

Risk and Reward

Take only the sensible, calculated risk.



by Peter Vidmar

AT THE 1983 WORLD Gymnastics Championship, held in the Budapest (Hungary) Sports Arena, I fell nine feet, but that wasn't the worst of it. Just moments before, I was going through a routine on the high bar that I thought would make me the world horizontal bar champion. I was in second place going into the high bar finals, close enough to be thinking about winning the title. And when the Japanese gymnast who was leading the competition fell during his routine, the cameras focused in on me.

I was ready. All I had to do was nail my routine. But there was one slight problem. I was suddenly having difficulty with a risk skill in my high bar routine—a tricky maneuver that I'd managed to pull off without a hitch in the preliminaries, but now was giving me problems. This was a skill that had made me a contender. Indeed, this was the one skill I needed to win.

As I warmed up, I kept having problems and became very frustrated. Worry soon gave way to panic. I looked at my coach and said, "You've gotta help me. Suddenly I can't do this right! It's my only risky skill! I have to do this! What's wrong?"

He watched me and said, "Just pike more on your swing. Arch more at the bottom. Let go of the bar a little later." He followed these tips with the ultimate coaching, teaching and leadership wisdom: "Just do it right!"

But I wasn't doing it right, and for a moment I thought about not doing it, leaving it out. Why not? I wouldn't get the two-tenths of a point awarded for risk, but I could still score as high as a 9.8—and that score would likely win the bronze medal, maybe even the silver. But I knew that I wouldn't win the gold medal without taking some chances.

I also knew that it wasn't every day you get a chance to be a world champion—in anything. Now I had that chance—and was I going to play it safe? Was I going to throw out the risk now that I was this close? No! I decided to leave that risky skill in. With it, I would ride to the top. All I had to do now was perform my routine successfully, and I would become the *World Horizontal Bar Champion*.

My risk skill came right at the beginning of the routine. So, I swung around the bar, let go, came straight up over the bar, did a half turn, straddled my legs, came back down, caught the bar, immediately let go again, did a back flip with the half turn in the pike position, and came back down to catch the bar—but the bar was not there.

That's when gravity prevailed.



After dropping nine feet, I hit the mat. Now, in my sport, you're only allowed one dismount in a performance. So, I did the only thing I could do. I jumped up off the floor, grabbed the bar again, and finished my routine.

I'd blown it. I'd choked. I'd failed and placed eighth (there were only eight people in the competition).

What bothered me the most was that I didn't come through. I honestly thought I would. That's what I kept thinking. *I thought I would come through!* Doubts suddenly came creeping in from all corners. Deep down I wondered: Will I ever rise to the occasion under pressure? Do I have what it takes? When the heat is on, will I always crack?

As I walked away, my coach cornered me and said, "Pete, this is not the end. *Everything* is a learning experience. You can benefit from this."

He was right. This was a valuable learning experience. That fall taught me this: Never take any risk for granted.

I promised myself that from that day forward, if I was going to take risks, I

was going to be ready for them. The Olympics were eight months away. I resolved that I'd either go back to the high bar at the end of my workouts or stay on the bar longer, and I'd work overtime on that risky double release move. I had learned my lesson. The next time the heat was on, I would not fall.

By the Olympics, I was a lot more comfortable with that risky release. I jumped up and grabbed the bar in the all-around finals at the Los Angeles Olympic Games. About a minute later, I had scored a perfect 10.

Looking back, I can say that I'm glad I fell in Budapest. Sometimes it is necessary to fail. Often, that's how we learn. It wasn't fun at the time, but it taught me to focus. Respecting a risk is every bit as important as taking one.

I suggest you make a list of some of your mistakes and ask, "Have I learned from each mistake? If so, what?" *Write it down.* If you haven't learned from that mistake, look at it again.

After completing this exercise, think of the next big bold task you would like to accomplish—the one that's a bit of a stretch for you. Ask yourself, "Is it meaningful? Is it worth the effort? What's the potential?" *Write it down.* What are the habits or behaviors that will prevent you from achieving that goal? What will you do to avoid those habits or behaviors? *Write this down.* What are the habits or behaviors that will contribute to your reaching that goal? How will you acquire those habits? *Write this down.*

Explore ways in which sensible, calculated risk-taking can help you get where you want to go, instead of where the risks want to take you. The pursuit of meaningful personal excellence will require some risk taking. Is your risk calculated? A calculated risk is clearly in focus, well considered and understood, and is seen as worth taking. An uncalculated risk is neither researched nor understood. Usually, it's just stupid. Consider whether the potential consequences are worth the gamble. These basic, simple exercises can make for a safer journey.

Remember: If not for risks, rewards would lose much of their value. My fall in Budapest taught me not to avoid risks, but rather that a life without risk—a life of safe mediocrity—hurts much more than a "face plant." PE

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ACTION: Go for the meaningful reward.