SHAPING FOR GYMNASTICS

Teaching Proper Positions for Gymnastics Success

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I was asked to place a priority on which videos in our Success Video Library that I considered to be the most beneficial. This was a difficult choice in that all of our videos deliver important information, but since I had to choose I went with the video that would be the most useful throughout all phases of coaching. That would be the Shaping for Gymnastics Video.

Here are 5 things I would like you to know about the importance of teaching proper gymnastics shapes. 1- Athletes who understand the core shapes of gymnastics skills will certainly progress faster, 2- Proper gymnastics shapes will assist with better form and execution of the gymnastics skills, 3- Efficiently transitioning from one quality shape to another will enhance the ability to produce speed, power and thus amplitude (an essential component of advanced gymnastics skills), 4- Proper shapes will help reduce the stress that this sport can place on a body and 5- Quality shapes add to the artistry of the sport.

A problem that exists in most gymnastics programs is that the attention given to teaching proper gymnastics shapes is introduced far too late in the developmental process. Shaping should begin with day one of gymnastics training. The adage “old habits die hard” is particularly true when it comes to gymnastics shapes. Good or bad, old habits will die hard. So coach, you might as well get the ball rolling in the right direction from day one.

Another problem that exists is that in most programs the developmental levels are taught by less experienced coaches who in turn may not fully realize the importance of teaching quality gymnastics shapes and positions. By the time these athletes get to the main coach, the damage is difficult to reverse. That is where this video can help. The main purpose of “Shaping for Gymnastics” is to emphasize the importance of proper shapes for all levels. The concepts are not difficult to understand but they do require focused attention.

Our Shaping for Gymnastics Video will not only identify the most important shapes and positions in gymnastics but also demonstrate good examples. Your developmental through advanced coaches alike will find this information to be beneficial as you steer your athletes towards success. Perhaps more important than the actual examples shown is the emphasis on the highest standards. Shaping is a necessity during every rotation: vault, bars, beam, floor, tumbling, and conditioning and thus the reason why I chose it as the video to start our Platinum Plus Program with.
Implementing an emphasis on proper shapes throughout your program is essential if competitive results are the goal of your club. In some places they are not, and this is fine. However, if there is an expectation to excel in competition then spending time on shapes is a worthwhile investment. With this being said however, there isn’t any quick fix. Shaping is a never-ending process that requires constant and consistent attention, year in and year out.

**Important things to consider:**

- **Begin with the smallest details or shape component.** As each component of the shape attains an acceptable degree of excellence, add on. Build a strong base and you will be able to progress over time. A shaky foundation however will eventually develop problems. Going back to fix problems is far more frustrating and time consuming than doing things right in the first place.

- **Shaping can be an actual teaching rotation but more often than not it is simply part of the teaching content on each event.** Because proper shaping requires such attention to detail, you the coach must be very observant so as to consistently enforce the highest standard.

- **Although increasing resistance is a vital part of enhancing physical abilities, resistance is less important when introducing the concepts of shapes.** Never sacrifice the quality of the shape for quantity of resistance. Adding resistance can be of some benefit but only after a shape has attained a very high degree of proficiency.

- **The main lesson being taught during shaping is the lesson of “Muscle Memory”.** Teaching the body and mind to automatically know what shapes to attain creates a smoothness and artistry to the movements. The problem is that muscles have a short-lived memory capacity and therefore have to be reminded quite often in order to maintain excellence. Muscle memory requires constant review.

- **Increasing numbers is another proven method for building strength.** It is important to remember once again to keep numbers manageable so as to encourage quality. Unreasonable numbers cause detrimental fatigue, which in turn lessens the attention to detail. Numbers should be increased only as the athlete’s shapes progress.
• Increasing range of motion is another fundamental aspect to consider once a shape has been mastered. Keep in mind however, that some shapes are meant to have limited ranges of motion in order to isolate specific muscles or muscle groups. Likewise certain joints are best kept within limited ranges (knee and elbow hyper-extension as an example).

• Controlled lowering is something that is emphasized throughout the video. Slow lowering or the eccentric contraction of a muscle, is a great method for increasing strength. Controlled lowering also encourages total body control and thus creates better shapes. Muscling, swinging, and struggling through desired shapes is counter productive.

• Progressing slowly through different shapes provides a better path to learning what is right. For instance, tucked to pike to straight body lever ups not only allows for the athlete to handle the exercise while they develop the needed strength to advance the shape, but also teaches an awareness of each shape along the way. Generally speaking, shorter body lengths are easier to shape than longer ones (tucked positions are easier to perfect than layout/straight positions). Therefore progressing from smaller shapes to longer/larger shapes is a good plan.

