of your competition gear safely inside your gym bag throughout the meet, unless you are using it.

7. Judges: Before and after each routine you are required to present yourself to the judges. When doing so, look the head judge directly in the eyes with a calm, confident expression. Regardless of what happens during the routine, never show your displeasure to the judges (or the audience) afterward. Even if you missed one of your skills, the judges may not have noticed if you covered well.

8. Scores: Remember, a score is not a judgment of you as an individual. It is an evaluation of a single performance. Once you have completed a routine, leave it behind and concentrate on the next event.

9. Falls: If you should fall or have a major break in a routine, take the time to mentally prepare for the rest of the exercise. Check to see if you injured yourself. Chalk up again if you need to. Once you are mentally composed, continue your routine (within 30 seconds of the fall) as though you never had the break.

This short article cannot hope to cover all the possible situations that may occur at a competition, but with experience you will learn how to deal rationally with almost any situation.

Above and beyond all the considerations listed above, learn how to enjoy yourself at meets. After all, each of us is responsible for choosing what activities we pursue. So we might as well choose something we enjoy. Have fun at your next competition.

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