**Annual Report to Members**

Dear Members, 21 September 2019

As Spirit Gymnastics Academy enters its second year, this report looks back on a tumultuous and successful first 12 months and looks forward to a bright future for the Academy and its members.

**Our origins**

First, it is worth reflecting on where we have come from. There are still members and families involved in Spirit who remember the very first days of the club in 2004, when Spirit was an offshoot from our local rivals Gryphon West Gym Club. Our founder, Terrie Rogers, had a vision of focussing on high quality, disciplined application to the sport, while remaining as accessible as possible to the community. These values are woven into Spirit’s DNA – in a world where opportunities in sport are so often only available to those who can afford it, Spirit strives to live up to its community roots by giving a chance to shine for everyone, whatever their background. Once our gymnasts step into Spirit’s superb new training facility, they are all equal, and they progress through their own determination, hard work, dedication, discipline and commitment. As Terrie used to say, “hard work beats talent, when talent doesn’t work hard”.

I truly believe that this approach – opening up to the community while maintaining standards – sets us apart and is one of the reasons people are prepared to wait many months for a place in one of our classes. From humble origins, with a membership of perhaps a couple of dozen, our member numbers today are rapidly pushing towards 300, and we have just welcomed our newest intake of members this term for whom we have created new lessons in the timetable. You are all warmly welcome to the best gymnastics club in the area and we all hope you settle in quickly and enjoy your gymnastics!

**Our first year in a new identity**

In order to take on the commercial and financial responsibilities and risks of moving into Seaton Mews, it was necessary to form a limited company, since it was unrealistic to expect any single person or small team to personally take on about £500,000 worth of financial risk. Just taking this step was challenging for a group of people from very different backgrounds, and it is fair to say the first year has not been simple. It is true that some people had their doubts about whether we should take this step, and I respect that view, but without it we could not have expanded and opened the sport to many more people in the Yeovil area.

From a standing start and a blank sheet of paper, we have grappled with everything, learning as we went along: everything from leases, contracts and accounts to having the bins emptied! But we did it for the gymnasts, so that they can enjoy this wonderful sport and aspire to be better than they ever imagined. At this point I must pay tribute to my fellow directors, who have been tireless in their commitment, generous with their time and above all have remained good-humoured! If you look around us now, it is almost unbelievable to see how far we have come in such a short time, and this is largely down to their selfless dedication to the members.

There is another team who are also fundamental to the running of the Academy – the Friends of Spirit. These volunteers pick up all the important tasks that need doing, but are easy for us all to overlook, from maintaining the leotards, to DIY, to providing the refreshments in reception, to cleaning everything! A large part of their role is to raise funds for the Academy; these funds are used to benefit the members and have provided many items over the first year such as the mirror wall, benches, soft play equipment, and lots more besides. Please continue to support the Friends group and if you have some time to give, why not join the team?

**Sporting Provision**

Of course, while there is always lots of administration to do in the background, our main reason for existing is to provide a sporting opportunity to the community. Our background is firmly in acrobatic gymnastics – and this will always be our main focus – but taking the opportunity to move into Seaton Mews allowed us to explore other branches of the sport (and was partly behind the decision to change our name to an Academy). We were therefore delighted to welcome Alex Grinter and Sean Seal into the team almost a year ago, to introduce FreeG (or Parkour as it is often known). Alex’s classes continue to go from strength to strength and it’s great to provide a different option, especially for boys who might be hesitant to try female-dominated acrobatics.

Our acrobats have certainly benefited from the new facility, and the coaches have seen how our competitive squads have developed hugely over the last year. We have seen success in competitions at all levels, and for the first time in a long while we had several gymnasts competing at national level earlier this year, representing the south west region. But while the senior gymnasts have done well, it is especially encouraging to see our lower level competitors making a name for themselves, with several medals at their first ever competition last autumn – a sign of great things to come!

Our foundation classes are the starting point for most gymnasts, especially those who have never had formal gymnastics lessons before. Although there are many branches of the sport in this country, they all share the same foundations, where the core skills are learned. As I often explain to new joiners, a forward roll is still a forward roll, whether it is done in acrobatics, artistic, team gym, or whatever. So time spent in foundation mastering these skills, or accelerating through the development group, is time very well spent.

