

# AGF Regional Workshop Recap



**January 4, 2024, Altadore Gymnastic Club, Calgary  
Coach Facilitator: Cameron Taylor**

## **OPENING NOTES:**

- Safety should always be your first focus with any age group. This includes the gym equipment, the front entrance way clutter, group dynamics. We want to create a safe and fun space for athletes of any age to fail safely both physically and mentally.
- If you can imagine an accident or crash (no matter how fantastical) it can happen, it's called "Murphy's Law". So place safety mats accordingly and always position yourself in a space where you can see all your stations. When accidents occur you need to have seen it both for assessment of the crash and for insurance reasons.
- Check your equipment before use! Remind your athletes to do the same and/or have another coach in the gym check also.
- Consider your group's age and skill sets. We often get excited by having our athletes "huck 'n' chuck" skills and this can lead to injury and/or bad habits being woven into the fabric of their gymnastics. As a coach (no matter your age) to be the expert of that environment. Spending more time on basics may feel like no one is learning or progressing, but they will have a "skill spurt" as they become stronger and more efficient in their physical movement and mental coordination.
- Stay consistent with your lesson plans. We identified the handstand as being the prerequisite for almost all the skills in acrobatics in one way or another. This means drilling, conditioning, flexibility and training range of motion. Because the handstand is so crucial we should be including various drills on all our stations. Get creative as long as the shape is strong, tall, and "stacked" (shoulders over wrists, hips over shoulders, toes over hips). The same drills can be done on different mediums and will feel like it's a new drill to the athlete.
- Remember that YOU are the expert in the acrobatics world! Don't let the athlete do things they shouldn't be doing for any reason. Especially if you are a young coach and your athletes are older than you, be firm in your knowledge and work within it. As you grow in this profession and get older your understanding and coaching trick bag will grow
  - be patient.
- Be creative and don't be afraid to experiment with new and SAFE ways to learn a skill. For every athlete there are 100 different ways to teach the same skill and 100 different ways that each athlete will receive and absorb the information you are providing.

- Build a strong foundation first! If your vision of your athletes direction can be understood by your athlete you will have an easier time having them buy into the slow and steady growth of skills in gymnastics.

#### **WARM UP: GAME/LINES/STRETCH**

- Always be ready to greet the team as they come in and start with something fun like a game that will test their coordination, speed, agility and anything else that we need for the day's lesson plan.
- Use resources and your creative brain to modify or invent new games all together. It keeps things fresh for you and the athletes while also getting them ready for gymnastics. In our workshop we played the reflex game (Head, knees, toes, foam). I like this especially if I need to consider injuries and/or age appropriate movements.
- Read the room and always consider safety. If I had a group of senior citizens coming in for gymnastics to enhance their tai-chi training, I probably wouldn't have them play "British bulldog".
- Be inclusive in your warm up - we all want to be a part of the team.

#### **LINES:**

I call this segment "lines" mostly because what I am trying to achieve is a consistent regiment of movements to help build strength and coordination within my gymnastics basics. In this segment I am looking to train the brain to remember where to put the arms, the head, etc. Look for the athlete's body shapes and don't be afraid to be hands on. Sometimes the athlete needs to kinesthetically "feel" where their positions need to be. Lines are performed on a sprung 40X40 competitive floor usually from one end to the other but some of the low impact lines can be accomplished on a vault runway or unsprung carpeted floor.

The examples of lines I will provide for you here can be used as is, or modified by you as you see fit. If your class is only 1 hour feel free to cycle through these lines in groupings. Maybe one day's lines are just roll focused, maybe another day's lines are more handstand focused, maybe one day's lines are more conditioning and core focused. Work within your age group, ability level, and time constraints in classes that you coach.

Below I will provide examples of categorized "lines" for your convenience. If at anytime my description of a movement is unclear, my door is always open for you to ask.

#### **LOW IMPACT SHAPING/COORDINATION LINES:**

- **Arms tall tiptoes walk forward and backward** - As the coach, from the side they should look like a capital "I". Elbows straight, palms facing in, shoulders extended "tall" (no space should be seen in between the neck and shoulders), knees should not be bending as we are using the hips to move forward and the glutes to move backward.

