

USA Climbing Competition Task Force – Final Recommendations

Updated February 20, 2020

Introduction

USA Climbing established a Competition Task Force (CTF) in May 2019 whose purpose was to look globally at the sport of competition climbing and make strategic recommendations to the USA Climbing Board of Directors on youth development, competition season, competition format, and IFSC rules alignment. Objectives of the task force were to position and align USAC for inclusiveness, athlete well-being, growth, and international success.

Fifteen members across three task force sub-groups have been working on developing and refining recommendations. CTF members were intentionally selected to represent perspectives of all key stakeholder groups affected by recommendations, including athletes, parents, coaches, gym owners, competition coordinators, competition officials, route-setters, academic researchers, and volunteers.

Key inputs that have influenced and helped shape CTF recommendations since the publication of its updated recommendations in November 2019 include numerous emails that have been submitted to Future@USAClimbing.org, consultation with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force and USAC Coaching, Collegiate, Athletes' Advisory, Judges, Rules, and other Committees, discussions among the Regional Coordinator community, feedback from USAC members and parents at regional and divisional events as well as via online posts to forum.usaclimbing.org, discussions with and a survey of gym operators, and continued primary and secondary research on cross-sport and cross-federation approaches and youth development models.

This communication represents the CTF's latest version of proposed recommendations for consideration by the USA Climbing Board of Directors based on that feedback and research. The CTF recognizes these are recommendations and as such modifications may be necessary to implement them as intended. The Board will vote on whether or not to accept these recommendations at their meeting on February 19th. The CTF asks that the Board accept these recommendations and direct the USA Climbing staff to implement them as a framework, with any material changes to the framework to require approval of the Board.

Recommendations Related to Youth Competition

First, the Youth division will now have two competition "tracks" – a Recreational series and a Qualifying series. This is designed to accommodate the expected growth of the sport and provide distinctive competition opportunities for youth climbers, based on their skill levels and their interest in advancement to divisional, national and international-level competitions.

The key elements of the new **Youth Recreational Series** are:

- Participation in these competitions will be limited to climbers up to 17 years of age who purchase a USAC Recreational membership, with the membership priced affordably to facilitate accessibility for all climbers, and with climbers permitted to compete in as many Recreational comps that year as they would like in any region of the country.
- USAC-member gyms will be able to host Recreational competitions any time from September 1 to June 1, and they can be any discipline, regardless of time of year. For example, a bouldering-only gym could host a Recreational Bouldering comp in April.

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- Recreational comps can be stand-alone events or can be combined with Qualifying Series comps (and/or adult “citizen” comps) happening at the gym on the same day/weekend. However, they will be distinct competitions – with route difficulty ranges aimed at those at a Recreational skill level.
- Gyms will be free to experiment with different formats, age/skill groupings, and scoring approaches at Recreational comps in a way that creates a fun, collaborative, developmental, and appropriate experience for youth climbers not currently seeking (or ready for) the Qualifying Series track.
- USA Climbing will provide member gyms with a “turnkey” package of comp support, including membership verification, online scoring system (if desired), ribbons, and setting guidance. However, while gyms will likely recognize competitor placement at their Recreational comps, USAC only plans to track participation, not order of finish.
- Each region may choose to host a fun-focused Recreational “championship” event at the end of the season.

We believe some of the benefits of creating a Recreational level of competitions include:

- A fun, low-stress, development-focused, relatively inexpensive way for new climbers to get introduced to competition climbing.
- Potential for additional revenue for gyms as they can attract more climbers to Recreational comps who might otherwise be intimidated by the setting and competitiveness at Qualifying Series comps.
- Opportunity for coaches to better focus their attention on differently skilled athletes at distinct events (vs. having them all competing at the same time).
- Opportunity for emerging, “apprentice” setters, Regional Coordinators, and judges to develop their skills outside of the more intense Qualifying Series events.

The key elements of the **Youth Qualifying Series** are:

- Participation in these competitions will be limited to climbers who purchase a USAC Competitor membership; they will continue to be assigned into the D/C/B/A/JR age categories. Those who choose to compete in the Qualifying Series may not participate in Recreational comps that year.
- For Bouldering and Sport disciplines, there will be a separate series of Qualifying Event (QE) competitions in each region, with standardized formats (e.g., modified redpoint, flash and onsight) to ensure consistency and fairness and with USA Climbing managing competitor registration. The number of QEs in each region may vary, based on membership numbers and geography.
- The Chief Routesetter for a QE must be a USAC-certified routesetter, level to be determined.
- Climbers may only compete in the QEs held in their home region. A competitor’s top two QE results will be used to determine their Regional rank in that discipline for that year. Each region will establish a maximum number of QEs that an individual climber may compete in for a single discipline, based on the total number of QEs in that region.
Update: Regarding the requirement to compete in Qualifying Events in Home Region only, USA Climbing staff is to collaborate with the Realignment Task Force (RTF) to generally require qualification in Home Region but (a) to permit petitioning to change

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Home Region for the season in order to alleviate travel burden, and (b) to consider permitting participation (but without ranking) outside of Home Region on a non-priority basis subject to availability of spaces at Events.

