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Shawn Johnson: Olympic ambitions in the balance

Gymnast finds gold in moderation

July 17, 2012 | By Wendy Donahue, Tribune Newspapers

At age 20, Olympic medal-winning gymnast Shawn Johnson understands life's balancing act better than most of us ever will.

And not just because she won gold on the beam at the 2008 Beijing Games.

After tearing knee ligaments while skiing in 2010, she underwent surgery and rehab and tried to stage a comeback for the 2012 Olympics.



Gymnast Shawn Johnson hoped to stage a comeback for the 2012 ...

"My body came to a point where it just said, 'No,'" she said in a recent appearance for Nike. "I was getting residual injuries because I was compensating."

She made a big-picture decision: retire from gymnastics earlier than she planned so "when I'm 30 I can walk," she said.

"The adjustment is difficult mentally and physically. Every free second of the day I'm like, 'I have to go to the gym.' My parents will say, 'No, you don't. You can actually relax for a change.' My dad will call at 10 at night and say 'Where are you?' I'll say 'Nowhere.' He'll say, 'Where are you?' 'I'm at the gym.' He says, 'Get home!'" she said, laughing.

The transition will take time, but she is bolstered by a sense of moderation that her parents and coach instilled in her throughout her childhood in West Des Moines, Iowa. She hopes other young, ambitious athletes — or any young person with lofty ambitions — will strive for that balance as they pursue their dreams too.

"One of the rules of my gym was you had to have a normal life, because my coach was smart enough to know that if we didn't, we'd burn out and lose the passion," Johnson said.

"Kindergarten through 11th grade, I went to a normal public school. I went to football games. I went to prom. I had sleepovers and birthday parties. I had to clean the house. I had to take the dog out. I nannied. My parents never wanted me to give up everything for my sport, just in case the day came where I could no longer have gymnastics, and would have nothing. I'm grateful for that now."

Johnson wouldn't trade her gymnastics experience, even though at the Olympic level, training demanded six hours of practice a day, six days a week.

"The biggest sacrifice was family time. I didn't grow up seeing my parents very often. If I wasn't at school, I was at the gym. I traveled with my team and without my parents. It's finally an option for me to say I'm not going to travel, I'm going to go to a family dinner or a reunion that I've missed for 20 years."

As successful as she was, she weathered doldrums.

"The best thing my parents ever did, when I'd come home and say, 'I'm over gymnastics, I want to quit,' was, 'OK.' You see things go wrong when parents become too involved or too overbearing. My parents never wanted to overstep the line between being parents and being a coach."

Her winning turn on "Dancing With the Stars" in 2009 helped fortify her for this adjustment.

"I never knew I could do something outside of gymnastics. It was a confidence-booster," she said. "It was terrifying. I think I was more nervous for the opening night than I was for the Olympics."

The next six to 12 months are booked with travel and work for her sponsors and the Olympics — she's teaming with Ryan Seacrest for commentary in London. She plans to start college in fall 2013.

"Stanford is my school of choice, but my parents said I have to tour at least five more to make sure I'm making the right decision," she said.

Because of "Dancing With the Stars," she finished high school with a private tutor — "not quite like I wanted to," she said. "So when college comes, I want to put everything aside and be a college student."

Incidentally, she has no regrets about the ski trip that led to this crossroads.

"Things happen for a reason," she said. "This helped me learn that you don't need to go to the Olympics to be happy and healthy and have worth. People are interested in the person you are and not the titles."

Helping a young achiever meet life's challenges

No matter how talented or ambitious they are, young athletes, musicians or scholars will encounter challenges. Parents can help their child negotiate each one, whether it's performance anxiety, burnout or a particularly difficult skill they are trying to master. Here are a few tools.

Tap into the child's imagination, says Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist, an associate clinical professor at UCLA and author of "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety Into Joy and Success" (Perigee/Penguin).

If the child is struggling with a fear, ask him where the fear is in his body. Ask him what color is it? What does it say? Then ask where the confidence is and what color it is. Then maybe you ask what happens to the fear when he breathes in confidence? Maybe the fear becomes smaller or changes color into something else.

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Reznick used this tool with a young dancer who was tiptoeing toward burnout. The girl created a "time management wizard" in her mind's eye — an imaginary "CD" called "The Magic of Time," which had tracks that included "Setting Up Priorities," "How to Get Things Done" and "What to Do with Spare Time." Whenever a problem arose, a new track appeared to address it, Reznick said, "and she was able to find enough free time a day to satisfy her 'just-chill' craving."

Teach mental rehearsal. "There is so much research in the positive power of mental rehearsal, whether you call it that or visualization or guided meditation," Reznick said. Closing her eyes, a child can visualize sinking a shot in basketball or playing a flawless concerto. "Engage all of your senses — what does it sound like when everyone is cheering for you? What do your teammates say? What does the grass smell like when you ace that shot in tennis? Engaging more of the senses makes the brain interpret it as real because the same synapses are being engaged."

Use and teach positive language. "Your brain hears the negative almost as a positive — 'Don't miss the ball' as 'Miss the ball,'" Reznick said. "So tell the child what you want them to do more than what you don't want them to do."

When a child wants to quit, listen to the whole story. "Then break it down and ask when was the last time they had a good time," Reznick said. "What are the consequences of stopping? How will it affect their life? And how will it affect their life if they conquer what the issue is?" She cites a young client whose basketball coach was a great guy, but barked directions from the sidelines. "The girl was freaking out. So we talked about her speaking to coach when he was just a regular dad. She let him know when he yells it scares her and she shuts down. He didn't realize it."

Foster a team mentality. Jay P. Granat, psychotherapist, author and founder of StayInTheZone.com, recently had a pro basketball player as a client who said his performance improved if he thought about helping his teammates and less about himself.

Be aware of trends. Even high achievers experience downturns. "A week is different from three months," Granat said. "A lot of kids give up on a sport due to burnout." Overtraining and injuries are another issue. Granat puts inspirational quotes on his bulletin board at his office. One of them is, "Fall down seven times, get up eight."