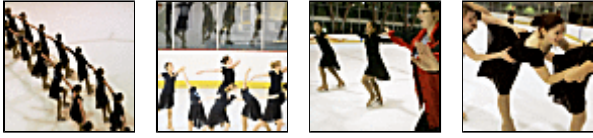


## Synchronized skating picks up Bay Area speed

Regan McMahon, Special to The Chronicle

Monday, February 23, 2009



All most people know about ice-skating, they learned from television. In the Olympics and other televised competitions, viewers see athletic single skaters, romantic pairs and flowing ice dancers. But the fastest-growing discipline of figure skating is something you may have never seen or even heard of: synchronized skating.

U.S. Figure Skating (USFS) held the first U.S. Synchronized Skating Championships in 1984, and hosted the first World Synchronized Skating Championships in 2000. It is not an Olympic sport yet, but it will be featured as an exhibition sport at the Vancouver Olympics in 2010, and its adherents hope it will be a medal sport by the 2014 Games.

Hard to describe but fun to watch, this upstart sport involves teams of eight to 20 skaters, dressed exactly alike, performing programs to music. For moves such as circles, wheels and lines, the skaters lock arms and move in unison. For blocks, they glide through formations in sync, touching or not. And for intersections (also called splices or cut-throughs), they may lock arms till the last second before passing through each other's lines. The key elements are power, speed, footwork, showmanship and teamwork.

"Everyone has to work together," says Casey Harper, 15, a sophomore at the Bay School of San Francisco and member of the Tremors, the 15-person USFS intermediate-level synchronized team from San Francisco's Yerba Buena Ice Skating and Bowling Center. "We have to skate as one to have it work. It doesn't look that hard, but it's really hard."

"Sync" or "synchro" teams compete at 15 age and skill levels. Skaters start as young as 5 on beginner teams and continue to compete into their 70s on masters-level teams (for those 25 and older). The Yerba Buena rink has four Tremors teams. (The intermediate is the only USFS team, while the tot and youth teams are International Skating Institute teams, which are less competitive.)

Junior- and senior-level teams incorporate lifts and spins in their programs. Most teams are all female, some are co-ed and one in Germany is all male.

### Tough judging standards

The performances may be reminiscent of the flashy numbers seen in ice shows, but in competition, USFS teams are subject to the same rigorous International Judging System that makes figure skaters tremble in the so-called Kiss & Cry zone as they pray for good marks from two panels of judges: one evaluating overall movement and artistic merit, the other adding or deleting points for technical elements.

The Tremors intermediate team sufficiently impressed the judges at the Midwestern and Pacific Coast Sectional Championships in Colorado last month to qualify for the National Championships March 3-7 in Portland, Maine. The team, made up of girls ages 12 to 18 from the Bay Area - including Redwood City, Menlo Park, Marin County,

Moraga, Berkeley and Oakland - wowed them with a little more than 31/2-minute "Surf Rock" program for which they wore flowing blue-and-white dresses meant to mimic a wave.

"We're just really happy we made it," says Parinaz Kajouee, an 18-year-old College of San Mateo freshman who has skated at Yerba Buena since she was 8. "All that hard work really paid off."

"All those Saturday mornings!" adds Casey, referring to the 5:45 to 6:45 a.m. practices that were added to the regular Sunday evening practices at 7:15 to 8:30 during the run-up to sectionals.

The team also has a weekly hour of off-ice practice to learn and rehearse footwork and formations. (Ice time is hard to come by at a rink that has lots of public skate sessions, figure-skating lessons and hockey practices to fit in.) And each team member has at least one singles lesson per week to keep her skills up.

"We'll be the team at nationals with the least amount of practice time," says Tremors co-coach Lindsey Wolkin, 28, a graduate of Miami University in Ohio, the top school in the country for synchronized skating, which is an intercollegiate sport in the Midwest and East. "Most teams practice three to five hours per week. We skate an average of one or two. We're hoping we can get another hour in next year."

