

Gymnast leaping to success

By CAROLYN WALKER
STAFF WRITER

Beautiful people of the world watch out. Renee Flores hasn't hit her stride yet — though with her emerging beauty, her ballerina-like poise and her athletic prowess, the 11-year-old rhythmic gymnast is sure to take the world by storm some day soon.

Meanwhile, she's content to seek her place in the nation. Come spring, Flores, of Independence Township, expects to learn whether or not she will qualify for her first spot as a competitor on the United States national team.

Flores, a Bailey Lake Elementary fifth grader, has been participating in the sport as a member of the Oakland Rhythmics Gymnastics team for four years. The Oakland Rhythmics is a parent-run organization that trains and competes out of the Good Shepherd Lutheran School gym in Birmingham.

"I tried it and I liked it," Flores says of her interest in the sport.

She first learned about rhythmic gymnastics while observing her sister participate in traditional gymnastics.

Perhaps less familiar to the public than traditional gymnastics,

■ "There's a zillion things they get graded on. They all have to be just so."

Barbara Flores
— Mother of gymnast Renee

tics, rhythmic gymnastics, currently an all-female sport in the United States, is performed on a gym floor with the gymnast tumbling while manipulating ropes, clubs, balls, hoops or ribbons.

As they execute their jumps, swings, turns and figure-eights to music, gymnasts are rated on a scale of 1-20 with judges looking for everything from facial expressions to how many times the performer drops her props. Routines are choreographed by their coaches.

Flores, who says she has never scored a 20, likes to challenge her personal best at each meet. Performing individually before an audience and judges can be stressful, she admits.

"You get nervous" when the props are dropped, she says. "You pick it up and keep on going."

Flores says she is looking to score a 16 at her next meet, to be held in Los Angeles. "It's hard but you get through it," she says

of the 20 or so hours she spends each week practicing after school. "It's for the team."

Her practices include an hour of stretching exercises and warmups as well as ballet.

"The complicated thing about this is they have to master each element," says her mother Barbara. "There's a zillion things they get graded on. They all have to be just so. Instead of saying, 'I want to go to the Olympics,' every meet she has a goal. She's really noted for her flexibility. She's very showy."

Usually Flores participates in six to seven meets per year. Those meets are typically held in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and other nearby states.

This year she will compete in what is called a Level 9 skill range. Those in levels 9 and 10 are eligible to compete for places at the national level. Typically, girls at that level are older than Flores, her mother says.

The public is welcome to attend a Michigan meet Feb. 7-8, from 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. at Good Shepherd Lutheran School on Lincoln in Birmingham. Membership in the 70-member team is open to girls interested in learning rhythmic gymnastics, Barbara Flores says.



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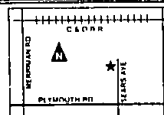
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