

## **65. Suzanne Yoculan: Visualizing Success Leads to 9 National Titles**

*Former Georgia Gymnastics Coach Suzanne Yoculan produced 9 national champion teams and 33 individual NCAA champions.*

*You've coached 9 national champion teams. What common traits did your NCAA championship teams possess that helped them become champions?*

There were different traits on the team that has never won a championship and the recent teams that have won four in a row. That first championship was won with enthusiasm and a kind of blind “go for it all” attitude.

If I had to pick one common trait it would be the picture. When I first arrived at Georgia in '84, I always said to the team that our picture is to win a national championship. From the very beginning, I talked to them about what that would look like from a visual standpoint. I would ask them: “what do you see when I talk about winning a national championship?” They would say, running down the runway, sticking a vault, holding up a trophy, and various other things. Instead of incremental step goals like making the NCAA regionals, I set a big picture goal of winning it all from the start. The common trait is that all the teams have shared that vision or picture.

*What are mental training techniques you've taught the team that you feel are most important?*

Believing you can be successful is first – whatever that picture of success looks like to you. We do a lot of imagery. One year we were having problems on balance beam, so we had little wooden balance beams made of Popsicle sticks. I asked the team to put the sticks on dressers in their dorm room and every time they looked at them to shut their eyes and do their imagery of a perfect beam routine.

We encourage imagery before the balance beam routine in practice and during competitions. We use a stopwatch and time them to make sure the length of their visualization is the actual time of their routine. If their routine is a minute and ten, but their imagery only lasts 30 seconds, we teach them to slow down mentally. This helps them if they feel nervous or anxious in competition. We do more of this with the freshman.

I'm a big believer in “what works for you.” We have so very high-level athletes who have had a lot of success prior to coming here. I don't try to change things. For example, if an athlete has had great success in the past on the beam without using imagery, we won't ask them to do any.

If someone has a competitive performance that is lower than what they are doing in practice, it has everything to do with pressure and fear of failure.

*What do you say or how do you coach during or after a competition with an athlete who is struggling with handling competitive pressure?*

One of the first things I do is to make sure she is not in ‘overload’ mode. Many coaches coach too much. They give too much information – too many cues. It's a mistake when you tell an athlete five things at once, instead of one. I want to make sure she is not getting too much

information from too many people. I may have to address this with the other coaches. I'll then have the athletes focus on two cues. One is a technical cue that they write on their left hand (which might be a phrase like head back or arms straight). This technical cue can change depending on what event they are doing. On beam, it could be chin up. On their right hand, I have them write an emotional cue. One of our five-time national champions will write "ferocious." She likes to think of herself as ferocious or fierce.

Our regular season is a time where we can afford to lose a few meets and still qualify for the post-season, which reinforces my view of looking at the process and not over-reacting to mistakes or wins or losses.

*Besides getting talented gymnasts into your program, what are the key factors to maintaining such a consistent level of success over twenty plus seasons?*

Knowing what you stand for. No team, sports or business can have three decades of success without knowing what they stand for and making it very clear to the people on the team. The mission needs to be very clear. Everyone needs to share the vision and the strategies to how we get there. It comes down to what and how we prioritize as a team.

One of the things our program has spent a lot of time on is communication. Even before that was really popular 20 years ago, I've believed in having open communication at team meetings and building team unity. We stand for respect. Years ago, I couldn't put it into words, but there has always been a level of respect that has permeated our program: from team member to team member, between coaches, and coaches and athletes. Respect is something that is earned and we spend a lot of time developing those type of relationship with athletes. We've never had another athlete transfer to compete at another school in my entire tenure. It's not a self-promotion thing. It's a program credential. We prioritize the respect level and well being of the athlete.

*Gymnastics requires great mental toughness. How do you help them deal with failure inherent in the sport?*

We don't deal with failure because we don't believe in any failure. There isn't failure – only partial success. We emphasize that there is something to be learned in the process. One of the reasons I'm not afraid to say, "We're going to win the national title" and then finish third – I don't consider that failure. Too many people don't set high expectations because they are afraid of failure, so they lower the bar.

*Coaching injured athletes. What are the best ways to communicate with them during the rehab process? How do you make sure they are mentally ready to compete once they have recovered?*

One of the things we have always made sure of is that we don't spend more time and energy on the top scorers than the rest of the team, whether they are injured or healthy.

Injuries are such a common part of the sport and we talk about how to prepare for them before the athlete has to deal with them. We always stress that they need to measure their success over the long haul of their careers – not just at any one point where they may be struggling. If they have a major type injury, we'll give them a more pronounced role on the team. It may be developing music videos for teammates or helping the assistant coaches with different tasks. We

never remove them off to another area. Our training and rehabilitation center is right together in the gym. We have our cardio equipment in a place where the person working on rehab can see everyone else while they are training.

