

Lack of gymnastics coaches a growing concern

By Jim Hughes
Staff writer

OLYMPIC IDOLS Mary Lou Retton and Bart Conner may have inspired youngsters to begin athletic careers in gymnastics, but the American gold medalists' accomplishments have done little to generate interest in coaching.

High school athletic directors in Oakland County have been hard-pressed to fill the void left by a high turnover rate in prep gymnastics. And the solution is not simple.

Once an athletic director finds a coach, only half the battle is won. The other half is keeping the coach on staff. It seems spotting gymnasts while they perform tricks in routines takes a physical toll on the coaches, and that may be the reason for the turnovers.

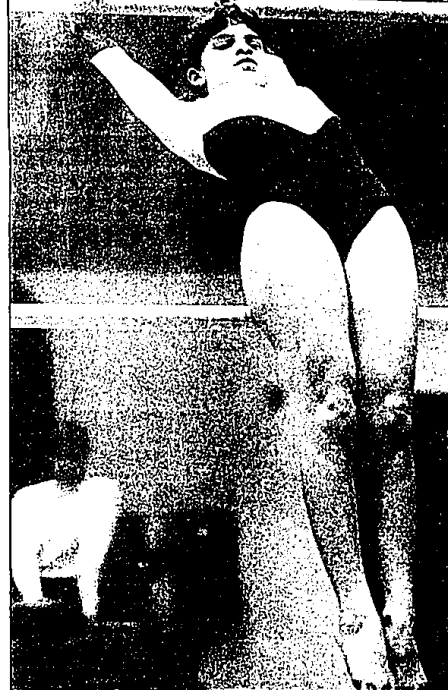
Oakland County has some strong high school gymnastics programs, especially at Troy and North Farmington. Although North Farmington's program is stable with coach Mary (Johnnie) Glitz in charge, things aren't the same in Troy.

"This season, Troy will have its third coach in as many years. The position was open two years ago when Sandy Smith retired after 13 seasons. Smith's replacement, Pat Hasmussen, moved to Utah after one year when her husband had a job transfer. Dennis Mitchell will coach Troy this season."

"Gymnastics is a special area and coaches are hard to find," said Troy schools athletic director Joe Francis, who faces the possibility of finding a coach at Athens if Lori Boes lands a job out-of-state.

"I have a suspicion — and it's just a guess — that there may be some disappointment on the part of the high school coaches because club kids can compete against non-club kids on the varsity level. I really don't know."

Smith, who retired because she was "getting stale," said that could be a fraction of the problem.



Troy gymnast Suzanne Enciso enters her third season of varsity competition with her third different coach.

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"That's part of it," she said, then added, "Coaching gymnastics, you need great knowledge, you have to know how to spot and you need to know the techniques. It's a difficult sport to coach."

"I would hope by now the kids who have gone through the programs would put time into coaching. But, that's not happening."

JULIE TISCHLER, the head coach at Rochester Adams, is a former high school gymnast who returns to her alma mater to coach. This is her first year at Adams as head coach, after serving one year as an assistant and two years at Reuther Junior High.

"I plan on staying," Tischler said, adding the only thing that would make her resign is an out-of-state job. "I'm a teacher, and I plan on looking for a job in Rochester as soon as I graduate (from Oakland University in April)."

Tischler is one of two gymnastics coaches Rochester schools athletic director Dick Ulrich hired this year. The other is Gale Renkiewicz, another Adams graduate and a former high school teammate of Tischler.

"There's even been a high turnover right after I've hired coaches," Ulrich said. "Coaching gymnastics takes a lot of energy and time. The coach has to be on their toes at all times. A lot of them are young people, and they have busy schedules which tie them up."

"It's hard to find coaches," Tischler said. "I had to get my sister (Janie) to help me."

Renkiewicz, who recently sustained a broken nose while spotting a gymnast, agrees with Smith in regard to the demands coaching takes on an individual.

"FOR A WOMAN, it's a hard sport," she said. "It's very aggressive and you have to do a lot of spotting. It takes a lot of muscle, and a lot of women aren't willing to do it when they get older. They can't."

Boes, who begins her third year at

Athens, was an all-state performer at Troy High. She says the shortage could be caused by the difficulty in the physical and mental aspects of coaching.

"People burn out way too fast," she said. "It's just too hard of a sport to coach. Another thing is the kids are improving so much, talent-wise, it's hard for a coach to keep up. Taking on a program is not as easy as it used to be. You really have to be up on things."

Glitz is the exception to the problem. She begins her ninth year at North —

where she performed in high school — and hasn't experienced the burn-out syndrome.

"I would say the shortage of coaches is mainly because of the strain on a woman to spot," she said. "That's why a lot of coaches do it for a few years, then stop."

ACCORDING TO Francis, the problem isn't only in Oakland County, but state-wide. There's even a shortage at

the college level. In his quest for a coach at Troy, he called the state colleges with gymnastics programs, only to learn there's a shortage there, too.

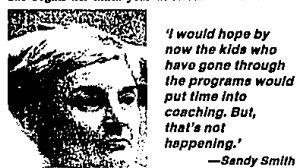
"It's tough to find a young coach and keep them," he said. "Why? I don't know for sure. Certain sports it's hard to find coaches, and gymnastics is one of them."

If the shortage has the athletic directors in a bind, consider the plight of the athlete, who, in some cases, must work with a different coach every year. Troy

High junior Suzanne Enciso begins her third year on the varsity, and will be working with her third different coach.

"It doesn't affect me as much because when I was in a club, we'd have different coaches each year," Enciso said. "It's hard on some of the other girls, though. They get used to one coach who sees things one way, then they have to get used to another coach who may see things differently..."

"It gets kind of confusing."



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—Sandy Smith

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—Mary Glitz



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—Dick Ulrich



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