

Solos – Guidelines for safety and success

1. Aim

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of the following for soloists:

- ❖ coach education and training
- ❖ pupil preparation
- ❖ pupil strengthening and development

The overarching concern is always to protect the health, safety and well being of calisthenic participants while participating in this wonderful sport. This document is aimed at soloists; however, the general principles also extend into team work.

Coaches have a duty of care to ensure that choreographed movements are appropriate to the age, strength and ability of the individual competitor. All movements must be performed with strength, control, excellent technique and correct alignment to ensure the safety and well being of the performer.

Parents need to respect the judgement of the coaches with regard to movements choreographed within the arrangement. Your child has certain strengths that the coach will highlight within the item. Including movements that your child cannot perform correctly not only loses your child marks but places them in danger of injury.

2. Solo competitions

Solo competitions are divided into two categories:

- ❖ Calisthenic Solo / Duo – this section requires pupils to present a greater diversity in their routine. They display elements of free exercise, aesthetic, dance and flexibility. Pupils can start to compete in this section from eight years of age.
- ❖ Graceful Solo - in this section, pupils from eleven years and over present a combination of aesthetic and dance movements.

2.1 Adjudicator mark-up

Adjudicators award scores for solo performances according to the critique mark-up for graceful and calisthenic solo items. The components of this mark-up have been devised and fine tuned over many years with input from experienced adjudicators and coaches.

The mark-up for each solo performance is segmented into three main components:

- ❖ technique
- ❖ choreography
- ❖ execution.

2.2 Calisthenic solo/duo markup

Adjudicators assess performances under the following markup:

Area	Marks	Components
Technique	40	
• Free Exercise Technique	20	As per the <i>Calisthenic Technical Guide</i> , including deportment and body movements.
• Dance Technique	20	Correct positioning of arms, hands, legs and feet. Alignment and extension. Rhythm according to style.
Choreography	20	
• Musical Choice and Theme		Quality - sound, edits. Light/shade, interest, suitability for age/section.
• Composition		Arrangement of set, entry/exit, use of accents/nuances, creativity, theme/concept, using entire stage, appropriate content to age/capabilities. Must include floor, strength, flex, standing movements using upper/lower/both sides of body in varying directions. Overall appearance (hair, make-up and costume). Lighting (if used) should create/sustain interest. Variety/continuity of movement in keeping with theme/choice/dance and time to complete.
Execution	40	
• Presentation and Expression	20	Transmitted through face, head and body (and voice, if used). Expression should be well projected and enthusiastically maintained. Command of stage, captures audience, aura.
• Overall Performance	20	Precision (exactness, timing, synchronization). Controlled movement, dropped apparatus (if used), errors. Confident and disciplined presentation.

2.3 Graceful solo markup

Area	Marks	Components
Technique		
40		
• Poise	10	Balance of body, carriage of head, good posture recovering from the floor and in movement around the stage.
• Grace	10	Elegant motion, fluency, softness and suppleness of the body and arms, Refinement of movement executed with beauty and fluency.
• Aesthetic and dance technique	20	(including elevation) (as per Calisthenic Technical Guide) correct positioning of arms, hands, legs and feet, alignment and extension and rhythm.
Choreography		
20		
• Musical Choice and Theme		Quality - sound, edits. Light/shade, interest, suitability for age/section.
• Composition		Arrangement of set, entry/exit, use of accents/nuances, creativity, theme/concept, using entire stage, appropriate content to age/capabilities. Must include floor, strength, flex, standing movements using upper/lower/both sides of body in all directions. Blending of movements with flow/time to complete. Overall appearance (hair, make-up and costume). Lighting (if used) should create/sustain interest. Variety of aesthetic movement, balances, elevated steps and dance.
Execution		
40		
• Interpretation	20	Sensitivity and style projected through face, head and body. The overall essence of the performance. Command of stage, captures audience, aura.
• Overall Performance	20	Controlled movement, dropped apparatus (if used), errors. Confident and disciplined presentation.

3. Achieving optimal marks

As you can see the mark-up is comprehensive. This, in conjunction with written comments on the performance, allows coaches and pupils to identify the areas of strength and those requiring improvement or attention.

To receive optimal marks, it is important the choreography is set within the capabilities of the performer. The pupil must demonstrate they have been taught and have the required strength and conditioning necessary to perform all movements with good alignment, technique and control. Each pupil has different strengths and weaknesses and their item should be choreographed according to their individual abilities.

Marks are deducted from 'technique' if movements:

- ❖ are not performed according to the *Calisthenic Technical Guide*
- ❖ are performed with incorrect alignment, technique extension and/or rhythm.

Marks are deducted from 'choreography' if:

- ❖ the movements are too difficult for the individual to perform safely (severe deduction)
- ❖ the movements are repetitive and the set lacks variety
- ❖ there is insufficient time allowed to complete the movements
- ❖ different sides of the body are not used.

