

Dear Team Parents,

With the first meets of the year rapidly approaching, we are very excited. The teams are also very excited and many are nervous. Tina & I were asked oodles of questions from new Team parents. Some asked other parents and were given erroneous information. I thought I would address them all in my newest book entitled “COMPETITIVE GYMNASTICS for DUMMIES” or “GYMNASTICS 101 CLIFF NOTES” (Have not decided on the title yet. It’s written in a kind of “What to Expect / Do” format. These are in no particular order, just in the order we thought of them. Take your laptop into the bathroom and sit down for a good read.

**\*\* DIRECTIONS:** Always allow ample time to arrive at a meet. When considering travel time, allow time for delays due to traffic or construction. Large Meets like the “Star’s & Stripes” are hosted in Arenas, Sports Complexes, or College Gyms... and are relatively easy to find. However most medium to small meets are held at the host gymnastics club. As a result, many (like EGC) are a little off the beaten path, and harder to find. Technology has changed that has made things a lot easier now-a-days. GPS systems are relatively inexpensive, or standard on many vehicles. Also, there are many websites that print out the directions for you. At any rate, make sure you have good directions prior to leaving and enough time to get there safely. Some people like to always cut things close. As a result, as time runs short, the parent starts getting nervous and flustered and this rubs typically runs off on the child. When late, parents are often Speeding, swearing, swerving, to get there, and the typical playing of the child in the back seat becomes an irritant and often gets the brunt of the parents frustration.

**\*\* FOOD:** A gymnast should have a moderate sized meal about an hour or more prior to coming to the competition. You want to avoid heavy foods with lots of fats. Heavy foods and overeating create lethargic gymnasts. Also, gymnasts get nervous, and nausea is common, and too much leads to bigger problems. A high carb meal is the best for keeping their energy up during a meet. Gymnasts are NOT permitted to eat during the meet, and a meet usually lasts 4 to 5 hours. Do not send Food or Snacks with them in their bags. The gymnasts are permitted bottled water only. Fruit juices, sodas, power drinks— leak and stain the guest gym equipment and their leos. Typically for the Parents & Siblings, most gyms provide a concession stand during the meet. Here you typically can get anything from Coffee to Pulled Pork. But again, during the meet, the gymnast should not be eating nor visiting the Concession Stand. It’s a competition, not a buffet.

**\*\* PACKING:** It is a good idea for your child to put everything on first and then lay it out the night before you leave for the meet. On many occasions people lose outfits somewhere between the gym, home, and meet. The gymnast should pack their Leotard, a Warm-up Leo, Warm-ups for Level 5’s & up. Make sure the gymnast has their Grips and wristbands. Although at some meets they may sell grips, they will not be broken in. I have been to many meets where the parents spent all this money on gymnastics lessons, parents club, hotel, gas... only to have their kid blow their bar routine due to the fact they left their grips at the gym. Often, the coaches leave for the meet, and we are not around to open up to get your grips from their box.

**\*\* NERVES / SLEEPING:** Obviously getting a good nights sleep is important. However you can expect that for most kids their nerves kick in as the meet date approaches. Meet nerves are particularly the greatest the night before the competition. Also, “Hotel meets” also interfere with sleep in the “different environment. My recommendation is try not to make too many weird adjustments to their schedule or sleep pattern. It is good to do something distracting to take their mind off the nervousness that is typically felt. However, most kids—especially newer athletes will NOT sleep well the night before a meet. The only consolation is that the kids on the other teams feel this nervousness too. Also, your child may have bouts with nausea and diarrhea pre-meet. This as well is normal. Try not to confuse nerves with illness. Over the years, I’ve had parents cancel (call off) the first several competitions because they thought their child had the flu. “I don’t understand?, she keeps getting the flu right before her big meet?” I have kids on the upper Optional Levels who after 100’s of competitions still get the runs right before a meet. Again, try not to confuse nerves with illness, and maybe pack a little Pepto-Bismol.

**\*\* DRESS CODE:** If you have never watched the gymnastics movie “Stick It”, you should get the movie. It is a pretty good movie by itself, and a definite for gymnasts. Very little in the movie is exaggerated about the “Gymnastics World”. One of the big incidents in the movie is that a ‘mean judge’ penalizes a star gymnast for her bra strap sticking out of her leotard. This is a true deduction. Our sport is all about image, and gymnasts are expected to play the part!

I sometimes consider Gymnastics one of the last ‘Conservative Stronghold Sports’. By this comment, I mean a lot of nuances in that statement. There are many examples of this comment. For one, “everyone does not automatically get a trophy for participating. There are official “Winners & Losers”. Many gymnasts will go home without a medal, and medals are earned and not just given for participation.

Without going into a long spiel about all of the nuances, the important example under this heading of “Dress

Code” is that your child is being Judged. The Judges will look at each child and subjective considerations will be attached to your child. Also consider that many of the gymnastics Judges are older, former, typically high level gymnasts. They at one point in their lives had to uphold the ‘image’ of a gymnast. They had to demonstrate good behavior, clean image, appropriate dress, and continual judgment by their peers, coaches, and judges.

So often, they aren’t too ‘privy’ on the latest fashion of “gauging your ears”, crazy hair styles, bizarre hair colors, fingernail art, tattoo’s.... It is very difficult to win for a Boy who has an Orange Mohawk, or a Girl with a Purple Crew-cut. Also, the kids sometimes put on temporary tattoo’s, (and I’ve seen real tattoos). Make sure they wash them off prior to the meet.

**Earrings**—Gymnasts are only permitted 1 set of stud earrings (1 in each ear). Dangling earrings and hoops are deducted in that they are considered dangerous and distracting. Nail Polish is NOT PERMITTED. This again is considered distracting. NO JEWELRY of any kind is permitted—Necklaces, Rings, Toe Rings, and the ever popular Rubber Bracelets... all NO!

