

Competition Structure

Women's Artistic Gymnastics Competitions

In Women's Artistic Gymnastics, there are two seasons of competition in the year. In the early part of the year (Feb-May) is Grades and in the later part of the year (Sept-Nov) is Levels. There may also be other National / Invitational competitions throughout the year as well.

When it comes to competition, **trust your coach!** By all means, feel free to ask why your daughter is doing the grade or level that they are, but remember the coach has experience here, and is seeing things in the gym that you don't or can't see. The pathways in gymnastics are flexible and allow for gymnasts to move around them at a pace that suits their development. The route they start on may not be the route they continue on, and coaches want to give them their best shot at a long and successful career.

The Levels / Grades system starts in the year that your daughter turns 8. Even if they are still 7 when they do the competition, as long as they turn 8 in that calendar year (not school year) they can compete. Competitions can be In Age / Compulsory or Out of Age. In Age / Compulsory is based on the year that your daughter is a set age for a grade or level. Out of Age means that your daughter is at least one year older than those who are In Age

Levels compete on 4 pieces of apparatus - vault, bars, beam and floor. Grades has the addition of Range & Conditioning (R&C) which focuses on passive and active flexibility, strength and balance.

After the Olympics, the Code of Points is reviewed and update by the FIG. Following this, British Gymnastics / Regions / Counties will review and update the rules for Grades / Levels / County competitions. They may also make some minor changes every year and clarify the rules.

Competitions will be held at:

County Level	Hertfordshire
Regional Level	East Region of Herts, Beds, Cambs, Essex, Norfolk & Suffolk
National Level	UK wide as part of your Club or Representing your Region

Gymnasts may also go to 'Invitationals' which are privately organised competitions which do not qualify to any Regional or National competitions. These are great for experience and for learning to have fun competing with a bit less pressure.

How It Fits Together - Grades, Levels and Invitationals

The grades routes are flexible and allow for movement between routes. As long as you move up in grade number and difficulty, you can move across the routes at the coach's discretion. A gymnast who has passed Regional Grade 3 could do National Grade 3 as it is harder, but a pass at National Grade 3 would require her to do at least Regional grade 2 if she moved in that direction.

The Compulsory Grade route requires a pass at Compulsory 3, so many gymnasts do this grade out of age. Most Regions offer a comp 3 'retake' around November time to allow gymnasts to catch up if they failed the grade in April or wish to join the route without waiting a whole year.

Feel free to ask your coaches for clarification if you are unsure about your child's grade route, and what they think their long term plan will be. However, do think carefully about how you phrase such questions in front of your daughter. If possible, a 1:1 conversation between you and the coach is a great first step, to make sure if your daughter has questions you are a united front, and if she asks questions at home you have the answers.

Children worry about their parents' opinion more than you may realise. Any sniff of the idea that mum or dad are disappointed that they aren't doing the same grade as their team-mates can manifest as massive insecurities, so positivity and celebrating any achievements at all is incredibly key when discussing this!

Just remember - for 80-90% of children their age, what your daughter can do would be absolutely impossible, both physically and mentally. Sometimes they need reminding just how much they have achieved to be competing this demanding sport.

Club Grades 6 & 5

At this County competition the gymnasts need to achieve a set mark for a Pass / Distinction and the top 3 overall medallists in each age group qualify to Regional Final. There are no ribbons for apparatus placings and no National opportunities for this route.

Club Grade 6 & 5 are the beginning of either the Regional or National Grade pathway. The R&C for Grades 6 and 5 is the same set routine.

Grade 6 is all about shapes. You'll see lots of straight jumps, splits and levers in this grade. It can be hard to imagine how on earth the judges will separate the gymnasts scores at first, but once you get to the competition the different levels of preparation at this level will be very clear.

Grade 6 arguably has the widest range of gymnasts competing. Newbies to the sport can pick up the skills relatively quickly, and gymnasts from all routes will be using it as competition experience. It's a great learning experience but very rarely indicates how a gymnast's career is going to pan out. The key for this often first competition, for parents, is to be very calm. Encourage your daughter to have fun and do their best without worrying where they come.

Grade 5 builds on these skills, adding in details like their first 'a' dismount on bars, round off on floor and a vault that passes through handstand. By this stage some gymnasts make take another route so the field will be less crowded.

It will also be emerging to coaches (but not necessarily parents) which gymnasts will move on to National or Regional Grades from here.

