

Understanding Competitive Gymnastics

A Guide for Parents

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Competitive Program Options

Compulsory Vs. Optional

The athletes compete in either **compulsory** or **optional** exercises or both. The compulsory routines are developed with varying levels of difficulty so the athletes use the compulsories to develop their skills progressively. Optional routines are choreographed (put together) by the gymnast and the coach. Optional routines are usually unique to each particular gymnast while compulsories are performed by all gymnasts in much the same manner. Scoring for compulsories and optionals is similar except that the gymnast must follow a prescribed sequence of skills in compulsories.

USAG Junior Olympic Program

There are 11 levels to the USAG Women's Junior Olympic Program. Levels 1 and 2 are non-competitive levels. The girls start with competing at Level 3 and go up to Level 10. Levels 3, 4, 5, and 6 are compulsory levels. Levels 8, 9, and 10 are optional levels. Level 7 is an optional level with certain compulsory skills required on each event. The Elite Level is for athletes beyond Level 10.

Levels 3 and 4

The first competitive level is **Level 3**. It consists entirely of compulsory routines. Compulsory routines are a pre-choreographed series of skills that each competitor must perform. Once again, they are made up of core skills needed for each event, built on the skills from a previous level. The philosophy of these routines is for the athletes to practice toward perfection of these basics. The minimum age for this level is 6 and there is no maximum age. The athletes are arranged in age groups at competitions. **Level 4** is a continuation of development of fundamental skills acquired in Level 3. Athletes do not need to compete in Level 3 to compete in Level 4. Levels 3 and 4 do not use the vault table for their vaults, perform their uneven bars routine only on the low bar, and only use part of the floor area for their floor exercise.

Levels 5 and 6

Levels 5 and 6 are also a compulsory only level of competition. Each level builds on the skills of the previous level and likewise is judged with higher expectations. The USAG structure is based on a progressive "step by step" building of physical, emotional and psychological skills. Proficiency of all aspects of the gymnast at each level is expected and required to insure a safe smooth movement through the levels. The minimum age for this level of competition is 7. Athletes do not need prior competition at Level 4 to compete at Level 5.

Levels 7-10 and Beyond

Level 7 is a stepping stone level. It bridges the gap between the all-compulsory levels of 5 and 6 and the all optional level of 8. The gymnasts have required skills that can be put together in an optional routine. **Level 8** is the first level of all optional competition. Optional competition consists of each gymnast performing her own routines for each event. The Federation of International Gymnastics (**FIG**) produces the optional rules every 4 years in conjunction with the Olympics. This book (**Code of Points**) dictates what each routine must contain (composition), the value of what is done (difficulty), and how to evaluate how well it is done (execution).

There are three optional only levels: 8,9,10. The minimum age for level 8 is 8 years old, while for levels 9 and 10, it is 9 years of age. **Level 9** is the second level of optional competition. Its difficulty requirements and expectations are accordingly more difficult than at level 8.
Reaching

Level 9 is a significant achievement for a gymnast. **Level 10** is considered a Pre-Elite Level and for the truly dedicated and motivated gymnast. **Elite** is the 11th level of competition. Like Level 10 it is for the truly dedicated athletes.

The Elite level is broken up into 2 categories, **NATIONAL** and **INTERNATIONAL**. Children and Jr. National Elites compete in skill testing and optional routines. Jr. International and Sr International compete optional only. It is from the INTERNATIONAL rank that our **Olympic** and **World Championship** teams are chosen.

USAG Xcel Program

There are 5 levels to the USAG Xcel Program. The Xcel Program is designed to offer a broad-based, affordable competitive experience outside the traditional Jr. Olympic Program to attract and retain a diverse group of athletes. All routines in this program are optional routines.

Bronze

The minimum age requirement for the Bronze division is 5 years old. (This means the gymnast must be 5 before she competes in her first meet.) The Bronze division is similar in skill requirements to the JO Program's levels 1-2.

Silver:

The minimum age requirement for the Silver division is 6 years old. (This means the gymnast must be 6 before she competes in her first meet.) The silver division is similar in skill requirements to the JO Program's level 3 and 4.

Gold:

The minimum age requirement for the Gold division is 7 years old. (This means the gymnast must be 7 before she competes in her first meet.) The gold division is similar in skill requirements to the JO Program's levels 4-6. The gymnast must score a 32 AA in Gold before

advancing to the Platinum level or an 8.0 on an individual event to move forward as an Individual Event Specialist (IES).

Platinum:

The minimum age requirement for the Platinum division is 8 years old. (This means the gymnast must be 8 before she competes in her first meet.) The platinum division is similar in skill requirements to the JO program's level 5-7. The gymnast must score a 32 AA in Platinum before advancing to the Diamond level or an 8.0 on an individual event to move forward as an Individual Event Specialist (IES).

Diamond:

The minimum age requirement for the Diamond division is 9 years old. (This means the gymnast must be 9 before she competes in her first meet.) The diamond division is similar in skill requirements to the JO program's levels 7 & 8.

