

JUDGES AND COACHES:—

What do we want each other to know?

by Ricky Stakem

COACH'S PERSPECTIVE: Courtney is your star vaulter, and you've chosen her to anchor your team in the last invitational before the state meet. She usually scores in the 9.200–9.300 range. Last week, you competed out of state, and she scored a 9.700! She salutes, runs, does two great vaults, and then, you congratulate her. The whole team celebrates. The score is flashed: 9.100. What?!? That's her lowest score all season! You carefully keep your concerns to yourself in front of the kids, but then, file an inquiry. What was that judge thinking?

JUDGE'S PERSPECTIVE: You're in the middle of the third session of a four-session invitational. Your assigner has put you on vault today, which means you get to see around 700 handsprings. Your stomach is grumbling... it's almost dinnertime. You salute gymnast #402, and she does two above-average vaults. You've given out a few scores in the 9.400–9.600 range, but those were some pretty fantastic vaults. The vault you

just saw should score a little bit lower than that. You add up your deductions. You and your assistant judge average a 9.100, a good score compared to the rest of the competition. At the end of the rotation, an inquiry is presented to you by the meet director. You saw a good vault and gave it a good score, one that will certainly earn a placement. What is that coach thinking?

Obviously, these are two perspectives of the same scenario. "Courtney," a hard-working gymnast, has earned a score a little bit lower than what her coach was expecting. How could that happen when she scored so much higher the week before? To answer this question, one must consider a psychological concept called **the phenomenological perspective: the idea that the perception of a situation is a subjective reality.** Coaches and judges each have very different perspectives. By understanding each other, it will be a lot easier to work together to benefit the athletes.

What do coaches want judges to know?

- Our athletes work hard, and we do, too. For many of us, this is our livelihood — our full-time job. Your scores are one quantitative measurement of our job performance. Please be fair and impartial. Please don't be influenced by the color of the leotard or the name on the back of the warm-up jacket.
- Please take the routine seriously! Hers may be the 623rd routine you've judged that weekend, but that doesn't mean it's any less special or important.
- Please acknowledge the gymnast. This includes you,



Judge #2! When the gymnast turns to salute you, she wants to see your eyes — not the back of your head. This eye contact is a mental “you did great” — even if she fell twice and was missing a few requirements. Please don’t look down right away — acknowledge the gymnast, who just performed her best for you.

- Don’t look down! That little bit of choreography after the first tumbling pass? I worked hard on that, and I’m proud of it. I’d hate for you to miss it because you’re writing down deductions from the tumbling. When you look down, we worry that you’re going to miss something. Please don’t give us another worry!

What do judges want coaches to know?

- Thank you! I understand and respect the great lengths it’s taken you and your gymnasts to get here. I do recognize, appreciate, and respect that

effort. I share your pride in how hard your gymnast has worked to be here, often under adversity — but that doesn’t mean I’m going to give her a score higher than what she earns today. I’m not judging personality or work ethic; I’m judging what I see, here, today, on this equipment.

- Our angle is not the same as your angle! We see the beam from the side. If you’re starting at the beam from the end, you’re going to see a totally different set of deductions than what we see. But we are human, mistakes do happen, and we will be happy to correct a mistake, as long as you go through the proper inquiry protocol and maintain mutual respect in the process.
- Scoring is subjective and will vary from week to week. What scores a 9.300 one week from one set of judges might score an 8.700 next week with a different panel. Our main

consideration is keeping the gymnasts ranked properly. We strive for consistency, but it happens. And it shouldn’t be a surprise to your gymnasts and parents, either — address these possibilities in pre-season meetings, or else you’re going to get a lot of questions!

- If a kid forgets her routine, tell her! She’ll lose 0.2, but that’s better than the trauma (and danger) of standing on the equipment sobbing.

We could spend hours elaborating on these lists, but these are just a few key points to consider going into your next competition. Above all, the key to any dynamic relationship is **respect**, and a key part of respect is **understanding each other’s perspectives**. At the end of the day, the safety and development of our athletes is our top priority. Respecting each other will help us maximize our athlete’s potential as they continue to strive for success!



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