- **Coordination** - Touch opposite knee with opposite hand as you march. You can add as the athlete learns this concept. For example, touch the opposite knee, knee, foot, foot, heel, heel, always making sure to reach across even when touching the heel behind.
- **Presentation walk or presentation leg kicks** - For this one the shoulder should be pressed down with a nice neck extension, straight elbows and fingers. If leg kicks are added, make sure the legs are straight (both the support leg and the kicking leg), toes should be pointed. Presentation walks may seem like they are only for athletes who are competing, however engaging all pieces of the body this way in a “tight” fashion helps the brain make the necessary connections of the tight squeeze that will translate into their gymnastics basics and power.
- **Presentation leg kicks backwards** - All details of the previous will apply here. This one will help with range of motion of the hips in the back. The upper body and chest should remain upright while kicking backwards for the walks. Most athletes won’t be able to lift their leg in the back very high (at first). Anyone wanting a more powerful roundoff, front handspring, or walkover should be doing this for sure.
- **Kick step to lunge** - Arms tall like “I”, Kick forward with straight legs into a lunge hold and then step legs together. Have the athletes do this with both legs even though they will have a dominant hurdle/lunge leg. In the lunge make sure the arms are still tall and squeezing the ears. Chest should be up, front leg bent 90 degrees in the lunge, back leg straight with knee pointing down. We are trying to remove the crooked hip habits that will transition into “hurdles” and roundoffs.
- **Teeter kicks** - We are combining the kick step to lunge with a reach to the floor. Imagine a teeter totter, the back leg that kicks should make a straight line all the way to the tips of the fingers with the body. Kick step to lunge and as the base leg is straightening is when the teeter action should be occurring. On the way back to stand a common mistake is to see a rounded back with shoulder angle. Encourage the athletes to lift their arms first on the way back to stand to reduce shoulder angle. Alternate legs in the teeter kicks as they walk down the line.
- **Teeter kick turn** - Everything in the previous applies here. The small quarter turn should only happen at the very end of the teeter kick just before the hands will be touching the ground. To fix or untrain crooked roundoff, this drill is great. As a coach I ideally shouldn’t be able to tell if you are doing a front handspring or a roundoff just from your hurdle. The start of both skills from the hurdle should look identical. Make sure to do this on both sides even though they will have one side that they do their hurdle on.
- **Pike walks** - Every step forward should be small with a bouncing motion with each step. Encourage the athletes to go slow and focus on the details of straight legs and only reach as low as they are able (touch hands flat on the floor is the best). The lower back should be encouraged to be flat or straight NOT round. If this is hard to communicate, ask the athlete to even try and arch their back as they reach for the floor.
- **Hollow body + roll to arch body (sideways)** - Full core engagement should be encouraged here with a 2 second hold in between each roll over to prevent the athlete from doing a “log roll” down the floor, we do not want this. Encourage arms by the ears, straight elbows, straight legs, pointed toes, legs together. During the “hollow”, lower back needs to squish the ground, during the “arch”, arms by ears without lifting the head up.

- **In-curve slides** - In-curve facing the ground with knees on something that slides on carpet OR pointed toes on something that slides on carpet. Start with arms by ears reaching forward with hands on the floor and a rounded back. Push the floor with the shoulders so the body pushes backwards and slides very slowly down to the ground until we finish on a flat stomach with armpits pushing into the floor with chin resting on the ground with full shoulder extension.
- **Front support pushes/pulls** - Front support with toes on a slider and then walk the hands forward to pull the body forward in front support and then push the toes back in front support. If there is a wrist injury of any kind this can be done the exact same on the elbows.
- **Rear/back support pushes/pulls** - Back support with heels on a slider and then push and pull accordingly. Make sure the hips are as high as they are able and encourage them not to sit down when they get tired. Of course, pointed toes and straight legs are required. If any wrist injuries are present consider just holding a back support on the elbows without any movement.

