

***Athletic Insight** – If an athlete asks whether it is realistic to think that he or she can be an All-Conference, All-Canadian, or All-Pro given a modest past performance, a good coach or sport psychologist might respond by saying, “I have no idea, and I don’t care”. I want to help you find out if you can be great. A good coach or sport psychologist might say that to help the athlete believe they can be great and then find out if they can be...Let’s get into possibilities and not probabilities...In short, do not create artificial limits.*

## **Squeeze those Gluts<sup>1</sup>**

“Diana, Stop!!!” Coach Francis yells, “What is going on? Why is your routine not coming together? I want you to take a minute, think, and then go for it.”

A minute or two later, walking back towards the beam, the coach tells Diana, “get off the beam, and come here. I know you can do it, you’ve done all these tricks before. What’s wrong now?”

“My body just won’t go, Coach,” Diana replies. “I’m not letting myself go. I try to think about the trick, and when I believe I’m ready, I just can’t go”.

“Are you afraid?”

“No, no, I’m not afraid, but I want to make it perfect.”

As a child Diana was one of those kids who loved to run and jump all over the house. She played softball and took jazz dance and ballet classes, but she still had too much energy when she came home. When Diana was 12 years old, her mother decided to get her involved in gymnastics. She hoped that her daughter would tumble on a trampoline instead of her bed and the sofas, and balance on

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Bob Rotella (1998) Case Studies in Sport Psychology, Jones and Bartlett, New York

the balance beam instead of the wooden fence. Diana loved it from the very first day. She quit everything else and devoted herself to gymnastics.

Her first gymnastics coach was a wonderful Romanian man who had worked with Nadia Comaneci before Bela Karolyi took over. Working with Coach Pavel meant a lot to Diana, and she learned a lot from him.

At the age of 16, she joined a new gymnastics club team. Her new coach had a negative attitude, and there was no team spirit. Coach Olin was rough with the athletes and believed in “no pain, no gain”. No routine ever seemed good enough to him. Diana did not like the new environment, but she loved gymnastics enough to stay with the team until she moved away for college.

She was recruited by Sithonia College (SC), a Division III school. SC has a great reputation for preparing future professionals in the health and physical education area. Attending SC, Diana would have the chance to start for the gymnastics team and also work through a very strong physical education academic program. Diana started competing in the all-around event during her freshman year. She competed in all of the Division III national championships during her freshman, sophomore and junior years. As a junior, she was awarded All-American Honors. This year, Diana is a senior and the captain of the women’s gymnastic team.

Diana has a chronic problem with her wrists due to weak joints, and the pain has been gradually increasing. She has been performing with supporting braces on both wrists since her freshman year, but on the bars and vault the pressure and pain had become unbearable. During her junior year, Diana and her head coach decided that she should stop competing on the bars and vault. Diana was not happy with this decision, but she had no other choice.

Even with her nagging injury, Diana almost always wore a smile on her face. Coach Francis often said she had never known a gymnast with a bigger smile. Especially on the floor, Diana’s specialty, she would move around as if her whole body were smiling. Diana just dazzled the judges with her floor exercise. At 5’4” and very fit, Diana tumbled and turned on her megawatt smile, while a huge white

and maroon hair ribbon mimicked her every step. One of her teammates even kidded Diana that the ribbons and her ear-t-ear grin were worth at least .025 points from the judges!

When Diana started at SC, she enjoyed working with Coach Francis, but recently Diana has sensed that things are changing. Diana feels as if the coach has no time for her. Diana's diary entries this year illustrate her growing concern. "Monday, more 'dirty looks' from Coach. Coach Francis is good. She is a little autocratic, but she always knows what she is doing. She may have her favorites in the gym, but I know deep down she cares for all of us. It's just that she does a poor job of expressing it," she wrote.

Now that Diana is a senior, she wants to make her last year as a college gymnast a great one. She has her heart set on being a great team captain and qualifying for Nationals. She also hopes to compete in the all-around again. She would love to finish her career as a *great* all-around gymnast, the best on the team.

