

COMPETITIVE GYMNASTICS – HOW IT WORKS!!

There has been a request from for a guide to competitive gymnastics to be included. To write a complete guide would run in to thousands of pages and so what is produced here intends to be a brief introduction to the British Gymnastics competition structure currently operating for competitive female gymnasts in our region.

To turn things somewhat on their head, it is perhaps easiest to start at the top end – the gymnastics that you might be used to seeing on TV and in which stars such as Beth Tweddle compete. This top level of elite gymnastics is known commonly as FIG level (FIG being the Federation Internationale de Gymnastique ie. The sport's governing body). In Great Britain only gymnasts who have qualified to the full British Championships at their age group are able to call themselves elite gymnasts and they are judged on the full FIG code. This article will give more details about the methods in which a gymnast can qualify for the British Championships later on.

At FIG level the female gymnasts compete on the vault, bars, beam and floor exercise. The scores from these events are added up to produce the gymnasts overall score and decide the medal winners, in the all-around competition. At major events finals also take place on each individual apparatus. Nowadays gymnasts perform only one vault in all competitions save for individual apparatus finals at major events where they perform two different vaults each from different groups (i.e. they go on to the vault in a different way for each vault); the scores of which are averaged. There are relatively few gymnasts able to pull out two high difficulty vaults from different groups and thus the field of top class vaulters at national and international events is quite small. (At the youngest age ranking in the British Championships – espoirs (12-13 years) – the girls are allowed to perform two different vaults but they can come from the same group so, in other words, the same entry onto the vault can be used).

After the 2004 Olympics, in which the results and judging were fairly controversial particularly in the men's all around competition, there was a massive overhaul of the rules and the judging system which led to the scrapping of the 10 scoring system. Without looking too deeply here at the reasoning behind this it was felt that gymnasts were quite easily achieving a 10 start value routine and so the gymnasts who were including even harder difficulty than this were not being rewarded for it. Thus the move was made to what is supposed to be an "open ended" scoring system.

In theory the 10 score on execution (i.e. how well the gymnast performs the routine) is retained. This is the E (execution) score and technically if a gymnast performs their routine perfectly without errors they get an E score of 10. Deductions come off that 10 score by the E panel judges who will deduct for bent arms, bent legs, wobbles etc (put simply 0.1 for a small error, 0.3 for a medium error, 0.5 for a large error and 1.0 for a fall) from that 10 score.

The other panel of judges is the A panel who decide the A score – i.e. what the gymnasts' routine is worth. This is sometimes known as the "start value".

On vault ascertaining the start value, or the D (difficulty) score, is straightforward. Each vault has a tariff depending on its difficulty. The most simple vault in the Code of Points is a handspring vault which is worth 2.4, the most difficult is a handspring double front which is worth 7.1! So, when adding the E score to the D score, a perfectly performed handspring could score a maximum of 12.4, a perfect double front 17.1.

On the other pieces calculating the D score is a little more complex. There are 5 Compositional Requirements (CRs) which are each worth 0.5. These are core requirements on each apparatus (for example a release and catch on the bars, a double somersault on floor and an acrobatic series with somersault on the beam) which the gymnast must fulfill in order to achieve the 0.5. If a gymnast fulfills all 5 of the EGRs they achieve the 2.5 basic D score.

Added to that is the gymnasts' Difficulty Value (DV). This is made up by counting the value of the 8 hardest difficulty moves in the gymnasts' routine (7 plus the dismount move on bars and floor, and 6 plus the spin and the dismount on beam). Each move in the Code of Points has a value. The most simple are A moves, each worth 0.1, up to a G move which is worth 0.7. So the gymnasts seek to cram as many D, E and harder elements into their routine to get as high as possible DV score.

Finally, further 0.1 or 0.2 bonus marks are awarded and added to the A score for Connective Value – i.e. for combining certain difficult skills together.