#### **ROLLS, HANDSTANDS, CARTWHEELS LINES:**

- **Rock and roll stand up** - From the very beginning level get the athletes used to holding the appropriate roll shape with one hand on each leg and a bit of space between the knees for the face. See if the athlete can start standing tall, squat down to a rock backwards and then use the pull of their shape to get back to their feet without touching hands on the floor, back to a tall stand.
- **Backwards roll prep** - Everything in the previous line applies with the exception of at the peak of the rock backwards, the hands can be placed flat on the floor in the appropriate position to execute a backwards roll properly in the future.
- **Forwards roll** - Start standing tall, have the athlete place the hands on the floor close to the feet, tuck the chin and place the back end of the head on the floor and push off of the toes to a proper rock and roll tuck shape. If the back is round they can roll to their feet and then stand tall and repeat. A cheese mat can be used if needed or a stinger mat.
- **Forwards roll (multiple)** - Should only be done if the forward roll is safe and proper. Instead of reaching tall at the end, the athlete will reach forwards to accommodate another roll right after.
- **Shoulder roll both sides** - This starts the same as the forward roll with the arm of choice reaching to the opposite hip. The roll happens over the shoulder and one side of the upper back. This is an essential safety skill that often gets overlooked when building basics in artistic gymnastics since nothing is usually "off axis". However, any acrobatic athlete needs this skill as a comfortable reflex as over rotation can occur while learning front flips and this shoulder roll reflex will reduce or remove the damage the athlete will take in the crash. Do these!
- **Backward roll** - Younger athletes under the age of 5-6 should do these only down an incline. Older athletes should do these down an incline if they are new and only ever proper prep and stretching. Everyone else should be okay especially if they have already learned these before. Start standing tall, squat down to rock on roll shape with proper hand placement on floor (hands slightly turned in with fingers pointing backward, hands

flat on floor). Kick toes over the head and to the floor. The number one mistake I see is during the roll the toes kick to the ceiling instead. Have the athlete envision making a “rainbow” with their feet. Stand tall when finishing.

- **Roll back to candle shape** - Start standing tall keeping the arms by the ears, squat down to back roll keeping arms tall by ears and at the peak of the roll, squeeze the glutes and extend the pointed toes upward before rocking back to roll up onto the feet, finish standing tall. The candle shape should look closest to the letter “J”. This shape is difficult to understand (at first) but is vital to many advanced skills.
- **Headstand** - Be aware of the athlete's age, injuries, and abilities! Headstand can seem benign, but if done improperly can lead to neck injuries. Make sure the hands make a tripod with the head being the top point. The top rear part of the head should be the part that touches the floor when performing this skill. Begin on the knees making sure the tripod placement is perfect (it's okay to only get to this point also, don't feel the need to rush into the actual skill if you feel the athlete isn't quite there yet). After the base is secure slowly lift one knee onto the elbow and then the other knee onto the elbow. You may balance here. If they can balance there, encourage the athlete to very slowly start straightening the legs and keeping their core tight and glutes squeezed. Never let the athlete do a headstand if they don't have a good tripod placement first. Placing the front part of the head close to the forehead can lead to neck injuries, especially if they fall over in this position.
- **Headstand forward roll** - Only do this intentionally if their headstand is good and safe. This can only come after they understand the headstand, the candle shape, and the forward roll. We are essentially putting all 3 pieces together. This is also the prerequisite for a safe and efficient handstand forward roll.
- **Candle stick roll** - This is quite advanced as far as rolls go. Start tall, squat down like you are doing a forward roll, push off of the legs, tuck the chin and as you are doing so, squeeze the glutes to briefly achieve what looks like the end of a headstand forward roll. Finish tall in stand.
- **Forwards straddle roll** - Focus here is on straight legs and pointed toes. This will also help improve flexibility.
- **Forwards straddle roll (hands first)** - Same as previous with an emphasis on contacting the hands on the floor before the heels touch the ground. This will strengthen the hip flexors and build strength as well as active range of motion.
- **Kick step lunge with “baby handstand”** - Make sure arms stay squeezed tall by the ears. The legs can remain split or depending on how high the handstand is, the feet can come together before opening for the step down. The athletes need to refrain from chin up or chin lift causing shoulder angle. We are looking for a strong handstand shape.
- **Kick to handstand** - Same as previous with the goal being to get to a handstand. Make sure they meet the prerequisite of being able to roll from a handstand first. If you are expecting that your athlete will “back slam” instead of rolling but they are able to train a handstand, please put an 8 inch mat in front of them or a stinger mat depending on the level.
- **Kick step lunge cartwheel** - Make sure this looks very similar to the previous line where we did a teeter kick with a quarter turn. Arms by ears as usual. A common mistake is

when the athlete starts with arms wide and hips turned. If this problem is not highlighted the athlete will have a bad habit that will carry into their hurdles and round off's. Go on a Velcro line to help with navigating shape.