• Shaping, at times, requires hands on corrections. The best way to learn a proper position is to be put into that position over and over again. This requires you the coach to be interactive with the athletes. Verbal cues are great and certainly necessary but hands on corrections will shorten the learning curve for your athletes.

• Increasing the hold times is another method for strength development. Holding a desired shape as a single element (hollow holds, arch holds, handstand holds) or holding at the end of a dynamic set of exercises (the last repetition of leg lifts or reverse sit ups) will benefit both the will power and strength. A gradual increase in the amount of hold time will help prevent poor shapes.

• One of the biggest benefits of proper shaping is the impact that it will have on reducing the stress, wear and tear on the body. Although injures can never be totally eliminated in this unforgiving sport, they can be significantly reduced with careful attention to numbers, techniques, alignment and positions. Proper shaping reduces the stress on the body by encouraging efficient alignment, reducing angles and creating total body control.
Gymnastics Shapes

The following are the basic gymnastics shapes and their related areas of emphasis.

• Straight
  This is undoubtedly the most desired of all gymnastics shapes. The perfect straight handstand, layout salto, or the perfectly aligned dance element is simply eye catching. The straight shape is normally the desired finish position after transitioning through other gymnastics shapes. It is like the grand finale position.
  The straight line requires great attention to detail. The straight vertical line of a handstand should extend from the base of support (hands) through the elbows, shoulders, upper back, ribs, lower back, thighs, calves and feet. Initial development of a straight handstand can be enhanced and or supplemented with the use of shaping drills and related conditioning elements. A wall, a spotter or another means of partial support can serve as a valuable method for straightening a handstand.
  Flexibility limitations (usually in the shoulders) and or structural deficiencies (the way some athletes are built) may provide frustrating obstacles but should not be considered insurmountable. These situations require greater patience and attention to the issue causing the problem. If shoulder flexibility is limiting progress then provide more emphasis on increasing the flexibility. Problems remain problems until they are corrected.
  Handstands are vitally important and a core component of countless gymnastics skills. Most acrobatic skills contain some version of a handstand and thus mastering a handstand hold should be a priority early in development.

• Hollow
  The second most popular desired shape is the hollow position. A proper hollow places a gymnast in a strong and controlled position where skills can be efficiently performed. The hollow position is seen throughout gymnastics in varying degrees ranging from upright to inverted, prone to supine and all angles in between.
  A description of a hollow would include rounding the upper back/shoulder blades while slightly concaving the chest. The core, upper thighs and calves would be contracted to create total body tension. The head is normally maintained in a neutral position while the arms can be placed in a variety of positions (extended overhead, hugging the body, extended to the legs, or arms crossed behind the head), depending on the goal or the exercise or the skill being performed.
  The hollow can be static (holding a position) or dynamic (contracting through a range of motion). The static hollow creates body control, tension and is helpful in alignment. The dynamic hollow (usually progressing from a
hyper-extension or arch position) helps create momentum, speed and power which are useful for skill development and perfection.

• Arch

The arch is the counterpart or inverse of the hollow. It is equally important as arching is almost synonymous with gymnastics. Gymnastics requires large degrees of arching during acrobatic and dance skills and lesser more precise arching as a method for producing speed, power and momentum.

Perfecting the arch and the related strengthening sometimes takes a back seat to the more popular hollow shaping details. As a coach you will want to give equal attention to both in order to build balance. It is no secret that the back takes a pounding in gymnastics and the cases of back injury continue to be a major concern. For this reason it is all the more important to make sure the arch position is trained and conditioned in order to withstand the inherent demands.

A good arch position will spread the extension over the length of the spine. The hips and chest should be off the floor while the core, thighs, butt and calves contract to create body tension. The head is kept neutral. Hip flexor and shoulder flexibility often limit the ability to perform a proper arch. Address these weaknesses as such. The ultimate goal would be to have an evenly curved line extending from the finger tips through the elbows (which would be covering the ears and extended over head), the shoulders, ribs, hips, thighs, calves and then pointed feet.

• Candle

The candle shape is basically an inverted hollow with the balance point being on the upper back and shoulders. Hand placement can be on the floor for greater balance or extended overhead for greater difficulty.

The candle is a shape used in many skill progressions such as back extensions, fly aways, pac saltos, tumbling saltos, vaulting saltos etc. It is a shape used during inversion in many skills.

• Plank

There are literally thousands of plank shapes which are used to develop core stability and strength. Planks can be done in a prone, supine or side position with one or both ends of the body (head/shoulders and or feet) being elevated. Once elevated the body is extended and the position held for a predetermined count.