- Regional championships will be limited to 20-25 competitors per category, based on the rankings for that discipline. **Update: Regarding the 20-25 target for number of competitors per youth category at Regionals, the target range is to be evaluated by USA Climbing staff in collaboration with the RTF and without delaying the RTF's efforts.** Pre-qualification to Regionals will be granted to those B/A/JR competitors who finish in the top 20 at the prior year's National Championship for that discipline. Those pre-qualifications will not increase the maximum number of Regional competitors in that category. **Update: Regarding Byes to Regionals, limit to those who actually compete at YWCH as team members or alternates; in addition, those with Byes would create extra quota for Youth Regionals.**
- Regionals will continue to use onsite format; the CTF is no longer recommending the "Rotational Redpoint" format initially proposed for C and D categories for Regionals.
- D category climbers who choose to compete in the Qualifying Series and finish high enough in their Regional rankings are eligible to compete at Regionals. However, they will no longer advance to Divisional or National championship events. C category climbers will continue to be able to advance to Divisionals and Nationals.
- **Update: Regarding the Team Championship rules, the Board encourages Staff to work with the Rules Committee and Coaching Committee to evaluate any necessary changes to the Team Championship rules in light of the CTF changes.**

We believe some of the benefits of creating a Qualifying Series include:

- More opportunity for youth athletes to gain experience by competing in high-level, championship-like events with meaningful results.
- The limit on the size of Regionals keeps Regionals to a single day event which expands the number of gyms able to host the event and decreases travel costs for families.
- A solution to future growth and crowding issues that does not require realignment or yearly modifications to Regionals eligibility requirements.
- Potential additional revenue for gyms as we expect high demand for and attendance at Qualifying Events.

The Qualifying Series **schedules for Bouldering and Sport seasons** will be as follows:

- Bouldering QEs can be scheduled from mid-October to end of December
- Bouldering Regionals will be held in mid-January
- Bouldering Divisionals will be held in mid-February
- Sport QEs can be scheduled from February 1 to mid-April
- Sport Regionals will be held in late April
- Sport Divisionals will be held in late May
- Youth Bouldering and Sport Nationals – along with Youth Speed Nationals (see below) – will be held at a single event in mid-July.

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The current schedule recommendations reflect feedback received from multiple stakeholder groups over the past two months. The November 2019 schedule recommendation has been modified to:

- Begin the Boulder Qualifying Series in mid-October in order to provide more time for Boulder Qualifying Events before the Thanksgiving and winter holidays.
- End Boulder Qualifying Series at the end of December. We recognize that initially few gyms may choose to host Qualifying Events in late December. However, as the climbing gym industry evolves and Youth climbing grows, we believe more gyms will be interested in hosting December QEs.
- Lengthen the duration of the Sport Qualifying Series.
- Provide greater separation between Boulder and Sport championship events and provide a 6-week period between Sport Divisionals and Youth Nationals.

The **Speed discipline for Youth** will now have the following elements:

- Consistent with the changes being implemented in the 2019-20 season, Speed will continue to be competed at Sport Divisional championships, but not Regionals. Divisionals will take place at facilities with 10m or 15m Speed walls that meet USAC certification standards.
- In addition, a collection of Speed Qualifying Trials (SQTs) will be held at facilities around the country that meet USAC certification standards for either 10m or 15m Speed walls. SQTs will take place between mid-October and mid-April; they can be stand-alone events or be held in conjunction with a Bouldering or Sport Qualifying Series competitions at the same venue.
- USA Climbing will establish 10m and 15m minimum qualifying times for B/A/JR categories (gender-specific) each year.
- B/A/JR category climbers wishing to compete at Speed Nationals can qualify either by achieving a time at an SQT that meets or beats the Qualifying Time for their gender/age category that year OR by securing a high-enough finish at Speed Divisionals (placement required is still to be determined).
- C category climbers may continue to compete Speed at Divisional championships on non-standardized “jug routes” and, based on their placement at Divisionals, may advance to Speed Nationals. There will no longer be USAC-sanctioned Speed climbing competitions for D category climbers.