Regional Grades 4-1

At this County competition the gymnasts need to achieve a set mark for a Pass / Distinction and the top 3 overall medallists in each age group qualify to Regional Final. There are no ribbons for apparatus placings and no National opportunities for this route.

The R&C for Regional Grades 4-1 is the same set routine. The skills are easier here than in the National Grades and allows for the gymnasts who do not have the higher skill level to have their chance to shine.

Many routines have options at the higher Regional Grades, allowing coaches to play to their gymnast's strengths even more. This route is so valuable because it provides that extra level of competition to keep gymnasts in the sport longer and allows slow burners a chance to develop.

Typically, gymnasts doing these grades are 2-3 years out of age in their levels competitions later in the year. An important thing to remember here is that yes, it is a lot more unlikely that these gymnasts will qualify to the British Championships, but that doesn't make their achievements any less valid. To be regional champion of their grade is no less fantastic than to be British champion at a Compulsory Grade.

National Grades 4-1

The National Grades is harder than Regional Grades and sits underneath the Compulsory Grades in terms of difficulty. The R&C for National Grades 4-1 is the same set routine.

At this Regional competition the gymnasts need to achieve a set mark for a Pass / Distinction. The top 5 medallists will automatically become team of four, plus travelling reserve, representing their Region at the NDP (National Development Pathway) National finals. There is no other selection process for the team and gymnasts cannot qualify individually to these finals. There are no ribbons for apparatus placings.

National Grades are not In Age, but there is a first year of age eligibility. For National 4 this is the year they turn 10, and subsequent grades add a year, eg. 11 for Grade 3, 12 for Grade 2 etc. The gymnasts competing the grade in this first year of eligibility will not be separated in any way from the girls who are older.

The National route has similarities to the Compulsory route, with the skills diluted somewhat to reflect the level of the gymnasts. It has a slower progression rate to give these gymnasts a bit more time to consolidate these skills. This does not mean that these gymnasts will always be behind their Compulsory Grade peers however as many of GB's top gymnasts have come through the National Grade route rather than Compulsory.

Compulsory Grades

At this Regional competition the gymnasts need to achieve a set mark for a Pass / Distinction. The top 5 medallists will automatically become team of four, plus travelling reserve, representing their Region at the NDP (National Development Pathway) National finals. There is no other selection process for the team, but gymnasts can qualify to the National final representing their Club by achieving a certain score. There are no ribbons for apparatus placings.

The Compulsory Grade / In Age route is the hardest level of competitive gymnastics that a gymnast in the UK can do. This route officially starts (with National rules and National finals to qualify to) at age 9 with Compulsory Grade 4. Many Regions also offer a Compulsory Grade 5 to be competed the year your child turns 8. This is a regionally organised event that doesn't qualify to anything and follows rules set by your Region.

The range & conditioning is much harder than the equivalent Cub / Regional Grade with leg holds, handstands and split/straddle jumps usually featuring.

If gymnast qualify to the National final at both their Compulsory Grade and their corresponding In Age level later in the year, they receive a combined score for the year. This is used by National coaches to select for pathway and Home Nations squads, so there is an added level of pressure here to be aware of.

This is also regarded as the hardest route in gymnastics due to the rate of progression. By 10, the gymnasts will be working in two grips on bars, twisting somersaults on floor and linking backward elements on beam. The sheer pace of learning drops many gymnasts by the wayside, and by Compulsory 1 the field has thinned out a lot.

Gymnasts can now do these grades out of age, meaning it is still a viable route to qualify to the British Championships. A pass at Compulsory 1 qualifies the gymnast to the British Championships appropriate to their age, whether they did the grade in or out of age.

Training this route necessitates between 15-25+ hours a week and is a huge undertaking for the whole family. Holidays will be interrupted by conditioning, family days out restricted to non training days, and regular time out of school will need to be negotiated. This route certainly isn't the be all and end all, but it is the most direct route to British Championship qualification and visibility to the coaches who select for the National squads.

