Turning Strong Gymnasts into Strong Women
An Ethnography of a Junior Olympic Gymnastics Team

PREFACE

When I was a young kid, I loved being outside and playing games with the neighborhood boys. No matter where I went, whether it was a fancy party or just a family cookout, I always wore tennis shoes just in case someone invited me to play a game of tag or kickball. This childhood attitude of mine has continued on into my teenage years and because of it, I have become somewhat of a sport fanatic. Not the kind that watches football every Sunday religiously, but the kind that ends gym class covered in a sheen of sweat after getting a little too competitive in a casual game of kickball. To me, sports are about cuts, contact, and competitiveness.

When assigned the task to write an ethnography, I quickly decided on studying a subculture that involved athletics, but had trouble selecting a specific sport. I knew I had to observe eight hours of a subculture that I had little to no experience with, so I definitely wanted it to be interesting. After carefully considering many different subcultures to observe, my friend Hannah Studee’s Junior Olympic gymnastics team came to mind and I knew that I wanted to study this a little bit deeper. Gymnastics involves both strength and beauty, which is quite
different from the usual contact sports I am familiar with. My versions of sports include bruises and muddy uniforms, not make-up and tightly pulled back hair.

Since this is a high level gymnastics team, I expect the girls to be in great shape, and I also expect them to be very serious with their workouts. From what I have seen in movies, gymnastics coaches are often very harsh, cold, and demanding—all of which are necessary traits for a high level coach. Hannah has often been unable to attend social events because of gymnastics, so it seems like this sport is a huge commitment. My assumption is that the girls will be serious about gymnastics, and that many of them will want to pursue it past high school. I believe all these girls come together for a common reason: the chance to become either a state or national champion. My goal for this project is to understand why they sacrifice so much for the sport they love.

BACKGROUND

Compared to all types of gymnastics in the United States (Trampoline, Men’s, Acrobatic, Trampoline and Tumbling, and Group Gymnastics), women’s is the most popular with about 70,000 participants. Men’s gymnastics trails far behind in second place with 12,000 participants. “The mission of USA Gymnastics is to encourage participation and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of gymnastics (usagym.org).”

Women’s gymnastics includes four main events: floor exercise, vault, uneven bars, and balance beam. For the floor exercise, gymnasts create routines for the judges to evaluate, and perform these routines on a spring floor with clearly marked edges. Vault routines start off with the gymnasts running down a padded runway, then springing onto the vault from a springboard,
and then performing their skills on top of a saddle-shaped vault. Uneven bars are specific only to women’s gymnastics and the female gymnasts perform their bar routine by jumping onto either the high or low bar and ending with a dismount at the end. Like the uneven bars, the balance beam, which is only 10 centimeters in width and about four feet off the ground, is performed only by female gymnasts and also involves a dismount at the end.

The basic rules of gymnastics are confusing to any person who is unfamiliar with them. The most basic rule of gymnastics concerns the starting and ending of the routine. At the beginning and the end, gymnasts must salute the judges to signal that they are ready or that they are done. Scoring is much different from other sports. Baskets and goals don’t exist, only points that indicate how well the gymnasts have performed their overall routine. Qualified judges evaluate the routines based on specific criteria and for every mistake, there is a deduction. Scoring is somewhat subjective which is why there is always more than one judge evaluating a specific routine. The highest score that can be attained is a perfect 10, which is next to impossible, showing how much they value perfection in gymnastics.

Gym Nation was created in 1991. Jim DiOrio bought the business just as it was about to go under and turned it into something prosperous. Since then, Gym Nation has expanded substantially. In 2005, Dragona and Cheda Vragovic purchased the gym from Jim to pursue their love for gymnastics. Previously, Dragona had been an elite gymnast for the Serbian National Team, but was unable to pursue the gold medal at the Olympics due to monetary reasons. Cheda loved sports and thought this could become a great business. Currently, Kevin Lewis owns Gym Nation and has been coaching for approximately seven years. He decided to purchase Gym Nation because of his love for all sports and teaching children (Studee).
This Junior Olympic team practices at Gym Nation in Buffalo, Minnesota every Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday for four hours each day. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays they practice from four to eight at night. On Saturdays they practice from eight to noon. I will be observing the practices on Tuesdays from four to eight.

The girls have been practicing at Gym Nation ever since they were about six years old, but this is the first year that all of the girls have competed together. Their passion has grown immensely and they are now competing at a much higher level. The ages of the six girls on this team range greatly. The youngest girl is ten and competes in level seven gymnastics. The oldest girl is eighteen and competes in level nine gymnastics. Levels in gymnastics are based on the skill level and ability of the gymnast. In levels one through six, every gymnast has the same routine with the same skills in it. From level six to 10, the highest level, you have the option to choreograph your own floor routine. With each level, the skills get more difficult to do and much longer to perfect.

