The Tumbling Dilemma

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From decades of experience, I am well aware of a common dilemma in coaching that happens each and every year when it comes time for choreography. Inevitably you will have some cheerleaders with rock solid tumbling skills. These cheerleaders you don’t even have to think whether or not you want to place them in the routine. They are in. Then you have a group whose tumbling skills (or lack of) are for sure not going to be worked into the routine. But then you have that group in the middle. You think and have faith that there is a good chance they can get that skill in time for the competition season, but right now it is just not so strong. So the big question comes up; your choreographer is standing there waiting for an answer. Should they work that cheerleader with the questionable tumbling skills into the tumbling section or keep them out?

Believe it or not, from my perspective and experience, the answer to this is easy, and here is why. If you place that cheerleader into the tumbling section in the routine you are now placing **pressure** on that cheerleader. They MUST now get the skill. Tumbling is a very “head game” skill. Pressure does not work as a form of motivation in gaining new tumbling skills. If you place that cheerleader in the routine and two weeks before the competition he/she still does not have the skill you now need to change the routine. This is embarrassing to that cheerleader. It also lowers team morale and ultimately affects the original choreography of the routine. So transitions, formations and flow are all jeopardized.

So here is what I suggest. Sit down with that cheerleader or depending on the age, the cheerleader and parent. At that time host a conversation that might go like this: “Alice, I have decided to not put you in the back handspring section of the routine. Would you agree with me that your back handspring is just not ready yet? But what I would like to do is come up with a game plan to **add** it in the routine. If you can show me five solid back handsprings 4 weeks before the competition I will work you into the routine. Now they need to be strong and clean. I would be more than willing to work with you and help you all along the way. Is that a fair deal?”

The leading benefit of this is team morale. **Adding** tumbling into a routine is a good thing. The rest of the team will not mind mild changes in the routine due to **adding** things that will gain more points and hopefully help them win. This takes the pressure off of that particular cheerleader and adds **positive motivation** and **something to work toward**. If he/she wants it bad enough, he/she is going to make it happen. Make sure you set a firm date on when you must see those five solid back hand springs. If you can, provide the cheerleader some info on additional classes they may take, drills they could do and maybe some open gym time before and after practices.

When coaching one team, I had a cheerleader work so hard on his back handspring. After weeks of extra practice and hard work, he approached me to show me what he had achieved. He in fact did perform five back hand springs but with bent legs and poor form. I was truly proud of him for his hard work and achievement. If only everyone on the team worked that hard. With excitement he wanted to start working it in the routine. Now I knew how hard he worked to get it, he knew and the team knew how hard he worked but the judges would not. They would only see one sloppy back hand spring. So that brings up back to the beginning. In this case you can only pick what to do based on the ethics and goals of your program. If you are out to win then no, don’t put that sloppy back hand spring in. If you are about cheerleader achievement and growth then, yes, that back handspring is going in and that is it.

So what did I do? I worked his back handspring in for some of our exhibitions and smaller competitions. This made him very happy. But I pulled him out for the national level events and to be honest this made him happy too. He recognized the excessive pressure that would be placed on him and wanted to do what was best for the team.

Ultimately that choice of putting that cheerleader in the routine is yours. Keeping everyone happy on your team is a challenge but giving people fair chances to achieve is easy.