**Hair**—Hair is to be neat. Long Hair is to be tied back or braided. Often Parents get together in the Hotels and have “Hair Braid” Parties the night before the meet. They often come up with some very tasteful and intricate braids. These are nice, and you will find many Gymnast do this. Gymnasts are NOT permitted to wear Hair Beads or Bows. Gymnasts are to tie hair with rubber bands or a team color Scrunchie. The biggest rule of thumb is that the Judges see it as dangerous if the hair is in or can bounce and cover their eyes. As well, extremely long hair that could possibly get caught in the bars or they could step on with their hands is unacceptable.

**Bras & Underwear**—There is a deduction for Bras & Undies sticking out of the leotard. Our serious advice is to take your gymnast to a “Victoria’s Secret” type store and buy Undies the same color as their leo bottom (Black). We used to recommend the String Bikini type Undies because they can tuck up high on the hips. These work good on some kids. However, if the leo stretches higher and they pop out, the string band showing is very noticeable and distracting.

Sometimes it is better to just have a plain pair of Black Undies. If they pop out, often they blend in with the leo and you don’t notice as much. They also sell Undies and Bras with ‘Invisible’ (clear) straps. This helps hide them if they do come out. The bra should fit in the leo. Many like to wear ‘sports bras’ to practice that often don’t hide well within their leo. At a meet it matters, so make sure the style Bra you get them fits within the confines of the leo. Again, color match them with the leo. If they are just wearing a bra to be a “Big Girl”, yet don’t need one yet, don’t wear it.

The best thing to do is try on the Undies with the leo and have them stretch in every imaginable position. If they stay in, they’re good. If not, find something else.

While on that note, it is a deduction for gymnasts to pick their wedgies during a routine. Most people have odd quirks they do when they are nervous. Some people chew their fingernails, some chew pencils, and some people twirl their hair. Many gymnasts go for the “quick pick” in a routine. We try to coach it out of them, but the current record at the gym was a girl who did it 22 times in one routine. LOL.

**\*\* PARENT DRESS CODE:** Team Parents should try to dress in the team colors (Black & Red). There is no required wear, however many parents buy a T-Shirt or Sweat Shirt sporting the logo of the gym they are with. We will be offering these on our Christmas Brochure very soon. We will have T-Shirts, Sweat shirts, and Polo’s available in Adult Sizes. Parents also like to wear picture buttons with their gymnast on their shirt or coat. Other than that, you probably want to bring an extra shirt, coat, or sweatshirt to the meets. Gyms often keep the temperature very comfortable for the gymnasts. This is fine if you are dancing, tumbling, and flipping, however if you are just sitting, it can get cold. Also, a group of Wild Boys Team Parents years ago started a trend of the Parents wearing Black Bra’s & Panties. They said it was good luck, and all did it for years. Do with that info what you want, however some of the fathers wanted this to be mandatory.

**\*\* TEAM SPIRIT / CHEERING**—It is nice to have our team parents all sit together at competitions. This is a great way to meet some new friends! If your child sticks with this sport, you’re going to get to know them over time anyway! Sometimes it is impossible to get seats near each other. Sometimes (depending on the facility) parents like to move around to get closest to the event their child is competing on. But it is nice to stay together as a cheering section. Gymnastics Cheering is somewhere between a Football Game and a Golf Tourney. Whistling, Screaming, Taunting the Judges is considered way too much and over the top. However, you are not required to sit on your hands either. Feel free to cheer and applaud not only for your child, but the other kids on our team. It is also respectful to applaud for the other gymnasts on other teams as well.

It also is considered Polite (**and we require this**) to stay until ALL of the awards have been given out. Sometimes at a meet, they give awards age group by age group. Thus, once a gymnast gets their awards, the Parents grab their kid and shuffle out ASAP. This is NOT POLITE! I have seen many meets where the vast majority of the crowd is gone, and the last few kids have nobody cheering for them. It is considered poor sportsmanship.

Another question that was asked was are the gymnasts required to stay for additional session in which

members of their team or other Team Lightning levels are competing. This is nice, but not by any means required. Sometimes due to age groups athletes on the same level are split into 2 sessions. It is nice to have their teammates in the stands cheering for them (especially if it is a team meet). However, often staying for additional sessions would require staying in a hotel or incurring additional costs, thus we don't feel it is necessary. What however is common, and our Optional Team does this all the time is the Athletes get adopted by the parents in the next session. Thus, they arrange with one of their team mates to ride home with them and stay and watch the meet. Sometimes they stay with the family at the hotel and come the next day. Thus, the team stays together and the parents are free to go. We stay out of the arrangement, but 'trust me', these kids will soon become your extended family, and everyone takes turns hosting team sleepovers and parties... and you soon will have more children at your house than you prefer. One point to mention though is if they stay for the next session, they are NOT permitted on the competitive floor. Thus, they must stay in the stands. For one, there are too many people on the floor, as well, they are often a distraction to their friends.

**\*\* PHOTOGRAPHY**— You will probably want to bring your camera and video camera. However it is a USAG rule that **"Flash Photography" is NOT permitted** at a competition. The Flashes supposedly cause temporary blindness, and can result in a gymnast getting injured. Typically as Parent, you would be taking pictures of your own child, and thus potentially causing your own kid to get injured! This rule is typically announced at each meet! **The Judges will go ballistic when they see a flash go off in the audience.** I have actually seen them take peoples camera's until after the meet. The judges can also penalize your child or the team for violations to this rule. Many more modern cameras and phone cameras have "auto-flash" on them, and if the camera doesn't like the lighting, it will automatically go off. Many parents are looking through the view-finder and are completely oblivious that they are flashing. Whatever you bring, make sure the flash is turned off. Flash is fine when the meet is over and they are getting awards.

