



# **Texas Dreams Mental Block Manual**

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	2
Introduction to Texas Dreams Mental Block Manual.....	3
Chapter 1: Introduction to Mental Blocks .....	5
Introduction to Mental Blocks .....	6
Identifying the Issue .....	6
Common Triggers.....	6
Chapter 2: Understanding Mental Blocks .....	8
Understanding Mental Blocks.....	9
From the Child’s Perspective .....	9
From the Coach’s Perspective .....	9
Chapter 3: Possible Treatments.....	11
Possible Treatments .....	12
Brainstorm .....	12
Confrontation with Gymnast and Parent/Guardian.....	13
Back to Basics .....	14
Drills, Drills, and More Drills .....	15
Coming Out on Top.....	17

## Introduction to Texas Dreams Mental Block Manual

Texas Dreams Gymnastics is a perfect gateway venue to pursue and achieve a child's gymnastic dreams. Since we opened our doors in 2001, through change and achievement, we have become one of our country's most recognized gymnasiums for the upbringing of talented, beautiful gymnasts in the world. It is our goal to have the child's best interest at heart and through hard work, sweat, and perseverance – we as a team can achieve anything.

Gymnastics is a mental sport. In order to succeed as a career gymnast, the child is put to the test – mentally and physically. We as coaches need to obtain the knowledge and training that is required of us to keep the gymnasts safe and healthy. Besides the blood, sweat and tears, gymnasts must also have the mental power to overcome fear and stress. In exception to our former gymnast coaches that we are so lucky to have working with us, have you ever considered bending over backwards with no anticipation of when you will touch the floor behind you? What about completing a similar skill on a four-foot high, four-inch balance beam or an eight-foot high-bar, or two simple rings suspended in the air up to eight feet high? With all this being said, you can understand the fear that these young gymnasts feel for these high-level skills.



*Image 1: Aly Raisman – Double Arabian Beam Dismount*

In the past few years, we have seen the increase in mental blocks amongst our athletes. Through trial and error, one-on-one and extensive pep talks and stress, the quitting of these exhausted gymnasts have become too prominent. As a solution, the knowledge and understanding of mental blocks and treatments for these blocks needs to be updated.

This manual will provide you with background information, causes, and solutions for these problematic issues that our athletes are experiencing. Research and several experiments have been included in the creation of this manual.



*Image 2: Texas Dreams Elite Team*

As a world-known company of the founder of several nationally-recognized gymnasts we wish to keep our gymnasium growing and succeeding by the extra help from this manual: Texas Dreams Mental Block Manual.

# Chapter 1: Introduction to Mental Blocks

## Introduction to Mental Blocks

Mental blocks, also called “baulks” can emerge in all sports – not just gymnastics. However, since gymnastics is our specialty, we will look at these mental issues from a gymnastics point of view. In gymnastics, mental baulks can emerge in single skills such as a kip on uneven bars or a back handspring on the balance beam.

### Identifying the Issue

In most mental baulk situations, the gymnast will attempt the skill, and before completing it, will stop suddenly, halting the gymnast before the skill is performed. This is usually followed by an extreme wave of various emotions whether it's tears, anger, or the ‘deer-in-headlights’ look. In some cases, especially in high-level gymnastics which requires extreme skills that most of us would not dream of even attempting, ‘baulking’ before a skill raises the danger risk dramatically. Several gymnastics cases of mental blocks have resulted in severe injury and the end of their gymnastics career. Texas Dreams’ Mental Block Manual will improve our chances of preventing these issues, which in turn will prevent injury emotionally and physically to the child.

[Insert self-taken image of gymnast under pressure and distress “deer-in-headlights” pose]

### Common Triggers

Mental blocks have not proven to have any substantial evidence of a medicinal illness that causes them. Since no studies have shown what the specific causes of the baulks are, in gymnastics, we have found that they can be triggered by numerous situations. The gymnast may have suffered a previous injury from the skill causing fear of re-injury, or the gymnast may have no explanation at all for the cause of the random fear. In these unknown cases, we must handle them with care to prevent emotionally damaging the child and their confidence. (Of course confidence is a major key to gymnastics.) Of course, these are only a fraction of the countless causes of these mental blocks. It's essential to be open-minded when it comes down to several different cases and types of mental issues in specific gymnasts. Every gymnast is different, whether it's their style of attitude, their mental capabilities, and even their emotional attachment to gymnastics. As the caretakers and major motivators in these child's lives, we must also adjust our thoughts and understandings about the complex infrastructure of these mental issues.