As a part of the Qualifying Series, there will also be a **National C/D Climbing Festival**, which will have the following elements:

- The event will last two and half days (likely Friday to Sunday) and will ideally be held in conjunction with USAC Youth Nationals or a US-based World Cup competition – on the same weekend and in the same city, but at a different climbing facility.
- It will consist of a combination of fun, skills-based competitions and convention-style presentations and workshops for athletes, coaches, and parents from top climbers, industry leaders, experienced coaches, and other experts (e.g. routesetters and judges).
- All C and D category climbers who qualify for and compete at Regionals will be eligible to attend the Festival; C climbers who qualify for Nationals will be asked to choose between competing at Nationals or attending the Festival.

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- Initially, the Festival will be a single national event. Depending on the capacity of the climbing and meeting facilities used, there may be a cap on the number of participants. Over time, the goal will be to expand the Festival into regional-level events, possibly held on the same weekend across the country, and perhaps with expanded participation by Recreational-level climbers.

A hypothetical Festival schedule might look like the following:

Day 1 (full day)

Morning: competition focusing on skills development, with post-competition debrief with route setters; might include team-based events (perhaps with pro climbers as “team captains”)

Afternoon: workshops & seminars

Day 2 (full day)

Morning: workshops & seminars

Afternoon: skills-based competitions

Day 3 (half day)

Morning: hands-on workshops using the competition routes/problems from Day 2

We believe some of the benefits of creating a National C/D Festival include:

- It is consistent with the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee’s American Development Model (ADM) and is designed to meet the developmental needs of athletes 13 years of age and younger.
- It offers a fun and enriching event, including competition components, that integrates educational components for athletes, parents, routesetters, and coaches while fostering the cross-country connections that so many climbers and families appreciate.
- It creates an event where the majority of time is spent climbing and developing.
- It supports the goal of creating life-long climbers by strategically introducing young athletes to the physical and mental demands of competition in a developmentally appropriate way.

Recommendations Related to Collegiate Competition

USA Climbing will be seeking NCAA sanctioning for climbing as an Emerging Sport and eventually a Sponsored/Varsity sport. As such, we are recommending the following changes to the Collegiate season in order to align better with NCAA requirements:

- The overall Collegiate season will be November 1 to mid-April, which aligns it with the NCAA definition of a “winter” sport.
- In the short term, the existing Regional structure will be retained for the local Qualifying season, which will run from November 1 to February 28. Longer term, consider geographic realignment of Regions/Divisions to align with NCAA conferences.
- The existing Regional Championship competitions will be replaced with a smaller number of Divisional level championships (i.e., combining climbers from multiple Regions to compete at a single Divisional championship to determine advancement to Nationals); Allow for Divisional championships to be held in March, with each Division determining the best date for its Division.
- The Collegiate National championship will take place in mid-April.

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Recommendations Related to Paraclimbing (unchanged from November)

Participation in Paraclimbing Nationals continues to grow and we anticipate that growth to continue. In order to foster continued participation and address the growing size of Paraclimbing Nationals, we propose the creation of a 'local' season for paraclimbing. A formal season will create opportunities for existing paraclimbing athletes to gain more experience and lower the barrier to entry for new, interested athletes. The season will also serve as a qualifying series for Paraclimbing Nationals when Nationals becomes too large to remain an open event. The recommendations above allow for the possibility of paraclimbing competitions to be held on the same weekends and at the same venues as other USA Climbing events. The exact timing, number, formats, and other details of the Paraclimbing local season are yet to be defined.

Recommendations Related to Open and National Cup Series (unchanged from November)

The primary goals for the Open Season are to better align it with the IFSC season, provide more developmental opportunities for Open athletes not competing at the international level, and to provide ample opportunities for training without competition and for rest.

- The Open season will consist of a Team Selection Event, National Cup Series (described further below), and a National Championship.
- The Open National Championship will be a three-discipline Championship event hosted in densely populated urban centers, featuring the sport's three disciplines.
- The Team Selection Event will be a National level competition used to select members of the US National Teams. Eligible participants for the Team Selection Event should be determined by National Cup Rankings and/or Open National Championship results.

The goal of the National Cup Series is to provide high-level, developmental opportunities for Open athletes, especially those not yet competing on the international stage. The Series will run in parallel with the IFSC World Cup season. Key recommendations for the Series are as follows:

- Four to six Cup events per year in the US with the potential for additional Cups in Canada and other Pan American countries.
- Each Cup event may involve one, two, or all three climbing disciplines.
- The objective will be to include an equal number of events per discipline, e.g., three Boulder, Lead, and Speed events across a six-Cup season.
- Cups will serve as qualifiers for Open Nationals and potentially for International Competitions.

Recommendations Related to Adult Recreational Series (unchanged since November)

We encourage USA Climbing to establish a Nationwide series for recreational climbers of all abilities from ages 18 and up. The Adult Recreational Series could provide a limited alternate pathway to participation at the Open National Championships. We do not anticipate an Adult Recreational Series beginning until 2021.

