

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

## Young ballet dancers compete for bid to New York City



Gwyneth Lu, center, and a fellow dancer warm up prior to their performances at the 2017 Youth America Grand Prix Regional Semi-Finals ballet dance competition at the California Center for the Arts Escondido on Saturday. (Don Boomer/U-T)

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For 13-year-old ballet dancer Lily Paul, this weekend's annual Youth America Grand Prix ballet competition in [Escondido](#), a semi-final event that sends winners on to an even bigger stage, is a chance at a redemption — and possibly a future career in dance.

Last weekend, the Mission Viejo youth, who trains at Laguna Niguel's Southcoast Conservatory, participated in the Las Vegas YAGP semi-final but missed qualifying for the finals by just two points. Friday, Paul

performed her solo, a variation from the ballet “La Esmeralda,” at the San Diego-area competition, but must now wait to find out her fate.

“We don’t know anything until Sunday night,” said Jennie Paul, the student’s mother.

In the world of amateur ballet, Youth America Grand Prix, now in its 17th year, is a potentially life-changing affair. It’s essentially the “American Idol” of ballet, as finalists compete for coveted scholarship awards to ballet companies around the globe. The 2017 season began with a semi-final competition in Seoul, South Korea, in late July and continues through early March, with the last qualifier in Philadelphia. Then, the semi-final winners — or those who scored 95 or higher out of 100 total points — will dance at the [David H. Koch](#) Theater at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York in April.

Escondido’s event, taking place at the city’s California Center for the Arts, started Friday and runs through 7 p.m. Sunday, when top performers will be revealed. The competition is open to dancers ages 9 through 19 and includes solo, duet and ensemble performances. Participants include dancers from more than 65 schools spanning five U.S. states and three countries. Students are judged by a panel of professional dancers who grade them based on a number of criteria, including standard ballet movements, technique and artistry.

“What I look for, because they are not professionals ... is very clean, basic technique,” said Carlos Lopez, a competition judge who is a studio company ballet master for the American Ballet Theatre in New York. “I know how difficult it is for them, being so young, to get on the stage and perform in front of the judges.”

Though certainly a factor for many young dancers competing this weekend, nerves were not an issue for 18-year-old Eila Neuroth during

her Saturday afternoon classical solo. Wearing a vibrant red dress, the Huntington Beach dancer, who has been studying dance since she was 3, commanded the crowd's attention with a seemingly flawless performance of a Gamzatti variation from "La Bayadere." Perhaps that's because, unlike Paul, Neuroth was merely competing for the experience, as the ballet dancer already qualified for the New York finals at the Los Angeles YAGP semi-final event a few weeks ago.

"It's been a long road," said Jerry Neuroth, Eila's father.

The YAGP ballet competition continues Sunday with junior female and male dancers performing contemporary solos starting at 9:30 a.m. The competition is open to the public. Tickets cost \$5 at the door.