Many of the 'bigger' competitions have Professional Photographers at the meet. They are typically by the floor and beam, and try to catch good 'action shots'. Then, they sell their wares immediately following the meet or put them online. You are under no obligation to buy, but sometimes they catch great shots you can have put on a Coffee Mug or T-Shirt.

**\*\* ADMISSIONS / REGISTRATION**— When you first arrive at the meet, they typically have 2 tables—one for Admissions, and one for Gymnast Registration. Most gyms charge an admission fee for spectators. This varies from gym to gym, however it typically is \$7.00 / adult at smaller meets hosted in gym clubs, and \$10.00+ at bigger competitions hosted in arenas. Be sure you have some cash because most gyms do not have MAC machines nor take Visa for admissions. You also want some spending cash for concessions and often they have 50/50 raffles and Chinese Auctions.

Gymnasts should always check in to the Registration Table. At this table they will Check in and receive their competitor number (typically written on their hand). Sometimes they are also given a gift or T-Shirt as a memento of the competition. Many times they hand this stuff out at the end. Your child doesn't need any paperwork or ID, in that we submit all that info prior to the meet.

**\*\* WARM-UP TIME:** A gymnast should be present 'ready to go' at least 15 minutes prior to their scheduled start time. Every meet allows a minimum of 20 minutes for General Stretch & Warm-up (typically 1/2 hour). This is a very important time to get the gymnasts body and mind warmed-up and ready to go. After the 'General Warm-up', the gymnasts will be directed to warm up on the apparatus. There are different formats depending on the type of meet. At many smaller meets they will run 'Traditional Format' which means the gymnasts will go warm-up their skills on all of the events (Floor, Bars, Vault...) They will then assemble after warming up on all the events and March-in for Introductions. At larger competitions (like Star's & Stripes) they will run what is called "Non-Traditional Format". This format means the gymnasts will warm-up one event, and then immediately compete that event. When done, they will move to the next event and warm-up that event.

Each gymnast is given an allotted amount of time to warm-up. Compulsory gymnasts are allowed 1 minute per apparatus. Optional gymnasts are allotted 1 1/2 to 2 minutes per apparatus depending on level. There typically is a person from the host gym or Judge timing the warm-ups to ensure each gymnast gets their allotted time. What most coaches will do is "Block" their time which means they add up the total amount of time given to their gymnasts and share it with-in their team. For example if we have 9 compulsory gymnasts, we will block 9 minutes of time and share them as a team. This is typically better in that the gymnasts don't have to rush as much to get ready. Sometimes we may be in mixed squads with other teams. In this case it all depends on the situation and the team we are with. Some gyms are fine and we block with them because it favors the athletes on both teams. However some gyms are out for blood, and will do anything to get extra time for their kids and disadvantage your team in which case we take our time independently. What this all means to you is that if it is a "Traditional Format", you have about an hour to kill before your child actually competes. Go get a coffee and a newspaper and relax. If it is a 'Non-Traditional' format, then you have about 10-15 minutes between each event.

**\*\* OLYMPIC ORDER:** The gymnasts / our team will ‘Randomly’ be assigned a starting event. This is the initial apparatus that the gymnast will compete on. From there, the gymnasts will rotate in “Olympic Order” which is the standardized international norm. Women Rotate— Vault // Uneven Bars // Balance Beam // Floor Ex. Men’s Olympic Order is— Floor Ex. // Pommel Horse // Still Rings // Vault // Parallel Bars // High Bar. This means if the girls are randomly selected to start on Uneven Bars, then their next event will be Beam.

As a coach, I typically hate drawing Beam as my first event. My reasoning is typically most gymnasts are very nervous in the beginning of the meet until they ‘settle in’. Beam by its very nature is very difficult, and the nerves (shaking & adrenaline rush) make it even more difficult. If the gymnast starts the meet with a fall, it often is hard to get their spirits up for the next 3 events, thus sometimes makes for a very long day for me. As a coach I like to get Vault first in that it is an event that favors the adrenaline rush. It makes them run faster which helps their score. They also get 2 vaults (women only) and pick the better score.

**\*\* ATHLETE ORDER:** Depending on the meet your child will either be first up, last up, or somewhere in the middle. How this is decided depends on the meet and the coach. At large meets and always State Meets and higher, the order in which the athletes compete is a random draw. This is to try to ensure there is no favoritism or strategy in play by the coaches. A different gymnast in each squad is predetermined to start first, and rarely does and athlete have to be first to go twice in the meet.

At most other meets, the Coach determines the order. There often is sometimes a strategy employed by the coaches. Realize that the judging is ‘supposed’ to be objective, however we are all human (Judges as well) and often interject ‘subjectivity’. Thus the coaches often play this way.... Typically I will line my athletes up weakest on that event to strongest. This is for the benefit of both the weakest and strongest gymnast. Often early in the meet, the Judges tend to be more conservative with their scores. If they start too high (let’s say a 9.5 with the first gymnast), where do they go if they have 15 gymnasts who are better? Thus, if your best kid goes first, he/she may get a more conservative score. As the meet progresses, that score often doesn’t stand up as the meet goes on and the Judges see more athletes.