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Master Calendar for the 2020-21 and Beyond

A major objective of the CTF has been to drive alignment of US competition seasons and formats with international standards and across categories (e.g. between Youth and Open/Adult). The CTF was guided by the following principles:

- Harmonize US seasons for Adult and Paraclimbing with the IFSC schedule.
- Harmonize US seasons for Collegiate with the NCAA seasons.
- Reduce the overall length of the Youth season.
- Provide sufficient training periods without competition and sufficient rest periods for athletes.

The recommendations outlined above, if approved by the Board, will produce a high level “calendar” that will likely look like the one provided below (exact dates for the season and competitions may vary slightly from those presented). **Update: Collegiate Divisionals should be shown in the entire month of April**

The table displays a 12-month calendar from September to November for five categories: International, Adult, Youth, Paraclimbing, and Collegiate. Each month is represented by a grid of days. Key events and seasons are highlighted with colored bars and boxes:

- INTERNATIONAL:** IFSC World Cup Season (green bar, approx. April to June). Events include University World Championship (even years), Free World Championship, World and Youth World Championships, and Youth Pan American Championships.
- ADULT:** Training (purple bar, approx. October to February), Adult Recreational Series (purple bar, approx. October to February), National Cup Series (Open Qualification) (green bar, approx. April to June), Open National (Alternative Dates) (yellow box, approx. July), World Championships (odd years) (yellow box, approx. August), and Open National (yellow box, approx. November).
- YOUTH:** Youth Pan Am Championships (yellow box, approx. September), Bouldering Regional (yellow box, approx. October), Bouldering Divisional (yellow box, approx. November), Sport Regional (yellow box, approx. December), Sport National (yellow box, approx. January), I Qualifier (Qual National) (yellow box, approx. February), Youth World Championships (yellow box, approx. March), and Bouldering Qualifying Series (BQS) (yellow box, approx. April).
- PARACLIMBING:** Paraclimbing Qualifying Season (green bar, approx. October to February), National (yellow box, approx. March), and Free World Championship (yellow box, approx. August).
- COLLEGIATE:** Collegiate Qualifying Season (NCAA Winter Season) (green bar, approx. October to February), Divisional (yellow box, approx. March), National (yellow box, approx. April), and University World Championship (even years) (yellow box, approx. August).

Recommendations Related to Rule Changes (unchanged since November)

As part of positioning USA Climbing to be more consistent with international competitions, we recommend aligning USAC rules more closely with IFSC rules, which will likely include the following changes:

- Conversion from USA Climbing nomenclature to IFSC (“Chief Judge” to “Jury President”, “Sport” to “Lead”, etc.).
- Addition of a glossary of terms such as the one in the IFSC rulebook.
- Identification of rules to be copied from IFSC and others that require adaptation and/or more explanation, as well as definition of the applicable level of competition (local, Regional, Divisional, National; Open/Youth/Collegiate, etc.).
- Consideration to the challenges associated with IFSC rules potentially being inconsistent with the insurance and legal requirements that US-based gyms must follow.

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- Maintaining options for USAC to experiment with alternative rules and formats at non-championship events.
- Process for USAC to consider adoption of rule changes as they are made by IFSC.

Update: Regarding adoption of IFSC Rules, encouraging collaboration in implementation among the Routesetting Committee, AAC, and Rules Committee, subject to (a) prompt progress so as to facilitate implementation and education, (b) subject to prior Board decisions as reflected in the CTF Charter, and (c) encouraging collaboration with the IFSC with respect to ongoing IFSC rules proposals.

Evolution of the CTF Recommendations

The initial set of proposals from the CTF were presented at a “town hall” at Youth Sport/Speed Nationals in July 2019. Based on stakeholder feedback and continued research and deliberation by the Task Force, those recommendations evolved, and a revised set of recommendations were published in November. Further feedback and discussions have led to the final recommendations outlined above. Below is a summary of how some of the recommendations have changed based on that feedback since the original July proposal.

Item	Original Proposal (July 2019)	Current Proposal (February 2020)
Youth Season Schedule	3 calendar options, all of which started in January and ended in mid-July	Qualifying Events begin in Mid-October; season ends in mid-July
Disciplines	All disciplines combined into a single integrated season culminating in a 3-discipline National Championship	Bouldering and Sport continue to have separate seasons through Divisionals; addition of October-May Speed Qualifying Trials; 3-discipline National Championship
C & D Categories	National Championship for C & D categories replaced with a developmentally-appropriate national-level event	Cs continue to compete through to Nationals; Ds compete through Regionals; C/D National Festival with skills-focused competitions and workshops for athletes, coaches, and parents
Recreational Series	Nothing proposed	New Youth Recreational series available from September to June; Adult Recreational Series potential
Collegiate	Nothing proposed	Collegiate positioned as an NCAA “winter sport”