**Annual Report to Members**

Dear Members, 31 October 2020

As Spirit Gymnastics Academy enters its third year, none of us could have anticipated the changes that have happened in the last 12 months, both those we have achieved and those forced upon us.

**Gymnastics Success**

Last year I talked about the Academy’s origins and our first year in a new identity, together with the challenges of setting up a new company and beginning our activities at Seaton Mews. After the huge effort of our first year, the 19-20 Academy year was looking like it had a bright future. And initially that proved to be the case.

We continued to grow, with more than 200 gymnasts attending a lesson at least once per week, and a further 100 or so on our waiting list. Demand was high, based on our growing reputation for high quality sports provision at an unbeatable price. We expanded horizontally by offering a wider choice of sports, including pre-school gymnastics, FreeG and adult gym, as well as our ever-popular Little Spirits open play sessions.

At competition level, we expanded vertically upwards, achieving more and more success. The season opener at Honiton Gym Club in October 2019, where we took several medals, was a sign of things to come. A few weeks later we saw no less than four partnerships take gold medals at the South West Championships, with two silvers and a bronze for good measure. What was noticeable and most important, however, was the fact that at both of these competitions every single gymnast saw their performances improve compared to a year earlier.

In the new year we had an emotional weekend trip all the way to Middlesbrough for an invitational competition, and took 9 medals, three of them gold with no partnership finishing below 6th in their category. We knew we had a special group of gymnasts and we were quietly confident in their abilities, but this was beyond our expectations and thoroughly worth the logistical effort of going all that way.

In the middle of March 2020 came the best competition weekend in the club’s history. We entered 23 partnerships in the NDP Preliminaries – the qualifying round for the National Development Plan Finals, which were due to be held in May. At the regional level we saw seven partnerships win gold, and qualify for a national finals, and a further three who qualified for the inter-regional competition. A truly amazing performance from all of our gymnasts, and just reward for their hard work through the winter.

In between all these competitions we had two wonderful Christmas Shows, in which every gymnast who wanted to take part had the experience of performing in front of an audience and for our Foundation gymnasts it was a great chance to watch the senior competitors up close. Both shows were extremely well supported so thank you to all the families and friends who came along!

None of the success outlined above would have been possible without our great team of committed and dedicated coaches, who continue to invest in both the Academy and the lives of the children who attend. The whole team deserves a big thank you for their flexibility and adaptability during this extraordinary year, and without them we wouldn’t have a gym club. Special mention must go to Amy and Issy who have both reached the final of the UK Coach of the Year Awards. The awards evening will be held on 3 December, so watch out for news of the results!

**COVID19 – what a year**

And then the world turned on its head. The national finals were an early casualty of the COVID lockdown, which began only a matter of days after the NDP Preliminaries. Having their shot at a national competition taken away was heart-breaking for the gymnasts and their coaches, who fully deserved their chance to shine. However, we will grow stronger from the experience and go into the next competition season with renewed vigour.

The lockdown for half of the year had a huge impact on the Academy, as it did on all of us whether as individuals, as families, in our working lives and in our spare time. What we knew to be reality was taken away in an instant and it was unsettling for many people for quite a while.

As an Academy, we were acutely aware of the impact on children, especially younger ones who might have found it difficult to understand exactly what was happening, but certainly understood how unfair it felt not to be able to go to the gym or see their friends. We wanted to keep a service going, in whatever form we could, and thanks to the heroic efforts of our coaches we were able to offer an unbroken and continued service from the moment we were forced to close the doors on 23 March. Through the magic of technology, we provided live online lessons and an array of downloadable material on our website. As time went by, these developed into an impressive catalogue of online tutorials, which we will retain and members can access at any time.

In July we were able to resume outdoor training – it wasn’t much, but it was nice to be back together again, albeit in small groups. Blessed by the weather (mostly…!) our squads were able to meet several times per week to begin to move back towards full fitness, while the online service continued for the Foundation classes. In August we were allowed to reopen the doors at Seaton Mews and indoor training resumed. The COVID-secure restrictions are in place and this is still the situation now – smaller groups, strict rules on what can be done, frequent sanitising and cleaning, one way systems etc – this will be the norm for some time, we think. But our brilliant coaches are using their imagination to keep a service going and keep our gymnasts engaged and interested, so that when the competition season resumes we will be in as good a position as possible. I am proud that we can genuinely say we kept our service going throughout 2020, and we looked after our members’ interests, when many other clubs did not.

Foundation classes are able to go ahead, but numbers are capped. As a result, the continuous interest in Spirit means that the waiting list for all forms of gymnastics is now at about 200 people. We hope to be able to chip away at that list, and as soon as restrictions allow we will invite as many people to their free taster session as we can.

As I write, it appears we might be entering another period of national lockdown, and we might need to brush off our online service again. It’s a good thing we kept all our great resources from earlier this year! I hope I can count on your support to enable us to ride out the disruption – if it happens – and return to indoor training as soon as possible.

**Our Finances**

With our reduced service during lockdown, we knew we would face a reduced income, which seriously impacted our finances. However, we survived through two main reasons. Firstly, the Directors were quick to research and apply for government and Sport England funding, so we felt much more secure once they agreed to invest in us. Secondly, we invited members to keep paying if they could – we knew it was an uncertain and worrying time for everyone, and we therefore did not demand anything. But we asked that if members wanted there to be a club to go back to, if they were able to pay something or anything, that would help us survive.

We could not have expected how well the members responded – so many people kept on paying whatever they could, and a significant number kept paying their full fees. This really made a difference to our survival, and by June we were much more confident that it was no longer a matter of if we would bounce back, but when. The members’ contributions really did help ensure there was a club to come back to and as a result, once our position became more secure, we decided to reimburse 25% of what they had paid to anyone who paid any fees during the lockdown period.

So in November 2020, we are not completely out of the woods, and we have been running at a loss since March, but it is containable and the Grants have given us a cushion on which to transition out of COVID19. As we bring more members in, we hope to be breaking even again by January, and then we can resume our development plan. This consists primarily of investing in our people, who have been very patient and have made their own investments in the Academy through their voluntary status or by accepting lower than market rates for their services. People are our top priority for the remainder of the 20-21 year, and this is likely to be the case well into 21-22. You can see more detail on our finances in the Finance Director’s Report, and of course ask any questions at the AGM on 7 November.

**Long term plans**

We have a business development plan looking out over the next decade. If we keep growing at the rate we have seen in the first 2 years, we will soon out-grow Unit 1, so we will be faced with a choice – to stop growing or to expand. Our long-term aim is to expand into Unit 2 as soon as it is viable and sensible to do so, but there is much to be done before that can become a reality. The aim is to grow our membership to around 750 over the next five years, but to do this we will need more coaches. Anyone with an interest in coaching is strongly encouraged to get in touch with the any of the senior coaching team to find out more.

I am happy to talk more about our plans during the AGM.

**Summary**

We had a great start to our second year in Seaton Mews, and we were building steadily on the first year. The impact of COVID19 has been serious and unprecedented. Many small businesses will, sadly, not survive. However, I am determined that Spirit Gymnastics Academy will not be a casualty of this incredible year and we are looking stronger by the week. So thank you to everyone who has supported us, and I hope I can count on your support in the future.

Yours

Al Haigh

Managing Director