Also, if a really strong gymnast goes up, immediately followed by a weak gymnasts, it makes the weaker gymnast look even weaker, thus hurting his/her score. There are many coaching strategies depending on the circumstances. Sometimes I may have a very consistent gymnast go first to establish in the judges mind that we are a serious competitive team. If I put up a gymnast that is very weak and may have 3 falls on beam, the judges may think that we are not a good team and therefore continue judging with that perception making it more difficult for the rest of the teammates. Sometimes we may start with our most consistent followed by the ascending predictions, with the weakest athlete at the end so as not to hurt the team score. Sometimes we also may sneak a gymnast in the high middle of the group to try to get her qualified for his/her State meet. By trying to build the scores higher and higher, we sneak in a weaker athlete who the judge suspects is better than the previous gymnasts, and although the score may dip down, it doesn’t go as low as it would otherwise thus allowing them to build a qualifying score. Sometimes, each gymnast is stronger at one event, thus I sometimes allow them to pick their order or have a contest to determine order. The moral is, do not take offense by the order in which your child competes... it is almost always in their best interest.

**\*\* QUALIFYING:** I mention qualifying in the previous paragraph. This refers to the minimum score required for the gymnast to get to the “Championship Meets”. This is a season goal for every gymnast on our team, and is necessary to advance to our PA Championship Meets. To Qualify for the State Championships, a Gymnast must earn a specific “All Around” score—pre-determined by the PA Gymnastics State Board. First, the All Around Score—is the ‘total score’ added up from all the events. For Girls, this is their Vault Score added to their Bar Score added to their Beam Score and Floor Score. For Boys, it is the total of all 6 event scores. A Gymnast can for example do Great and win a medal on the Bars. Then the gymnast blows their entire Floor Routine and will not get a medal for Floor. As a result, that Floor Score will hurt them in the All Around. Often, a gymnast may do pretty good on all of the events, but just under the Medal range for getting an award on any of the events. However, all of those Pretty Good scores add up to a Higher All Around than does—Lets say the gymnast who won Bars.

But, the gymnasts are all trying to secure a spot at the State Championships. Again, this score differs from Level to Level and is determined by the PA State Board. For Women’s Qualification to States...

Level 3:	34.00AA	Level 4:	34.00AA	Level 5:	32.00AA
Level 6:	33.00AA	Level 7:	33.00AA	Level 8:	32.00AA
Level 9:	32.00AA	Level 10:	32.00AA	Xcel:	33.00AA

For Men’s See Justin. I have no clue.

This qualifying score can be attained any time during the season at any meet (even out of State).

This year, a decision by the PA State Board decided to split the Level 3 and Level 4 States into an Eastern State

Championship and a Western State Championship. Thus, our Level 3's are trying to make the Level 3 Western PA State Championships, and the level 4's to the Level 4 Western PA State Championships. This decision was made in that last year there were 800 Level 3's who qualified to the State Championships.

Championship Meets for Women are as follows...

Level 3 = Level 3 Western State Championships

Level 4 = Level 4 Western State Championships

Level 5 = Level 5 State Championships

Level 6 = Level 6 State Championships

Level 7 = Level 7 State Championships

Level 8 = Level 8 State Championships / then, the top 6 athletes per age group advance to the Level 8 Regional Championships.

(Regionals refers to USA Gymnastics {our National Governing Body} breakdown of Geographical Maps. There are 8 Regions in the USA. We (PA) are part of Region VII. This includes PA, NJ, MD, DE, WV, VA, DC.)

Level 9 = Level 9/10 State Championships / then a 34.00AA advances them to Level 9 Regional Championships.

Then, the top 8 / age group advance to Eastern National Championships.

Level 10 = Level 9/10 State Championships / 34.00AA to qualify to Level 10 Regional Championships / then top 6 per age group advance to JO National Championships.

Xcel = Xcel State Championships for Gold / Platinum / Diamond. We are the proud host of this competition this year and will get you more news about that. It will be at the Bayfront Convention Center—May 1, 2—2015

Sub-note to the Men. Sorry, I don't have all the answers. The reason is that Men run the Men's State Board. With that said, years ago I used to coach the Men's Team. We coaches would attend the Tim Weaver Invitational (first meet of the year). After the meet, the coaches would gather, open a couple cases of beer, and then decide where they wanted to host the State Championships, what the Qualification Scores should be... then we would tell jokes and stories until late in the evening. Eventually, someone would shoot out an email with all the pertinent info. To my knowledge, it is still done the same way.

With the Women's Program, they have several women on the board including the State Chairmen. They meet several times a year. They drink only wine. By June, they know who is hosting what State Meet, the Dates, the Qualifying Scores, and what the apparel should be for Coaches who have athletes qualify to Regionals, so we all look alike at the meets. They have an Award Committee, Apparel Committee, a Representative for every Level,

....

This just goes to show you that ... well ... Men are more fun.

**\*\* AGE GROUPS:** Typically at a meet you will see a lot of gymnasts. Sometimes like our Star's & Stripes, there may be multiple sessions of athletes at the same level. USA Gymnastics limits the number of athletes competing in a Session or Flight to 96 athletes for compulsory or 64 for Optionals. At most meets these 90 athletes are not all directly competing against each other. The athletes are broken into age groups. There is a predetermined Age Group for State Meets and higher, but none for Invitational's which are most of the meets we attend. The Age Groups are typically determined by the host club. Some Clubs are generous with awards, and break these age groups down pretty far. Other competitions have larger Age Groups. As an example, the upcoming meet may have 80 level 4's registered for the meet. The youngest is 6, and the oldest level 4 is 14 years old. They will break these athletes into 4 age groups— (Age 9 and under) (Age 10) (Age 11) and (Age 12+). Thus each age group is broken into about 20 gymnasts. Let's say your child is 10 yrs old. He/She will compete in the 10 year old age group against all the other gymnasts who are 10 years old. This will include gymnasts from other gyms, and most likely some team mates. There will be separate awards for just this Age Group. Thus, there will be a Vault Champion for this age group, and a different one for the other age groups. So, unless you know the other kids on the other teams and how old they are, it is very difficult to tell who is winning prior to awards. However I will emphasize the following point. Gymnastics is NOT like most other sports (Basketball / Baseball / Soccer / Boxing...) In most sports, there are 2 teams or 2 competitors and they go head to head. At the end of the game, there is 1 winner and 1 loser. In gymnastics, your child will be up against 15, 25, 40, even 60 other gymnasts all competing for 1 gold medal. Depending on how you look at it, there can be one winner and 59 losers. That is typically not how we judge the gymnasts.