All of this success in the provision of the sport has only been possible through the dedication of the coaches. This very small team have carried us through a very challenging first year, as the number of gymnasts has grown faster than we had dared to imagine. Many members may think the coaches are paid handsomely for their service, but actually they are not. While we endeavour to ensure they are not out of pocket – and indeed some of them have specified they don’t even want these modest payments – the coaches are just as voluntary as anyone else, and nobody makes their living from doing that role. This team have had a very hard first year and we could not have achieved our success without them; the whole club is hugely indebted to them.

**Our Finances**

Becoming a company and moving into Seaton Mews was, in many ways, a leap of faith. It required us to try to predict how many new members we could attract if we were to avoid going under inside the first year. Thankfully, the combination of good quality coaching, in a top-class facility, and the support of several committed volunteers has proved to be a strong attraction and our member numbers have grown above our highest expectations. Thank you for joining us and staying with us!

At the AGM you will hear the Finance Director explain the finances in more detail and you can of course ask her anything about that side of the business. Suffice to say that we have kept our fees as low and competitive as we can. We want to balance the need to provide a quality service to our members, with the desire to remain accessible to any sections of society who might gain the most benefit from that service. Our finances are stable, and we have achieved nearly all the very high first-year set-up costs, so as we go into year 2 we should be able to invest more in our people, equipment and infrastructure.

This approach is absolutely in line with our status as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. This status means that, unlike a commercial company like Tesco, our aim is not to make the biggest possible profit, so that our shareholders can take a slice of that profit. Instead, our aim is to run the company prudently and efficiently in the interests of our members. Because there are no shareholders, nobody takes a slice of profits – any surplus we make is put back into the Academy for the benefit of the gymnasts.

**The Future**

The future is exciting! Over the next 12 to 18 months we are investing in about 20 new coaching qualifications, thanks to our successful bid for a grant – we recently received about £6,500 from Sport England. This means we can plan to upgrade some of our coaches and introduce more, and different, qualifications. We have already seen 7 new core proficiency coaches qualify this summer, who help with the lower classes (foundation and development), and we plan to introduce new qualifications in disability gymnastics and pre-school gymnastics. We also continue to aspire to pay our coaches more than a token amount, as and when it is prudent to do so.

Our equipment programme over the next few years should see us replace some of the older crash mats and acquire new specialist equipment for both Acrobatics and FreeG. We also have an aspiration to make the whole of the gym a sprung surface, not just the competition floor. As our member numbers grow, so do the sizes of the competition squads, and therefore so does the need for high quality competition leotards! We would like to decorate the reception and the gym, and we have some ideas for improving the reception area, which can often get quite crowded.

We are currently in discussions with a number of local businesses about sponsorship opportunities, but I can’t go into any further detail just yet – watch this space! Our website will go through a complete overhaul in the next few months, so if you have any suggestions as to what you would like to see please fill in a suggestion slip (available at reception) and pop it into the letterbox in the corridor. We want to reinvigorate the Spirit Shop, but we need a new volunteer to take that over – it is quite a significant commitment, but it provides a good service to the members while raising funds for the Academy so it is also very rewarding and worthwhile. If this sounds like something you would be interested in, please speak to one of the directors for further information.

**Summary**

It is sometimes difficult to comprehend how far we have come in such a short time. We haven’t just survived our first year, we have thrived despite all the challenges. And with the group of people already involved – plus anyone else who can give a similar commitment – I am certain there is only one way this Academy will go: upwards. We have received many highly complimentary comments during the last 12 months, from other clubs, regional and national officials and administrators, friends, rivals, new members and longer serving members. We might not get everything right every time, but there is no doubting that this Academy is run for you, the members, by a small team of dedicated individuals whose only reward is seeing the faces of the gymnasts when they achieve some new skill, break their personal best score, or win a medal.

Thank you to them, and to you all for your continued support.

Yours

Al Haigh

Managing Director