

MAKING THE NEW GRADE IN A NEW ERA OF FREESTYLE

In the past few years we have experimented with some judging guidelines and score sheets. Through many years of observation we have found that the best flatland freestyler touches many facets of art and sport during his/her expression. We've found that tricks, combinations of tricks, along with their intricately subtle variations upon variations have made it extremely difficult to compare one trick kind with another kind or combination. Naming these tricks is another huge task.

Have you noticed lately that the flatland skating elements of yesteryear along with the current freestyle revival we are in is colliding head on with the "skate and destroy" world of today's hybrid flatland freestyle street skater? It is a good thing as long as it results in a marriage, and not a war.

Some tricks are over in a split second, while others can last for minutes. I did a demo at the Franklin Science Center in Philadelphia. JJ O'Donnell did a 4-minute stationary wheelie. Everyone loved it! We elaborated on his trick in the next show. I did my spinning dog walks around JJ while he posed in his frozen wheelie, ever tightening the circular footwork around him. We all had a blast at those shows that weekend.

Indulge me as I make a couple more points. If a freestyler does a 3-minute wheelie in a competition, and while the spectators love it, realistically, should he be in the running to win the contest, or did he earn a few style points? If a skater was flawless in his run and did only three very long time-consuming tricks, could he win the event? Should the judges consider awarding someone first-place for one or two very long tricks? I believe this little exercise demonstrates one of the salient differences between a demo and a competition.

Ritchie Carrasco, Russ Howell and other high number spinners can whirl for a minute or longer. The mechanics and insight into spinning high numbers of 360's on a skateboard is a discipline that eludes most skateboarders, and few will devote the time it takes to earn that right. Are 360's a trick, or the lifetime journey of a human gyro? Most skateboarders want the next "cool" trick wired by dinner hour or they may lose interest. Some tricks are harder than other tricks even though they may not break free of gravity, or the pavement. Must all tricks "get air" to be real tricks? Older tricks are not always easier tricks and should not be dismissed just because they are missing the "New" stamp.

Some skateboarders can spend half of a routine or more doing edge/rail tricks. Others can spend the entire 2 minutes popping the different kinds of ollies they've learned "street" skating, all the while as they are constantly pushing off the ground to their next ollie destination with that trailing "Deadfoot" that never learned how to ride. This would be what I call the "Deadfoot" form of flatland free styling that many "crossover/hybrid flatland street/freestylers" employ today. That last point I made is a general observation made mainly for its effect, and is not necessarily a judgment of that skateboarder's level of artistic quality, or trick variety.

Can any skateboarder win a freestyle contest as long as he/she is “on”, regardless of the level of difficulty, originality, artistry, and variety? Do they have the necessary elements needed to win? What elements? Isn’t skateboarding just about doing tricks? And speaking of tricks, if a skateboarder is trying very difficult tricks, but is not “on” and misses several times, could he win because he tried harder stuff, or should he win only if he *makes* the harder stuff?

What are the predominant skating characteristics of a flatland freestyle champion? What are the elements that are inherent to flatland freestyle skateboarding? How do we help tomorrow’s flatland judges sit down at the freestyle table as informed, educated, and mindful guards of the general elements and characteristics of flatland skateboarding?

Am I a relic still unaware that I’ve been petrified? Do I need to wake up and watch the newest “One Trick Wonder” video?

Have skaters ever been hastily or unfairly graded by the judges? Have judges ever been hastily or unfairly graded by the skaters? Should skaters be protected from the possibility that unknowledgeable, biased, or purposely closed-minded judges are grading their life’s work? Can these hurdles be cleared without taking the freedom out of the skater’s expression or over-directing our judges?

How can we expect a judge to take a deep breath at the end of a skaters run, and pull a single number out of his head that will fairly represent the elements of trick variety, difficulty, consistency, artistry, style, and originality that is painted on concrete by a freestyle skateboarder? So then, what do we do to help make for a better accounting of our labors, skaters and judges alike?

Maybe the judging and scoring of flatland freestyle could be about the gathering and awarding of points from several known general categories as defined by over 30 years of contests, and the elements employed by the winning contestants. I believe this “New Way” could help judges be more confident of a job well done by owning a greater sense of thoroughness on their part. It may make it easier for us to find judges when we need them on short notice because the job would not be as much of a guessing game as it has sometimes ended up being in the past, and because we would have tools at our fingertips for them to use. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not kidding myself. There are no freestyle judges living in Utopia.

