

FESTIVAL OR CHAMPIONSHIP? GYMNASTICS FOR ALL EXPERIENCES

FESTIVAL OU CAMPEONATO? EXPERIÊNCIAS NA GINÁSTICA PARA TODOS

Aline Ferreira¹, Kaio César Celi Mota¹, Nayana Ribeiro Henrique¹, Lorena Nabanete dos Reis-Furtado², Tamiris Lima Patricio¹, and Michele Vivienne Carbinatto¹

¹University of São Paulo, São Paulo-SP, Brazil.

²Federal University of Ceará, Fortaleza -CE, Brazil.

ABSTRACT

Models for athlete development have prioritized sports experiences, including events. It is assumed that the variety of events instills in the experience of paradoxical situations, important in the permanence in sport and/or active life. This article discusses the lived experience perception by children in two gymnastics for all events with different biases: one competitive and the other demonstrative. Based on qualitative research, 29 children were interviewed using Focus Groups (n=8), and data analysis using Thematic Analysis. Furthermore, field notes by 4 coaches and reflective narrative from the Focus Group interviewer were considered for triangulation. Two themes were highlighted: a. intersubjective aspects and b. interrelationships. These themes were addressed in both events to a greater or lesser extent. In item a, commitment, aesthetic components, and anxiety were in both events, but overcoming and nervousness more prominent in the competition. In item b, the importance of the other/ group was evident, mostly because of the presentation than the type of event. Recognizing the sporting bias of a practice is, therefore, promoting events of different natures, as practitioners can presume high performance or an active life through sport.

Keywords: Gymnastics. Physical exercises. Qualitative research.

RESUMO

Modelos de formação de atletas primam pela ampliação de experiências esportivas, incluindo os eventos esportivos. Assume-se que a variabilidade de propostas incute na vivência de situações paradoxais, importantes na permanência no esporte e/ou vida ativa. Este trabalho discute a percepção da experiência vivida em dois eventos de ginástica para todos com distintos vieses: um com caráter competitivo e outro com caráter demonstrativo. Protagonizaram o estudo 29 crianças participantes de um projeto de extensão universitária. Para a coleta de dados, realizaram-se 8 Grupos Focais, sendo utilizada a Análise Temática. Diários de campo e texto reflexivo do mediador dos GF foram considerados para a triangulação dos dados. Dois eixos foram evidenciados em ambos os eventos: a) aspectos intersubjetivos, cujo comprometimento, o componente estético e a ansiedade perpassaram ambos os eventos e a superação e o nervosismo tiveram maior destaque na competição; e b) inter-relações pessoais, nas quais a importância do outro/grupo foi evidente, com maior relação ao tipo de apresentação coreográfica de grupo, do que especificamente ao tipo de evento. Reconhece-se, então, o fomento a eventos de diferentes naturezas, uma vez que os praticantes de base podem presumir o alto rendimento ou a vida ativa pelo esporte.

Palavras-chave: Ginástica. Exercício físico. Pesquisa qualitativa.

Introduction

Studies on sports practice have significantly evolved in recent years, with an emphasis on practitioner development rather than talent identification¹. Traditionally, it was believed that reaching high performance levels was a result of innate talent, and consequently, sports initiation focused on assessments to identify a probable attainment of sporting excellence. On the other hand, the developmental approach emphasizes training, focusing on the acquisition of general skills and competencies, and centers on the quality of the process both for professionalization and for active life.

Along this path, the long-term athlete development entails stages throughout its process, which indicate important characteristics about the sporting experience. We highlight as relevant the Model of Sports Participation Development (MDPD)², which advocates for continued sports participation in youth sports, emphasizing the health benefits and personal development.

The stages of MDPD, years of experimentation, years of specialization, and years of investment, are consistent with general theories of child development and integrate the expected outcomes — performance, participation, and personal development². At this point, we bring

forth our concern: studies propose a sports education that values different experiences, including in terms of their sporting events. Therefore, would it be possible to discuss the experience of beginner practitioners in events with distinct characteristics: those of a competitive nature — coded, arbitrated, and ranked — and those of a festive nature — regulated, flexible, without judgement, and podium?

Discourses within the realm of sports indicate championships as unanimous in the experience of sports practice. Intertwined with moral and cultural aspects and associated with confrontation, challenge, and play, competition is seen as an inherent process in sports and is considered its very essence^{3,4}. We understand that the competitive context is a potential learning environment that, depending on how it is experienced, can strengthen social, moral, and ethical development for life⁵. However, it is not the only possibility for experiencing an event.