All of this added together gives the gymnasts' D score. In top level international competition D scores of 6 or 7 are fairly common. At national level the gymnasts are often more challenged by achieving the 5 EGRs so the D scores are often a little lower, at 3 to 5 save for the very top competitors.

The gymnasts' D score is added to her E score (i.e. 10 less the deductions and penalties she has picked up) to give a total score.

Working back from this top level, the CRs are so difficult that it would be impossible to expect young gymnasts entering the competition system to achieve them, and also many of the “easy” moves that a gymnast learns early on in their career are not even in the Code of Points as A moves and so would attract no DV at all. Also, British Gymnastics sets a programme of development which believes that young gymnasts should not be pushed to perform very difficult moves at a very young age as it could cause them physical harm or “burn out”.

Therefore British Gymnastics (BG) has its own competition structure which provides a system of competitions for gymnasts at all levels to prepare them either towards elite competition or for them to compete at the level most appropriate for their ability and desires.

Junior competition in girls' gymnastics is broadly speaking divided into two parts, at the lower ages and levels at least. The first part is the grades competitions which take place every spring, the second is the voluntary levels competitions which take place in the autumn of each year.

A gymnast is not able to enter a regional competition until the year she turns 8 and is not able to qualify for a national final until the year she turns 9. It is the calendar year which is important for these purposes and so our groups are often referred to by their year of birth ie.02s, 03s etc. For young gymnasts entering the competition system there are two main competitive paths which can be taken depending on the gymnasts' aspirations and abilities. The first is the elite route, the second the club route. Following a recent change to the club grades competition structure, the club route can now be sub-divided further into regional and national club grades.

Elite grades are organized into 3 nationally structured levels and one regionally structured level as follows:

Age 8 – Compulsory level 5 (regional only)

Age 9 – Compulsory level 4 (regional and national events)

Age 10 (or 11) – Compulsory level 3 (regional and national events)

Age 11 (or 12) – Compulsory level 2 (national event only).

The compulsory level 5 event has been introduced to give gymnasts aged 8 in the year of the event the chance to compete at a higher level than at Club Grade 14 (see below) in readiness for them entering compulsory 4 the next year.

A gymnast does not need to pass compulsory 5 to enter compulsory 4, or compulsory 4 to enter compulsory 3. However, a gymnast does need to pass compulsory 3 at age either 10 (in age) or 11 (out of age) in order to enter compulsory 2. There are two compulsory 2 events per year, in spring and the autumn and a gymnast can have a total of 3 attempts at compulsory 2 across the years they turn 11 and 12. Any gymnast that passes compulsory 2 becomes an elite gymnast and can enter the British Championships the following year.

The compulsory grades are marked out of 13.5 on each apparatus. The girls compete on the 4 regular pieces of apparatus plus they must also perform a Range and Conditioning exercise. This is a routine performed on the floor, sometimes with the aid of a bench, which is designed to test the gymnasts' strength and flexibility. The routines are very difficult and include lots of held handstands, splits and lever moves.

In order to pass compulsory 4, 3 or 2 the gymnast must achieve a set overall score (currently 47.5 for compulsory 4, 50 for compulsory 3 and 52.5 for compulsory 2). They must also achieve a prescribed pass mark on range and conditioning (9.5 at compulsory 4, 10 at compulsory 3 and 10.5 at compulsory 2). At 3 and 2 a gymnast who achieves the overall pass mark but fails the range mark gets the chance to re-take the range at the end of the competition (only once!).

At the regional heats of compulsory 4 and 3 the top 4 finishers make up the region's team to compete at the national finals. Any gymnast who achieves the overall and Range and Conditioning pass marks, can also travel to the national finals and compete for their own club.

