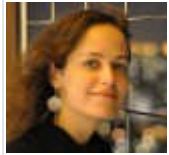


SPORTS | FEBRUARY 2, 2012

Five things to know about...rhythmic gymnastics



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Learning about rhythmic gymnastics is like learning about a culture on the other side of the world -- some things are similar and some seem totally foreign, but all of it is intriguing.

In an effort to know more about artistic gymnastics' hyperflexible cousin, I pelted **Los Angeles School of Gymnastics** general manager **Tanya Berenson** with questions about the world of rhythmic.



Here are five things I learned:

1. Rhythmic gymnasts receive scores for difficulty, execution and *artistry*, all three being marked out of 10.0. Now there's an idea!

2. The L.A. Lights Tournament of Champions, which begins Saturday and runs through Sunday, is the U.S.'s only FIG-sanctioned event for rhythmic gymnastics, and usually attracts big competitors. This year's meet is no exception -- among those scheduled to compete are gymnasts from **14 countries**, including 2012 Olympic qualifiers **Liubov Charkashyna, Melitina Staniouta** and **Aliaksandra Narkevich** of Belarus.

(Do you live in L.A. and interested in going to the meet? Everything you need to know is [here](#).)

3. Unlike artistic gymnastics, rhythmic has remained principally dominated by Eastern Europeans since the mid-1980s, but that's beginning to change. The diaspora of top rhythmic coaches from east to west hasn't been as dramatic as in artistic, though it has happened, Berenson said. But today in the U.S., "there is the largest number of rhythmic gymnastics centers I've seen in course history," Berenson said. She also named **Italy** and **Spain** as two group teams to keep an eye on.

4. Performance is key. Artistic gymnasts sometimes portray characters or themes in their floor exercises, but rhythmic takes the concept to another level, tailoring movement, music and yes, costuming to the idea that shapes the routine. "It's almost like watching a play now," Berenson said. "I haven't seen that since the late '80s."

5. Ah, the '80s... They were bad years for hairstyles, but great years for gymnastics, rhythmic and artistic alike. Rhythmic, Berenson feels, is currently undergoing something of a Renaissance, both in performance quality and respect from the outside community. "There's always going to be a positive with a negative," Berenson said, "but I feel rhythmic gymnastics is gaining more of a positive with the community. Before it was viewed as an elitist sport. Now, with more trainers coming to the U.S. and more centers opening up, I think it has a better image."

The mainstream media is rethinking rhythmic, too. At the 2000 Olympics, NBC host **Bob Costas** wondered on-air why rhythmic was a sport. In 2008 he took it back, noting that rhythmic gymnasts are "highly skilled athletes."