In general, events can be divided into six categories⁶: Cultural Celebrations; Business and Commerce; Art and Entertainment; State and Politics; Private Functions; and Sports and Recreation — the latter being prominent in the field of Physical Education. In summary, sports events highlight differences in purpose and evaluative rigor. Commonly, in sports, there are those that value the participation of everyone and do not have a specific and formalized evaluation (festivals), and those that follow a coding close to high performance and the prerogative of classifications (first, second, and third place)⁶.

It is important to consider the objectives of participation in sports events and adapt their characteristics to the needs of the target audience. Studies suggest the possibility of altering the rules of formal competitions to promote greater personal involvement and positive experiences⁷.

Among them, we highlight Competitive Engineering⁸, which proposes systematic adjustments in the sports competition environment, related to structure, rules, facilities, and equipment, to promote intrinsic motivation and improve the competitive experience of its participants. Thus, the level of competitiveness of the event and its format can be adapted to the level of development of the practitioner and the intention of participation of its audience, throughout the trajectory of athletes' sports education, as advocated by the Competitive Participation Model⁵.

In gymnastics, there are different types of events, such as performances on commemorative dates, festivals, contests, and competitions. Festivals are events commonly without formal evaluation, with open participation, focused on leisure. In contrast, competitions involve assessments based on gestural codes that score technical execution and compare scores among athletes⁷.

Festivals and championships are, therefore, representative of the most traditional sports events and have raised some questions: what are the perceptions of participation in sports events with a festive character? What are the perceptions of participation in sports events with a competitive character? Are they similar or contradictory?

To avoid responses focusing on different sports practices, our project focused specifically on the analysis of the Gymnastics for All (GfA) practice, which is one of the official gymnastic manifestations of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG)^{9,10}.

The FIG officially promotes two events in the realm of Gymnastics for All (GfA): the World Gym for Life Challenge (WGfL) and the World Gymnaestrada (WG). The WGfL has a competitive nature, as the presentations receive a quantitative evaluation ranging from 1 to 5 points based on the following criteria: entertainment, innovation, originality and variety, technique, quality and safety, overall impression^{9,11}. Upon consolidating the scores, groups are organized into first, second, and third place. The WG is festive in nature, focusing on the unity among gymnasts, groups, and countries. During the presentations, there is no formal evaluation, criteria, or formal feedback, and interaction with the audience is relaxed.

This article discusses the perception of the lived experience by children in two types of Gymnastics for All events: a festival and a championship.

Methods

To identify and discuss the perception of the lived experience in different Gymnastics for All events, qualitative research was adopted as the basis, approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under protocol number 92331118.90000.5391.

Research Context

To avoid the influence of context on the perception of the event, data were collected in a university extension project that involved children of both sexes, aged between 6 and 12 years, at a public university in Brazil. During this period, the structure of the classes, the available materials, the groups of practitioners, and the teacher-monitors remained unchanged. Data collection took place over two consecutive semesters: one dedicated to the preparation of classes and choreographic compositions for participation in a GfA festival, and the other focused on participation in a competition. In both events, the presentations occurred sequentially, allowing practitioners to watch each other. At the festival, all practitioners received printed participation certificates.

On the other hand, in the championship, a panel composed of five evaluators was positioned in front of the floor, each with evaluation sheets following the model of the "World Gym for Life Challenge" event by FIG, including ratings from 1 (lowest value) to 5 (highest value) for: a) entertainment value; b) innovation, originality, and variety; c) technique, quality, and safety; and d) overall impression. After each presentation, the evaluators filled out the sheets and provided the numerical data to the event manager, who consolidated them into a spreadsheet. At the event's conclusion, the groups were called to receive awards in the form of medals, with only one group achieving first place and the others being equally divided between second and third place.

Regarding the proposed activities

The GfA classes, lasting one hour and fifteen minutes, followed the three-moment methodology inspired by the Unicamp Gymnastics Group (GGU)¹²: exploration of materials, creation of small choreographies, and presentations among groups in the class. GfA does not have an institutionalized gestural code¹³, which allows for diverse interpretations and flexible management by each group in different contexts¹⁴. The practice aims to culminate in a choreography presented at sports events, whether festive or competitive.