# Chapter 2: Understanding Mental Blocks

## Understanding Mental Blocks

As a professional child gymnast with an age ranging from six to sixteen, mental blocks can affect each individual differently. Some may show signs of fear, sadness in the form of tears, or they may have a sense of helplessness and cease to put forward any extensive efforts due to the feeling of ‘not being good enough’. Before the treatment process begins, we have to take the time to assess each child’s reactions and mindsets separately from any other individual’s.

### From the Child’s Perspective

From the child’s perspective, mental blocks can create a sense of intense fear, which can risk the spread of these issues to other skills. These skill baulks are known to spread like wildfire – from skill to skill and eventually reaching the point where children are not able to complete a single skill anywhere in the gym. Children who suffer from this may, in result, have a low self-esteem, depression, anger, or an overbearing fear of just about everything. Imagine – if you suddenly were frightened by a simple task as driving a car with no apparent reason of how this came-about. The natural reaction to this situation would be frustration, of not having the ability to get from place to place. Imagine if you wanted nothing more than to go to the grocery store, but were not able to because of an unexplainable fear and inability to force you to get in the car and drive. These feelings are very similar to the feelings a young gymnast, having done the same skill numerous times before, and having it ripped from your abilities. These affected gymnasts are emotionally fragile and we must handle them with care and understanding.

### From the Coach’s Perspective

From the coach’s perspective, of course this could be extremely frustrating. Having taught the child the certain skill for months on end, running them over and over again until it was perfect may seem like it was all-for-nothing. However, this is not the case. Every single child gymnast is a human being – not just a machine (even though they appear as one at times!). Despite our personal feelings on the situation, we must understand that the efforts and actions that we put into these gymnasts with mental issues affect them now more than ever. Most gymnasts, especially of younger ages, will cling to the coach for support and help. If the coach responds with anger and forcefulness, this could push the gymnast closer to quitting more swiftly. As we will cover in the ‘Treatments’ section of this manual, we must handle the baulks with care and patience. We must take the time to analyze the child’s emotional stance on

the issue, break down the skill to its most basic parts, and in simple terms – start from square one. In the next sections we will go into detail on how to perform these tasks and hopefully overcome the fear that is dwelling and taking over the young gymnast.

[Insert self-taken picture of frustrated coach (myself) with frustrated gymnast]

# Chapter 3: Possible Treatments

## Possible Treatments

### Brainstorm

Reminder: Keep the child’s best interest at heart – never give up.

After the coach has identified the issue as a mental block and has analyzed the child’s emotions and attachment to gymnastics, it is now time to brainstorm on the solution proposal. As coaches, we have all been required to teach skills from their most basic level. With the skill on topic, take the time to break the skill down into its minor parts. Bring the physics back into the skill. With gymnastics, it’s all about timing and body positions and how this all works along with the power of gravity. Keep in mind that most likely, the gymnast being handled is still in the process of biologically growing - the slight incorrect movements may throw off their center of gravity, so steer-clear of throwing them into the skill without any basic instructions. While brainstorming on the processes and techniques for the plan-of-action, make the plan as simple and easy to understand as possible. This will prevent the child from becoming overwhelmed and mentally exhausted. To aid in the simplicity of the plan, try writing down the steps in words that the gymnast of the correct age could understand. This will also help you to plan your thoughts clearly. Read books, ask other coaches, obtain any further knowledge on the physics of gymnastics and apply these rules to the skill you are assessing. At the end of your brainstorming process, you should have a clearly written-out set of techniques and drills that the gymnast is to complete each day on that specific skill. The written plan should include the basic body shape assignments, and then move forward to specific set-up drill assignments, then moving forwards to the completion and repetition of the entire skill put together. This written plan should serve as a great go-to for the gymnast if he/she needs to back track later on.

	Conditioning	Flexibility	Vault	Bars	Beam	Floor Ex
NOVICE		Hamstring feet flexed against wall fingers touch wall	5-7 approach steps	Mount: jump to front support	Coupe walks	Stretch Jump
	20 sec. chin hold	Forward split L & R bend knee forward	Hurdle & rebound from board	Single R leg cut forward	180° Turn in Forward Coupe	Cartwheel, 1/4 (90°) turn inward
	7 flexed knee lifts from hang	Straddle split 45 deg.	Tuck jump (min 90° hip & knee angle)	180 deg. Turn L with single leg cut backward	Straight Jump	1/4 (90°) Pivot Turn
	20 sec. hollow body hold, legs slightly bent	Shoulder: lie face down hold dowel rod 2" above floor	Demi-pile landing w/arms forward diagonal low	Cast, push away disount	Releve Steps, Fish Pose, 180° Turn Left	Side chasse w/ 1/4 turn, 180° pivot turn
	5 pushups		Extend legs to finish in a straight stand.		Tuck jump dismount 90 deg. hip & knee angle, w/demi pile landing	Split Jump (45°)
	3 candlestick to straight jumps	Bridge: head off floor				

Image 1: Example of a Well-Planned Lesson Plan for Each Event at the Novice Level

Note: If a coach creates and completes a full written plan for a specific skill, it is important to make copies and save these for future references for other gymnasts and/or coaches in the future.

