

## Gymnastics with an Infinite Mindset

Considering the overwhelming supply of information, misinformation, and spin, I feel compelled to give my long view of the permanent effects of our current state of gymnastics. I do this with the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sexual abuse crisis, and the evolution of the sport in general. As a bit of foreshadowing, I see a bright future for gymnastics that will match or surpass our magnificent past!

Before I dig into my insights, I believe it's fair to reveal my personal life path which is the heat that has forged my beliefs. I am proud of my 50-year involvement in gymnastics, albeit not as a champion. My proudest credit is continual involvement. This can be best explained through game theory discussions of finite vs infinite games that has recently been made popular by Simon Sinek, author of [The Infinite Game](#). Finite games are those which have agreed upon rules, the boundaries are well defined, and the games have winners and losers. Baseball and Football are good examples of finite games. An infinite game is defined as known and unknown players, the rules are changeable, and the objective is not to win—the objective is to keep playing, keep perpetuating the game. Partnerships, friendship, marriage, and sometimes business are examples of infinite games. Clearly there is value in both finite and infinite games; and balance may be the critical ingredient. I have experienced and benefited from both the finite and infinite game of gymnastics.

I entered gymnastics as an infinite player. My only objective with gymnastics was the fun of tricks and building my strength and fitness level for the sport of wrestling, in which I was definitely playing in a finite game to win. My interest migrated from gymnastics activities to the sport of gymnastics and a finite gymnastics mindset in high school. That mindset lasted through college or a bit beyond as I did spend some time coaching. The lessons from finite games (in this case, sports) are important. Without winners, we wouldn't learn to lose or the value of effort, risk, and growth that we gain regardless of our finish. As one who experienced victory and defeat, I'm not a fan of physical awards for participation. The awards for participation are much greater than ribbons or trophies.

Unknowingly, I adopted an infinite mindset on gymnastics as I graduated from college and chose a job with Nissen, the leading US gymnastics equipment company of the time. I chose a job as a mechanic in gymnastics over my trained profession of teaching. I chose this career path for the sole reason that "it let me stay involved with gymnastics". Over the next 45 years, I've had a variety of jobs that have led me down a business career path, but always with the underlying foundation of staying involved in gymnastics. Today I work for AAI, one of the premier gymnastic equipment companies in the world. I say that not to promote the equipment, but to thank the company that has allowed me to maintain my infinite mindset and devote significant time to supporting gymnastics. This company as with others has an imbedded mission of growing the participation in gymnastics.

I believe there are thousands of coaches and club owners that entered the sport for the same reasons as me and have built a career in gymnastics for the love of the inherent value of the activity. And now during the Covid -19 pandemic as our clubs are closed and our sport has been taken away from us, we have far too much time to reflect on "why" we are so committed to gymnastics. And if indeed we have that infinite mindset of prolonging the game (not winning), what do we do next?

Maybe, we've drifted from our love of gymnastic activity to a reliance on the dopamine rush we get from the medals, applause, and adulation that comes from competitions. I am as proud as the rest of you in the success of the United States Olympic Gymnastics Team, but the roots of gymnastics were not in competitions, but in participation. It was exciting to learn, perform, and teach new skills whether for

competition or fun; and all the benefits are the same. In addition to the physical benefits, gymnastics teaches self-confidence, problem solving, risk taking, and socialization and a host of skills that are important to not just succeed in life but thrive in life. You get those benefits whether or not you ever enter a meet. There are those that will argue that the benefits are greater for those that compete in a public setting or competition and they may be right, but it's never been proven that there is any greater long-term benefit for the gold medalist over any other competitor.

Some of the discussions started before our current pandemic. Cleanliness, safety, verbal abuse, and touching have all been major topics addressed in coaches and business gatherings. We've discussed the need for trackable procedures to ensure the proper fun and learning environment for our children. Some clubs have taken bold steps with video surveillance, photo restriction, posted cleaning schedules, and some have evolved into self-directed learning without spotting. Regulation growth is inevitable with the increase in participation and popularity and it will be coming to the gymnastic industry. Whether its traffic laws that came when more cars hit the road, or amusement regulations as the roller coasters got bigger, regulation is inevitable and its good. Sometimes the activity gets ahead of the regulation and problems arise, like the number of public swimming pools that opened before there were universal rules for filtration and chloritization. The good news is humans are smart and eventually we regulate ourselves into sanity. What is coming to gymnastics will include more than hand washing and physical distancing. It's up to us to prepare and embrace change.

The current environment brings new challenges and there are multiple ways to react. In an interest in focusing on the private business side of gymnastics we've heard a wide variety of responses and plans. Everything from "I can't afford to continue" to "I can't wait to get back to normal". I don't believe either of those is an appropriate or logical response. To select either response you are avoiding either your "why" or your "common sense". Now is a good time to reflect on everything you've thought about gymnastics and how your career has evolved.

Like me, perhaps you are one who believes that the world would be a better place if every child had the opportunity to experience gymnastics. Many have a strong affection to other sports, but I truly believe that gymnastics is special. On the physical side, gymnastics improves aerobic capacity, strength, flexibility, balance, and coordination. The mental benefits are equally impressive and include confidence, problems solving, memory, interpretation, introspection, and socialization. I know that if you've gotten this far in this article you already know this, so perhaps where I should have started is with the reasons we did not get involved in the business of gymnastics. Regardless of how we evolved, most of us didn't enter the sport to win medals or to be declared champion or be the best coach. We started for the sheer joy of turning upside down or swinging on a bar.

Some problems in the world are solved by gymnastics and others are still profoundly affected. Please remember that I refer to gymnastics the activity, not the sport. One childhood problem solved by gymnastics is inactivity. Many of today's youth don't stay active. Play is no longer an intuitive workout, and schools offer an ever-decreasing amount of physical education. I believe there is only one state remaining that mandates daily physical education from grades 1 through 12. Recess, the usual "yea but" response to the PE problem has been reduced from active tag and touch football to texting and group chat sessions. Gymnastics provides an activity, but the real benefit of gymnastics is that it stimulates future activity. Learning to manipulate your body for an hour a week in gymnastic class has the corresponding effect of children spending countless hours upside down or jumping over an obstacle. Yes, gymnasts are more active children. The second societal problem that needs addressing is our

children's addiction to electronic devices. Yes, I purposely said addiction which it is. We don't have the space here, but children are becoming distracted by electronics and are losing their ability socialize, converse, think, and play due to neuroplasticity or the degeneration of the brain. We need to get our kids off of electronic devices and back to being active.

There's my "WHY" and hopefully at least part of yours. Yet the worry that I hear about during our time of home sheltering and gym shutdowns is "What we do when the gyms can reopen?" "What if I need to have more space for the kids?" "What if I can't spot because touching isn't approved?" "What if I must train without the use of a pit because its legislated out of existence?" "What if class size is reduced?" "What if kids don't come back?" "What if gymnastics is deemed non-essential?" Well, I guess then we need to start over and reconvince the world of the value of the infinite game of gymnastics. It is well worth it.

If we take on an infinite view of gymnastics, our focus needs to be on how many children we can introduce to gymnastics and how long can we keep them involved. It may not be about how many medals they win or even how many events they are in. The value you bring to the world by introducing and teaching gymnastics is infinitely more important than any award that is won. The competitors and champions will still surface and your skills in the finite game will still be important, but maybe we were due for a reset and the current pandemic forces us (or maybe permits us) to rethink and reinvent ourselves with a bit more of an infinite mindset for the betterment of the sport, our children, and our society.

- Steve Cook, Gymnastic Fan  
Steve.cook@fotlinc.com