- **Power hurdle to lunge** - Begin with feet together arms tall. Swing arms as knees bend (chest relatively straight). Spring tall with arms by the ears and finish in a lunge shape with arms tall by ears.
- **Power hurdle cartwheel** - Same power hurdle details as previous into a cartwheel. Athletes may finish sideways. At least at first, encourage arms by the ears the entire duration of the skill. The tendency will be to have "T" shaped arms.
- **Cartwheels continuous** - Facing sideways, arms by ears the whole duration, bending the knees upon landing to spring and accelerate into the next cartwheel. Watch out for spacing as athletes that go for this may end up crooked and bumping into other athletes.
- **Step cartwheel (step down)** - Arms by ears with same cartwheel details as previous finishing in a round off shape facing the opposite direction. Incurve shape with straight arms pointing towards the floor on the finish. Make sure the feet land 1, 2, and that the push off of the hands is accomplished.
- **Power hurdle cartwheel (step down)** - Same details as previous with an added power hurdle. If done correctly the athlete will feel acceleration backwards to the point where they have to start walking backwards upon landing to prevent themselves from falling over.
- **Step round off** - keeping arms by the ears at the start. Again this should look similar to the teeter kicks as mentioned previously. The athletes will spring off the hands landing with feet together in an incurve shape with arms straight and fingers pointing down. Have the athlete go back to cartwheel step down if the roundoff is too crooked.
- **Power hurdle round off** - Same as previous with added power from the hurdle. Athletes should be very tight during the execution of this skill. Landing shape same as previous. Be considerate of ability and age. This skill can be hard on the ankles and knees especially if the skill is crooked or done poorly. If this is the case, go back to round off from step or cartwheel.

#### **STRETCH:**

Keep the stretch active at the start. Typically we would be stretching at the start and finish of a training period. I like to keep moving during the stretch of the start whereas I like to have more static deep holds for the finish. Everyone has a different stretch routine so I will provide some notes below for you to help with constructing this for your demographic of athlete:

- Keep the stretch consistent from day to day to the point where the athletes know what stretch is next. This can help if you need to set up a nearby station and someone in the group can lead.
- It doesn't have to be the exact same every single practice. Consistency means repetition but feel free to alternate the routine or focus from day to day. Just be sure to keep your Monday stretch the same every Monday if it differs from the Tuesday stretch for example. If you only train one day a week you can rotate with this concept weekly.

- Consider the focus of the day and the body part that we will be using for the skills they will be working. Since there is only a limited time for stretching in a class, keep it to the point.
- Always stretch the “critical landing” shape. I don’t think I went over this in my session so for those that do not know, critical landing is a way of crashing during a failed skill. Begin on your back and lift your toes over your head. Hands can support the hips to help if the athletes are not flexible or are older. Very slowly reach the toes over the head and try to touch the floor on the other side. If they are able they can even touch the knees to the ground beside the head. In the instance the something happens and they land like this with force it can be incredibly jarring on the body, we have to make sure to stretch this out and get the athletes comfortable and limber in this shape before practicing acrobatics (just in case).

Finish your class with more of a deep stretch with holds that except 30 seconds (60 seconds is good). Work on breathing through the stretches. Make sure we are stretching with as best positions as we can. Letting an athlete stretch splits with significant hip-screw can be detrimental to their development and they will end up getting more flexible in the wrong shape. Please be aware of your “roll” in their stretching as stretching can also cause injury. Also I would advise against pushing your athletes. Although this is something that we may have experienced as athletes in the past, it is something that I have moved away from as a coach. You never know who is watching and/or not understanding what you are trying to accomplish. Sometimes stretching your athletes can give the appearance of harm and/or can put yourself in a compromising position that can lead to accusations from parents or athletes. We love our job and have to at least be aware of this in order to protect ourselves. Teaching the athletes that stretching is positive and finding creative ways to have them stretch on their own is possible and I have seen positive results on my end in terms of flexibility gains. I also feel that teaching self stretch leads to the likelihood of younger athletes taking their own stretching responsibilities as they get older.

#### **SHOULDER FLEXIBILITY AND MOBILITY:**

One of the main questions that came up at the clinic was improving this in older athletes.

I will provide some shoulder mobility exercises you can include as side stations on your rotations or even as a station on its own that you can rotate through your lesson plans. These exercises are not mine, I learned them from a USA gymnast - turned shoulder surgeon. His main point was to stop “reefing” on the athletes shoulders. He said that while this will give you some short term gains, and even the athletes will mention that their flexibility is improving, he said that this permanently stretches the “shoulder girdle”. This leads to shoulder injuries in the long term that more often than not need surgery. The way we can achieve greater shoulder flexibility and mobility is by working on the muscles around the shoulder (the lats for example), as well as training shoulder mobility exercises.

- Use a foam roller to roll out the Lats.
- Stretch the Pecs by placing a hand on a wall and slowly opening the chest (both sides).

