Juniors try for Olympics

By Kimber Pefect
Lantern staff writer

The top junior gymnasts in the country competed over the weekend on the OSU campus in the final qualifying meet for the U.S. Junior Olympic Team.

Mark Howard, assistant meet director, said "last year, five of the six gymnasts on the U.S. Olympic Team came out of this program."

The Columbus Gymnastics Academy, in cooperation with Ohio State, hosted the 1985 Boy's Junior Olympic Nationals Thursday, Friday and Saturday at Larkins Hall.

The gymnasts reached the national meet by competing first on the local, state and regional levels. The winners are "in theory, the best six boys in the country in each event," Howard said.

The United States Gymnastics Federation governs all national qualifying meets for the national teams and is under the control of the U.S. Olympic Committee, Howard said.

"More than 200 gymnasts from 31 states competed in this qualifying meet before 1000 spectators, according to tournament officials.

Boys ages 13-15 compete at the Class II level and boys, ages 16-18, compete at the Class I level. A third level, the Junior Elite class, features boys up to age 18, who are considered the best athletes in the competition.

All three groups in this competition competed in the five Olympic events: floor exercise, pommel horse, still rings, long horse vault, parallel bars and horizontal bar.

The top-five overall winners in the Junior Elite class make the Junior Olympic Team, their last step before being eligible to compete for the U.S. Olympic team.

The top-10 overall finishers in Class I and Class II also make the Junior Olympic Team, which competes with other countries around the world.

All 25 of these winners will attend the Junior Olympic training camp this summer in Colorado.

Two central Ohio gymnasts competed in the meet. Fifteen-year-old Chris Howard, son of meet director Mark Howard, is a Class II gymnast from Watterson High School who placed fifth overall on the floor exercises. Rick Ijams, a 17-year-old gymnast from Dublin High School placed third on the pommel horse in the Class I division.

"It feels good for it all to be over, but I liked it while it was going on," Chris Howard said of his third year in the Gymnastic Federation's meet. He said he plans to compete in the meet next year in Atlanta, Ga.

Chaine Umphrey, a 14-year-old from Albuquerque, N.M., finished first all around in Class II and will join the national team for competition in Japan, Hungary and England.

"I've been working hard and it feels great to go out there and know you did your best," Umphrey said.

"I am able to do so much more because I have the support of my family and church and because God is on my side," Umphrey said.

Ed Burch, Umphrey's coach for eight years, said he would like to see him next achieve Junior Elite status.