The equipment used included large and small gymnastics apparatus, as well as unconventional materials, encouraging movement exploration. The monitors encouraged students to recognize the material, form pairs and quartets to create collective movements, resulting in various movement possibilities¹⁵. The classes included small presentations among subgroups as preparation for future events, promoting the development and participation of gymnasts of different skill levels^{9,10,16,17,18}.

Protagonistas da Pesquisa

Protagonizaram este estudo 29 crianças, sendo 25 meninas e 4 meninos, com média de idade de 9 anos. Em média, 25% dos participantes estudavam em escola pública; 22 considerados brancos, 5 pardos, 1 preto e 1 amarelo. Aproximadamente 75% do total de participantes praticavam outras atividades físico-esportivas, como natação e futebol.

Research Participants

This study involved 29 children, comprising 25 girls and 4 boys, with an average age of 9 years. On average, 25% of the participants attended public schools; 22 were considered white, 5 were mixed-race, 1 was black, and 1 was Asian. Approximately 75% of the total participants engaged in other physical-sporting activities, such as swimming and soccer.

Data Construction

We chose to use Focus Groups (FGs) to obtain children's perceptions of the lived experience in the events, considering that this instrument is effective for this age group¹⁹. FGs involve interaction between researchers and participants, focusing on specific topics. The selection of participants for data collection was careful, following the recommendation of a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve participants per FG.

- 12 children in 2 focus groups before the festive event (PRE-Fest);
- 13 children in 2 focus groups after the festive event (POST-Fest);
- 10 children in 2 focus groups before the competitive event (PRE-Comp);
- 09 children in 2 focus groups after the competitive event (POST-Comp).

For the inclusion of children in the groups, we established attendance in classes, active participation in choreographic composition, and presence at both festivals. Additionally, the mediator described her perceptions of the focus groups in discursive texts, which were handed to the principal researcher after each collection, contributing to the reliability and validation of the data. We also utilized field diaries maintained by four monitor-researchers who accompanied the entire process.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, we adopted Thematic Analysis (TA)²⁰, as per Braun and Clarke, which "examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences, and so on are constructed from a series of discourses that operate within society"^{20:7} and therefore "works to both reflect reality, and to undo or unravel the surface of 'reality'"^{20:8}.

This analysis unfolds in the following stages: a) familiarization with the data; b) generation of initial codes; c) search for themes; d) review of themes; e) definition and naming of themes; and f) production of the report²⁰.

Reliability and Validity of Data

Triangulation of data was adopted to improve the quality of information collection in the study, involving the analysis of field diaries from four monitor-researchers, focus groups, and overall perceptions of the focus group mediator, aiming to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. The combination of different instruments allowed for data triangulation for the issues discussed in the results²¹.

Thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers, who initially proposed themes. After a meeting with a supervisor, the themes were reviewed and refined through recursive reflection, resulting in the identification of two main themes: those related to the intersubjective aspects of the experience and those related to the inter-relational aspects of the experience.

Results and Discussion

Intersubjective Aspects

a. Commitment

Regardless of the event, children showed commitment to the experience. The fact that the "product" of GfA manifested in the choreography may have facilitated the understanding of each one's responsibility in the composition: "I must avoid missing out", "it's important that I attend class", "my presence at the event is relevant, after all, my position is unique in the context".

(Dialogue PRE-Fest)

Barbara: "There was supposed to be a ready choreography, because some people skip and it harms us!"

Nathalia: "In our group, one person missed once, and the other missed when the one who had missed before came."

Barbara: "Then there was a mismatch in the choreography."

Rafaella: "It messed up a lot!"

Beyond the mere cinematic reproduction of bodily elements with music, GfA choreographies delve into the realm of the senses, and bodily gestuality, beyond physical demonstration, describes a linguistic itinerary. It is necessary to depict formations in space, changes in planes, unexpected combinations, and offer a moment of wisdom, not only to the spectator but also to the gymnast-interpreter¹⁵. Scholars in the field of choreographic compositions warn that, regardless of the event's objective in which the choreography will be presented, there is an intrinsic commitment to its artistic component, after all, there is a bodily poem as the thematic language of the composition. Metaphorically, one less gymnast is like excluding a letter from the poetry. Words lose their meaning, and the sentence, at times, must be undone or remade, depending on the physical-technical disposition of who is positioned in the place.