Marks are deducted from 'execution' if movements are performed with a lack of control and unsteadiness.

Therefore, if a pupil staggers through a walk-over without the adequate control, marks may be deducted under each of the three headings:

- ❖ **technique** because good technique was not taught/demonstrated
- ❖ **choreography** if it appears the movements choreographed were beyond the individual's capabilities or not enough time was given for preparation, execution and recovery
- ❖ **execution** because there was a loss of control, precision or confidence.

Therefore, if a pupil loses control and falls in a tiger stand, marks may be deducted under each of the three headings:

- ❖ **technique** because good technique was not taught/demonstrated
- ❖ **choreography** if it appears the movements choreographed were beyond the individual's capabilities or not enough time was given for preparation, execution and recovery
- ❖ **execution** because there was a loss of control, precision or confidence.

4. Coach responsibilities

4.1 Optimal marks

It is very important the coach choreographs the routine to suit the pupil's ability otherwise marks may be deducted over all three categories. There is no stipulation or requirement about what movements should or should not be included in a soloist's routine. Therefore it is the coach's responsibility to ensure the pupil has the necessary strength, flexibility and technique to execute all choreographed movements well. Marks are not awarded for attempting difficult movements and marks will be deducted for difficult movements not performed well. All movements must be completed with correct technique and control for the competitors to gain maximum benefit.

4.2 Safe program

It is every coach's responsibility to provide a safe program for their pupils:

- ❖ Coaches must be either a Level 1 or Level 2 coach, registered with the Victorian Calisthenic Coaches Association (VCCA). If you have any queries about coaching, please contact the VCCA office on 03 9543 3757.
- ❖ No movement should be choreographed unless the coach knows the correct way to teach them to their pupil.
- ❖ Choreographed movements must be appropriate to the age, strength and ability of the competitor.
- ❖ Skills should be taught in a progressive manner with readiness in strength, flexibility and understanding of requirements being constantly monitored.
- ❖ Programs should be balanced, providing a variety of content over a period of classes. They should include adequate physical conditioning and a range of movement experiences.
- ❖ Conditioning programs should focus on the major muscle groups for strength as well as the smaller muscle groups for joint stabilisation.
- ❖ All lessons should include adequate warm-up and cool-down sessions.

4.3 Agreeing to coach a solo

If you are approached by a parent requesting their child learn a solo it is important you assess the individual ability of the pupil. It is your decision whether you allow a pupil to learn a solo as you will teach them and sign their entry form. When choreographing the solo you must only include movements that you have a sound knowledge on the method to teach such movements which are within the capability of your pupil.

Remember:

- ❖ Marks are awarded for movements performed correctly with good control.
- ❖ Marks are deducted for movements performed incorrectly and in an unsafe manner.
- ❖ Marks are not awarded for attempting a movement.

5. Advanced movements

As the ability of the pupil develops, more advanced movements can be introduced.

Coaches can accelerate the safe development of the competitor by assigning strengthening exercises for the pupil to undertake at home. These are well depicted in the VCCA kit *Teaching Advanced Gymnastics Movements*. It can be quite inspiring for the pupil to realise that if they diligently practise the strengthening exercises, they should be able to perform the movements with control within 10 weeks.

Coaches need to be very clear in their instructions to the pupils and can even copy pages and diagrams from the booklet for the pupil to take home.

6. Coach qualifications

Solos can only be taught by a:

- ❖ **Level 2 coach:** This is currently the highest qualification available for a calisthenic coach. After attaining Level 1, coaches must attend advanced seminars and training over an extensive period of time.
- ❖ **Level 1 coach:** This is the minimum level of coaching required to teach independently or unsupervised. To attain this level coaches must attend a full weekend course, coach for 40 hours and be assessed in the class environment. Coaches of this level are qualified to choreograph and provide tuition to pupils in all areas of calisthenics.

Level 1 and Level 2 coaches must continue to fulfil the obligations of accreditation and renew every four years. They must also be financial members of the VCCA.

Cadet coaches are not qualified to coach a solo

It is important the person coaching your child is qualified. If they are not qualified your child:

- ❖ is not covered for any insurance
- ❖ may be subject to inappropriate coaching methods
- ❖ may not receive the best possible instructions and corrections for calisthenic skills
- ❖ may be given a set of work that is not appropriate, which could result in injury.

All solo and team entry forms to competitions must be signed by a qualified Level 1 or Level 2 coach. If your child's solo entry form is signed by a coach that does not teach your child, the signing coach can be deregistered for 12 months. **For the safety of your child, only employ a coach with a minimum Level 1 qualification.**

7. Warm-up, strength and flexibility

As each year passes, calisthenics demands greater strength and speed in the execution of movements and a greater degree of flexibility. Without the required strength in the limbs and torso, many of the gymnastic movements cannot be safely executed. Therefore, the first step is to build the required strength and flexibility to minimise the risk of injury.