Voluntary Levels

In Age

Level 5	County and Regional Competitions	8 yrs
Level 4	County / Regional to National	9 yrs
Level 3	County / Regional to National	10 yrs
Level 2	County / Regional to National	11 yrs
FIG Espoir	County / Regional / National	12/13 yrs
FIG Junior	County / Regional / National	14/15 yrs
FIG Junior	County / Regional / National	16 yrs +

Out of Age

Level 7	County only Floor & Vault	7 yrs+
Level 6	County Qualifier to Regional Final	8 yrs+
Level 5	County Qualifier to Regional Final	9 yrs+
Level 4	County Qualifier to Regional Final	10 yrs +
Level 3	County Qualifier to Regional Final	11 yrs +
Level 2	County and Regional Competitions	12 yrs +

Voluntary routines are constructed around 4 requirements on each piece and are a modified version of FIG rules. These are the rules our senior team GB gymnasts have to follow at events like the Olympic Games. Whilst the difference in difficulty required is obviously very great between these gymnasts and the girls competing level 5 in their regional competitions, the routine construction is actually pretty similar!

'Composition Requirements' are the foundation of a routine. These are the skills or family of skills that a gymnast must fulfil during the routine. Each requirement fulfilled is worth 0.5, up to a maximum of 2 marks if all 4 are checked off. After that, the gymnast's top 8 skills (often 5 on bars for younger / lower level gymnasts) are counted and their 'Difficulty Value' added to the composition requirements to produce a start score, along with any relevant bonuses. On various apparatus, there are other things

to take into account, such as dismount must be counted or acro vs dance skills in the routine construction.

Which Level

Your child's coach will choose their level based on what they are achieving with consistency in the gym, and what fits the long term plan for your child. It is not unusual at all to repeat a level, sometimes several times. There will still be progression - she can compete harder routines the following year, and/or aim to beat her score. The levels framework allows for this flexibility, and there is no point moving up a level if she cannot fulfil the requirements, which most of us view as the bare minimum.

In Out of Age levels, there is sometimes a 'must move up' score, when a gymnast scores above a certain number and cannot compete this level again. The logic here is that if she is doing so well at this level this year, she should be able to compete the next level the following year. Staying down at this point would just be medal chasing and not useful for the gymnast's progression.

Routines

Every skill gymnasts can do is listed in the FIG code of points and assigned a difficulty value. An 'A' skill contributes 0.1 to the score, a 'B' skill 0.2. This continues all the way up to 'I' which is Simone Biles level stuff! At lower levels, there may be some elements which are not in the code of points, but listed in the permitted uncoded skills section (such as a forward roll on beam) which are given 0.1 value for that competition only.

The key take-away for all levels is that where they can, coaches construct your daughter's routine based on what they can do safely and cleanly. The most important thing you can bear in mind as a parent is that gymnastics is also judged on execution as well as difficulty, and coaches weigh up each skill against how it will be judged. They will often ask for the opinions of other members of the coaching team or qualified judges.

A conversation that is had regularly by coaches and parents all over the country is why is my child not competing *skill* when they "can" do it. There are a variety of answers to this. Most common amongst them is that yes, that skill is worth 0.2, but we can see at least 0.5 in deductions on it. 0.3 knee bend, 0.1 flexed feet, 0.1 hip angle fast add up to make the skill not worth doing just yet! Whereas the 'A' skill that they competed last year is only carrying a 0.1 deduction the majority of times they perform it. It doesn't mean we have given up on the new skill, or are purposefully holding your child back, they just aren't ready yet.

Some skills also have frustratingly close difficulty considering how tricky they are for little ones to learn. The body tension, spacial awareness and technique required to do a straight back on floor only earns the gymnast 0.1 as it is an 'A' skill. After all that hard work, she only gains what she would have for a tuck back, and the potential deductions are endless. Most careful coaches will leave that tuck back in until the straight back has no head chuck on take off, no loss of body tension (that banana shape is not popular with judges!) and is high but controlled.

Competition prep is endless repetitions, and any bad technique will be absolutely hammered in by the time that competition season is over. Using the example of straight back again - is it worth it competing it before it's ready, to then spend the next few years struggling to learn twists because the base skill is technically incorrect? Definitely not!

As ever, it is our philosophy that if you have questions about your daughter's level or routines to speak to your coach. Communication is key, and we can't always anticipate what you may be confused about. Letting resentment build up and letting yourself think the worst is never the solution to a productive relationship.

Website Links

Marriotts Gymnastics Club

www.marriottsgymnastics.com

Herts Gymnastics Association (HGA)

www.hertscountygymnastics.com

East Region (EGCA)

www.british-gymnastics.org/east

British Gymnastics (BG)

www.british-gymnastics.org