The narratives coincide with Patricio and Carbinatto^{22; 13}:

In the sensitive responsibility of accepting participation in a sports event, a commitment is also brought into play. Hours of training, hours of contact, hours of respect. Days of limitless interaction. Stepping into each other's worlds. Care and concern to ensure that "everything goes well." In this commitment, not always explicitly stated, we affirm that during the preparation process and throughout the event, the group becomes one.

b. Overcoming

The competitive event led the practitioners to pay greater attention to the presentation. Leticia clearly noticed this relationship: "I think we only succeeded because we were more attentive, and we were more attentive because we were in a competition, so, we pay more attention (POST-Comp)."

The competition was not framed within the paradigmatic precepts of military and capitalist approaches (fighting against each other or being better than others), but rather in the understanding that we need to surpass ourselves and strive for improvement^{4,24}:

So, this thing of first, second, and third. Like, if you get third place, it's okay because you'll be happy because you did a presentation. And like she said, you have to know what to improve. As everyone says, winning doesn't matter (Carlos, POST-Comp).

I'm going to say like before, I like first, second, and third place, because then you know exactly where you placed, and you know what to improve. You think "look, I didn't do it perfectly, I could have done more!" I can improve something. (Jéssica, POST-Comp).

It's also to get first place, and we want to get first place and we try harder (Amanda, POST-Comp).

Practitioners acquire knowledge that will serve as an instrumental means to overcome shortcomings, and in this case, we could relate it to the technical deficiencies of the sport itself, on the path to both sporting and personal development⁴.

There is a relationship between the individual and the "lived world" in sports practice, where through the body, one can express feelings and perform various movements²⁵. In both events, we could identify that the lived experience in each model was reflected in the gymnastic performance. However, the sense of overcoming was evident both in the children's expressions and in the execution of the movements.

Sports practice, regardless of context and purpose, should give meaning to life in all its forms. Thus, in the context of competitive practices, self-improvement reveals a movement of transcendence and a search for its essence, materialized by climbing steps, in the aspect of the athlete's technical and personal development, and by overcoming the difficulties encountered along the sporting journey⁴.

It is important to emphasize that competition can promote the development of the motor aspect, as it was only in the environment with assessment and feedback that we identified, in the children's statements, greater effort to perform the motor tasks involved in gymnastic movements.

The essence of sports is associated with confrontation, challenge, and play, and therefore, with competition⁵, as the competitive context can be a rich learning environment. The educational value of participation in competitions will depend on how athletes are guided, as well as the lived experiences in this context. Gaya and Gaya²⁴ emphasize that if built on ethical and moral principles, sports competitions and challenges constitute secure foundations upon which a pedagogy aimed at the integral formation of children and young people can be built.

c. Aesthetic Component

Questioned by a participant about the theatrical nature of the composition of one of the groups, the children reinforced that expressiveness "entertains people, because there are feelings too, we did the feeling of laughter, but we could have done any other feeling" (Jéssica, POST-Comp). Clearly, not only the movement of gymnastics and its display were raised, but also the understanding of this movement²⁵.

The proposal not only brought about an aesthetic need inherent in modalities that have a product to be displayed as their axis, but also to perceive GfA as an opportunity to express feelings and relate to the present audience.

We noticed that some groups find it easier to create a choreography when they tell a "story," like today's group, who developed a composition of "cops and robbers." However, they didn't want something heavy; instead, they wanted something that, in the end, everyone would be "friends," conveying a message of peace to the audience, demonstrating the sentiment that "good always triumphs." After a long discussion among them, they managed to come up with a script (Field Diary Construction of Monitors).

The presence of the audience seemed to involve the value that the students give to the events, indicating a commitment (item a) to the quality of the performance and the available time for it:

I think it's much better than us bringing a pre-made choreography and just imitating, you know? It's authentic! I just think we could have more time, but other than that, I think it's really cool for us to create. (Nathalia, PRE-Fest).

The initial process is always slow. The children want to create something "amazing and surprising," so the discussions about the theme and what will be included in each choreography are always lengthy. Typically, two or three students start with ideas, and with our mediation, the others contribute. However, with the limited time of the classes, they start to get anxious about the delay in creation and sometimes complain among themselves to "resolve it quickly" (Field Diary Construction of Monitors).

