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GYMNASTICS:

THE LONG JOURNEY WORTH TAKING

Learning gymnastics skills can be frustrating, but Dave Durante explains why the return is well worth the investment.

BY DAVE DURANTE



True mastery in gymnastics means months, years and sometimes decades of relentless practice.



This type of body control takes years to develop, but the process of achieving such a goal is well worth it, says Dave Durante.

Be patient and limit frustration.

These are the first two points on a list I share whenever I'm speaking about gymnastics to a new group of CrossFit athletes.

Every aspect of the world we live in pushes us toward a constant need for instant gratification. We need everything now-now-now, so it can be tough for CrossFit athletes to hear they need to slow down, take a step back, refine each movement and appreciate the proper learning curve for gymnastics skills.

The reality of the situation is that if your goal is true mastery of gymnastics skills, the timelines are not measured in hours, days or weeks. They are measured in months, years and sometimes decades.

While this statement might be discouraging and frustrating for a lot of athletes, the primary focus should be the process itself, not the end result. Many athletes fail to realize the importance of learning and growing stronger on the road toward ultimate goals, and many stop trying because of perceived stagnation.

As athletes and coaches, always respect and take pride in the process of development. Gymnastics skills are not and should never be thought of as all or nothing. It's not accurate to say you have or don't have a muscle-up. You have a work in progress somewhere between the first tentative attempt and absolute virtuosity. Every skill develops on a continuum, and small improvements have incredible value and transferability to other skills.

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One of the most fundamental aspects of working on gymnastics and body-weight movements is the building of body awareness: the understanding of what the body is doing from fingertips to toes within space and time, whether the body is upright, inverted or somewhere in between. It's about being able to control your body rather than having your body control you. Imagine what improved body awareness and control could do when applied to other CrossFit movements involving objects such as barbells and kettlebells.

Here's a little test to provide a better appreciation of body awareness as it pertains to each athlete's skill set. Take a gymnastics skill you think you perform fairly well and record that movement from several different angles. Before watching the video, close your eyes and visualize that same action, imagining what you think it looks like on the video. Then review the footage. It's very likely what happens on the video will look vastly different than what you had pictured. This is true for the majority of athletes. If you watch the video carefully, you will start to notice inefficiencies and problem areas you didn't recognize while performing the skill. This is a completely normal part of the learning process. The important takeaway is that athletes should be able to recognize inefficiencies

and make necessary changes—even if that means taking a step back to refine technique. I highly recommend more videotaping of gymnastics skills much as athletes regularly film Olympic lifts to help analyze movement patterns.

A gym buddy is another tool we use in the gymnastics world to create awareness. When I got to Stanford University in 1998 for the start of my freshman year, I was assigned two things on the first day: my locker and my strength partner. My partner was someone who was learning the same movements I was and would be there to help spot, motivate and give corrections on skills. We helped push each other on days when we absolutely didn't want to be working on those weaknesses, and we became stronger because of it.

After a couple of years, I went from being very average on the rings to being one of the stronger guys in the United States. I attribute my strength transformation to the consistent and relentless partner training during those years. I'm sure most of you already have a perfect strength partner in mind. As soon as you're done reading this article, call the person and get him or her on board.



To improve your gymnastics skills, find a strength partner seeking to learn and refine the same movements. This person will help spot, motivate and provide correction.

The process of building strength and competence takes time, and improvements are not always obvious. But consider a river wearing away a rock: Progress is constant if not immediately apparent. Eventually the rock is worn away. Gymnastics is like that, and small improvements in strength and body control eventually result in new skills.

Performing a gymnastics skill for the first time can be one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of training. That moment when something clicks and a breakthrough occurs can make all those horrible training days worthwhile. For those of you who have made your first muscle-up, I'm sure that moment and feeling are etched into your memory.

I wish for each athlete to experience many of those moments, but it's also a coach's job to remind that successfully completing a skill one time is not the destination even if it is a major milestone. Performing a skill one time is far from mastery of that skill, and making your muscle-up does not mean you are ready to do a workout that has 30 muscle-ups in it. Performing a skill for the first time is a stepping stone toward true competency, and the accomplishment should be viewed that way.

Over time, your percentage of successful skill completion (hit percentage) will start to increase. That hit percentage will be a good indicator as to whether or not you are prepared to perform the skill in workouts. And even when your hit percentage approaches 100, you can still work toward virtuosity by refining the movement to add greater precision, control, technique and grace.

The last aspect I want to touch on is the importance of first working on the creation of body shapes and static holds before even thinking of working on dynamic action. Understanding how to manipulate your body through hollow/arch/tuck/pike/straddle/layout positions and applying the shapes when needed are fundamental prerequisites to eventually using the positions with dynamic action. The value of working on holds can't be overstated. Dynamic skills can never fully be appreciated or mastered without first learning to control movement.

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For instance, it's common to see athletes repeatedly attempting kipping handstand push-ups against a wall in session after session. What's less common is seeing athletes away from the wall working on proper handstand positioning and balance techniques or performing strict work with a partner. When working on new movements, I believe your goal should be to set the foundation to allow for the understanding and development of the highest-level version of that movement, not just the completion of a rep for the purposes of going faster through a workout. What good is becoming incredibly fast at kipping handstand push-ups if the skill doesn't ever allow you to move away from the wall to perform a strict freestanding handstand push-up or possibly one day a strict ring handstand push-up? The speed will undoubtedly come once the strength, stability and position are set in stone.

These improvements are not always as obvious as a 10-lb. snatch PR, and gymnastics training is often frustrating because some skills seem so difficult as to be impossible. But small improvements provide a subtle yet rock-solid foundation for every aspect of your training, and there's value in using appropriate progressions and spotters to work toward difficult skills. Even if you never achieve a planche or lever, working on these skills can provide dramatic increases in strength, control and body awareness—and with enough effort, dedication and consistency you might indeed find yourself in your first planche.

While I'm completely aware my stance might be discouraging for some, gaining perspective on the true learning curve for gymnastics skills is critical to reaching your full potential. You've heard it before, but it's worth restating: There are not shortcuts to these skills.

The road can be challenging, but it will be one of the most rewarding parts of your athletic journey. Take pride in the process and celebrate the small achievements along the way! ■

About the Author

Dave Durante is a multiple-time USA Gymnastics national champion and was part of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Team as an alternate. After retiring from competition, Durante helped coach his alma mater, Stanford University, to an NCAA team title in 2009. He's continued to be a part of the sport through his position on the Athlete Advisory Council with the United States Olympic Committee, as well as in his position as the athlete representative on the Men's Program Committee for USA Gymnastics. Dave is co-owner and operator of [Power Monkey Fitness](#), a gymnastics-based fitness company that focuses on equipment, education and events including the biannual Power Monkey Camp. Dave was a lead coach with [CrossFit Gymnastics](#) course from 2013 to 2015 and wrote and developed the CrossFit Gymnastics Advanced Trainer Course. He is an avid CrossFit athlete and trains and coaches at [CrossFit Long Island City](#) in New York, New York.