

# *Pasadena Star-News*

## **FINDING HER RHYTHM**

South Pasadena teenager Chan readies for international debut in rhythmic gymnastics

*By Keith Lair, Staff Writer  
January 31, 2012*



*South Pasadena's Heather Chan, 13, is scheduled to compete in this weekend's L.A. Lights Tournament of Champions. The event will feature more than 200 competitors from 14 countries. (Courtesy photo)*

It is Heather Chan's coming-out party.

The South Pasadena teenager will be making her international debut when she competes in the L.A. Lights Tournament of Champions rhythmic gymnastics competition this weekend.

"This really is a sneak preview of the start of her international career," said Tanya Berenson, the general manager of the L.A. School of Gymnastics. "This is a very challenging lineup and the first time at this level for Heather."

Chan, 13, was elevated to the top level of rhythmic gymnastics after a successful 2011 campaign. She will face some of the world's top Olympic hopefuls in the lone international meet in the U.S. leading up to this summer's London Olympic Games. The event is sponsored by her Culver City-based LASG club.

"I think I will do pretty well," Chan said. "I have all my routines down pat. There are always one or two international gymnasts that I compete against. I'm pretty excited to see all of these gymnasts compete. There are different styles and choreographies from all the countries. I know I just have to express myself more freely and be more careful. I can't compete without being cheerful and happy. The routine is within your heart."

More than 200 competitors from 14 countries will compete on Saturday and Sunday at Bernstein High School in Hollywood. It is the only Federation Internationale de Gymnastique-sanctioned competition in the U.S. this year.

It will be Chan's final competition against international elite athletes until after this summer's Olympics and probably not until the L.A. Lights meet is held next year. Because the South Pasadena Middle School student is only 13, she can't qualify for the Games until she is 16. She will be 17 when the Games are held in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro.

Among this weekend's competitors are Russia's Anna Bessonova, the 2008 Olympic bronze medalist; Belarus' Liubov Charkashyna, the bronze medalist from last year's world championships; Belarus' Melitina Staniouta, who is ranked sixth in the world and Belarus' Aliaksandra Narkevich, who is No. 14 in the world. Joining Chan from LASG will be Shirley Gon-Gibbs and Elizabeth Petrosyan, among other top LASG athletes.

The U.S. Visa National Championships will be held June 7-10 in St. Louis, and Chan will compete in that event. The U.S. Trials will be held June 28-July 1 in San Jose.

"She definitely could have made the Trials," Berenson said. "Our aim is for her to go to Rio."

Rhythmic gymnastics takes place only in the confines of a 39-foot by 39-foot floor exercise area. Competitors use balls, hoops, clubs and ribbons to perform their routines.

Chan said she mastered the clubs apparatus first, but she has no favorite.

"My strong point might be clubs today and ribbon tomorrow," she said. "I do not really know. My routine is sometimes a work in progress and I get frustrated with it. And then sometimes I'm really good with it."

Chan trains five or six days a week in Culver City. Her mother, Helen, drives her from school to the gym for the three- to four-hour workouts. Chan said she typically does her school homework during her lunch break or while she's in the car. She said she typically gets home after 9 p.m.

She has applied to attend the L.A. County High School of Arts for next year so she can study dance and ballet, important elements to her sport. Otherwise, she said, she will attend South Pasadena High.

"She's very mentally strong," Berenson said. "She has an excellent work ethic and genetically has natural flexibility. She is a hard worker."

Chan said she wanted to do gymnastics, with balance beams, parallel bars, vault and floor routines, when she was 2. She was told if she got all A's on her report card she could join a local club. When she began training when she was 7, she found out she had double-jointed elbows and easily could suffer serious injuries.

"I switched to rhythmic," she said. "I instantly fell in love. It is like you are extending your arms. You see the beauty of the extended arms. I think rhythmic is more graceful and beautiful. You have to have flexibility and strength to do all the elements. There are more dancing aspects."

Rhythmic gymnastics became an Olympic medal sport at the 1984 Games in L.A. No American has won an Olympic medal.