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

23 February 2016 (4:00 p.m.-5:30 p.m); 1 March 2016 (4:00 p.m.-6:30 p.m.); 8 March 2016 (4:00 p.m.-6:30 p.m.)

Gym Nation is nestled in between multiple industrial buildings, an odd place for a gymnastics gym. Decorated with brightly colored signs on the front window, Gym Nation is the only gymnastics club in the small town of Buffalo. It provides not only gymnastics, but also karate and dance. Bright red mats cover the floor to the right, the locker room straight ahead, and the coach’s offices are to the left side of the building. There is no clear path to the lobby,
creating a disorganized feeling. A hidden, narrow hallway leads to a main lobby where pictures of the coaches and the award-winning gymnastics teams are proudly hung on the wall, indicating that they take great pride in their successes. Tucked in the corner, is a rack filled with small leotards, most likely for the young girls attending their first tumble class.

Throughout the gym, colorful mats and foam cubes are scattered across the floor. These artifacts show how important it is for the owners to try and get young gymnasts interested early, so they can be successful when they get older. The majority of Gym Nation’s gymnasts are younger, so the owners decorate the gym accordingly with vibrant colors. Trophies and banners line the walls of the gym, which are other important artifacts. The owners display these accomplishments proudly and are always looking to add more to their collection. The abundance of trophies and banners indicate yet again, that the gymnasts and the gym members value achievement and winning.

Beginner classes started and many of the parents watched their young children nervously while others casually scrolled through e-mails on their phones. Each parent is at a different level of involvement with their kids’ sports. Some care immensely how their child’s practice is going, and for others it is just another appointment in their busy schedule. This not only applies to the young gymnasts, but also to the older girls, like Hannah, on the Junior Olympic team.

Hannah Studee is the oldest gymnast at Gym Nation, and has been attending this gym for the entirety of her gymnastics career, beginning when she was six. With her curvy figure and mature personality, she is quite different from the other petite, young gymnasts she competes with. She speaks with confidence about gymnastics and life in general, which contrasts with the
youth and immaturity of the younger gymnasts. Due to her age and knowledge, her role as both a leader and a caretaker of the team have developed naturally.

“There wasn’t a woman leader on the team, which there needed to be, to help with emotion. Eric is a guy, so obviously he didn’t know how to comfort the girls, so I had to step up,” Hannah said proudly.

Hannah is recognized as a leader by both her teammates and her coach. Eric has been coaching Hannah for thirteen years, watching her grow and develop as both a gymnast and as a woman. Eric trusts her with personal details of his life because he knows she can handle the large amount of responsibility that is given to her.

“Next Saturday I don’t know if I will make it to practice. My dad is not doing too well and I would like to see him. You will be in charge of practice and Rocci will oversee things,” Eric said quietly to Hannah.

It is evident how strong of a leader Hannah has become. Not only does Eric trust her with running the practice while he is gone, but he also feels comfortable enough to tell her about his ill father. Eric, who believes in complete openness, shares everything with the girls. This level of trust has extended into the relationship Eric and the girls have, causing a special bond to be formed.

Hannah walked onto the floor and several of the girls greeted her with gifts for her birthday. “Happy birthday Hannah! It’s crazy to think that you’re already eighteen,” Alayna said. Giving gifts to the other girls on this team is an expected behavior. If someone’s birthday is forgotten, the girl feels left out. This team is all about unity, so they make it a point to celebrate
birthdays and to make the girls feel supported. Shortly after the girls gave their presents, Eric told them to start warm-ups.

Warm-ups started out very casual, which disproved my theory that this team would be very strict and structured in every aspect of their training. Some of the older girls showed up a little late with no punishment. Eric understands that sometimes life happens and overlooks their tardiness. He knows being in a sport as demanding as this one can get tiresome.

“In the 70’s and 80’s I was a part of the US Olympic Ski team. I know what it takes to become great, but I also know how exhausting it can be. In both skiing and gymnastics, long hours of hard work are required to become great, but being too hard on the girls will only make it harder for me to train them,” Eric explained.

By using his experience as a phenomenal athlete, he attempts to prepare the girls for their upcoming meets. The girls just completed a long spell of important meets, and now they are preparing for State and Regionals. Eric, an extremely competitive athlete, knows that in order to be exceptional, intense conditioning and perfect execution are required.

As the girls got farther into warm-ups, more and more groans could be heard. Their bodies ached from climbing up and down the 20-foot rope in 13 seconds using only their arms, a daily ritual for the girls. After warm-ups, the girls took turns practicing their routines and having Eric critique them. In order to try a higher level move, they must ask Eric for permission first. This rule must be followed by all gymnasts for safety reasons. The gymnasts start out easy and then advance when they have perfected their easier moves. After a while, the girls were getting frustrated and tired of hearing the same old, “Do it again,” or “Faster! Get higher!” from Eric who was never satisfied until the move was done perfectly.
“This is the time when we must be precise. A big meet is coming up,” Eric said to a struggling gymnast.

Even though the girls were frustrated, they never lashed out at Eric, showing how disciplined and respectful they are. It is understood that Eric’s constant pushing are to better them, not to break them. His goals for the girls are for them to succeed not just inside the sport, but outside as well.

When Eric talked about inspiring women and their qualities on National Women’s Day, it was obvious that his goals for the girls extend beyond gymnastics.

