



# SIX REASONS WHY GYMNASTICS IS GREAT

By Julie Cross Photos by Larry Gibson

**I**t's Monday morning and the preschoolers taking over the next hour of my day are lining up for class. As a younger coach, the mere sight of all the tiny heads bobbing up and down, awaiting my expert instruction would have sent acid churning in my stomach. It took years for me to understand the most important reason I'm here.

Today, as the little ones sit on their carpet squares, legs flapping in the butterfly stretch, excitement filling their faces as they tell me what exotic location this flight will take them on, I realized something. This isn't just any group of preschoolers, it's six very different reasons why gymnastics is the most amazing sport for kids.

We move to the preschool circuit and little Jack shuffles slowly to my station. He pushes up to a front support on his own, and I glance over at mom who gives a loud cheer, as if this were a gold medal performance. Last week she even cried. At two years old, Jack had just learned to walk and already logged more hours of physical

therapy than most adults. He was diagnosed with low muscle tone as a toddler.

While attending a birthday party in the gym, tiny Jack was fascinated by the colorful equipment, and it was all the motivation he needed to climb the steps in front of the tumble track and step on to the bouncy surface. Not only did Jack climb for the first time in his life that day, but he also ran and loved every second of it. At 4 years old, after two years of lessons, Jack could jump off two feet, perform a forward and backward roll, and now his arms were finally strong enough to pull himself up to a support on the bar.



An Olympic medal in gymnastics may not be in Jack's future, but he has come so far – further than any physical therapy session had gotten him – and most importantly he loves gymnastics.

I move Jack along to the next station, and Courtney stands in front of me, her adorable blonde curls are such a contrast to the angry glare she almost always wears. Her arms are crossed, but she holds her tongue. I know what she wants to say, "Why didn't I get to go first? I never get to go first!"

Slowly Courtney has learned the art of waiting her turn, saying please and thank you, and allowing others to receive attention from the teacher. The threat of missing a turn on the trampoline if she complained about having to wait was too big a risk for Courtney to utter her usual complaint.

Mom watches carefully, eyes peering over her book as Courtney unfolds her arms and jumps up to the bar like a pro. Unlike Jack, this part is easy for her. Mom relaxes back in her chair with a sigh of relief, and a glimmer of hope that maybe in a few months they could try something else -- dance, soccer or the music program the other moms have been raving about. The possibilities are endless. At least they are now.

After Courtney shifts to the next station, Patrick runs at the bar full speed. I catch him around the waist to keep him from flying

over. On the first day of class, just before lining up, Patrick was running up and down the metal bleachers while his mother, seeing a few stitches in the near future, frantically chased after him.

"He just has so much energy," she had said to me. "What makes a five year-old want to try a back flip off the couch?"

I just smiled and said, "You might want to consider more than one class a week."

She decided on three!

That was the bargain Patrick's mother made with the fearless little boy. He could do all the flips he wanted at the gym, but no more living

room gymnastics. Patrick's goal was a few less trips to the emergency room from accidental collisions with his coffee table. His story mimicked several great athletes in history.

Drew was the opposite of Courtney. He didn't want my attention nor did he want the other children looking his way. But today, he performed his very first pullover on his own. Traditionally, when this happens, the kids ring a bell hanging from the ceiling and everyone stops to watch the performance. I don't even ask and instead say, "Good job."

But Drew leans over the bar and whispers,

***As a parent and a coach, I'm so thankful to be a part of the growth and development that happens with each child.***



"Can I ring the bell?"

And I just look at him, stunned and nod my head. "Of course."

It's a huge accomplishment.

Lacey is next and she's the little girl I have to walk on egg shells around because everything makes her cry. She struggles with the pull over, and I know the tears will come and they do, but today she keeps going, even in her frustration. In a few weeks, perhaps she won't need to cry at all.

Emily is the gem whose skills shine above the other five. She's a tiny Carly or Nastia and for some coaches, kids like Emily keep them coming to the gym every day. Even I find myself fascinated when she pulls her chin to the bar effortlessly, legs glued together she flips over with such ease. She'll go far in gymnastics if that's what she chooses. If not, Emily has the building blocks needed for any sport -- confidence, discipline, body control, flexibility, and strength.

So there you have it. Six very different reasons why the benefits of gymnastics expand even farther than most realize. As a parent and a coach, I'm so thankful to be a part of the growth and development that happens with each child. Regardless of the goal when walking into that first gymnastics class, the results are almost always magical. ✧