

“My Kid Has Talent? So What, She’s Only 5!”

By Julie Cross, Recreational Gymnastics Program Director for the Champaign County YMCA and author of the forthcoming young adult novel, *Tempest*.

As a gymnastics instructor, if you are faced with this situation, make a copy of the article and pass it on to the parents. This may help the parents to realize the importance of helping their child be the best he or she can be.

As a teacher I have to know each of my little gymnasts. I have to learn what they need from my class and figure out creative ways to harness energy. I need to know that for some kids, even the simplest skills are a challenge and maybe I need to find a new way to break it down. And then there’s a rare few like Emily. Emily is the star of my story. On a Monday morning, at age 5, she began her very first gymnastics class. A day that, no doubt, could have changed the entire course of her life.

I noticed during warm-ups she performed every stretch to perfection. Eyes glued to me, she paid no attention to the other children. During bars, I assisted with forward rolls over the bar. She learned it on the first try. So, I asked her to attempt something more difficult. She does a perfect pullover, on her own. Not only was Emily flexible, she’s strong. I made a mental note of this as she headed to the next station.

As the class continued, I added more difficulty to Emily’s skills, and she could do everything. I was shocked and appalled by her talent (yes, I’m using the scary “T” word) but what intrigued me more than any of the skills she had mastered was her face. Her expression told me everything I needed to know. The entire 60 minute class her face was set, serious, she didn’t smile, not even once. This girl was serious about gymnastics! As the class came to a close, I was thrilled to have witnessed this great moment for Emily. I couldn’t wait to talk to mom.

“Are you Emily’s mom?” I asked the woman



Photo by Dean Capelotti

standing beside the child.

“Yes, is there a problem?” she asked, obviously not looking at my excited face as she scrounged under the bleacher for shoes.

“If you have a minute, I’d love to talk to you about a few different programs we offer that might be great for Emily.”

I knew immediately I was going about this the wrong way, sounding more like a pushy salesman. She finally looked up at me and said politely, “Sure.”

I took a deep breath, attempting to make the best choice of words this time.

“Emily did a fantastic job today, but I think this class might be a little too easy for her.”

Mom smiles kindly, like she’s letting me off the hook. “It’s ok. We just want her to have fun. You do a great job with the kids.”

Again, she’s misunderstood me. I wasn’t looking for compliments. I knew I’d have to use the “T” word. The one that sends many parents running.

“Emily has a lot of talent. She has the potential to go far in gymnastics.”

Mom raises her eyebrows, now skepticism crossing her face.

I continue anyway, “We have a pre-team group of girls ages 4 to 6. The group meets three days a week for two hours and I think Emily would be perfect.” My voice trailed off because mom’s hands were in the air, her head shook back and forth slightly as she backed away from me.

Shoot! I scared her off.

“That seems like too much for a 5 year old.”

True. It probably is, but not for a kid like Emily. I sighed to myself, my spirits sinking as I decided on a compromise. “Well, what about a more advanced recreational class, it meets only two days a week for 90 minutes.”

“Is that in the evenings?” Mom asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s too difficult with my other two children and I really like my family to have dinner together. It’s much easier to come in the morning while the other two are in school.”

Of course, she would throw the dinner excuse at me. I’m all about family time, but why is it always dinner? Why not have breakfast together, play Twister before bed, why dinner? Doesn’t she realize how incredible her child is?

No, I think to myself as they walk away. She doesn’t get it. Most parents don’t get it.

Does that make her a bad mother? Absolutely not. She’s an incredible mother who manages the lives of three little people. A mother who values every minute she spends with her children, including dinner time. So, Emily continued in my class and I provided her with skills three levels or more above her current class. But it wasn’t enough. What Emily got from my class, was like a single drop of water when you’re dying of thirst. It left her disappointed and unsatisfied. Not at first, but eventually it did because every child wants a real challenge.

What’s the moral of my story? If your little one shows talent in a sport (whether it be gymnastics, swimming, or archery), really consider giving them every opportunity to go as far as they would like to. Imagine if Michael Phelps’ mother had told him he couldn’t train in swimming because she didn’t want him to be late for dinner or because one of his brothers had soccer practice at the same time. The sacrifices you make to provide a dream for your child will mean just as much to them in years to come as the sport itself.

Trust me it’s worth it! ✨

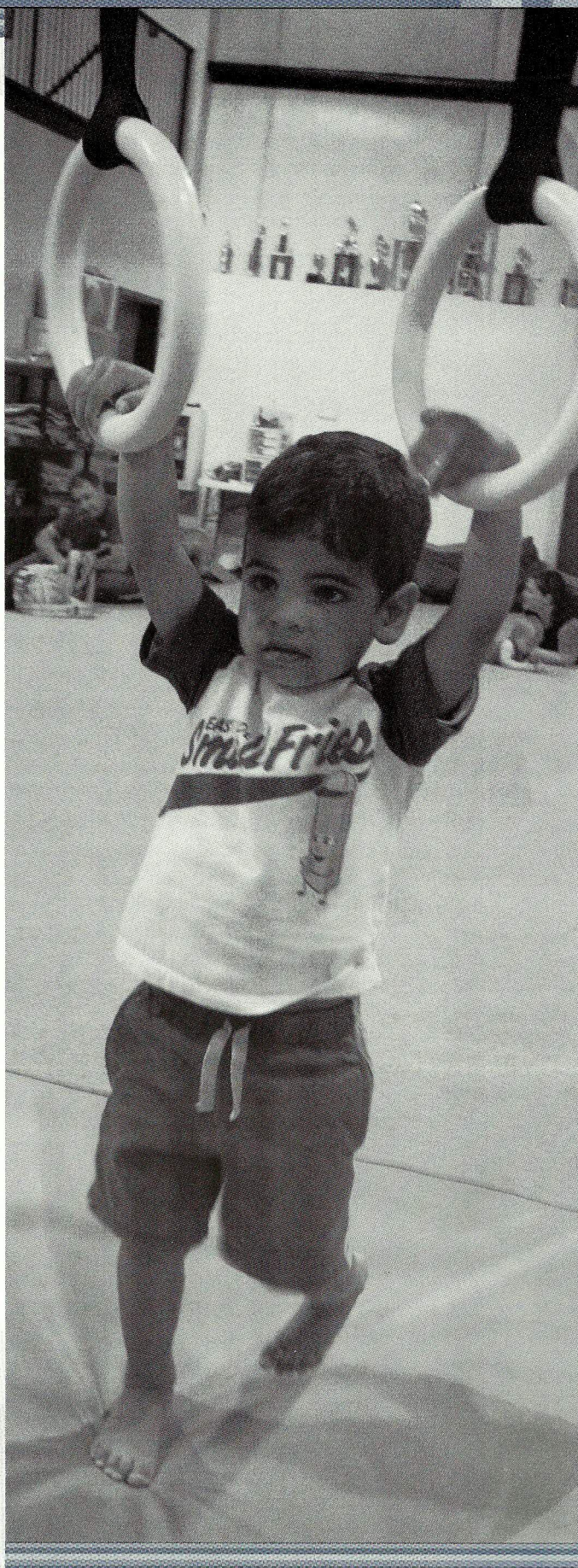


Photo by Larry Gibson