For the children, we found the aesthetic component to be a reference regardless of the type of event. However, in competitive events, general evaluation aspects were a guiding part of the process:

During the choreography development today, we tried to recall what would be evaluated during the event, what criteria would be observed by the judges. These reminders of evaluative concepts were crucial because when the students ran out of ideas to continue the creation, we revisited what had not yet been addressed – in this case, the safety of acrobatic poses and the synchronicity of movements (Field Diary Construction of Monitors).

The alignment between body work, use of music, and handling of small apparatus is recurrent in traditional modalities, such as rhythmic gymnastics²⁶. Now, if the foundation, or the formative phase of future gymnasts, practitioners, or even spectators is in focus, attention to the development of aesthetic competencies seems prominent.

d. Emotions

We noticed that anxiety prevailed in both events and highlighted the importance of presenting well, as expressed by Marcos (PRE-Fest): "It could be faster because we only have one more day to remember the entire choreography because the presentation is on Saturday."

The relevance of the audience raised feelings of anxiety, which may alert us to discuss and clearly explain the audience that may be present at the events: "I'm anxious because I know everyone's parents will come, but I don't know if other people from outside will come to watch us" (Nathalia, PRE-Fest). The presence of a judging panel was depicted by Amanda (POST-Comp): "I pretended there was no one there!"

Previous experience was highlighted as a way to deal with this emotion. Participation in past events, in the same location and project, helped the students feel more comfortable: "I didn't feel nervous because I've already performed! I was here last year, I've performed twice already" (Rafaela, PRE-Fest). This raises the importance of offering a range of sports events to increase the participation of practitioners, as advocated in Sports Pedagogy literature²⁷.

Furthermore, practitioners who had similar experiences such as physical-sporting activities, events from different modalities, felt more at ease regarding participation in the analyzed events:

Last Saturday, I had participated in the swimming festival, right? I was very nervous! So I said, "Okay, in this festival I won't get nervous!" Then I was a little less nervous, on the day, not even the day before I was nervous, but when we were entering, I got a little nervous. (Barbara, POST-Fest).

Therefore, there was agreement with sports education models²⁸, which indicate students' participation in different events, with appropriate proposals for each stage, offering a range of experiences throughout their journey in each practice, which will assist in their future choices and promote the continuity of a healthy sports life.

However, in the competition, the feeling of nervousness was also noticeable, revealed by Maria (POST-Comp):

I was very nervous... When they called us to (...) do the presentation. I was kind of nervous. Because they had said that we have to have confidence in the group, we have to have a lot of rhythm in gymnastics.

The carefreeness was evident in the pre-festival narratives and was noticed concurrently with characteristics of the practice. Laura (PRE-Fest) revealed that GfA "develops imagination," especially by explicitly expressing the loosening of specific gymnastic code and manuals. This fact was confirmed by Nathália (PRE-Fest) and Rafaela (PRE-Fest) simultaneously: "it was to use imagination: what did you see on that apparatus?"; "what did you think was something that could be done." Although this prerogative was also followed for the competition, it was more pronounced in the FGs related to the festival, which may be an indication of the broader nature and appreciation of movements in the event in question.

Our reflections indicated a preparation of the events that met the pedagogical needs of the children and the GfA²⁹, as whether formal evaluation was involved or not, they were perceived with lightness by Augusto (POST-Comp): "for me, gymnastics is a fun thing"; and reinforced by Emily (PRE-Comp): "it was kind of [the routine] to have fun, let's say"; and Henrique (POST-Comp), "it was really cool, it was fun! To watch the performances and to do the presentation!"

The experiences in the events introduced the children to "competing" and "performing" in a calm and appropriate manner:

No matter the place [podium], at least we had fun doing it. And even if we make a mistake, afterward we'll start laughing about it! (Jessica, Pre-Competition).

Inter-relational Aspects

Menegaldo and Bortoleto^{30,31} confirm the theoretical care in revealing aspects of collectivity, as GfA and its potential in social interaction should not be superficially approached^{29,30}.

Immersed in the choreographic aspect and the possibility of proposing, we perceive values of a democratic nature, pronounced by Jessica (PRE-Comp):

And I think it's really cool that we can choose, why? Because then we don't have to follow an idea already chosen, that we can't change anything. But instead, we listen to options, and we all decide together! I think that's really cool!