Planks are generally performed in a straight or hollow shape. Difficulty or variety can be introduced by changing angles or support positions (on elbows or in a push up position).
• **Open Tuck**

  The open tuck position or shape is not only a good progression towards a straighter body position but also a useful shape in itself for enhancing twisting while flipping acrobatic elements (twisting dismounts off bars or twisting double saltos on floor).

  An open tuck position is a basic compromise between flipping and twisting positions. It is easier to flip in a tight tuck position but harder to twist. Conversely it is easier to twist in a straight body position but much harder to multiple flip. The open tuck combines the best of both by bending at the knees and hips (less than 90 degrees) while hollowing the chest and rolling the hips upward to produce a very rounded back shape. The knees, calves and feet should be pressed together tightly while the head remains neutral.

• **Tuck and Pike**

  As elementary as these positions and shapes are it is quite surprising how deficient most athletes are when asked to perform them. Do not let the initial ease of learning put these shapes on the back burner forever. They require periodic review so as to maintain their quality.

  A quality tuck position (knees bent, hips bent) can have a large range of leg and knee bend, but should always have the rounded upper back, concaved or hollow chest and the forward rotation of the hips (contraction of the lower abdominals).

  Similarly, the pike position (legs straight with bend at the hip) can have varying degrees of bend at the hip. Understanding these degrees is always helpful, especially as it relates to ease of movement and increasing flip rotation (tighter pikes rotate faster). In all cases, the athletes need to understand engaging the lower abdominals and rolling the hips forward to maximize efficiency of this position.
Shaping For Gymnastics- Training Video Certification

1. Proper gymnastics shapes are essential for
   a) Quality skill development
   b) Attracting a college scholarship
   c) Eliminating the possibility of injury
   d) Being a state champion
   e) All of the above

2. Proper gymnastics shapes will enhance
   a) Strength development
   b) Speed and Power
   c) Skill Amplitude
   d) Form and Execution of gymnastics skills
   e) All of the above

3. Teaching proper gymnastics shapes
   a) Is a never ending process
   b) Requires constant and consistent attention
   c) Requires attention to detail
   d) Requires hands on corrections at times
   e) All of the above

4. Teaching proper shapes
   a) Requires a complete understanding of bio-mechanics
   b) Requires a separate shaping rotation 3 times per week
   c) Is the total responsibility of the head coach
   d) Begins with day one of gymnastics training
   e) All of the above

5. Shaping should be taught by
   a) Experienced coaches
   b) Dedicated and passionate developmental coaches
   c) Beam coaches
   d) Recreational Coaches
   e) All of the above
6. In teaching proper shapes
   a) Increase the strength of the athlete first
   b) Begin with the smallest detail or component before advancing
   c) Increase numbers as soon you are able
   d) Increase resistance to challenge the athlete
   e) All of the above

7. Controlled lowering is
   a) An effective method for increasing strength development
   b) Also called eccentric contraction
   c) Creates shaping issues
   d) A and B
   e) All of the above

8. An athlete with improper shapes comes to your gym
   a) Muscle memory is set so there is little you can do to help
   b) Introduce shape components a little at a time
   c) Give her a crash course in shaping so that she catches up
   d) Blame the parents for not bringing her to you sooner
   e) All of the above

9. The lesson(s) taught by proper shaping is(are)
   a) Old habits die hard
   b) Muscle memory serves a great purpose
   c) Form and execution matter
   d) Competitive results are related
   e) All of the above

10. A common problem that exists
   a) Introduction to shaping is taught by the least experienced coaches
   b) There is never enough time during training
   c) Shaping rotations require massive amounts of space
   d) The supplemental training aides are expensive
   e) All of the above

11. Which is considered the grand finale position of gymnastics
   a) Arched
   b) Pikes
   c) Open Tucked
   d) Straight
12. A proper hollow position can
   a) Create strength and stability
   b) Assist with body alignment
   c) Assist with creating speed and power
   d) Assist with creating momentum
   e) All of the above

13. Developing a proper arch is important because
   a) Arching is essential for a great Ta dah finish
   b) Arching is a special requirement on beam
   c) It will assist with reducing the stress on the back
   d) Arching is the most important thing in gymnastics
   e) All of the above

14. A candle position is
   a) A position that resembles a candle
   b) A great landing drill position
   c) An inverted hollow shape
   d) A great progression of all dance elements
   e) All of the above

15. An open tuck position is?
   a) A compromise twisting and flipping position
   b) Assists with Twisting beam and bar dismounts
   c) Assists with multiple Twisting tumbling elements
   d) A and B
   e) All of the above