

Written by Dwight Normile  
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As the sport continues its never-ending push forward, I've noticed a few trends that might be leading gymnastics off the most desirable path. And by desirable I mean what is good for both the gymnast and the spectator. Of course, the best path is always open to debate, which I welcome in this periodic Stretching Out column.

**Stag Jumps:** Every time a new rule is imposed, gymnasts and coaches figure out a way around it. Now that women are required to stick their tumbling passes on floor exercise, we're seeing stag jumps after double Arabians. These stag jumps, some of which reach an elevation of six inches, are odd because so many gymnasts are doing them in a desperate attempt to avoid a landing deduction.

I prefer the old rule, which allowed gymnasts the freedom of stepping back into a lunge or dancing out of a landing. Judges could still deduct if the landing was short or otherwise. Stag jumps should be high and show good posture and flexibility. Most of the ones I see now look like an afterthought.

**Mai Murakami:** The [floor routine](#) of the minuscule Murakami (she looks to be about 4-foot-4) at the Japanese championships is creating some buzz on the Internet. She can tumble *and* dance. Her passes are well done too: double layout; tucked double-double; punch front-full, rudi; triple twist. While it may not be a growing trend, there is one technical glitch prior to her tumbling: she takes *two* hurdles before each tumbling pass, which means 6-7 steps before her roundoff. If and when she grows taller, she'll have a difficult time staying within the floor area if she doesn't learn to economize her tumbling approach. But this hurdle hiccup is probably a habit she developed as a beginner, and may be hard to change. But considering how amazing she is in the air, she should be able to handle it.

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**Transitions:** In men's floor exercise, "corner moves" were once the sweet filling between cake layers. They offered a creative breather between passes, and artistically positioned the gymnast in the direction of his next tumbling run. They served a purpose by turning four tumbling passes into a floor exercise. If you were to simply step into the corner, pivot on one foot and windmill your arms, you would have been hit with a deduction. *You can't just walk into the corner and turn around!*

Now you can just walk into the corner and turn around. The talented **Jake Dalton** did virtually the same step-turn

*five*

times in his winning

[floor routine](#)

at the recent Winter Cup. And since it's well within the current rules, I don't blame him. Energy is at a premium when you're doing six demanding passes.

The 10-skill requirement for men's routines has led to the six-pass routine, and inadvertently eliminated corner moves (and probably increased the number of Achilles' tendon injuries). So men's floor exercise, once an exploration of creativity, of rhythm and contrast, has become a monotony of tumbling in a confined space. For the most part, there is no "performance" aspect.

Maybe it's time to cut the 40-by-40 mat into thirds, make one long strip, and see what these guys can *really* do. Or, maybe it's time to reduce the number of required skills, which would lead to fewer passes — and perhaps something interesting between them.

Check out this [routine](#) from the late **Yukio Endo** from 1966. He's "on stage" from beginning to end. You never see him "let down" in the corner and suck air. He actually does a version of the step-turn into his first corner, but it's beautiful instead of cursory.

**Lauren Mitchell:** This is a bit of trivia instead of a trend. Guess who choreographed the floor routine of Aussie Lauren Mitchell, who won the gold at the 2010 Rotterdam worlds?

**Stacey Umeh-Lees**

, older sister of former Canadian Olympian

**Stella Umeh**

. By the way, Stella is back with Cirque du Soleil, performing in Asia.

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As always, I welcome your views.