Freestylers will be the first to tell you that they are not robots performing compulsory tricks, devoid of soul or passion. Back in the 1980’s I judged a couple freestyle contests that awarded skaters two sets of marks that were then averaged together. We gave them Technical and Artistic marks then. It was interesting. I do believe flatland freestyle has more opportunity than any other type of skateboarding for the skateboarder to be artistically expressive, and it should be counted in the scoring process.

Judging is a subjective discipline. *All judges are at best slightly biased from the start. They come to the table with experience, personal philosophies, and preferences. They do their best to put any bias away as they grade their peers. A judge must draw from his own knowledge and experience to grade someone that may not skate as the judge himself would. Also, A judge may subconsciously prefer one skater to another because certain skating similarities mirror the judge's own skating preferences.* Tricky stuff.

How can judges become less subjective? How can judging freestyle contests become more detailed and concise concerning skater performance without directing the judges too much, or requiring the skaters to perform specific compulsory tricks? How can this be done while making the whole process of judging easier to understand and carry out?

We have found that the elements involved in flatland freestyle skating are difficult for a judge to digest all at once in the 15 seconds after a skaters run, and that it is almost a disservice to the skater to lump all of these considerations into one numerical score. How do we proceed to prepare ourselves to sit in judgment of the new complex freestyler, and our next wave of freestyle contests? I would like to propose a process for future contests but first lets review the viewing guidelines that we have given judges at recent contests.

VIEWING GUIDELINES/SUGGESTIONS: JUDGES SHOULD BE POSITIONED IN A LOCATION THAT HAS A CLEAR AND UNOBSTRUCTED VIEW.

A) OVERALL PERFORMANCE: Is the skater in control of his skating? Whatever the freestyler is doing, does he do it well? How much of the skating surface is used?

B) THE DETAILS OF THE SKATERS PERFORMANCE: (Alphabetical order)

1) ARTISTRY--"Where conception and execution are governed by imagination and taste; one who creates a beautiful thing"

2) CONSISTENCY -- "Condition of adhering together; Coherence"

3) DIFFICULTY--"Hard to do, to make, or carry out; Not easy"

4) FLUIDITY--"Capable of flowing, as style; Free to change in form"

5) FREE--"Not subject to some particular authority or obligation; Set loose from anything that restrains or constrains"

6) MISTAKE--"Any unintentional error"; How many? Did he regain his skating composure in spite of the miss?

7) ORIGINALITY—"First in order of existence; Not copied or imitated; Independent and creative in thought or action"

8) STYLE--"Distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction, or execution in any art; the quality which gives distinctive character, elegance, and excellence to artistic expression"

9) VARIETY--"Diversity; a collection of different things; A varied assortment".
Examples: Use of the whole board from top to bottom, edge, nose, and tail. Tricks that incorporate Foot Work, Foot Tricks, Board Flips, Board Spins, Balance Moves, 360's, Inverted Tricks, and Combination Tricks. Do you see a variety, or constant repetition?

There is just too much here for a judge to consider at one time, and then lump all of that data into one finite number score. A new proposition of fairness is proposed for consideration and constructive feedback. For a fairer and more thoughtful score, why not allow skaters to earn points in each of several categories outlined below.

These elements of the freestyle routine have been hotly debated for a long time, and may all deserve equal credit in the judging process. You may feel that one or more of these categories should reflect a greater or lesser percentage of the total possible points. Notice that specific tricks or trick types were not singled out, so as not to begin the "superior trick" argument/discussion.

5 ELEMENTS: 50 Total Possible Points

When assessing the finished skating routine a judge may ask himself, "How well did the skater demonstrate each of the five elements throughout the **entire** program?" Note: One or two difficult tricks in the program should not earn a perfect score of 10 in the "Difficulty" category. Only part of the program could be considered difficult.

ARTISTRY & STYLE 10 Points

"Where conception and execution are governed by imagination and taste"; "One who creates a beautiful thing"; "A Distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction, or execution in any art"; "The quality which gives distinctive character, elegance, and excellence to artistic expression". Note: This element is usually concerned with *the way* the tricks are presented.

