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Strength to Persevere

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Ryan Atkins

Atkins helps a young gymnast test another for tightness during a Gymnics event.

Strength to persevere

“I was born with a heart condition that left me with an extremely unlikely but still present risk of dying if my heart rate rose above a certain point. Because of this, I didn’t participate in sports or athletics. I was a ‘shrimpy’ kid who wanted to be not little, so I tried martial arts and gymnastics.”

This was the beginning of Ryan Atkins’ love of fitness. Just before college, Atkins volunteered at a summer camp in Canada and became friends with the gymnastics class teacher.

“He taught me how to do a cartwheel and then told me to sign up for Gymnics when I got to Andrews,” says Atkins. “I did, and I enjoyed it, so I kept doing it.”

Today, Atkins has been involved with Gymnics for a total of seven years. Now, in addition to studying for his master’s degree in English at Andrews, Atkins also serves as its assistant coach.

“My job is to minimize injury risk for the team,” he says. “There’s one of me and 40 of them, so I’m pretty busy.”

Atkins is the details guy who makes sure everything happens safely. Part of this is done with skills he learned with Function Movement Screening (FMS).

“The original intent of FMS was to help schools with no budget find a way to minimize athlete injuries,” Atkins explains.

FMS requires very basic tools: wooden boards, a stick and a rubber band. It checks for asymmetry, injury and imbalance in an attempt to catch things before they become a problem.

One of the biggest events for Gymnics is Acrofest, an annual gathering of acrobatics teams. In November 2016, Andrews University hosted the 25th anniversary event, where over 800 high school and university students participated in intense training, skill building and a joint performance.

“Acrofest is kind of a family reunion where you show off your skills to your friends,” says Atkins. “It’s not a ‘we have to win and you have to lose’ thing, though. We all know how much went into what we’re seeing on the mats, so

we’re each other’s best audience. You really couldn’t ask for better friends to push you toward your best.”

Aside from the personal aspect, Acrofest focuses on fitness, skills and collaboration. Professional clinicians join the teams at various training stations, teaching and offering performance tips.

“Exercise helped me develop into someone I wanted to be,” says Atkins. “Not necessarily physically, although that happened, too, but more in that it showed me I could triumph over difficulties and become stronger in the process.”

Atkins recalls that Teddy Roosevelt, president of the United States from 1901–1909, was a “sickly child” who used exercise to temper his body, mind and spirit, becoming “a truly remarkable person.”

“Physical training and exercise are important for a lot of reasons,” says Atkins. “It’s a transformative experience — you get to struggle against something and improve, and that spirals out into more areas of your life. It makes you ready to face whatever you need to. And I love being able to share that passion with the team.”

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Becky St. Clair, media communications manager, Andrews University



Atkins, age 4, and his sister pose with their gymnastics coaches.

Ryan Atkins