

All About U.S. Figure Skating Tests

If you or your child recently started taking private lessons in figure skating, you may have heard from your coach or other skaters about the test structure, or been told to start working on “moves in the field” or “pre-preliminary” or your “first test.” The test structure can be confusing to new skaters, but it’s one of the most important parts of figure skating and will soon become an integral part of your skating language!

What is the test structure and why does it matter?

The test structure is the foundation of U.S. Figure Skating. Starting with the first test you take and through your entire career, it is the national standard that you are measured against. When you fill out applications for just about everything in figure skating, the first question will be, “what is the highest U.S. Figure Skating Test passed?”

U.S. Figure Skating tests are offered in the following tracks:

1. Moves in the Field
2. Free Skate
3. Pattern Dance or Solo Pattern Dance
4. Free Dance or Solo Free Dance
5. Pairs

The level you enter in competitions is determined by your highest test passed, sessions at rinks are often divided by the skaters’ test levels and skaters registering for a camp or clinic are divided by test level. Each U.S. Figure Skating test that you pass goes on your permanent record and is an achievement you always carry with you.

U.S. Figure Skating’s test structure can be compared to karate and the process of athletes earning belts until they achieve their black belt. Another comparison is the Boy Scout program, where boys advance through levels and ultimately strive to become Eagle Scouts. In each figure skating discipline, there are either six or eight test levels, with the highest one being either “senior” or “gold.”

When an athlete passes his or her senior or gold test, it’s a huge accomplishment, marking many years of dedication to the sport and the mastery of that discipline. The athlete earns the title, “U.S. Figure Skating Gold Medalist,” he or she receives a gold pin from U.S. Figure Skating, may purchase a Gold Medalist jacket and most importantly, he or she can put the accomplishment on a skating resume, college application or even a job application. A skater passing a senior or gold test in two disciplines becomes a “U.S. Figure Skating Double Gold Medalist.”

The amount of time it takes to achieve the senior or gold test varies, but on average, it takes around five years from when a skater passes his or her first test (pre-preliminary moves in the field) to when he or she passes the senior moves in the field test. Then, expect an additional several years to pass a second gold test. Most U.S. Figure Skating Double Gold Medalists have been skating for approximately 12 years. The most common age to earn that accomplishment is 17 years, regardless of when the athlete started, or how quickly he or she went through the earlier tests.

In a typical calendar year, approximately 30,000 U.S. Figure Skating tests are passed by members. Of those, approximately 1,000 are senior tests in moves in the field, 250 are senior tests in free skating, 80 are gold dance tests and 20 are gold pair tests.

Earning a gold test is something that every young skater can and should strive for, and it’s a wonderful goal for one’s skating career. It’s achievable and realistic, and with perseverance, dedication and many years of hard work, every figure skating athlete has the potential to become a U.S. Figure Skating Gold Medalist — or even double or triple gold medalist.

Types of Tests

Moves in the Field: Athletes typically begin their testing with the moves in the field track because the test is considered a prerequisite — or baseline — test series. This means that in order to take a discipline-specific test, like free skating or pairs, the skater must first pass the equivalent moves in the field test.

Moves in the field tests a skater's ability in skating skills. They help athletes learn skating skills and turns that are necessary to be successful in any discipline of figure skating, focusing on accuracy, posture and carriage, bilateral movement, strength, power, extension, edge quality, continuous flow, quickness and turn execution. It's impossible to become a high-level skater in any area or discipline of skating without mastering these skills. Doing so would be like attempting to read without understanding the alphabet.

Each moves in the field level consists of four to six set patterns that must be performed by the skater. Each level requires skaters to perform skills in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions, on both the right and left feet, and on both inside and outside edges.

Each level in the series builds upon the one before it. Skaters at the lowest level begin learning the stroking technique, basic consecutive edges, spirals and a "waltz eight" pattern with two easy turns. New skills are layered on with each progressive test. Skaters never stop practicing what they learned in the beginning — it just becomes more challenging and intricate as they move up. The senior test, in a way, is a summary of every turn, edge and skill learned over the years, and skaters must perform it at a superior level.

The patterns required at each level are found in the U.S. Figure Skating Tests Book. The Tests Book describes the patterns in detail, provides a diagram of what they look like on the ice, and even designates a specific focus for each pattern (for example: "power and extension" or "edge quality," etc.).

