

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Everyman's Gymnastics

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Competitive Gymnastics in the Media

When the term “gymnastics” is used in the United States, most people immediately visualize only what is available on television. TV coverage of gymnastics is generally limited to the World Championships, the Olympics, or some other international meet showing the general public the true elites of the sport. These elite, however, include a staggeringly small portion of the individuals involved in some form of gymnastics. Most athletes in the sport never compete at all, much less at the level that is seen by the general public. So why participate in gymnastics if not to compete?

Gymnastics as Foundational Fitness

Gymnastics training is tremendously effective as a foundational fitness program for any physical activity. This specific training develops strength, flexibility, body awareness, and agility that cross over extremely well to other physical activities. The degree of control and body awareness cultivated in gymnastics training is unrivaled. Gymnastics develops functional movements that are often otherwise neglected but are extremely useful in other sports and in everyday activities. The kids in any schoolyard that consistently outperform their peers in fitness tests (frequently by large margins) are usually gymnasts.

Perception of Gymnastics in the U.S.

There is a perception in the U.S. that gymnastics is a sport for children, specifically little girls. This is an

unfortunate result of media coverage of competitive gymnastics. Coverage of gymnastics events in the U.S. is weighted on the side of women, presenting the average elite female gymnast as a 5-foot-tall, 100-pound 16- to 20-year-old. While it is true that gymnastics is a sport in which small size conveys a tremendous advantage in actual competition, large body size does not preclude individuals from gaining immense benefits from gymnastics training. On the contrary, it is especially critical for larger individuals to have good body awareness and a favorable strength-to-weight ratio.

Falling

The bigger you are, the harder you fall. A 280-pound individual is going to hit the ground with far more force than a 100-pound individual. While a larger person's skeletal and muscular structures will be stronger, these strengths do not fully compensate for the additional force, so injury is more likely. Unfortunately, our natural instincts when falling are often not the best reactions to the situation. Developing skills in tumbling and other apparatus helps to reprogram instinctual reactions to falls to allow a trained individual to fall from a higher place, or in an awkward position, and reduce or prevent injury. In many cases, these skills will allow trained individuals to stay on their feet or return to their feet quickly in the event of a fall.

Efficiency of Movement

Efficiency of movement is also an important factor in gymnastics training. Skills are constantly drilled to

1 of 3

Everyman's Gymnastics (continued...)

ensure they are being performed in the most efficient way possible. Again, this is of great benefit to a larger individual who can't get away with inefficiencies. Complete awareness of body position, and of how and when to push, are trained to increase the efficiency of motion.

Hand Support

Hand support is a key skill that is virtually untrained in all other activities. Few sports or training programs ever require individuals to support themselves on their hands. Gymnastics does this in abundance—from handstands in tumbling to swinging on a pommel horse. Though larger individuals will initially have more difficulty with handsupported skills, the benefits are the same for everyone. Trainees will develop a feel for hand balancing, strength through practicing the required skills, and a clear sense of how to maintain support. The ability to maintain support has a strong carryover to other realms and skills—traversing rough terrain, climbing obstacles, and working through tight openings, for example.

Strength

There is no question that gymnasts are among the strongest athletes in the world. In terms of strength-to-weight ratio, few other kinds of athletes can compare with elite gymnasts. Most of this strength can be developed using nothing but the gymnast's own bodyweight along with an understanding of positions and loads and physical conditioning. Gymnasts learn to lift their own bodies in just about every way possible. The ability to lift one's own body quickly, easily, and in any situation is immeasurably valuable. Again, this is another arena where it is more important for larger individuals to train themselves how to move around efficiently and easily. Their mass requires more force to move, which requires more efficient movement and specific strength-to-weight ratio training.

Varied Stimuli

It is well known that repeating the same exercise for long periods of time will reduce its effectiveness. Gymnastics continually introduces new movements and new stimuli to training. These varied stimuli ensure that

Correlation between Gymnastics Events and General Fitness

Floor

Tumbling is the most obviously transferable gymnastics event. Learning to roll, tumble, jump, and land is highly beneficial in many other physical activities. Trainees learn how to handle motion, roll safely, keep awareness while inverted, and stay on their feet in a wide variety of situations.

Rings

For teaching control and support, the rings are incomparable. The instability of the rings is the greatest single factor in their effectiveness as a training device. Just maintaining a support requires stabilizing muscles to contract and adjust dynamically, which creates an effective stimulus for incredible strength gains. Developing a strong support and control over the rings enables trainees to climb, mount, and navigate random obstacles quickly and easily.

Parallel Bars

The parallel bars teach tremendous hand support control and develop strength in the shoulders. Learning how to swing properly and develop power below the bars enables a trainee to quickly pass through a small opening directly overhead, with minimal effort and with only the edges of the opening itself as support.

Pommel Horse

Pommel horse was originally developed as a training aid for mounted knights. In its current form, it teaches trainees to maintain support and control regardless of body position or angle. Simply performing the basic skills on this event develops incredible shoulder strength, and the process of shifting weight from one hand to the other develops almost unparalleled balance and control.

High Bar

Understanding how to develop swing efficiency is the key factor on the high bar. Learning a kip and a pullover will allow trainees to immediately get on top of any single object they can reach. Simply swinging on the high bar will improve shoulder flexibility and range of motion.

Vault

Vault offers the obvious benefit of learning how to run full speed at a stationary object and leap over it while maintaining forward momentum.

Everyman's Gymnastics (continued...)

trainees will never “just get good at training” but that the training will truly improve their fitness for all tasks.

Portability of Training Equipment

An additional benefit to gymnastics training is the ability to condition and train with little or no equipment. Since most gymnastics conditioning can be done with nothing other than the individual's own body mass, training equipment is always present. If rings and parallettes are available, virtually all strengthening moves can be performed with sufficient load to challenge anyone.

Breaking the Stereotypes

1. A 51-year-old male, 5 feet 10 inches and 190 pounds, started gymnastics training at age 47. He was in decent condition for an average man of his age but not highly athletic. Now he is capable of skills and movements he has never performed at any age. In most strength feats he is more capable than he has ever been. He suffered two accidents in which his gymnastics training mitigated injury. First, while skiing, he fell and landed on his shoulder on one his ski bindings. He suffered a two-point shoulder separation. Doctors expected significantly more damage and attributed the relatively minor injury he sustained to the strength and stability of his shoulder. He has fully recovered from this injury. Second, while biking, he flew over the handlebars. Because of his gymnastics training, he was able to roll out of the fall and was not injured aside from minor abrasions on one shoulder.

2. A 45-year-old mother of two, 5 feet 7 inches and 170 pounds, has been doing gymnastics for three years, only once per week. Her initial fitness level was moderate. She is also now capable of skills and movements she had never before performed. In some fitness testing, she has beaten 20-to-30-year-old bodybuilders who would be considered very fit by most people's standards.
3. A 45-year-old male, 6 feet 2 inches and 215 pounds, has been doing gymnastics for three years, once per week. Initially, he was thin and had decent cardiovascular fitness but was not strong. He was initially unable to do a single pull-up but is now capable of multiple sets of ten. He can hand balance, has a great sense of support, and swings double leg circles on the pommel horse.

Note: All these individuals maintain full-time desk jobs and have family responsibilities that do not leave much time available for training. Individuals with more time to dedicate to training will see more dramatic results.



Roger Harrell is a former competitive gymnast with twenty years of experience in the sport. He has continued to train in the sport well beyond his competitive years. He has run several competitive gymnastics training programs and currently focuses on coaching adults and bringing the benefits of gymnastics to those outside the usual community. He is the developer, designer, and webmaster of www.DrillsAndSkills.com.