At most meets they award a minimum of 25% awards. That means that if they are in the top 25% of their age group they will get a medal. The term Podium is used to describe the Awards stands at meets. If the gymnast makes the podium, it typically means they placed first, second, or third at the meet. This is always good. However we typically base success on specific goals for our gymnasts. For our newer athletes, just getting out there and doing their routines is cause for celebration regardless of score. It is scary to put on a little leo and get out in front of a large (typically hostile) audience. I say hostile in terms of the only people who want your child to win is the parents of that child and the coach.

There are many goals set by the coaches and the athletes... things like perfecting a specific skill, reaching a specific score, qualifying, sticking a beam routine....

**\*\* AGE DETERMINATION:** The age group a gymnast is entered in is determined by the age the gymnast will be at the culminating meet of the Season. This means Levels 4-7 athletes will compete in the age group they will be as of the PA State Championships for that level. Level 8's will be the age they are the date of the Region VII Championships. Levels 9 & 10 will compete in the age they will be as of Nationals. These dates are posted on the PA website and on our website under Stars & Stripes. It is important to note for levels 4 thru 7 that when competing in other states, your child may be a different age in that each state governs when they host their State Meets. Thus, NY, WV, OH State dates are not the same as ours, so they technically may get moved around at each meet.

**\*\* JUDGES:** As much as we try to make the sport Objective, the sport is "Subjective" in nature. I at one point in my career used to Judge, and I can attest it is a very very difficult job. I didn't like it at all. However 'most' of the Men & Women who judge are professionals. To become a Judge, they have to pass a series of tests. The tests are extremely difficult. To give you an idea, every skill in gymnastics has its own name. Each of these skills has a symbol that looks like a Chinese Letter. There are 1000's of skills in gymnastics. Judges must know all of these Hieroglyphics for each skill as well as their point value. Skills are given a point value based on their difficulty. Easy skills are rated "A" skills, and the most difficult skills are rated "E". In addition to the rating of the skills, there is 'combination bonus' given for performing 2 or more difficult skills in a row. For example a gymnast performing 2 "C" skills in combination receive 0.10 in Bonus.

All Compulsory skills at levels 4, 5, & 6 are all competing "A" level skills. Gymnasts do not perform "B" level skills until level 6. Level 9's & 10's perform D & E level skills. Anyway, the Judges in gymnastics are typically very bright people (contrary to popular belief). To give an example, Terri Bailey who is Erie's only National Level Optional Judge. She has a Masters Degree in Bioorganic Chemistry. Another gym friend Mark Welsh who typically judges our Star's & Stripes meet was the youngest Doctor to graduate in the country. My other friend—Jane Caruso—will be the Meet Referee for our Xcel State Championships. She has a Master's Degree in Chemistry and did AIDS Virus research for 20 years. Thus, they are often very smart, and I think attracted to the sport for the challenge of both the mind and body.

However this doesn't alleviate the fact that often the sport can be subjective. Thus, it is important to 'Kiss @\$' occasionally and mind your P's & Q's. To give an example, a Judge on Compulsory Vault has to judge 90 kids in a session all of which compete 2 vaults (so they see 180 front Handsprings) in 3 hours and determine the rank—First thru last for all 90 gymnasts. They have to constantly ask themselves if that kid who competed 5th in the morning was slightly better or worse than this kid 80 kids later. It's a hard job.

As a coach, our sport is based on score, and it is these scores that determine who wins and who loses. This sometimes is the most frustrating aspect of coaching. There are "Regional Differences" in the judging. Western PA (where we are) tends to have the toughest judges and give the lowest scores. New York and Eastern Ohio have more lenient scoring. For example, let's say we go to this first meet in NY. Your child does a decent, but not great vault and receives an 8.50 for her efforts. The next meet we go to Pittsburgh and she does a great Vault, much better than the one in NY, and gets a 7.90. This is really hard not only to explain to a gymnast, but even harder to explain to a Parents. How do we explain that your child is getting better, however her score got worse. Coaches tend to take these fluctuations in stride. We mostly concern ourselves with "Rank". Maybe she did score a 7.9, but if that was the best vault of the day and gets gold, the score isn't that important then. **DO NOT PUT A LOT OF WEIGHT IN THE SCORES!**

Most of the times the scoring is pretty fair. It can be difficult though when you don't know the rules. If you are in the stands, and are watching routines, you may see a kid stay on the beam and receive an 8.20. The next gymnast up falls off the beam and scores an 8.65. This can be frustrating to watch! However there often are good reasons for the difference in scores. The coaches know the rules, and will explain after the competition if you want to know why.

Occasionally a score goes astray, and coaches have the right to "protest" the score. There is a procedure called an "Inquiry" that is filed by the coach if the coach does not think the score is correct. Sometimes there are very easily explainable reasons... for example the kid flashing the score is dyslexic. Instead of flashing a 9.60 to the crowd, the kid flashes a 6.90. These things happen but are correct in the computer. But sometimes the judges do make mistakes. It is up to the coaches to file these if they see fit. This may not be how the parent sees it, and has led to many a parent / coach battle. We use this "Inquiry" procedure sparingly. Some coaches from other teams are notorious for writing these inquiries frequently. When they are overused, the coach and team develop a reputation and become known as whiners, and often the Inquiry is dismissed—just as the boy who cries 'Wolf'.

