

A photograph of a woman and a young gymnast in a gymnasium. The woman, Suzi Prokell, is standing on the left, wearing a black top and jeans, with her arm around the gymnast. The gymnast, Jordan Prokell, is sitting on a wooden balance beam, wearing a red leotard. The beam is labeled 'ELITE™' and '05-13'. The background shows a blue mat and gym equipment.

Sticking With It

— By Amber D. Browne

To excel in gymnastics, competitors must exhibit drive, determination and persistence. Gymnastics is a competitive sport that also requires a lot of practice. Many gymnasts start out in the sport at an early age, but few continue into their college years because of the physical and mental demands involved. For Jordan Prokell, competing in the sport at the college level has become her dream, and she is doing what it takes to get there.

Suzi Prokell is supportive of her daughter, Jordan's, gymnastics career.



The 12-year-old initially wanted to compete in the Olympics, but that changed when she witnessed a college gymnastics competition. "When I first saw it, I thought, *I'm doing that!* It's so fun!" Jordan shared.

"The way she competes now, the competitions are very serious and very professional," Suzi Prokell, Jordan's mother, explained about USA Gymnastics competitions. "When she watched her first college gymnastics meet, they were playing all this loud rock music, and when a girl competed, all her teammates were standing and jumping right next to her," Suzi recalled. The positive spirit of the college competition pulled Jordan in, and she hopes to one day join a team at Louisiana State University or the University of Arkansas, where her brother, Jacob, attends.

Jordan's gymnastics career started when she was 6 years old. Her sister, Erin, was involved in the sport, so she wanted to join in the fun. She began taking classes once a week. "She fell in love with it," Suzi said. Jordan increased the number of hours spent in the gym and began training for competitions. "She's never looked back."

For five hours each day, five days a week, Jordan can be found practicing with her team. They begin a 45-minute warm-up with stretching, running and strength training. The gymnasts then move on to their events, rotating to stations. Competitions include four events: vault, uneven bars, floor exercise and beam, so these are included in daily workouts. "We have a different schedule every day of what event we go to first," Jordan explained. "At each station, we work on different skills in our routines."

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The beam takes balance and skill. One of Jordan's routines features a back handspring back tuck off the beam. At first, Jordan was leery of executing the back handspring. "Everybody gets afraid at some point," she admitted. Her coach at Impact Athletic Training Center, Sydnie Evans, advised that she take a few steps back and relearn the skill. "Sometimes you have to do that. It helped me a lot." Spending hours practicing each day has achieved muscle memory. "I know that my body already knows how to do it."

The uneven bars event has proven to be the most difficult for Jordan, but it's her favorite. "On bars, it's all upper body strength," Jordan explained. She does a lot of strength training to improve her skills. On floor exercise, Jordan is working to improve her tumbling passes, including a front handspring front tuck, which she has trouble landing at times. "I just have to stick it," she admitted. Her floor routines also include choreographed dance elements.

The skills included in each routine are based on the level of the gymnast. The highest competitive level is 10, and Jordan is competing at level 7. During competitions, the gymnasts perform one routine for each event, except for vault, which they perform twice. Medals are awarded for each event, and awards are given for the best all-around scores. Jordan has won nearly 100 medals over the years. "It makes me feel really proud of myself. But whenever I don't win, I always know that it's OK. It's just another chance to keep pushing harder," Jordan shared. At the end-of-year banquet in 2014, Jordan was voted Miss Impact by

her teammates. She also won the Overall Impact Award, which was voted on by the coaches. In May, Jordan represented Texas at the 2015 Level 7 Regional Championships in Colorado where nearly 500 gymnasts from seven states competed. Jordan placed 15th all-around.

Because most of her day is spent at the gym, Jordan is now homeschooled. "I think the best thing we did for our family life was to pull her out of public school. She would go to school all day and go to the gym straight from school. She wouldn't get home until 8:30 or 9:00 at night," Suzi shared. Jordan initially attended classes at the gym with several of her teammates. The following year, she attended a homeschool co-op at Aledo Christian School. It's structured like college, so Jordan chooses the subjects and times she is in class. The unconventional schooling has given Jordan's family a lot of flexibility.

School may be over for a few months during the summer, but gymnastics practices increase. The team practices about 32 hours each week and gets two weeks of vacation. "If she has a couple of days off, she gets a little stir crazy and gets bored," Suzi smiled.

Gymnastics is a great way to get exercise and relieve stress. "It helps get stuff off my mind. If I'm having a bad day," Jordan shared, "I burn it off at the gym."



Jordan's Coach, Sydney Evans, gives her a few tips.



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Jordan is the youngest of four children, and her siblings are very supportive of her sport. Involved with their own lives, her siblings are also always on the go. "At first it was hard, but we have just gotten used to it. We don't know any different," Suzi shared. "I love watching my kids do anything." The eldest child, Jacob, plays baseball and will be a sophomore at the University of Arkansas in the fall. Ryan will be a senior at Aledo High School, and Erin is a cheerleader entering her sophomore year. Although they are busy, the Prokells are a tight-knit family. Jordan's siblings help out, when necessary, either fixing her hair or driving her to practice. "They're very proud of her," Suzi said. "She's the baby."

"You would expect siblings to fight, but I don't remember the last time I've fought with my siblings. I think that's cool," Jordan shared.

In their down-time, the Prokell family enjoys traveling. Jordan and her mother often take road trips across the state to gymnastics competitions. Jordan's father, Joe Prokell, decided to join in the fun at a recent competition in the Bahamas. "If it's a cool destination, he'll find a way to rearrange his work schedule," Suzi laughed.

Jordan has learned a lot through her sport of choice. "She's the one who told me that 90 percent of gymnastics is mental. I think that's a great life skill," Suzi said. "She won't do this forever, but everything that she's learning from it, she'll take with her and use it." NOW