### **Confrontation with Gymnast and Parent/Guardian**

In most cases, especially young gymnasts who thrive for their coach's approval and love will be embarrassed or fearful of explaining their issue to their coach or family members. As competitive athletes, gymnasts are brought up to be tough, fearless, strong, and hard working. If either of these things is compromised, they may feel as if they are not good enough or lack the talent to be a high-level gymnast. In turn, these mixed feelings result in the gymnast keeping their issues to themselves for them to dwell on the issues instead of asking someone for help. In these cases, we must address and confront the gymnast with care and compassion.

However, before you confront the child, it is necessary to address the parents/guardians first. This way, if the child becomes upset or angry when confronted, the family will have a warning of what is to come and will be able to handle the situation fully prepared. When confronting the parents/guardians, be sure to make it clear that you are in the process of creating a solution-plan for the child and that you have their best interest at heart – to overcome the skill and continue on in their progression to becoming the gymnast they wish to be. Also confront the parents/guardians with evidence that the child is having these problems. (If needed, show the 'Identifying the Issue' section to the parents and have them watch their child at practice.) This will give them the sense of security that you are capable of identifying and analyzing the child's situation and know how to deal with it. Finish confronting the parent with the eagerness and positive attitude towards the mental block. "Gymnasts experience and recover from mental blocks all the time", or "He/she is a strong boy/girl and are able to accomplish anything they set their mind to." This will leave the parents/guardians with the sense of ease that you have the mental issue under control.

With the child, it is vital to approach him/her with caution and care in your tone of voice. Start by asking them their views on gymnastics. If the child seems unattached to gymnastics, proceed to ask questions to try and understand where the disconnection originated. It could be a variety of things such as family issues, age (the older the child gets, the more distant they become), or the answer we were looking for – fear. If the answer is fear, ask the child specifically what they are scared of, which should have the specific skill as the answer. Talk to the child about where the fear may have come from. (If

the child's fear originated from an injury or fall, analyze what part of the skill the fall or injury came from and build your drills around this specific piece to give the gymnast a sense of comfort and confidence.) If the child responds with anger and denial, ease-off and let the child be to his/her own thoughts about the matter (now knowing that the coach is aware of the situation). If the child responds with thankfulness and eagerness to fix the problem, then bring the written plan-of-action to them and let the child read over it. If he/she has any questions about it, answer them in full detail. Be sure to voice the fact that you are here to help and want them to succeed – which is why the plan-of-action will help their baulk if they are willing to work at it.

[Insert self-taken image of gymnast, gymnast parent, and coach (myself) in discussion]

### Back to Basics

Break the skill down into the various body positions needed to perform the complete skill. To simplify this even more, for example, hollow-hold and straight-line body positions are essential for almost all gymnastics skills. For skills involving these body positions, make a plan to assign the gymnast with 50-100 hollow-body holds and countless minutes of holding a tight-body shape. This could start the gymnast off with a good understanding of how the body should look within this skill.

[Insert self-taken pictures of gymnast showing necessary body positions: hollow-hold, arch-hold, basic straight-body position, and handstand]

While the gymnast is progressing through the assignment, be sure to keep a close watch on him/her to be sure the gymnast is completing the shapes correctly. Use hands-on techniques to correct the child's positions. (Press the ribs down to create a hollow shape, squeeze the knees together or the arms by the ears to help the gymnast understand the sensations of what it feels like to be in the correct position.) Move and mold the gymnast into the correct position for full effect.

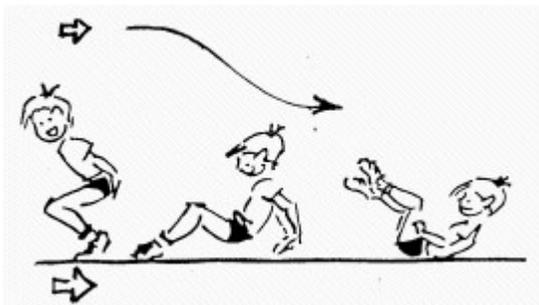
[Insert self-taken pictures of the coach (myself) showing gymnast how to complete a body position; hands on technique]

In some cases, just verbally telling the gymnast what to do does not take as much of an effect on them as a visual technique would. It is vital for the coach to be knowledgeable and capable enough to physically show the gymnast how to do something. Now of course, Texas Dreams does not expect the coach to be able to perfectly perform a high-level skill on a four-inch balance beam.