**\*\* JUDGES / OFFICIALS / BOUNDARIES—** It should be noted... **NEVEN APPROACH A JUDGE nor OFFICIAL** at any meet for any reason. If you think there is a significant problem, you may only inquire to our

coaching staff. Over exuberant parents of past often wish to tell officials exactly what they think of the score the judge gave their daughter. This may be OK at a Hockey or Football game, however NOT at a gymnastics meet. Doing so can hurt the reputation of our gym, your daughters scores at the meet, a team penalty, and his/her scores at future meets.

Being in Gymnastics is like being from West Virginia. We're ALL related to each other in some way or another! This is VERY IMPORTANT to remember, especially if you like to gossip, or are prone to uncontrolled outbursts. Almost every Owner, Coach, and Judge no each other. Right now I have about 10 of my former gymnasts who loved gymnastics, moved to a different city and coach or own Gyms there. This Judge was a former gymnast for that gym, and this Coach was a Gymnast at this other gym. Although we are rivals at Competitions, we typically are friends outside. The winner typically buys the drinks and we have to listen to him (or me occasionally) brag of our conquests.

Many parents do not initially realize this 'inter-relationship'. We once had 2 mothers who went to the bathroom together at a meet. In their 'chit-chat', they started complaining about the "FAT @\$\$ Judge on Floor". While they tore her up, that Judge politely remained in her stall long enough to hear the conversation—emerging just in time to see the Team Lightning logos on the parents shirts.

Another Father followed a judge outside on a smoke break to tell her exactly what he thought of her scores. He thought since we were in Pittsburgh, he would never see her again. Wrong, this is a very tight knit sport, and he saw her at the Sectional Championships and again at the State Championships.

Another important warning is watching what you say in the stands. It is a tight knit sport. Just like we have some of our staff have gymnasts on the team. They sit in the stands during the meet, and look like unassuming parents. If you sit and make fun of some team because their kids all fell on beam, or you make fun of a kids hairstyle or the way their coach looks, you are asking for trouble—and typically harming both our Team and your kid. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.

That is not to shun you from talking to people in the stands. This is part of the fun and 'gymnastics experience'. I often encourage it. Why? You will most likely find, that as expensive as you feel we are, you will find that most gyms are way higher in both tuition and Booster Fees. But, for the most part, you're all in the same boat. Most parents from other teams don't know a lot about the sport either, and there is some comfort in that fact.

Beware the parent who seems to know too much. I don't know how many times a year I have to deal with something that came as hear-say from some other parent in the stand.

I will interject this funny story. I was hosting the Stars & Stripes Meet a couple years ago. My daughter, Mackenzie, was on the Level 4 Team. Between the sessions, I went outside to have a smoke. Another Parent just arriving for the meet was outside smoking. She had no idea who I was. So she asked me if I had a daughter in the meet. I answered her "Yes". She asked what level and I answered "Level 4". "Oh", she said, "so you're a Rookie at this"? So then she proceeded to tell me everything about Level 4 and the entire 'gymnastics experience'. I politely listened and was thoroughly enlightened, taking notes of the interesting perspective she provided me with. She did tell me though that she heard this is a really good meet, to which I was flattered!

Bottom line, just be cautious of what you say and what you hear.

#### **\*\* PARENT / GYMNAST BOUNDARIES — Gymnasts Floor / Parents Stands!!! NO EXCEPTIONS!!!**

**Once the gymnast comes onto the floor, they are ours. There are boundaries at a meet, and Parents are NOT PERMITTED to come out onto the floor or near the equipment. These boundaries exist predominantly for safety reasons. During the meet the gymnasts are not permitted to go visit mom & dad in the stands. Also, do not chase them into the bathrooms. Parent interference typically does more harm than good. I would also like to point out that the intricate hand signals & gestures that some parents do to signal their children is distracting. There are some parents who have this intricate hand sign language that challenges even a third base coaches signals. Again, this typically does more harm than good. If you want to give the 'thumbs up' signal, that's OK by me, but stop at that!**

**If they fall, we will take care of it! If they cry, we will take care of it! If they are misbehaving, we will take care of it! If you want to coach, please see me for a job application—knowing however that I do not permit even my staff of coaching their own child. Your job is to Parent, ours is to Coach. There is a huge difference in those 2 positions.**

I will tell you I've been doing this for awhile. I will give you some friendly very important advice! As a Parent, we sometimes feel helpless when our child has a problem. Our instinct is to help our child. However, we often don't know exactly what to do. As a result, we try to do something, anything, that will immediately solve the problem.

Since I've been doing this so long, I have some 'tell tale' signs of Gymnasts who are never going to make it past the first several Levels based on how their Parents—Parent them. I take note of a few things Parents do or say, and I can make a Highly accurate prediction of who will make it and who will not. I can make these predictions and seal it in an envelope, and give it to you when your child quits at age 13. It's often not the case that the child didn't have the ability to make it extremely far in the sport. It's just that the Parent unintentionally forced that kid to quit or lose their love for the sport. The ironic part of it is that the Parent often has no clue they

were the root of the problem, and the Blame get diverted to Me or my staff.

Perhaps the biggest common denominator is not completely understanding that their gymnastics career is a Marathon and NOT a Sprint. In this sport, it is often the Turtles that emerge as the Victors, and the Jackrabbits who quit.

Too often, parents look at the skills of the Level and make a determination that they aren't "good enough". So then the Parent tries to intervene in the process. They lecture or try to bribe their child into getting better scores. The apply pressure... 'if you don't qualify or move up', then I'm forcing you to quit. "I pay too much money for you not to Excel in the sport"! Too often Parents exaggerate their own sporting careers much higher than they really were! "When I was young... I did it this way...". Other parents feel that putting pressure on their Coach or me somehow is going to get us to pay more attention to their child. Often this too backfires in that the coach—trying to please the parent—puts too much pressure on the kid—forcing additional stress. A little stress can be a good thing. Too much stress is deadly!

