

Case Study

Retaining Gymnasts: Effective Practice Case Study (1)

Background

This Trampoline Gymnastics Academy is located within a purpose built facility funded by Sport England, which is attached to a leisure centre located on an industrial estate. The club currently has around 700 members which is down from a peak of around 1000 which the club believes is the result of economic constraints.

The coaching staff includes a full-time coach, two part-time coaches who are paid and eight additional paid coaches. All coaches were previously gymnasts at the club.

The club is open every day of the week except Sunday. There are sessions across the age range from pre-schoolers through to adults aged 50 plus.

Sessions on offer range from recreational through to elite, including provision for gymnasts with disabilities with coaches suitably trained to offer it. Classes have been developed to meet the needs of anyone wishing to attend the club. Consequently there are classes running during the evening, during lunchtime and directly after school for example.

Club Ethos

The club aims to provide a friendly environment for its gymnasts in which they can feel part of a family:

‘I think because I am a mum we have always thought what do young people want to be valued to feel part of something special so we try and make it homely and friendly and still professional.’ (Coach)

‘We are like a family. Everyone talks really nicely to each other.’
(Young coach and gymnast, aged 17)

The coaches within the club also strive to ensure that the young gymnasts enjoy their experiences and have fun.

‘They make a point of making sure everyone is happy.’
(Young coach and gymnast, aged 17)

Club Approach

Coaching staff believe that in order for gymnasts to be able to reach their full potential there needs to be a clear and visible pathway from recreational through to Olympic athletes. This pathway is reliant on having the coaching structure that permits it. If a gymnast outgrows their coach they will ensure that the club meets the child's need and the club aims to ensure that the coach who starts the journey with the gymnast is always recognised as the development coach and that credit is not only given to the elite coach.

The club has coaches that teach across the ability spectrum rather than solely focussing on either recreational or elite gymnasts. This has a number of benefits in terms of delivering the gymnast development pathway.

The club believes that gymnasts must be allowed to progress at their own pace within an environment which allows them to enjoy their experiences. The club encourages young gymnasts to self-identify their aspirations and make their own decisions about their progress.

'As coaches we have to step back and let them decide.' (Coach)

Competitions are noted as being an important part of the gymnastic experience and make an important contribution to the progression of the young gymnasts.

The badge reward structure was also said by the young coaches to be important to young gymnasts of all ages:

'Badges are a really good thing because its gives them something to work up to especially if they are just coming for fun. If they come in for a session and they have that one last thing to do to get a badge then they try really hard to get it and then when they get their little slip they are so excited.' (Young coach)

Drop-out and club response

The club has a part-time administrative assistant who investigates why young people choose to leave. The club's most common drop-out age is 14 or 15 for girls and 11 for boys who are in the minority at the club.

With regard to drop-out amongst boys, coaches suggested that general perceptions of artistic sports means boys get bullied or teased by their peers. The coaches stated it is important that there are visible male role models for the boys. Whilst there are elite male gymnasts in the club, their training schedules differ from the training schedules of the younger boys, although the club is trying to re-arrange the timetable to accommodate this.

The coaches believe that one of the most important factors in retaining gymnasts is keeping the experiences fun and enjoyable, noting that where this is not the case, gymnasts are unlikely to sustain their involvement.

Providing opportunities for young people to become coaches is also an important factor in retaining young gymnasts as this allows the young gymnasts to use their existing experience and talents in an alternative way.

‘We are self-sustaining so we have to make sure that the members help us to run every single programme.....the pleasure that they get is a really important part of being self-sustaining.’ (Coach)

The club has a high proportion of its members within recreational classes and it manages to successfully retain these gymnasts for many years. It was suggested that a contributing factor was the gymnasts wanting to remain part of the family atmosphere. The following comment was made by a seventeen year old recreational gymnast who had been at the club for six years and trained for two hours, three times a week:

‘It’s just so much fun. We learn things all the time andI look forward to it so much. I love it so much.’ (Young gymnast and coach, aged 17)

Key strengths

- Clear pathway supported by coaching structure
- Emphasis on fun and enjoyment
- Young gymnasts self-identify their progression needs and aspirations
- All the coaches at the club have been recruited from within the club and this helps to sustain and retain the club ethos that has been created and developed over a number of years
- Coaches are very supportive of young people’s development and use positive language to encourage gymnasts to progress at a rate that suits them
- Strong relationships with parents
- Large purpose-built facility with viewing area

Key Challenges

- The club has to ensure that it provides something that is different to, and better than, bouncing on a trampoline in a garden
- Coaches suggested that the club could improve its own self promotion, as not all members and their parents realise how good the club is at developing its gymnasts
- The club faces competition from other sports and from the increased range of extra-curricular activities that are available through schools and which are often offered free or heavily subsidised
- Health and safety concerns have restricted the ways in which coaches operate and have led to the discipline being more restricted