*Have you ever used some motivational tactics with individual athletes or the entire team that weren't entirely successful?*

Early in my career I used to have too many rules. This can backfire because athletes can get confused about too long a list of do's and don'ts. Another error was looking to lead the team the same way I did in the past with different personalities. It's important to be spontaneous and read the team as to where they are emotionally at any given time.

In the 1990s, I used to be a believer that everyone had to compete for her spot in the line-up. If someone made a mistake, then they were out the next week and had to earn her way back in. I thought that was good motivation – “stay on the equipment or you are out.” Really, that was negative motivation. It didn't work well at all. It just added to the pressure, so instead of the athlete being able to go into a competition relaxed and ready to perform, they knew if they didn't stay on the beam or bars, they were out the next week. That was a motivational trick that didn't work out as I intended.

*How do you recommend coaches handle the psyches of the more emotionally fragile gymnasts?*

We've had individual team meetings with the girls since 1998 as part of our 20 hours of practice. They didn't enjoy them at first, but later on they became one of the things they most look forward to during the season. It's important to be available to your athletes and I've tried to have an open door policy and be a resource to them.

*Motivational movies. How do you put those together and when is the best time of year to get the most impact?*

We mainly do those as we get ready for the SEC and national meets. I'm totally spontaneous. I have to get a feel for what the team needs at that time before I can do anything.

For example, after the 2007 season we lost 2 All-American seniors who competed in all 4 events. We lost 8 of 24 routines from our line-up due to injuries. One happened just days before we left for the nationals. The mood of the team was down. I decided that I wanted the focus or theme of the national championships to be on “fight”. I went to the football coach's office because they have lots of motivational videos and asked if they had a video that emphasized fighting. I used a Muhammad Ali movie video whose message was “when you think you are down, you're not. When everyone counts you out, including the fans who think you don't stand a chance, you can fight through the adversity.” That was the message of the movie.

So we used clips from that movie and inserted some of our own video. It starts out with scenes where Ali is getting beat up, then we showed some of our early season struggles where we looked like we were beaten and down for the count. Then we showed examples where our team was tenacious and fought back. It ends with the scene where Ali comes out and runs through the

fans and wins the big fight at the end. The team was so excited after watching the video that they were like, “yea, let’s go kick some butt.”

Nationals are a two-day event. Fight was the theme for the first day, because you have to qualify the first day to advance to the second round. We won the first day, which really helped the team’s confidence. Focus was the theme of the second day. I wanted them to narrow their focus. Then I had the team watch clips from the movie “The Last Samurai” which is all about focus and without focus you can’t succeed. The message resonates through the whole movie. Then I had parents of the athletes wear Samurai headbands at the meet. The girls had their focus words on their hands. I pulled off the bedding in the hotel room and had them make a tunnel with the quilt. I had the team who was competing on the beam do their routines inside the tunnel to narrow their focus and visualize that there was a wall on either side of them.

We never missed a beat. After making a mistake, we remained focused. I told the team right before the final day that we didn’t need to be perfect. Our main rival that year was Florida and they had beaten us during the regular season and SEC tournament, so they were the big favorite. I said, “Instead of worrying about being perfect, we need to not become distracted after making mistakes – just focus on what you are doing and not on your teammates or the other team.” The rival coach did just the opposite. She told her team that they needed to be perfect to win the tournament, which was the wrong thing to say (before such a high pressure event). I told our team the way we react to mistakes will make the difference on how well we perform.

In the first half of the meet, we had about the same number of mistakes. When their team was on a bye (not on the floor competing), they were watching us. When we were on a bye, we had the door shut to our locker room and were dancing. We didn’t get concerned about what the other team was doing.

*Gymnastics is a very individual sport that operates within the framework of a team. What are some of the challenges that must be overcome to build team unity in such an environment?*

Our team emphasizes team cohesiveness so much. There is not one unkind word or bad feeling between the girls. Also, there is nothing we are afraid to discuss as a team. So many teams struggle with divisions. It can be between seniors and freshman, between black and white, gay and straight athletes. A lot of coaches don’t want to talk about these issues and want to bury them under the rug. They cause divisiveness. One of the ones we have had to deal with is drinking and non-drinking. We have nothing sacred. Our policy is that if an issue involves the respect level and cohesiveness of the team, the issue has to be put out on the table and discussed. Certainly, there are private matters that some of the girls don’t want to share. But if it’s an issue that is causing any kind of tension, it impacts the team as a whole. Once you lose that lack of trust and love between teammates, when you get out on the field or gym, you just don’t play as hard. But if you have a great relationship with your teammates, you’ll eat dirt for them if it comes down to it. We keep jealousy and animosity to an absolute minimum. It’s hard to implement however.

**Note: This is a partial excerpt from the interview section of the book - “Coaching Women Athletes to Excellence.” To read the full interview and a dozen more great one to one discussions with women’s coaching legends, purchase the book today.**