To share a story with my own kid. Jesse played Hockey. It was his passion. He started too late in that I didn't realize some of these kids had been on the ice since they were 2, and he was 10 when we enrolled him. I would watch his games, actually loved to watch them! Although I don't know a whole lot about Hockey, I could easily see when he messed up as a player. I could tell when he was out of position, or skating too slow.... Feeling that I as an occupation as a coach could help, I started giving him advice.

I would critique his games on the car ride home—pointing out what he did wrong. I tried to point out what he did right, but I don't think he heard that part. I started to push him to do different drills at home, and bought him goal posts and training aids. I gave him tactics I wanted him to try at the next game. I was watching, so I would know if he did that or not.

I had to miss a game one day, and he called me so happy that he had the winning goal. I got it then, that the common denominator was I wasn't there. I talked to the coach, pointing out his problems and how I tried to help. The coach pointed out to me that he did NOT want Jesse doing that move and that Jesse was coming along fine.

So, I tried going to a game and after the game keeping my mouth shut. I only complimented him on the things he did well. It was a whole different—happy conversation that ride. No pouting, no arguments, no tears.... As I did this, every game he seemed to improve and now was happy I was there to see. I didn't ever critique him again.

I was intent to love him if he was a great Hockey player or a horrible Hockey player. It works!

**\*\* SCORING—** Typically immediately following your child's routine, they will flash the score your child received on that event. Sometimes they are on flashers, sometimes dry/erase boards. You should record this score. This score is added to the scores they will receive on the other events to determine the All Around (AA). The AA is the most prestigious award. Awards are given to the top percentage of gymnasts in each age level. At normal meets the number of awards is set by the host club. Some are very generous and make sure everyone gets something. Others only give a required 25%. There is a set of awards given for each event, and one set of awards for AA. So, they may have a great Vault and receive an award for that, and have a bad bar routine and not get an award for that event. These are referred to as "Individual Awards".

Many meets are also —"Team Competitions". This is where the Team Attending the competition are directly competing against each other. The Team Score is determined by the top (5 compulsory // 3 Optional) scores for each event. So, we take our top 5 Vault scores and add them together. Then we take our top 5 Bars scores and add them together.... The total of the scores for all the events is our Team Score. This is typically for a trophy awarded to the top teams at the competition. Thus, even is a kid screws up an event, they often can still be part of the "Team Score". For example, my daughter Mackenzie was by no means a top AA gymnast. She is horrible on beam, so so on Floor and Vault, but she is awesome on bars. In many meets, Tina needed Mackenzies good bar score to help the Team Score. As a result, even if she didn't get as many medals as most kids, she was a very important part of the team. Kind of like the Kicker on a Football Team. Games are won and lost because of one persons efforts. Thus, they all are important to our success.

**\*\* COACHING CHILDREN—** We will not Parent your child, so please don't Coach our Gymnast. Too often parents want to help, and they fill their kids heads with tons of advice. Too often parents have an inflated and exaggerated memories of themselves as youth sports heroes. As a result, they want to pass off all of their supposed experience on their children. Problem is that a) most have no clue even the basic rules of the sport b) were no where near as good as they thought they were c) usually just frazzle the child they are trying to help even more so than the child is already. In this business, I have cringed at having to be some of these kids. For a 2 hour ride to Pittsburgh they are drilled on 'How to do it correctly'. Then, they are lectured for 2 hours on the way home about everything they did wrong. I feel even worse for the kids who have to go all the way to Philadelphia. The truth be told, no gymnast ever deliberately falls off the beam. Even the Chinese gymnasts who have trained their whole waking life fall off the beam at the Olympics. Gymnastics is hard! It is easy for the parent to tell the kid how to stay on the beam, however if I took some of these heroes and put them up on the beam and had them try even the simplest of gymnastics skills, I would scare these retired college football players.

The advice we have for you is to be a Parent! Tell them you love them no matter how they do at the meet. Give them a big hug and tell them you are proud of them whether they win or lose. Buy them that special leo whether they stick the beam or fall 5 times. Applaud for them no matter how they did. If you really want to help, keep their mind distracted on the way to the meet. Keep them light and in a good mood. Play a car game or sing their favorite songs. Get them laughing and joking instead of being uptight and nervous. Personal Story — My son plays Hockey. At some point he was selected for "Travel Hockey" - which is the equivalent of the gymnastics team your child is on. I am not all that up to date with the various Hockey lingo nor rules. I can see when he makes a mistake. For awhile, I would talk to him after the game trying to help him by pointing out his mistakes. This soon would turn into a fight in the car with him forced to defend his mistakes. Half way home, no one was talking in the car in that we were all stewing. Somewhere along the line, he had a really good game. Thus I really didn't have any critique. We talked about all the good things he did at the game the whole way home. Everyone was happy, laughing, joking.... The next game, he played even better. Why? I think the compliments and encouragement made him even more confident. He became more secure with his position and was motivated to do even better. Since then, he has significantly improved, and I rarely if ever critique any of his mistakes. He however has grown into a very good player, and we don't fight in the car rides anymore. If you want to help, review the good things



they do at the meet and leave the criticizing to us coaches.

**\*\* STUFFED ANIMALS -** Bobby the bear, Ken & Barbie will have to stay in the car or stands during the meet. Please do not send the kids with comfort bears and toys when competing.