CONSISTENCY & CONTINUITY 10 Points

"Condition of adhering together; Coherence". "Quality or state of being continuous; Something that has or gives continuousness or sequence. Having continuity of parts without cessation or interruption". Note: 1) Consistency & Continuity assumes the lack of mistakes, and may also assume a seamless, fluid skating program. 2) Planned stops, or controlled, deliberate changes of tempo in the skater's program should not result in a point(s) deduction. 3) Mistakes, missed tricks, and *incongruous, unplanned breaks of flow* in the program should be reflected in a reduction of the Consistency/Continuity score.

ORIGINALITY 10 Points

“First in order of existence; Not copied or imitated; Independent and creative in thought or action.” Note: An original trick can be, but does not have to be difficult.

DIFFICULTY 10 Points

“Hard to do, to make, or carry out; not easy.” Note: 1) *Making or Completing* a difficult trick scores points in this category. 2) Completing a difficult trick after missing it one or more times during the program will earn points for Difficulty because the trick was finally completed, but *any and all* mistakes should also be properly accounted for in the Consistency/Continuity category.

VARIETY 10 Points

“Diversity; a collection of different things; A varied assortment”. How many different ways did the skater manipulate his board? I.E.: Top to bottom, wheels, trucks, edge, nose, tail, etc. Tricks that incorporate Foot Work, Foot Tricks, Hand Work, hand Tricks. Board Flips, Board Spins; Stationary, Rolling, and Balance Moves. 360’s. Handstands, Inverted Tricks, Gymnastics, or anytime the skater is upside down. Combination Tricks, Multiple Tricks, or Sequentially Linked Tricks. Do you see a variety in the routine, or is the skater locked into a repetitive vein, a narrower scope that involves many similar looking tricks? The superior skater should be able to show a variety of tricks that employs a wide range. Also, how much of the skating area was used in the program?

This demonstration model with a possibility of 50 total points gives each category an equal share, 1/5th, 20% of the total score. I believe this system or a similar one, especially at large contests would reflect more clearly the ability and depth of the skateboarder, and it could help minimize ties. These points earned by the competitor in each category would be added for a Total Score, and then added to the other judges’ totals for a Grand Total Score. Averaging and long division is done away.

Example: Each judge awards points for all competitors in the five categories. *The tabulator would total the categories of each judge, and then add all of the judge’s totals.*

Competitor #1 received J1-40, J2-35, J3-42, J4-36, J5-41.

Grand Total Score= 194 out of a possible 250 points

Judges would be asked to award points in the individual categories and NOT total the points while the competition is ongoing. This would help the judges be more objective by NOT knowing each skater’s total. A judge would be less tempted to influence the overall outcome of a contest if the results were not known to him. *He would be urged* to compare the points he has awarded other skaters in each of the individual categories for a more accurate competitor placement during the competition. I believe that with this system there may no longer be a need to drop high and low scores. All of the judge’s scores could be used for the Grand Total.

With this new system it is also possible that judges may be asked to be responsible for only one of the element categories, awarding 1-10 points, and then have the judges scores totaled, for a Grand Total maximum of 50 points. If you like working with the number 100 you could score each of the five categories from 1-20 when using this method. You should have 5 judges when doing this. With less than 5 judges on hand it is almost mandatory that each judge award points in all five categories for each contestant. Either way, in the end a larger Grand Total Score should virtually rule out the possibility of ties.

Furthermore, judges will no longer have to pull a single number “out of the hat” in order to represent all the elements representative in freestyle. **With this new type of cumulative, earned scoring system there would be no crowding, packing, or crunching of competitors between 80 and a 100 because a starting/reference score was positioned too high or too low.**

Is skating about tricks, and tricks only? Some think so. With this new system the consideration of tricks is progressively cumulative and reflected in more than one category as the judges award points throughout the five categories. It may be said that Artistry and Style has to do with the way tricks are presented, and not so much about the tricks themselves. If the tricks are executed well in the routine with the fewest mistakes possible, then the Consistency/Continuity point score will be high. The Difficulty, Originality, and Variety categories are concerned with the specific trick types and their individual attributes. So, I guess it may be fair to say that tricks would make up at least 60-80% of the skaters overall score. This scoring system is still primarily focused on the tricks, as it should be.

This scoring system, or one like it, while not compulsory to any specific action for a skateboarder should help to impress upon the judges and skaters alike that there are some general elements of a freestyle routine that are to be taken seriously, or points cannot be awarded.

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