7.1 Warm-up

All pupils must ensure they participate in a warm-up session before each practice or performance.

The following is a guideline for a basic warm-up. Obviously all pupils have individual needs and, depending on the movements they need to perform, may have more specific exercises to complete a warm-up.

- ❖ Start with a run / jog until warm enough to start shedding clothes. This increases the heart rate, and therefore blood supply to the muscles.
- ❖ Rotate wrists, arms, waist, hips and ankles.
- ❖ Stretch neck, wrist, shoulders, body, back, hip flexors, legs, hamstrings and achilles.
- ❖ Follow with body strength exercises.

If parents stretch their children, they must be aware that hip alignment is correct. Never force any stretching as injury may occur. Speak with your child's coach for guidance on the correct warm-up.

7.2 Strengthening

All movements require the use of muscle groups to allow the body to move in the correct way. Such muscle groups need to be strengthened and conditioned to tolerate the stress and strain placed upon them. If the muscle is not stretched or strengthened, injury is likely to occur. Injury may be immediate or long term through incorrect execution or repetition over a period of time.

In addition to safety, if the pupil does not have the correct strength, there are often counterbalancing body movements which detract from the execution.

For example, if the competitor was attempting a side leg raise, but did not have the abdominal strength to sustain it, we would see:

- counterbalancing torso movements to jerk it to the desired position and
- a gradual slippage of the leg from the position.

Not only does this place a strain on the back muscles to lift the leg and present a safety issue, but marks are also lost at competitions through incorrect technique and alignment.

Therefore it is imperative that coaches, parents and pupils are aware of the necessary strengthening exercises and the skills that need to be achieved before attempting the advanced movement.

7.3 Flexibility

Some competitors are naturally flexible. However, most competitors have to work consistently to improve and maintain flexibility. While flexibility is necessary to complete a vast number of advanced movements, pupils need the correct strength to complete these movements with control. Coaches need to be aware of specific exercises to increase flexibility in certain areas of the body.

7.4 Injury prevention

Injury may occur when a pupil:

- ❖ is not correctly warmed up or stretched
- ❖ does not have the strength or conditioning to perform the movement with correct alignment and control
- ❖ has not received adequate tuition in the correct execution of the movement
- ❖ does not have adequate time to prepare, perform and recover from a difficult movement
- ❖ is not correctly prepared and is under competition pressure
- ❖ is repetitively performing the movement incorrectly
- ❖ rehearses and performs the movement a great number of times and may cause over-use injury.

If a pupil becomes injured first aid should be applied and medical assistance sought. The pupil **may** be able to commence a modified program under the guidance of their medical practitioner or physiotherapist. It is important for the coach, parent and pupil to understand the injury, its limitations and treatment so the future well being of the pupil is not compromised. Injury is upsetting for all concerned as well as costly for parents.

Prevention of injury should be the highest priority.

Risk of injury can be reduced through thorough warm-up and conditioning, and by understanding individual performer's limitations.

8. Pupil Skills program

The Pupil Skills program is an excellent way for all calisthenic participants to develop and reinforce their calisthenic detail and proficiency. The program is open to participants of all ages, although some skill levels have a minimum age requirement.

To compete in a solo or duo at metropolitan competitions, competitors are required to have achieved the correct Pupil Skills level for their age in the year **prior** to competing.

Although a pass in the appropriate level is necessary to compete in a solo competition, it does not confirm nor demonstrate that the pupil can perform more advanced movements correctly.

Solo age group	Exam level required	Recommended age to present
8 yrs	Test 1	7 yrs
9 yrs	Test 2	7-8 yrs
10 yrs	Test 3	9-10 yrs
11 &12 yrs	Grade 1	10-12 yrs
13 &14 yrs	Grade 2	12-14 yrs
15 yrs	Prep 3	13-15 yrs
16 yrs	Grade 3	13-16 yrs
17 + yrs	Grade 4	17 yrs

Pupils 16 years and 17 years and over, competing in the Graceful Solos must attain a pass of 80% or more in the dance and aesthetic sections of the Grade 3 and Grade 4 exam.

For regional Victorian solo competitions, other than Geelong and Ballarat, competitors require the following levels.

11 years	Test 3
12 years	Grade 1
13 & 14 years	Grade 2
15 & 16 years	Prep 3
17 years & over	Grade 3

There are bronze, silver and gold medal exams for those who attain a high standard and wish to develop their calisthenic skills to an elite level.

9. Conclusion

We wish you all the best for an enjoyable, rewarding and safe solo career. Always keep in mind; marks are awarded to you if the movements are executed safely and correctly.