### Popularity growing

"This sport is really growing on the West Coast," says co-coach Sophie Taylor, 27, who grew up in Berkeley and skated on the 1995 sync team at the former Berkeley Iceland and on the San Diego Figure Skating Club team when she was in college at UC San Diego from 2000 to 2005. "Lower-level teams have exploded."

She says that is partly due to increased visibility at the rink. "Young skaters see the sync teams practicing or performing in the annual Christmas ice show and want to try it." Last year, Yerba Buena had only two younger teams but has three. "That's almost 20 new skaters this year," Taylor says.

Even with the increased demand, the coaches are busy with other career pursuits. Wolkin recently got her master's degree in creative writing from San Francisco State University and is working on a novel - "set in the desert, with no ice in sight" - in addition to teaching creative writing at San Francisco's School of the Arts. And Taylor will graduate from dental school at the University of the Pacific in June. She jokes about combining her two worlds, saying she could make living patching up the mouths of injured hockey players.

### Do synchronized skaters get injured?

"Oh yes," says Wolkin. "I have a big scar on my arm from a blade. When someone falls when they're going at top speed, they can run you over."

"I've been kicked in the back of my leg," says Casey, "and people get sprained ankles. It's definitely a dangerous sport."

Ice rinks that are in sync Skaters can start on a synchronized-skating team as young as age 5, and some rinks have adult as well as youth and teen teams. Some are recreational International Skating Institute teams; others are the more competitive U.S. Figure Skating teams. Here are some Bay Area and Sacramento Valley rinks that have synchronized-skating teams.

**San Francisco**

-- Yerba Buena Ice Skating and Bowling Center

750 Folsom St.

(415) 820-3521

Team: Tremors

**East Bay**

-- Dublin Iceland

7212 San Ramon Road, Dublin

(925) 829-4445

Teams: Dublin Dazzlers, Dublin Dolls, Silver Stars

-- Oakland Ice Center

519 18th St., Oakland

(510) 268-9000

Team: Oakland Ice-ettes

**Sonoma County**

-- Redwood Empire Ice Arena

1667 W. Steele Lane, Santa Rosa

(707) 546-7147

Team: Pacific Stars

**South Bay**

-- Sharks Ice at San Jose

1500 S. 10th St., San Jose

(408) 279-6000

Team: Golden State

-- Nazareth Ice Oasis

3140 Bay Road, Redwood City

(650) 364-8090

Team: Ice Crystals

### **Sacramento Valley**

-- Vacaville Ice Sports

551 Davis St., Vacaville

(707) 455-0225

Teams: California Crush, Solano Stars

-- Skatetown Ice Arena

1009 Orlando Ave., Roseville

(916) 783-8550

Teams: Sierra Storm, Sonic Stars, Sparklers, Capital Ice, Solar Flares

- R.M.

### **A short history**

There are 525 synchronized-skating teams registered with U.S. Figure Skating, and nearly 5,000 skaters compete in the annual sectional championships from the Eastern, Midwestern and Pacific Coast regions. The sectional winners then go on to compete at the national championships. Here are some significant dates in the growing sport's short history:

**1976:** The first official synchronized-skating competition is held in Ann Arbor, Mich.

**1984:** The first U.S. Synchronized Skating Championships are held in Bowling Green, Ohio, with 38 teams competing.

**1994:** The International Skating Union officially recognizes synchronized skating.

**2000:** The ISU conducts the first World Synchronized Skating Championships in Minneapolis with 21 teams from 16 countries. The United States names the first World Synchronized Skating Team, composed of 48 skaters.

**2007:** The United States wins its first medal at the World Synchronized Skating Championships in London, Ontario, when the Miami University team from Oxford, Ohio, earns a silver.

**2010:** U.S. Figure Skating will host the World Synchronized Skating Championships in Colorado Springs.

- R.M.

Source: U.S. Figure Skating

Regan McMahon is an Oakland writer. E-mail her at [datebookletters@sfchronicle.com](mailto:datebookletters@sfchronicle.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/23/DDDB15VD38.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle