

DON'T BLAME THE BEAM!

by Katherine Friedman

Remember: the beam is only four inches wide! If you're a gymnastics fan, there's no way to forget that fact; television commentators mention it at least once per competition. They love to build the tension every time a gymnast steps up to the "dreaded" apparatus. At the Nationals this year, as gymnasts entered the last rotation, commentator Al Trautwig said, "Again, the specter of the balance beam hangs over this national championship." At the 2012 Olympic Trials, Trautwig went even further after Rebecca Bross fell off of the beam when he said: "You know, there should be a retirement ceremony; every female gymnast should have some time alone with a chainsaw and the balance beam."

Huh? I know that Al was making a joke, but after about twenty years of hearing commentators repeat the same story line regardless of the facts, it gets old. As someone who has watched almost every National Championship and Olympic Trials since the days of Kim Zmeskal (as a gymnast, not a coach), I can't remember even one competition where beam alone determined the winner. And I imagine that I am not the only long-time gymnastics fan that is getting tired of the story of the "dreaded beam."

Yes, beam is hard. Unlike the floor exercise, it looks intimidating by itself, even before a gymnast mounts it and starts doing insane tumbling and dance moves that are far more difficult than anything that the average person could ever manage on a flat surface. Yes, elite gymnasts sometimes fall off of beam, and one little mistake can ruin a competition. But in elite gymnastics, any little mistake can ruin a competition, and every event could be the place where dreams die.

If you want to blame any apparatus for killing the dreams of female gymnasts, the uneven bars deserve the award as much as the beam. By my observations, just as many elite gymnasts fall off of the bars as the beam during any major event. A few world class gymnasts, including Catalina Ponor and Alicia Sacramone, struggled so much with the bars that they gave up any hope of all-around success by choosing not to compete on them at all. They both, however, performed countless no-fall beam routines during their competitive careers. I guess the phrase, "The uneven bars are only four centimeters in diameter" just doesn't have the same ring to it.

If we start analyzing competitions, every apparatus has been the culprit for one gymnast or another. Dominique Dawes nailed bars, beam, and floor, then fell during vault at two World Championships in a row, and the scariest televised fall of the 2012 Olympic women's finals—not to mention McKayla Maroney's famous "look"—came on vault. The floor exercise may look like the "easiest" event, but it has also dashed its fair share of dreams. Dawes, Mo Huilan, and Shannon Miller all botched their floor routines in the 1996 Olympic all-around competition, and Jordyn Wieber's step out of bounds cost her an all-around finals spot in 2012. Don't get me wrong- I'm not criticizing these athletes for making mistakes. I have nothing but admiration and respect for any gymnast who is able to reach the elite level. To get a decent start value they have to take risks— a *lot* of risks— and therefore any high-level competition will include mistakes.

Besides, injuries, not any one apparatus, are the real killers of gymnastics dreams. Going along with our friend Al's assumption that a level-headed gymnast would enjoy destroying an expensive piece of equipment, I bet that Rebecca Bross would attack the vault, not the beam. After all, she was a shoo-in for the 2012 Olympic Team before she injured her knee at the 2011 National Championships- on the vault. Kim Zmeskal's promising comebacks were cut short by multiple injuries sustained during tumbling. (In addition, while Kim Zmeskal's fall off of the

beam during the compulsory competition of the 1992 Olympics got a lot of press, it was actually her steps out of bounds on floor exercise that cost her an all-around medal.) And countless elite (and lower-level) gymnasts have never even had the privilege of performing before the commentators because of career-ending injuries. If you analyze the cause of these injuries, vault and floor are the most likely culprits, not the balance beam. To be fair, repetitive stress and death-defying acrobatic elements are the biggest cause of injuries, but the blame for those goes largely to the Code of Points, which a gymnast could easily shred to pieces without the aid of a chainsaw.

Yes, many great gymnasts have fallen during their beam routine. But many great gymnasts have also fallen during their bar routine, and their floor routine, and their vault—hopefully, not in the same competition! Perhaps what commentators should be saying is: "Remember, gymnastics is really hard." But that would be too obvious, even for a commentator.