Since the start of her senior year, Diana has been experiencing some difficulties with her performance. Suddenly, she misses the tricks and moves that she used to perform easily. Her physical condition is not the problem: She is as fit as she has ever been. Her thinking is what is causing her difficulty. Two thoughts cross her mind before executing the tricks "it has to be perfect," and to a lesser extent, "What if my wrists don't make it through the pressure?"

She is keeping a diary, for practices as well as meets. Every day she writes down what she did in practice, how it was, and how she felt. This log helps her keep track of everything that goes on in the gym. She notes things she could not execute and tricks that she did well. Late in September, she wrote, "These two aerials on the beam have to come together soon; I don't have much time left. I have to connect them smoothly, but I can't do it. I work hard, I stay after practice, but they are not coming together."

This log has been with her at all practices and meets and is one of her rituals. Lately, she has had hard time keeping up with it. She wants to keep this part of her

routine, like the one Tootsie Roll that she treats herself to before performing in a meet.

After some incidents where Diana could not execute her routine, Coach Francis called a meeting with Assistant Coach Reap. “Do you have thoughts or suggestions about Diana?” Coach Francis asked. “You’ve worked with her the last three years. She trusts you, do you see a way to help her with her performance?”

“I think the problem is how Diana sees gymnastics,” Coach Reap replied. “Gymnastics is the center of her life. If everything goes okay with gymnastics, then she’s fine. If something goes wrong, however, everything goes wrong!”

Apparently, this rule even governs Diana’s relationships. Her boyfriend, Marc told Coach Reap that her obsession for perfect gymnastic performance has strained their relationship terribly. “If I weren’t a perfectionist in athletics myself, I don’t think we’d still be dating. I try to respect her commitment, but sometimes she is beyond any limitations. She has her goals set, and nothing can get her mind off them. Lately, she is more obsessed with her goals. I try to stay next to her and give her all the support I can. I think this is what she needs from me now.”

Coach Francis decided to call Diana in for a meeting. She wanted to ask her what she sees as the problem. Diana told her she doesn’t really know what is going wrong. She talked about two thoughts that often cross her mind and that she “just can’t let go.” When talking to Coach Francis, she mentioned her difficulty with visualization, describing it in this way: “I used to close my eyes and see myself doing it, executing the routine and each of the tricks. I could feel my body moving, flying. Now I can’t!”

Coach Francis suggested to Diana that she forget her goals for a minute. “Get out of there and just perform, and bring that smile back, Diana!” After two meetings, Coach Francis now believes that Diana has become over analytical in the gym, with herself and with her teammates. She needs to release and let go. “You have the potential for something great, but only if you stop thinking,” Coach Francis said to Diana at the end of their meeting. Somehow, Diana didn’t appear convinced.

Recently, Diana has started thinking negative thoughts about herself. Her confidence is shaky sometimes, like when Coach posted the prefinal lineup for this year's first meet. Her name was not on the list, and she was very upset. She believed that she was more ready than some of the women who were in the lineup and that Coach Francis was not being fair. "After all, the coach has not seen all my routines lately," Diana pleaded to Coach Reap.

Diana believes that her motivation has greatly suffered, but she does not want to let anybody down, especially herself. She can understand that not everybody has the same level of commitment, but being the Captain she has to try her best. When Diana sees the women of the team forming cliques and cheering only for their buddies, she gets upset. Not everybody perceives the team spirit concept in the same way! Her attitude, her work ethic, and her performance have to be "the best."

Two months after Diana started her senior year, Coach Francis called asked me as a sport psychology consultant, to meet with Diana. After meeting with the gymnast, Coach Francis thought she could use some help with her thinking process. The next day in the gym, she asked Diana if she would like to meet with me to talk about her recent difficulties. Diana says yes, she was willing to try anything that could help her performance.

"Diana is the Captain of our team," Coach Francis told me. "We need her, but I'm not sure how far I can trust her. She has had these mental blocks since last spring. Then, however, the blocks were not so bad, and I could work through them. I try to help her now, but nothing seems to work. I let her work alone, and she complains to Coach Reap that I don't care. She's obviously obsessed with trying to reach her goals! At some point I think she's scared of the freshman on the team. Being the Captain has placed a lot of pressure on her, I'm sure. I really don't know how to handle her anymore. Can you help though? I can give you her number." Coach Francis said to me, with the not-so-subtle desperation in her voice.