



he Mental Game

By Glenn Oakley

The beam is the key. A suede-covered wood slab 16 feet long and four inches wide, the beam demands of gymnasts the most concentration and presents the greatest risk. "The balance beam," says BSU gymnastics coach Jackie Carringer, "wins the meet. Whoever stays on the beam is going to win. It's the toughest to master. It's a mental game."

Carringer knows coaches who will leave the gym when their team is performing on the beam. They can't take the anxiety.

If no one else notices the stress and pain, says Carringer, it is because "They just see the finished product, and the finished product is gorgeous. They don't see the falls, the ripped hands, the sweat." Most people, she believes, don't know whether gymnastics is sport or art.

Gymnastics is perhaps the greatest blending of sport and art in athletics. So rigorous are the maneuvers that female competitors are over the hill by their mid-20s. Their bodies can no longer take the pounding, the powerful twists and turns that test the limits of tendon and ligament. Yet the choreographed moves are as fluid and controlled as a ballet.

There are strong ties between dancing and gymnastics. Carringer notes that "I was a dancer for 16 years before I ever became a gymnast." That is unusual, however; most gymnasts begin at age 8 or earlier. But Carringer is, as she says, "very competitive."

She competed at Boise State in 1972 and 1973 and returned in 1980 to coach the gymnastics team. During the last seven years she has developed BSU's gymnastics program into one of the top ten in the West. In addition, her reputation as a gymnastics choreographer is spreading internationally. Each summer she teaches at an international gymnastics training camp in Australia.

This year she believes her Boise State team of 12 women will place in the top seven of the NCAA Division One Western Regionals. The BSU team has made it to

regionals once before—in 1983. Carringer says if her team can "stay healthy," 1987 will be the best season ever for Boise State.

Lacking the money to recruit "elites"—the best college-entry age gymnasts—Carringer recruits from Class

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I gymnasts and hones their skills. She takes skilled but disillusioned gymnasts and teaches them to love the sport again. She takes talented but inexperienced gymnasts and teaches them the hardest part of gymnastics—"the mental game."

At the daily pre-season practices, Carringer stands in the middle of the gym, a veritable three-ring gymnastics show with women hurtling around the uneven parallel bars, somersaulting across the floor, and executing precise flips on the balance beam. With pop dance music booming from the corner radio, Carringer shouts encouragement and pointers to her girls. "Good job Trace! You got it, you got it! Good snap!"

Carringer, who seems to speak with exclamation marks in mind, is a five-foot tall ball of fire who could give Dale Carnegie a lesson or two on the power of positive thinking. "We operate on a very high energy, very positive program," she says.

She understands that gymnastics is not a lifetime sport. When her seniors leave in spring they will probably never again compete in gymnastics. "Basically," says Carringer, "once a gymnast has reached the collegiate age, they're done. Once they've finished their college career, that's their last shot. You can't go out and play gymnastics," she notes. "A, there's no place to do it, and B, your body can't take it."

So she instills in "her girls" a philosophy that will last much longer than

a double salto. "The things you gain from the sport are the things that will stay with you forever," she says. "I want them to understand they have one shot at life, so give it all you've got. I want them to believe they can do anything."

Carringer's philosophy has made gymnastics at BSU a team sport. True, each woman still vaults into the air individually. Each one faces the balance beam alone—flinging their bodies in backwards flips to land again on the four-inch wide beam.

But there is a camaraderie on the BSU team that draws comments and surprise from other teams at college meets. Boise State team members not only like each other and call out encouragement, they live together, sharing homes and their little free time.

The typical gymnastics team rivalry had so disillusioned team members Connie Lavertu and Karie Kunkler that neither intended to get involved in college gymnastics after high school. Ten years of fierce competition in private clubs had blunted their enthusiasm for the sport.

Team spirit was beaten down in the struggle to remain on top, to compete for scholarships. As their BSU teammate Lisa Treciak, a sophomore, commented, "You'd maybe say you wanted your teammates to do well, but really you'd be hoping they'll fall." That cutthroat competition led Treciak to transfer to Boise State this year.

Boise State gymnastics, says Kunkler, "is so team oriented it's like a completely different sport. That's due mainly to Jackie. She shares her love among everybody."

One gets the impression that the women are more of a family than a team. "I admire those kids," says Carringer. "I have girls who work out every day with pain. They sacrifice, but they also get a lot out of it. They're with a team, they're fit, they get an education and lots of stories and memories."

Too many gymnasts burn out early and never want to see the inside of a gymnasium again, says Carringer. "I want them to leave this sport loving it as much as when they started."

Photo of coach Jackie Carringer and gymnast Connie Lavertu by Glenn Oakley