So that's the elite grades. Those grades are extremely difficult, particularly at level 2 and are only achievable for the most talented and committed of athletes. Far more gymnasts compete in the Club Grades competitions which work as follows:-

Regional Grades:

Age 8+ - Grade 14 (County qualifier in age groups, to regional final)

Age 9+ - Grade 13 (“ “ “ “ “)

Age 10+ - Grade 12 (“ “ “ “ “)

Age 10+ - Grade 11(“ “ “ “ “)

Age 10+ - Grade 10 (“ “ “ “ “)

Age 10+ - Grade 9 (“ “ “ “ “)

National Grades (all age 10 plus): Grades 8-5 – regional qualifier leading to national final for the top 4 placed gymnasts.

Gymnasts do not have to take all the grades but can enter at whatever level they wish, but can only take 1 grade per year. Grades 14 and 13 plus all of the national grades have a range and conditioning exercise as well as the four basic events and moves to be performed are set (there are some options). For the National Club Grades the range and conditioning set is performed only at the regional final and the gymnast must achieve a pass mark there if they are to pass the grade overall and to qualify for the national final. The range and conditioning set is not performed at the national final.

Gymnasts can switch between national and regional club and elite grades. Often girls that pass compulsory 3 but cannot achieve the difficult moves required for compulsory 2, drop to Club Grades and young gymnasts may start out with grade 14 before moving to compulsory 4 the following year.

In the autumn of the year most gymnasts compete in voluntary level competitions. Here the gymnasts complete moves of their choice rather than the set moves which they perform in the grades events although some categories of moves are still set and must be performed – the gymnasts have more choice about how to fulfill a particular requirement.

The National Development Plan recognizes 3 levels – 4, 3 and 2. For in age gymnasts this works in line with the compulsory grade ages so for example a 9 year old elite stream gymnast would take compulsory grade 4 in the spring and compete in level 4 in age in the autumn. However the levels are open to all age groups on similar rules. The levels work as follows:

Age 9 – Level 4 in age – direct to regional final, qualifier to national finals

Age 10 – Level 3 in age – direct to regional final, qualifier to national finals OR
Level 4 out of age – county qualifier to regional final in age groups

Age 11 – Level 2 in age – direct to regional final, and direct to national finals OR
Level 4 or 3 out of age – county qualifier to regional final in age groups

Gymnasts 12 plus out of age can also compete at any of the regional levels events. It is direct entry to the regional event at level 2.

At the in age competitions the top 4 gymnasts make up the region's team for the national finals. Any gymnast who is not in the top 4 but scores a qualifying score can enter the national finals as an individual qualifier representing her club, providing she attended the compulsory national final earlier in the year. At the national final a voluntary champion is crowned and the scores from voluntaries are added to those from compulsories to give an overall British Champion and ranking places for the year group.

The levels are judged as per the FIG rules explained earlier on with certain modifications. For example, at level 4 the gymnasts can perform certain uncoded elements which are given an A (ie 0.1 value) to help them to achieve the requirements of their level, gymnasts at the lower levels are not required to perform all of the EGRs but are awarded the 0.5 value automatically and there are some restrictions on the moves the gymnasts can perform (eg. No somersaults on beam at level 4 etc) and some special bonus points awarded for certain moves/combinations which BG wish to encourage.

Once a gymnast has passed through the compulsory grades and levels systems they are able to compete at the British Championships – at age 12-13 they compete in the espoir section (which now also includes a Range and Conditioning set), at 14-15 they are in the junior division and at 16 plus they enter the senior ranks. However a gymnast's place at the British Championships is not automatically secure forever. If a gymnast fails to achieve a particular score they are relegated to the Challenge Cup (see below) and have to try and re-qualify from that competition back to the full British Championships.

The British Challenge Cup is a competition organized into espoir, junior and senior sections as per the full British Championships and it gives gymnasts who have not passed compulsory grade 2 the chance to, firstly, compete in a national event judged on full FIG code, but also nowadays the chance to qualify for the full British Championships. Gymnasts often enter the Challenge Cup when they have finished their Club Grades but they can enter before this point, as long as they have attained the minimum age of 12 in the year of the event. Each year a score is set and gymnasts achieving that score in any of the divisions are able if they wish to move up to the full British Championships the following year.

March 2008

Modified and updated May 2009