The **MOVES IN THE FIELD** tests progress through the following levels:

1. Pre-preliminary
2. Preliminary
3. Pre-juvenile
4. Juvenile
5. Intermediate
6. Novice
7. Junior
8. Senior

Athletes move at their own pace through the moves in the field tests, some preferring to spend a lot of time working their way up, and others choosing to devote a lot of their skating time to them early on, thus progressing more quickly. There is no right or wrong amount of time that it takes to advance to the next level, nor is there a perfect amount of time each week to practice them. Skaters and their parents should discuss their goals, desired time commitment and budget with their coach to develop a plan that works.

Tests are evaluated by a panel of judges, marking each of the patterns on a scale of -3 to +3. Earning a "0" on a pattern is considered the passing average with +1 to +3 awarded if the skater's performance exceeds the standard. The totals of the marks awarded for each pattern are added up, and a skater passes the test if they earn a total of "0" or higher. Skaters that earn +'s on multiple patterns have the opportunity to earn "pass with honors" or "pass with distinction."

If a skater does not pass (they receive a total of less than 0), they will be asked to retry the test. While disappointment is natural, this is absolutely nothing to be upset over. It does not in any way mean a skater is untalented or that they will be unsuccessful in the sport. It has happened to nearly every skater who has reached the top!

FREE SKATE tests are the next most common type of test to take, although it is perfectly acceptable to move directly to dance or simply focus on moves in the field.

The levels in free skate tests mirror moves in the field, and skaters may not attempt a free skate test until they have passed at least the corresponding moves in the field test. However, skaters may test as high as they want to in moves in the field without taking any other tests.

If a skater wants to compete in a free skate or short program event in a competition, the highest free skate test that he or she has passed determines the level that the skater is required to enter. For example, a skater who has passed the juvenile free skate test will enter the Juvenile Girls Free Skate event. Once that skater has passed a test, he or she may never again enter a competition at a lower level. Most competitions do, however, allow a skater to "skate

up" one level. For example, the same skater who have passed juvenile free skate test can enter the Intermediate Ladies Free Skate event.

The free skate series of tests begins with pre-preliminary. This test consists of five basic jumps (waltz jump, Salchow, toe-loop, 1/2 flip, 1/2 Lutz) and a one foot spin. The skater can either demonstrate that he or she can successfully complete these technical elements or perform a program to music.

Beginning with the preliminary test, each level consists of required jumps, spins and steps. Steps are either specific step sequences, spiral step sequences or moves that connect elements to one another. Instead of the skater simply demonstrating the elements, he or she must perform them in a program choreographed to music at a prescribed length. As the levels increase, the length of the program and the number of required elements increases. As with moves in the field, more challenging and intricate skills are layered on as the level gets higher.

Once a skater is at the juvenile level or higher, he or she has the additional option of earning credit for passing the test by "skating up" in a competition that is evaluated under the International Judging System. This system assigns points for the program skated, and if a skater earns a [minimum score](#), he or she can submit their result to receive credit for passing the test without going to a stand-alone test session.

The requirements for all free skate tests are found in the U.S. Figure Skating Rulebook, found at usfigureskating.org. It's a good idea for skaters to look ahead and understand not only what is required of them now, but what they should be reaching for in the future. Athletes choosing to take their test in a standard test session are judged on a scale of -3 to +3, like moves in the field, and can earn "pass with honors" and "pass with distinction." Athletes applying for test credit simply earn "pass," if they meet the minimum score and submit their results.

The **FREE SKATE** tests progress through the following levels:

1. Pre-preliminary
2. Preliminary
3. Pre-juvenile
4. Juvenile
5. Intermediate
6. Novice
7. Junior
8. Senior

PATTERN DANCE AND SOLO PATTERN DANCE tests are offered as a fun way to participate in ice dance, even if the skater doesn't have a partner to compete with. Approximately 3,000 pattern dance tests are passed by U.S. Figure Skating members each year.

Pattern dances consist of required steps to music, skated in a particular tempo that cover the ice surface. There are either three or four dances per level. Like moves in the field and free skate, the patterns become more challenging and intricate as the level increases.

Skaters can select to learn to skate with a partner or test in the solo track. In many cases, skaters wishing to dance with a partner will do so with a coach. Since there are many more girls than boys, it's common for male dance coaches to partner their students on dance tests. In addition, executing the steps properly on your own is extremely important, and in the standard track, once a skater reaches the silver level, they must perform the dance with a partner, and then repeat it solo during a test session.

Illustrations and detailed requirements for each pattern dance are found in the U.S. Figure Skating Rulebook, found online at usfigureskating.org.