Recent studies^{32,33} propose that a student-centered pedagogical approach contributes to students constructing their trajectories and collaborating during the process:

Yeah, I think we develop imagination and some movements that we end up learning, because sometimes you know how to do something, but another person doesn't know, and you want to incorporate that into the choreography, you either teach another person or the other person teaches you.

The methodological approach resonated with the event experience and aligned with recent literature on the process and timing of presentation in GfA^{22,34}. Jessica (POST-Comp) clarified this relationship between the type of presentation (group choreography) and the perceived experience:

It's much better for me to work in a team because you won't be alone up there, there will always be someone there supporting you, even if your place is last, everyone will be there! It won't just be you; you won't feel alone.

The establishment of pathways facilitating the connection of gymnastics to other physical practices was noted, which expands access to the possibilities and limitations of each practitioner, a factor reinforced by Leticia (PRE-Comp):

But what you said about some people being able to do it and others not. Sometimes we put only those people who can do those steps, and the others do other things.

Perceiving oneself with others was also mentioned by Leticia (PRE-Comp): "We listen to some other people, and we put our steps together with theirs. And then we manage to create a choreography where everyone is united!"

Isabela warns that sometimes it's necessary to give up skills that you possess, in favor of harmony or moments when everyone should perform the same movement: "I can do handstands, cartwheels, but some people can't, (...) so it has to be something for everyone" (Isabela, PRE-Fest). This ideal aligns with the reflections presented by Patricio and Carbinatto^{22:11}, after all,

prior joint reflection was necessary: who can perform? In such a way, that the ideas only made sense considering our processes of sports transcendence and gymnastic overcoming.

The relationship with the evaluators and the potential feedback from the competition were identified as positive by the gymnasts: "because when there's no referee, you don't know what you need to improve" (Jessica, POST-Comp).

Our data indicate that the different objectives of the event did not make a difference, but rather the presentation model - choreographies - which circumscribed an intense self-other relationship. On the day of both events, the children were apprehensive as the start of the activity approached and missed some classmates. Therefore, if we do not indicate that these situations can instill in other areas of human formation, such as empathy and even the appreciation of the other in our coexistence⁵.

It's interesting to note that the process of participating in the events also evoked an awareness of situations and understanding of results, tied to the methodological approach outlined earlier. For example, during the classes, the groups would perform small presentations for each other. This dynamic became a space for preparation. The opportunity to watch other groups seemed to develop and enhance their own creation, and the ability to recognize the value of their peers' work: "We expected them to win because theirs had a lot of gymnastics and they had ideas that we would never think of."

Conclusions

Regardless of the path an athlete will take in their journey, for sport to become a significant phenomenon in their life—whether through professionalism or active living—the early years of involvement in sports should promote, beyond skill development, social, moral, and personal development. For this, events should move away from unique models, commonly driven by adult-centric competitive models.

The construction of our data highlights that variability in situations can evoke broader formative experiences. If one event facilitates recognition of success, another may reveal more vulnerable situations. Both, however, are important for understanding and recognizing weaknesses, virtues, potentials, and limitations.

Furthermore, we argue that this study presents a counter-hegemonic perspective. Hovering over a usual dualistic atmosphere—either this or that—we perceive that both proposals brought interesting aspects to the sporting experience. The preparation path of

gymnasts for events was beneficial and brought to light a general perception of the role of each individual and the group in the overall context. Therefore, we do not advocate for the substitution or supremacy of one over the other.

We advocate for sports work proposals that allow for attendance at various events, aware of possible outcomes: sometimes close to leisure precepts, sometimes to those of sports performance, sometimes with the premise of social strengthening and group belonging. Events that provide experiences and stimuli for practice without an excessive focus on results seem healthy. For this, methodologies grounded in the most contemporary principles of education, where inclusion, social interaction, and autonomy is present.

Furthermore, recognizing the sports bias of GfA is about fostering events of different natures in support of practice encouragement. After all, there are practitioners who will have gymnastics as a foundation for active life. Others, as a presumption for high performance. Let us think, therefore, of the foundation as an amplifier of possibilities!

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ORCID:

Aline Ferreira: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9885-0115>

Kaio César Celi Mota: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9732-6194>

Nayana Ribeiro Henrique: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4749-0698>

Lorena Nabanete dos Reis-Furtado: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6593-4646>

Tamiris Lima Patrício: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3867-4302>

Michele Viviane Carbinatto: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6598-9938>

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Corresponding author: Michele V Carbinatto. E-mail: mcarbinatto@usp.br