

# The Stuck Landing



The only YMCA boys' gymnastics program in the state is helping Aquidneck Island youths front tuck their way to achievement.

By Annie Sherman | Photographed by Jacqueline Marque

**T**hese boys never took gymnastics classes before. They never really wanted to, either. Their parents might have thought organized instruction wasn't an option here or that their sons would refuse it. But once these hyperactive boys started somersaulting over the furniture and running backflips in the yard, they all realized that

perhaps they should unleash this energy in a gymnasium with trampolines and padded floors, and with a coach who encouraged their athleticism.

This is how they came to resemble ping pong balls bouncing around the Middletown YMCA's gym. The 25 boys in practice, ranging in age from four to 14, are running and flipping across the mats, and swinging on



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—Cheryl Cole, mother of gymnasts Daniel and Joseph

Michael Garvey on the parallel bars;  
Daniel Cole on pommel horse.  
Opposite: Shea Burnley on rings.





rings 10 feet in the air. They're all comrades with a shared restlessness and athletic excitement. Even the youngest team member, four-year-old Joseph Cole of Middletown, is practicing his wobbly somersaults and the routine dismount we recognize from televised Olympic performances — standing with arms overhead, chest and chin out. He smiles with the pride of accomplishment, and looks around to see if anyone witnessed what he has just done: His mother Cheryl gives him a thumbs up from the sideline. "This is especially good for the boys, because it helps them channel all their energy, and they see it as a way to enjoy fitness," she says. "My older son Daniel, 11, has been challenged on the pull-up bar at home, and being part of this team really helps him. Physically they're stronger, and compare their six-pack abs."

Established in 2005, the program has grown from 12 gymnasts to more than 60 now, with twice-weekly two-hour practices and voluntary performances in state and regional competitions. That part of the program is voluntary because boys compete only if they want to, says Coach David Rollin,

Left: Auggie Hann on rings with Coach Catriona Tilden.

Below, left to right, front row: Assistant Coach Catriona Tilden, Graham Brown, Joseph Cole, Jack Voute, Luke Voute, Calan Armitage, Brady Johnson, Coach Andrew Enos. Middle row: Shea Burnley, Alex Stephens, Aidan Justice, John Gleason, Michael Phelps, Owen Hawkins. Back row: Coach David Rollin, Daniel Cole, Auggie Hann, Ricky Rascoe, Michael Garvey, Kieran Gallison, Josh Laramie, Coach Chip Voute. Not pictured: Jonah McEwen, McKay Gleason, Coach Paul Campbell.



a former competitive gymnast. He insists that hardcore training and scores on the pommel horse, for example, are not the focus. "They're here to have a good time, enjoy themselves and be good people," he says. "We're the A.D.D. generation, so when you're hyperactive, you need a good outlet. Many of these kids have tried other team sports like soccer and football, and just weren't engaged. Though this is an individual sport, we condition, correct and train as a team, so everyone watches out for each other."

That "all for one, one for all" dynamic is pervasive in other group sports where each athlete relies on others to succeed, but it's less evident in individual sports where the pressure rests squarely on one person's shoulders. On and off the apparatus, these boys encourage each other, and with multiple sets of sibling gymnasts on the team, older boys regularly instruct the younger ones on proper technique and formation. They compete fiercely in practice but encourage and console each other if a tumble routine goes wrong. Rogers High School freshman Michael Garvey, 14, is one prime example of that brotherly influence. At the top level now after being on this team for seven years, he once was the only boy at practice in the program's nascent stages. Now he helps instruct the burgeoning team and competes statewide and regionally, between playing cello, running cross country and as student council class president. "I had too much energy and my mom said if I kept doing flips in the house, I might get hurt. So we tried it out first, just to see how it went," he says. "I really like it a lot. It's not the easiest sport, and while I'm lucky that it came easier to me than to others, I thought I would get better quicker. But now, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have gymnastics. It's like a second home." His mom Sue agrees. "He was doing some pretty impressive flips in the house, and would literally climb the walls. So when he started doing cartwheels on the baseball field, he decided to do gymnastics."

Growing with the team and now being a mentor to younger boys has allowed Michael a unique perspective on

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Michael Garvey on the parallel bars.



The boys compare their "rips" as a badge of honor when the calluses rip off.



the sport and his passion for it, but it hasn't always been blue ribbons and adoring fans. He went from being a shy boy with a speech impediment to a confident social butterfly who daunts naysayers or bullies whenever he does a backflip. "Everyone supports me now, because they think it's really cool that I can do that," he says. Some pessimists who claim gymnastics isn't really a sport might create a little underlying negativity. But it's not enough to threaten or deter these boys, who come to practice every Tuesday and Thursday with smiles on their faces and hearts full of determination. "There is a definite stigma against boys gymnastics," says Portsmouth resident Monica Burnley, whose 13-year-old son Shea is a gymnast, but also plays hockey, baseball and basketball, and runs cross country at Portsmouth Middle School. "There are people who think it's a sissy sport, but it totally isn't. Everything takes time, precision, dedication and discipline."

Comparatively, the YMCA girls gymnastics program is considerably larger, with more than 200 girls participating in practice and regular competitions. But the two programs complement each other and work together to shape the sport's overall reputation. "I'm so impressed with how the boys program has grown," says Shannon Farrell, YMCA school age gymnastics team director. "We've had some boys leave because they didn't think it was a masculine sport, but it originally began as all-male. And we have quite a few others, both in the boys and girls programs, who don't understand that gymnastics is not just about flipping around the gym. You learn so many things by being on a these teams, like discipline, time management and responsibility."

Rollin, who himself fought peer pressure as a young gymnast, now ignores the stereotypes and the female competition, and continues to push as any coach would. While he acknowledges that many of his athletes will not continue the sport past college, just as he stopped competing when gymnastics was dropped from his collegiate program, he recognizes the values that gymnastics promotes, even if the athletes are not going to the Olympics. "We are building young men here," he says, "not just gymnasts."

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—Coach David Rollin



Joseph Cole flies through the air into the ball pit during his play time.



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