- Bend the elbow 90 degrees with the hands flat on the wall and open the chest slowly (both sides).
- Lay flat on stomach with squeezed body and push the armpits to the ground with holds for 10 seconds at a time.
- Lay on your back or stand with your back on the wall and lift arms slowly up and down trying to touch the wall or floor without the lower back coming off of the wall.
- Lay on your stomach holding a dowel or foam noodle with the chin on the ground and arms tall by the ears. From here, slowly lift with dowel or noodle off of the ground and back down slow and controlled with a tightly squeezed body.
- Sit in a pike with your back and butt against the wall with arms against the wall at 90 degrees bend. Slowly lift your arms up to your ears and back down keeping your arms against the wall. This can also be done laying flat on the floor.
- Lay on the stomach with arms bent 90 degrees, with your chin on the ground. Slowly lift arms up to the ears and back down to 90 degree bend.
- Hold a “doggy drop” shape with hands and knees perpendicular to a wall or block. Achieve arm circles forwards and backwards slowly without turning the chest or turning the hips. If this is something you can not do, move further away from the wall. Repeat on both sides.

#### **SHOULDER STRENGTHENING FOR HANDSTANDS:**

The following are separate from lines and can be done as their own station or as side stations.

- **Bungee work** - Standing on a bungee with your back against the wall or box. Hold the hands tall by the ears.
- **Bungee circles** - Same as previous making small circles one direction and the other. Making sure the athlete is tall.
- **Sitting holding small weights** - Pushing tall shoulder shrugs. Elbows should be straight.
- **Inverted “L” Shape handstand hold** - Toes on a box, body makes the letter “L”, arms by ears. Hold. The same can be done with parallettes to switch up the feel of the exercise.
- **Tuck Handstand against a wall** - Focus on the tall push with arms by the ears.

#### **ROUND OFF DRILLS:**

Some of the notes I made with the group regarded that if a problem is identified to take away the power behind the skill and work on the technique to break it down. In some cases this means asking the athlete to perform the skill from a hurdle only instead of running into the hurdle. In other cases it means taking away the hurdle and just doing a step into the skill, furthermore this can be broken down into starting in a lunge and just doing the skill from there. In any case fix the problem as best as you can before it turns into a habit that is harder to break.

- **Roundoff from lunge onto a box** - Do this skill on a line and make sure that the athlete is landing on their knees with the upper body in a very tight incurve shape.



- **Roundoff from step through two porta-pit walls** - Set up two large soft mat about shoulder width apart and have the athlete step into their round off. This will encourage a tall stretch of the arms as to not hit the sides of the porta pit.
- **Roundoff from step over rotate to back** - This is a fun challenge where we are learning how to drive our power without a run. Encouraging the athlete to keep a incurve shape relying on the heel drive of the first foot and the push off of the hands to generate rotation.
- **Power hurdle roundoff to low porta-pit** - This will be out back handspring prep. Make sure the mat they are pushing to is not too high, as we want our back handspring to go backwards and not upwards.

#### **BACK HANDSPRING DRILLS:**

- **Standing jump back** - A partner can hold the athlete by the wrist and count down from 3. Upon release the athlete should already be slightly leaning back and springing backwards with arms by the ears and tight body on the landing.
- **Handstand tick-tocks** - Holding a handstand between two walls of mats the athlete will then stretch tall keeping arms by the ears and gently touch their heels to the mat behind them and then use their shoulders to move their feet to touch their toes to the mat in front of them. Back and forth. That mats can be moved a bit further apart for a greater challenge when appropriate strength in these shapes are achieved.
- **Spotted jumps to roller** - This one should be spotted at least at first. Athlete jumps backward to a large mat roller and is gently placed into an elevated back bridge shape on a solid 8 inch mat (to prevent pain in the wrists). Athletes will move through handstand shape and push tall all the way to their stomach.
- **Spotted jumps to roller to "inch worm" shape** - Same as previous but instead of landing on stomach the athlete will land in and incurve "inch worm" shape.
- **Angled beatboard back handspring** - Off of an angled beat board and with spot at first. The athlete will perform the same drill without a roller to assist. This one should only be done when the athlete has enough strength and understanding. Pay close attention to the head position. The position should always be mostly between the arms and not sticking out.

#### **CLOSING REMARKS:**

Remember to be creative. A successful turn is one in which the athlete is able to take another turn. So please always be on the lookout for things that are unsafe. I am happy to do more of these regional workshops in the future so just ask AGF! Thank you to those that came, I had a lot of fun.