However, when it comes down to the simple body shapes and basic skills such as a handstand, it can sometimes be very helpful for the gymnast to visually see the skill be performed in a correct manner. In the hollow-hold example, sit next to the gymnast practicing the hollow-hold and correctly do the same position next to him/her. This will give them the opportunity to basically play copycat.

[Insert self-taken picture of coach (myself) doing hollow-hold next to the gymnast; visual technique]

Another technique that should be more prominent in the coaching of gymnastics is the use of pictures. Gymnastics magazines, articles, books, and the web are great sources to find explanatory pictures to aid in the understanding of the specific skill for the child. However, gymnastics has an unnameable amount of various skills in the gymnastics handbook. It would be a miracle to have a step-by-step picture explanation of every skill in the entire handbook. In this case, a hand-drawn picture of the shapes and forms of the body can also help. Simple lines and curves are all that is needed to effectively show the gymnast what you are trying to explain.



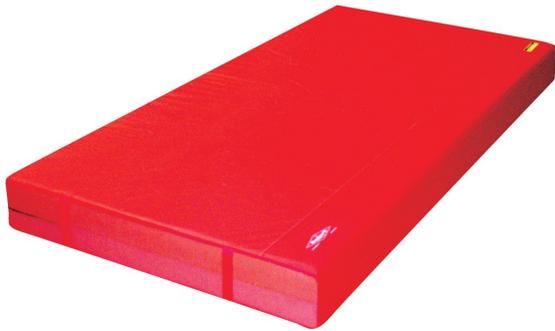
*Image 2: Drawing of Gymnast at the Beginning of a Backward Roll*

### Drills, Drills, and More Drills

After the gymnast completes the body-position assignments while utilizing all the different techniques described in the previous section, it is now time for the coach to apply their critical thinking skills in order to create a unique and operative drill for the specific skill at hand.

A drill is a gymnastics specialist's way of teaching a skill without shoving the gymnast into a difficult skill that they are not prepared for. In drills, the usage of mats, barrels, hand-markers, trampolines, single-rail bars, floor beams and springboards are crucial. Mats are used for the safe, soft landings that may be

required. The barrels and hand markers are used for visual placement of hands and bodies throughout a skill. Springboards and bounce-mats are used for the extra 'spring' or force (in physics terms) that may be needed to complete a new skill. Stall-bars, floor beams, and soft-vaults are often used towards the end of the 'learning' phase of the skill just before the gymnast is capable of performing the skill on the original uneven bars, high beams, or vault table. A drill can be taught in parallel with several other drills in order to achieve the most practice or to specify on certain pieces of the skill at hand.



*Image 4: Landing Mat*



*Image 3: Single-Rail Bar*



*Image 6: Barrel Mat*



*Image 5: Floor Beam*



*Image 7: Tumble Track Trampoline*

Just for further interpretation, let's use a back handspring on the floor as an example. To complete the first phase of a back handspring on floor, aside from the strength and physical ability that is required to complete the skill, the gymnast must learn to have faith in themselves to jump backwards (blindly) and trust their two arms to catch them upside-down. With the critical thinking skills we have used to brainstorm our plan-of-action, it was decided that a barrel (like in the image below) would be a great spot to fall back on in the correct position without the risk of injury. The barrel contours the shape of the back in a comfortable position allowing the gymnast to slowly, at their own pace, to jump back onto their back on the barrel, and slowly rolling the gymnast onto their hands without risking the collapse of the arms from the unpreparedness of the 'new' skill.



*Image 8: Demonstration of Barrel Use for a Back Handspring*

### Coming Out on Top

Now that you have a clearer understanding of what mental blocks are, how they are triggered and how to properly treat them, you are well on your way to becoming a more well-rounded, intelligent coach. Texas Dreams is proud to have the staff that we are blessed with and we not only want to watch our gymnasts succeed, but our coaches and staff as well.

Whether your plan-of-action for a specific child works or not, the most important aspect is that the effort was made to keep the dreams of our children alive and in progress. If your process does not succeed, do not blame yourself – some mental blocks are extremely hard to tackle, even for psychological

professionals - hence the lack of evidence on mental blocks! However, if the plan-of-action does succeed, give yourself and of course your gymnast, a pat on the back. It takes a strong bond and team to get through such a difficult obstacle.

Now, you can celebrate the journey and triumph with your little one and learn from it for the (hopefully not soon) next gymnast in need!

[Insert self-taken picture of coach (Michael, Eli and I) with happy gymnasts after practice]



