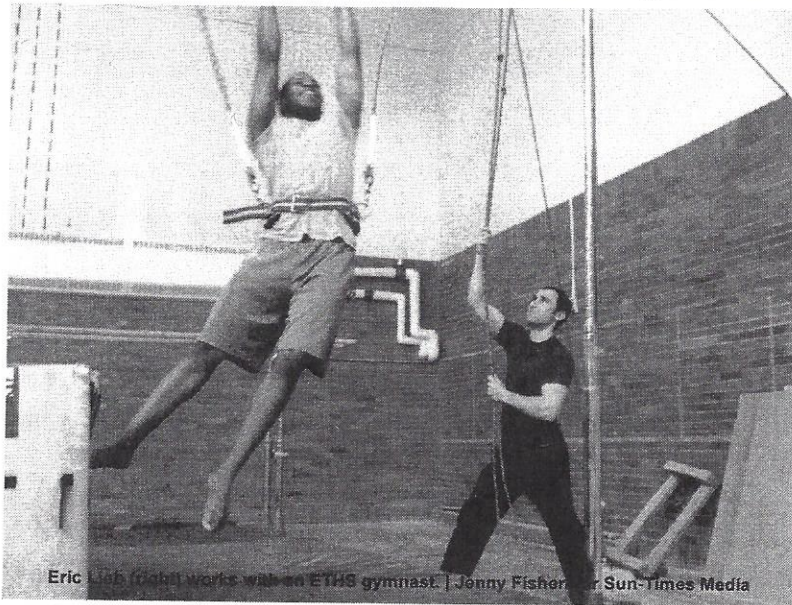


SPORTS

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Gymnastics coach spreads mindfulness to Evanston High School athletes, Chicago Bull



Eric Lieb (right) works with an ETHS gymnast. | Jenny Fisher | Sun-Times Media

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Five years ago, Evanston Township High School assistant gymnastics coach Eric Lieb spent 15 months at Deer Park Monastery in California, where he practiced mindfulness for as many as 15 hours a day.

Returning from Deer Park, he said, "I realized that I had improved in gymnastics, even though I hadn't even practiced."

The experience of daily mindfulness — a meditative practice of focusing on the present — completely changed how he approaches the sport, as well as how he coaches the boys team at ETHS.

Now, Lieb leads his gymnasts in breathing exercises before every practice and trains them to do their own mindfulness exercises before they compete. He also plans to lead a mindfulness camp for all ETHS athletes this summer.

"There's always that initial hesitancy ... but it's scientifically based," he said. "It works. It totally works."

Lieb, who graduated from ETHS in 2000, has done gymnastics since he was 3 years old and competed throughout high school. He began exploring meditation at the end of college, and said it gave him a sense of centeredness and clarity he had never felt before. He also started coaching in while college, and began as a volunteer at the high school a few years ago.

Before a typical practice, Lieb's athletes stand in a circle with their hands on their stomachs. He tells them to breathe "into their stomachs," and sometimes they lie down, or sometimes they sit. They also practice breathing and body awareness while stretching in different positions.

"I kind of want them to feel like it's theirs, as well," he said of the mindfulness exercise.

In competition, Lieb instructs the athletes to take one or two breaths before certain moves, and before others he reminds them to breathe into their stomachs, which is designed to generate power and energy. Focusing on breath, he said, can clear an athlete's mind before competition.

"It lowers the volume of all these negative voices," Lieb said. "Or at least, the volume goes down a lot."

Ben Morton, 17, a junior at ETHS, said the mindfulness exercises are effective for him — although it's hard to stay still for an extended period of time. Nevertheless, he said, the exercises help him pay attention to parts of the body he wouldn't usually focus on, like his ankles and calf muscles, both of which are important on vaults.

Mindfulness is also helpful when he's competing and getting jittery, Morton said.



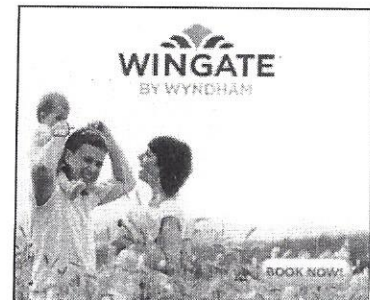
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This year, Morton is having his best gymnastics season ever and recently broke 40 for the first time, out of a total of 60 points on six events.

The mindfulness training even carries over to his main sport, wrestling, which he describes as "90 percent mental and 10 percent physical."

Teammate Alassane Diop, 18, a senior on varsity, said the training has also been helpful outside of gymnastics, especially the breath work.

"When I'm nervous about something, like I'm taking a test, I find myself to be using it," he said.

Chase Jenkins, 18, a senior on junior varsity, said during floor exercises he tends to rush things and make a lot of mistakes, but breath training has helped him slow down. He also uses it to deal with his two little brothers, ages 6 and 4.

"Every time they upset me, I just take deep breaths in and deal with them in a nice way," he said.

Head coach Chester Jones, who has coached gymnastics at ETHS for 26 years, said the mindfulness training is similar to the mental imagery he studied in college.

"Depending on how much you buy into that type of thinking, you can actually teach yourself skills without even touching the equipment," he said.

Outside of the boys gymnastics team, Lieb is incorporating mindfulness into other athletic programs. He is forming a gymnastics team for first- through eighth-grade girls and boys, which will teach students mindfulness training and hopefully feed into the Wildkit gymnastics program. That team will likely start at the end of the summer.

He also advises a Chicago Bulls player, whom he declined to name, on how to incorporate mindfulness exercises into his daily training routine.

Lieb's work is part of a growing trend among amateur as well as professional athletes. This year's Super Bowl champions, the Seattle Seahawks, are known for practicing meditation and yoga and for the team's emphasis on positive thinking.

Watching the big game against the Denver Broncos, Lieb said he saw the second half as a test of how well the Seahawks were training in yoga and meditation.

"In the second half, usually teams take a dip," he said. "They kept elevating their play. They didn't have that element of, now we're on top, we can relax."

That's the power of mindfulness, said Lieb, who meditates for 20 to 25 minutes each morning and practices mindfulness throughout the day — whether standing in line, at a red light, or before he exercises.

"When you practice mindfulness, it sustains," he says.

Tags: Boys Gymnastics, Evanston Township High School, Evanston Wildkits

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