



Kim Riley, class three beam coach, gives a student a helping hand. Ms. Riley, who can't perform gymnastics due to an injured knee, says she enjoys coaching and judging. "I could never coach these kids," she says of her class. Heidle Kraus, of Farmington, watches her friends' progress from the background, knowing that her turn is next.



Paula Broderick, 12, of Northville, gracefully balances on the bottom bar of the uneven bars.

Gymnasts seek balance

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Twenty hours a week, almost every week of the year, 16 girls concentrate on perfecting handstands, backflips and balance in the old Westbrook school gym, Farmington.

Under the direction of James Hafke, the members of the YMCA girls' gymnastic team gladly give up their Saturdays to practice the graceful, difficult sport.

"It's a frustrating sport," said Hafke, of Farmington Hills. "The kids need parental backing, especially in the sport, where it takes days, weeks to learn a new move."

The girls learn to adjust their schedules around the class.

"I do my homework right when I come home," said Holly Lewis, 13, of Farmington. "I try to do it in school. Mr. Hafke won't let us do it in here."

Debbie Brumbull, 13, of Howell, does her homework during the two-hour drive to the class.

"AT MEETS, I like to see the girls I like to do gymnastics," she says, explaining why she has continued the light schedule for 2½ years.

"The girls don't meet during holidays," Hafke explained. "But that is a sport that has to be kept up all year round."

Hafke, his wife, Carlyn and Kim Riley of Troy supervise the girls as they learn basic routines and elaborate movements on the floor, the beam or the uneven bars.

The girls compete in three classes, which are based on age.

Girls who are 8 and under compete in class three contests.

Girls who are 9-11 compete in class two contests. Class one contestants are 12-14.

The junior elite class is girls 15 and older.

Each girl is given a series of routines to use in competition.

"We change our routines every year," Hafke said. "We're graded on originality and sometimes, in returning the next year, we find parts of our routines being used by other teams."

The first part of every contest consists of a mandatory routine of basic movements which are performed to music. Each girl uses the same music.

"You keep on hearing the same music over and over," said Mrs. Donna Lewis, Holly's mother.

"You really dream about the music, then," she said. "But each girl does the same routine, but each has her own style."

The complexity of the basic movements and the accompanying showmanship depends on the experience level of the gymnast according to Hafke.

A novice will pass during a series of backflips. A more experienced gymnast will perform the series as a continuous movement.

"A judge won't have to look at the routine. He can hear the rhythm of the movements," Hafke said.

"The basics are boring to watch," Hafke admitted. "The optional are the best spectator sport."

The optional are individual routines which have their own music. Elements of dance appear in the optional, adding grace to the movements.

Gymnastics is a sport that instills grace and balance in a girl, Hafke said.

"AFTER YEARS of being in gymnastics, you gain these things, you learn something," he said.

"The floor routines are the easiest to accomplish. The bars are the most difficult," he said.

"The bars are the most fun," said Holly. "You have to have better timing for them. You have to have good hands."

The wooden uneven bars are coated with a friction-reducing chalk. Hands are rubbed in chalk to protect them from blisters.

"You can't be afraid of the bars," Holly said. "If you're afraid, Mr. Hafke won't force you on them. But then, you feel bad."

"You try anyway."

The time, effort and expense which is required by the sport prompt Hafke to be selective about choosing his team members.

"Each girl is given a three-week trial period. She doesn't have to buy a warm-up suit or a leotard until then. If the work is too hard for them, they can leave," he said.

The YMCA membership, required for the class, is \$13 a year. Gym fees are \$23 a month.

Three leotards are required for the class, as well as a warm-up suit. The girls pay their own travel expenses.

The team travels to meets in Ohio and West Virginia by bus.

The parents' club of the YMCA sponsors sales to help defray the cost for the girls' parents.

The girls sell Christmas cards to buy their leotards.

Mr. and Mrs. Hafke don't accept pay for their efforts.

"We put it back into the team," he said of the money. "Those uneven bars cost about \$1,800. We want to have the best equipment for this team."



JAMES HAFKE



CARLYN HAFKE

Staff Photos by Harry Mauthe

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Jenny Fraser, 6, of Farmington, practices balancing on a low beam. One of the youngest members of the team, she joined the girls three months ago.



Heide Rayer, 12, of Northville, perfects her balance as she can walk the beam. She's been part of the team for three weeks.