What to Expect at a Competition

Traditional Gymnastics Competition: This is what you have seen on TV. The gymnasts march out and are evaluated on vault, bars, beam, and floor by four or eight judges. The reality is not nearly as glamorous as you see on television, which has been heavily edited for the mass market. Be prepared; at the beginning levels the gyms are crammed with kids, the competition seems to last forever, and your gymnast may not get an award at all! You can pass the time by commiserating with the other team parents and complaining about the on-site cuisine and pro-shop trinkets.

A typical gymnastics competition is divided into **sessions**; each session contains athletes of one or more levels. Sometimes levels are grouped together, whereas others there are multiple sessions per level. How the gymnasts are grouped into sessions depends on the number of competitors and the meet director; the USAG has rules which regulate the maximum number of competitors in a session.

WARM UP

The competition will begin with a **warm up**. Although it is called a "warm up" these periods closely resemble a workout. During the pre-competition warm up the gymnasts will begin stretching and other activities (no full floor tumbling allowed) and then move to their first event's apparatus for pre-competition skill and routine rehearsal. Time limits for each athlete or team are set so that everyone gets the same amount of time to practice.

MARCH IN

Following the warm up the athletes will assemble at some designated place (typically near their first event). They will then "march in" meaning they will salute when their team name is called; the judges for each event are also introduced. Then the National Anthem will be played.

COMPETITION

Following the **march in**, the gymnasts will disperse to their first competition event. They always stop by the judging tables at each event to acknowledge the judges and to say Hello. At some meets, such as sectional and state competitions at optional levels, gymnasts will begin yet another "warm up". This second warm up period is called the "30 second touch." This is true even though the gymnasts receive warm up time on the uneven bars, balance beam, floor exercise and vault. This touch time is so coveted that guards are assigned to monitor this time with a stop watch.

At some meets, gymnasts warm up on all events and then compete on all events (Traditional format), and other meets the order is warm up compete, warm up compete (Modified traditional format). Larger competitions use 'capitol cup format' where more than one set of apparatus is in use. The hosting facility decides the format. V, UB, BB, & FX

Gymnastics competitions for girls involve performances on four apparatuses called **events**: **vault** (VT), **uneven parallel bars** (UB), **balance beam** (BB), and **floor exercise** (FX). The gymnasts in a given session (level) are divided into roughly even **squads** who rotate among the four events (**rotations**), always proceeding in Olympic order: *vault - uneven bars - balance beam - floor exercise*. If your girl's squad happens to start on the balance beam, then her next event will be the floor exercise. At any given time, someone is competing on each of the four events.

VAULTING

Vaulting consists of a run of about 70' - 80' followed by a jump to a small wooden springing device called a **spring board** (what else?), and a diving flight to an apparatus which looks like a "tongue" (**table**) held up on metal posts (called a **horse**). The gymnast lands on her hands on the vault table, usually somewhere around a handstand, and pushes off, performs some movement, and then lands on her feet. Vaulting requires extreme quickness, a fast run, a hard push from the horse, some cool flips and stuff in the air, and a landing that is **stuck**. Gymnasts typically perform two vaults; the best vault determines the score. At the bronze level, athletes vault onto a minimum 16" mat. At the silver level, athletes use the vault table but land on top of a mat stack off the vault. Gold, Platinum & Diamond levels use the vault table.

UNEVEN BARS

The uneven parallel bars (**bars**) consist of two wood-covered, fiberglass rails held up by steel posts at different heights and a variable distance apart. Depending on the level of

competition, routines consist of skills performed in a series. The gymnasts show large swing skills, **kips**, **casts**, **handstands**, a **release** and re-catch of the bars, some sort of somersaulting (**salto**) or twisting skill, a **dismount** to the floor, and a stuck landing. Bronze & Silver levels only use the low bar.

BALANCE BEAM

The balance beam (**beam**) is an apparatus made of steel and padding that is 5 meters (16.5 feet) long, 10 cm (4 inches) wide, and approximately 4 feet high. The gymnast will show a variety of skills from dance and tumbling and combine them into a routine which lasts from 30 - 90 seconds. Basically they do the same moves executed on the floor except they are confined to a space that is four inches wide.

FLOOR EXERCISE

Floor exercise (**floor**) is performed on area that is 12 meters x 12 meters (about 40ft x 40ft). There is a platform under the pad and carpet called a spring floor. The spring floor can be comprised of either springs or foam blocks or both. There are approx. 1,600 blocks or springs under the floor. The girls perform to music; each level of compulsory gymnasts perform to the same music; optional levels choose their own music. The routine should cover most of the area of the carpet (inside the lines), must include tumbling, and include lots of dance elements.