**\*\* WATCH WHAT YOU SAY—** Again, this is a very tight knit sport. Everyone knows everyone—coaches, gymnasts, judges, owners.... Many parents get themselves into trouble by shooting off their mouth in front of the wrong people. I have seen fights in the stands from Parents who play judge and comment on other teams routines only to find the Mom of the kids they were very critical of was sitting in front of them. I think it is due to the high amount of estrogen in the gym, however gossip in this sport and gym is rampant. I also mention the parents talking in the stalls of the bathroom as the judge sat in the next stall — Not good. If your child is good and sticks with this sport, he/she will see these same judges, coaches, owner, and these other parents for years to come. Many of our optional gymnasts and parents are friends with some of these kids on other teams. It's a case of familiarity in that they have traded places competitively, stayed at the same hotels, swim in the same pools... for years, that they have become friends. Many of them keep in touch via facebook & my space. Thus, keep emotions and egos in check.

**\*\* AWARDS:** The awards ceremony immediately follows the competition. The gymnasts are to remain in full dress for awards. Changing into jeans and a meet T-Shirt are frowned upon. The awards vary from meet to meet depending on the gym and the theme of the meet. Most meets award medals for the events and All Around. Some meets will give plaques with a spot to place metal stickers with the place. Many meets will give trophies or banners for All Around winners or Team. Lower level meets tend to be more generous with awards than are optional meets.

**\*\* HOTELS:** When attending a meet that requires a hotel stay, it is a great idea to all try to stay together as a Team. Typically the host club will recommend several hotels in their area. Often they work out deals for special rates at these hotels for gymnastics families. It is a good idea to make these reservations ASAP in that at many large meets, the hotels sell out quickly. EGC does not mandate where you stay. Some people have points on their CC for specific hotels, some have relatives in the town.... But it is nice when traveling to get everyone together for fun. Many times the kid decorate their door with Team Lightning Stuff, so take some paper, posters, and markers. Most often it is dinner and swimming, however each town offers something unique that the team often do together.

**\*\* AFTER MEET CELEBRATION:** Depending on the circumstances of the meet, we often get together after the meet for lunch or dinner before heading home. These are loosely organized, but common. For example I will use the upcoming Buffalo Meet for compulsory gymnasts. If the Team did very well at the meet in Buffalo we like to go out and celebrate our victories. The Level 5 meet is over at noon, everyone is hungry, so we find a nearby Applebee's, or Chucky Cheese, and the whole team goes. The coaches like to go as well, however in this case right after the 5's are finished, the Level 4's are coming in to start their meet. Thus, you 5 Parents will have to organize this in the Parking lot. When the Level 4's are done competing Tina and the coaches will probably want to go get something to eat and drink. See her after the meet.

**\*\* CONTACTING THE HOST GYM:** **Never, repeat NEVER contact the Host Gym of any meet.** The only reason to contact another gym is if you wish your child to quit EGC and go to that gym.

Please let me tell you the following Scenario. I (EGC) host the Stars & Stripes Coed Gymnastics Invitational. Last year we had 1,400 gymnasts attend that meet. Can you imagine how overwhelmed our gym would get fielding 1,400 phone calls and emails??? Everything from what time are the Level 6's?, how do I get there?, are you going to have diet soda at the Concession Stand because my husband has diabetes?

We—and every meet director knows that Parents want to know the Schedule. We all realize that Parents have other children who may have scheduled activities for that weekend. We all realize that many parents have to work at jobs where they need to request days off way in advance. We all realize that you can't schedule a Hotel until you know exactly what day and time your kid competes. We all know and understand that.

With that said, what most parents don't know is that there are certain protocols—Rules & Policies—we must adhere to when scheduling a Competition. We are only allowed certain numbers of athletes in various sessions based on their Level. We have certain deadlines to accept Injury petitions.... These rules were developed by USAG, for the health and safety of the athlete and not necessarily with convenience in mind. Such is the way of Gymnastics.

I can know the weekend date we are going to the State Championship, however I can not know what time the Level 6 age 9 year olds will compete. It could be Saturday morning, it could be Sunday night.

Believe it or not, we've already fielded a few phone calls of "Do you know what time the Level 3 age 10 gymnasts will compete at the Stars and Stripes? I haven't even received an entry yet for that meet to have any clue.

As a result of this, proper protocol every parent on the team goes through their coach only for this information. I will typically email this stuff out the minute I receive it. I do not sit on this stuff for weeks. Typically the day I get it—you get it. With the sport, this can be less than 2 weeks out. Last year I had a parent call me to tell me that they wanted me to move Level 7 to Sunday because they were going on vacation the prior week, and "Suzy" wanted to be able to practice Saturday before the meet! Hello??? Yeah right, I am going to move 1,399 athletes around because Suzy just got back from the Bahamas! LOL I think I started their whole team on Friday and on Beam!

The gym owners and coaches typically stick together on this and all warn their teams. We also tend NOT to treat it lightly. I was already notified that TNT—Pumpkin Patch meet coming up had both a Phone call and an email. In this case, it was my fault because

I had not yet sent this letter. You guys got the jump on me, and I realize in both cases it was Level 3 new people who just didn't know. However, for future, please refrain from every calling another gym. We will provide you with all you need to know as soon as we know it.

\*\* EMERGENCY NUMBERS— If you get lost, your child gets sick, or an emergency arises, you need to contact the coach. You can not call the gym in that we have no office staff there on Saturdays and Sundays, so we won't get the message until Monday.

Compulsory Girls = Cindy's Cell —814-504-3892

Optional Girls = Doug's Cell —814-504-1102

Men's Team = Justin's Cell — 814-449-7201

\*\* This was Gymnastics for Parents 101.

I am working on Gymnastics for Dummies—Cliff note version. I hope you enjoyed reading this and hope it answered some of your many questions. We realize that this is new to many of you, and that our sport is obscure. This is by no means complete, and you should have additional questions as we go. I just didn't want to overwhelm you! LOL!

We don't object in the least to answering your questions, and are happy to do so. Please if you have a question feel free to write me an email or request a call.

Thanks