The **PATTERN DANCE and SOLO PATTERN DANCE** tests progress through the following levels:

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| 1. Preliminary: | Dutch Waltz, Canasta Tango, Rhythm Blues |
| 2. Pre-bronze: | Swing Dance, Cha Cha, Fiesta Tango |
| 3. Bronze: | Hickory Hoedown, Willow Waltz, Ten-Fox |
| 4. Pre-silver: | Fourteensstep, European Waltz, Foxtrot |
| 5. Silver: | American Waltz, Tango, Rocker Foxtrot |

6. Pre-gold: Killian, Blues, Paso Doble, Starlight Waltz
7. Gold*: Viennese Waltz, Westminster Waltz, Quickstep, Argentine Tango
8. International*: Austrian Waltz, Cha Cha Congelado*, Finnstep, Golden Waltz, Midnight Blues, Ravensburger Waltz, Rhumba*, Silver Samba*, Tango Romantica*, Yankee Polka*

** When a skater has passed the gold test, he or she becomes a U.S. Figure Skating gold medalist. The international dances are offered as an additional challenge for those who wish to keep going after achieving the gold level. In addition, only those marked with an asterisk (*) can be skated solo.*

In addition to having an extra level beyond gold, pattern dance tests are unique in that skaters may test each dance in a level at their own pace. They may test the dances within a level in any order, and they can choose to do them all at one test session or spread them over several test sessions. They can work on one dance at a time if they like, or many. The only important note is that a skater is not considered to have passed a level until he or she has completed ALL dances in that level.

Pattern dance is self-paced, and therefore it is difficult to determine the average amount of time a skater spends at a level. This is because skaters testing in this track have very different goals. For example, an athlete that wants to focus primarily on dance, and spends most practice time on dance will progress quickly. On the other hand, many athletes appreciate the skills dance provides, and will do it as a supplement to another discipline. In this case, they may set aside a limited amount of time to practice dance, take each pattern dance test one at a time, and spend a year or more at each level.

If a skater starts in the standard pattern dance track, he or she may switch to the solo dance track at any time and begin at the next highest level completed in the standard track. However, it does not go the other way, and a skater passing only solo pattern dance tests that wants to move to the standard pattern dance track must start at the beginning.

Tests are evaluated on a scale of -3 to +3, with athletes having the ability to earn "pass," "pass with honors" or "pass with distinction" if they significantly exceed the performance expectation.

FREE DANCE AND SOLO FREE DANCE Skaters wishing to compete in competitive ice dance events that lead to the U.S. Figure Skating Championships must first pass free dance tests with a partner. Free dance tests are programs to music, much like free skate tests. Each test consists of lifts, spins, step sequences and synchronized twizzles, increasing in difficulty throughout the levels.

Solo free dance tests mimic the standard free dance test but allow dancers without a partner to participate. The required elements at each level consist of short and long edge elements (replacing the lift), spins, step sequences and twizzles (replacing the synchronized twizzle element).

The **FREE DANCE AND SOLO FREE DANCE** tests progress through the following levels:

1. Juvenile
2. Intermediate
3. Novice
4. Junior
5. Senior

Free dance is very self-paced, and in most cases the reason for taking the test is to fulfill a requirement for competition. Therefore, the average amount of time a couple spends practicing for a test is not terribly relevant, as it's a very small portion of their overall training. It depends the most on how long a couple chooses to compete at a given competitive level. For example, a couple may choose to compete at the novice level for two seasons, for their competitive development, choosing to wait on taking the junior free dance test, and leaving a gap of several years between passing tests.

If a skater starts in the standard free dance track, he or she may switch to the solo free dance track at any time and begin at the next highest level that he or she completed in the standard track. However, it does not go the other way, and a skater passing only the solo free dance tests that wants to move to the standard free dance track must start at the beginning.

Couples may earn test credit for partnered free dance tests by "skating up" in the appropriate level at a competition, and earning the [required minimum score](#), as with free skate tests at the juvenile level or higher.

PAIRS tests are taken most often by teams wishing to compete in the qualifying competition system. However, they may also be taken by any individual who wishes to learn and practice pairs skating. Skaters in the latter situation often test with their coach.

The PAIRS tests progress through the following levels:

1. Pre-juvenile
2. Juvenile
3. Intermediate
4. Novice
5. Junior
6. Senior

The pairs test structure is uniquely self-paced. In addition to skaters starting at the beginning and working their way through over many years, it is common that high-level singles skaters will make the choice to skate pairs and move through tests very quickly. For example, a singles skater at the junior or senior level who finds a partner and wants to compete at the junior level in pairs may be able to progress through all the required tests in a few months, whereas a true juvenile level skater would take several years.

Like free skate and free dance tests at the juvenile level or higher, teams may earn test credit by earning a [required minimum score](#) at a competition.