AWARDS

At the conclusion of a session awards are conferred on the girls who have done the best. **Medals** and/or **trophies** are given for each of the four events (V, UB, BB, FX), as well as the all-around (**AA**). The girls are grouped by both level and age (such as Gold level, ages 8 and below, Silver level, age 10, etc.). This is to limit direct competition between older and younger girls so that all have a fair shot at an award. The USAG mandates that at least 40 percent of the places receive awards; many competitions award 50 percent places (if there are 10 girls in a given level/age group then the top five places are recognized).

At many gymnastics meets there are **team competitions** as well. In this case, for each team, the top three (it can be more depending on the meet) scores in each event are added up, then all four team event scores are added to produce a final team score. Putting it all together, there are four events plus the all-around for each age group (plus team awards); this means that a lot of awards are doled out, and it can seem like it takes forever. Fortunately, we use computerized scoring software which helps keep forever from becoming a reality. *How well your daughter does in awards depends on both her score, which she controls, and who else is at the competition, which is out of her control.* While the girls tend to focus on the awards, it is really far more important that they do their best.

Understanding Scoring & the Jobs of a Judge

[A Parent's guide to understanding Gymnastics Judging](#). It's one thing to sit at a gymnastics competition and watch your daughter compete. But it's quite another thing to understand how the scoring system works. Here on CB and during the many competitions I've attended, it's a common complaint. "What didn't she do right? Why is her score lower than that other girl?" As parents, we rely only on our limited knowledge of the sport for answers. When grasping to find these answers, I find it's always best to add a little education into the process to shed some light on the situation. So I thought I'd offer what I've learned and scrounged up over the last year on the topic with the hopes of helping to provide that little light. Judging gymnastics is complicated and tedious. Parents and spectators need to understand that a judge is only human, and each judge has a different background with a varied level of experience in the sport. Each judge is charged with presenting his or her opinions, used at their own discretion, with a different level of expectations. The judgment is ONLY an opinion of the performance on that particular day, for any particular event. Gymnastics judges must pass a test that requires a great deal of studying from a very thick manual (I've seen it!). They must stay current with changes to routines, the scoring systems, and keep up with professional growth opportunities throughout the year to be assigned to gymnastic meets each season. It's safe to say that judging gymnastics is not a full time career for most. It's a VERY part-time job, pays surprisingly little money, but still requires almost full time effort. It's also safe to say that most gymnastics judges adore the sport. Here in the U.S, compulsory gymnastic routines are universally defined, and have a start value of 10.0 points. The routines, requirements, and penalties are outlined in a book, (aka. The purple book), and each skill or series of skills is given a value. As the athlete performs a routine, the judge notes any mistakes he or she sees in a code of symbols. Each symbol has a value, and after the routine is complete, the symbols are tallied and this amount is deducted from 10.0.

In Xcel levels, the created routines *must* contain certain elements. For example, silver bars requires 5 total skills, a mount, dismount, a circling skill, and a cast not less than 45 degrees from horizontal. As long as the routine contains those requirements, it begins with a start value of 10.0. There are a few exceptions to this rule when it comes to vault. Certain vaults have certain start values and changes dependent upon the level in which you are competing. Some of the general deductions are "Flat" rate. A fall is 0.50, a change of a small part is 0.10, omitting or substituting a major element is double the value of the element, and extra step is 0.10, and a coach assist is the value of the element PLUS 0.50, overtime on the beam is 0.10. Just to name a few. Then there are general "up to" deductions, and this is how judges seem to vary so much. For example, leg separation can be "up to" 0.20; a balance error is "up to" 0.30, insufficient split is "up to" 0.20, lack of overall rhythm during the routine is "up to" 0.40; incorrect body position on a major element is "up to" 0.20. Then there are penalties for specific skills or a series in the routine that can be set values, or "up to" values. Some examples include: Not placing hands in the correct position on the vault – 0.50. Contacting the mat on the vault after the vertical- up to 1.00. Hooking the knee on a stride circle – 0.50. Failure to show hollow position during a back hip circle- up to 0.20. Failure to attain vertical in a handstand on beam dismount – 0.30. Early bending of the legs in beam mount-up – 0.20. etc.,

There are literally pages and pages of rules and possible deductions. In fact, It's a wonder the scores are as high as they are. If judges were to think and write as fast as a computer with a video camera, the scores would be very low by many of our standards. The judges with years of experience usually have lower scores because they have so much practice judging gymnastics events. They "See it" faster, "think it" faster, and "record it" faster. Expectations are often higher because they've had the opportunity to witness truly great routines, and are now conditioned to expect it.

My best advice for parents and spectators is to simply accept the score for what it is: One person's opinion of the performance given on that particular day. I would encourage you to focus on the gymnasts' performance compared to her own personal best, and if she has competed to the best of her ability on that day. It's been said many times on this board, "Parents make the best fan's" of gymnasts. Just remember it's not about the score, it's only about your daughter. Be supportive on good and bad days. This alone will make your gymnastics experience just as fulfilling as doing gymnastics is for your daughter. I hope this was helpful.