“I am coaching the girls to become strong women, not necessarily strong gymnasts,” Eric said proudly.

He is more concerned with the life-lessons he teaches in gymnastics than the athletic accomplishments earned. He knows these lessons will stick with them forever, whereas the pointed toes and basic fundamentals will be long forgotten. This shows that the lessons taught in this gymnastics program are just as much about creating strong character as they are about creating strong athletes—if not, more.

While waiting for their turn to practice their routine, the girls fixed their hair in the large mirrors lining the wall next to the floor area. The girls are constantly looking at themselves in the mirror during practice, making sure everything looks right. The mirrors are an important artifact to this team and what they value. This indicates how much perfection is valued in this highly competitive sport.

The girls are surrounded by reminders that perfection is the end goal. Eric is never satisfied with their skills and neither is the judge that comes into the gym every season to critique
them. Every year Eric hires a qualified judge to evaluate every girl’s routine, which gives the girls another highly valued perspective on the girls’ routines. Not only do the girls have Eric to please, but also the judge.

Alayna is the best gymnast in the gym, resulting in many of the girls looking up to her. She is extremely serious about getting her moves perfect, and comes off a little intimidating. Alayna has a lot of pressure put on her by her mother who previously was a gymnast, and by her coach who expects a lot from her. After she completed a seemingly perfect floor routine, she walked over to the judge and Eric.

“I gave you a 9.5. The execution was pretty well done, but you were sloppy on some parts. You had a bent knee after your front tuck, you stepped forward after your arabian, and you never smiled,” Eric said harshly with the judge agreeing.

The judge and Eric can always find something wrong with the girls’ routines no matter how many times they practice it and try to perfect it. The goal in gymnastics is to receive a perfect ten, but it almost never happens. These unrealistic goals and the importance they place on perfection contribute to the girls lack of self confidence. They spent countless hours trying to perfect a routine that will most likely never be a perfect ten.

Going through their usual routine of moving from one event to the next, the girls grabbed their grips as they walked over to bars. Grips are the devices worn by gymnasts on their hands to achieve a stronger hold when competing on bars. This artifact shows how dangerous this sport can be. Without the grips, the girls wouldn’t be able to do the difficult skills they do now. Even though this sport is extremely dangerous, the girls still choose to participate. They believe that the benefits they get from the sport will outweigh the possibility of serious injury. Abby, the
spunky, young gymnast who always brings a little excitement to the atmosphere, is not worried about the possibility of injury. Due to the fact that Abby is so young, the fear of falling or injury does not fill her mind as she tumbles high above the floor like it does for the older girls.

“I’m never scared,” Abby said. “I love competing and being the best and in order to be the best, I have to take risks. I have to try new moves that are dangerous, but it is worth it in the end when I am the only girl that sticks her dismount.”

These girls believe that the rewards far outweigh the price of competing. For most people endangering your safety, losing your social life, and never getting enough sleep would be too much, but for these girls it’s totally worth it.

CONCLUSION

Sports have become a huge part of student athletes’ lives--often even bigger than academics. Student athletes focus more on sports than any other aspect of their lives because it is so rewarding. What I have learned from this team is that this idea is true. When kids find a sport they love, they dedicate their lives to it. These gymnasts practice seventeen hours a week, much more than any other type of athlete. The girls on this team value achievement and success; they know that to be the best and achieve the most, this is the right team to be on, even though they sacrifice safety, time, and social events. Not one girl on this team regrets their decision to be so involved in gymnastics.

Going into this assignment, I thought for sure the coach would be constantly pushing the girls, trying to create national champions. I assumed his job as a coach was only to create phenomenal athletes. Quickly, I learned that his job is about more than that. Eric’s ultimate goal
is to shape the girls into successful women, not specifically successful gymnasts. He wants to teach them the necessary skills that are needed to be prosperous in the future.

Before observing this Junior Olympic gymnastics team, I viewed gymnastics as a weak feminine sport. After spending eight hours watching and connecting with these girls, I realized that gymnasts are one of the most hard-working and dedicated athletes. I never would have guessed how much work they put in and how much time they sacrifice for the sport that they love. Through observing this team, I have gained a new appreciation for the sport of gymnastics.

In the next year, this team will no longer be as it is now. Many girls will leave, including Hannah Studee. Her time as a high school gymnast will be over, but she plans on continuing her gymnastics career in college. Currently Hannah is coaching at Gym Nation, and next year she will be attending college at the University of St. Thomas; she wants to continue coaching at a gym near there. Abby also plans on leaving Gym Nation relatively soon. Abby will finish this gymnastics season at Gym Nation, but then plans to move onto High School gymnastics. High School gymnastics is less of a commitment, but she still gets to participate in the sport that she loves—gymnastics.

Although the members on this team will come and go, being replaced by younger, more vital gymnasts, the girls will never forget their experience on this team.

“(Gymnastics) has literally given me everything,” Hannah said. “I would be a completely different person if I had not been a part of this team. Even though sometimes I get overwhelmed with all the stress, I wouldn’t have had it any different.”
Works Cited


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