

Figure Skating Passion in Chicagoland

If you think Salchow and Lutz sound like new linebackers for the Bears or that crossovers are pass patterns put in place by offensive coordinator Mike Martz —well you may not be smarter than a Fifth Grader. But here in Chicago you are forgiven these blunders because ...well, because this is football-mad Chicago. Yet, there are thousands of people here who recognize these terms as elements in one of the most demanding, pressure-filled sports imaginable—competitive figure skating.

A Family Passion

Every week, thousands of young figure skaters across the Chicago area practice in excess of 30 hours in their quest for excellence in this demanding sport. For “serious” skaters, annual training costs can rival college tuition. And it is almost always a family affair. Skating moms spend their free time traveling to and from the rink and sitting in the frigid cold (yes it’s freezing cold in these rinks even in July!) watching endless jumps, spins and tumbles. Skaters have as many as three coaches for different aspects of “their game.” Siblings, parents, and grandparents show up at numerous competitions, exhibits and shows to support their athletes—often traveling to venues hundreds of miles away.

Pressure and More Pressure

While there is plenty of pressure in team sports, in figure skating competitions, it's absolutely “nuts” due to a grading system that is more precise now than ever before. Each stroke, arm movement, bend, stretch and expression is scrutinized by experts looking for mistakes. Most often, the figure skater is alone on the ice under the microscope. Watching are the skating officials, coaches, family, competitors and countless skating fans. Figure skating is a superb test of mettle, training and guts—and it's often a financial burden on families like few other pursuits. The skater is often aware of the financial stress put on the parents—only adding to the pressure to succeed.

House Family

Like Chicago’s football tradition, Chicagoland’s figure skating heritage did not happen without endless hours of blood, sweat and commitment. There are many families spanning generations of skaters and coaches who have made their mark on area programs—programs that have recently developed high caliber skaters such as Evan Lysacek. One of those families in the northwest suburban area is the House family.

Many skaters have passed through Ilona House’s coaching program in Chicago. Ilona herself was a three-time US Gold Medalist. Having been at it for decades, many of Ilona’s students are now coaches and skating program directors themselves including, Tiffany Sfikas Groc (Holiday on Ice) at Rolling Meadows, and Victoria Pietrasik Annes (National Bronze Medalist) at Glacier Arena in Gurnee. No surprise, one of her favorite students is daughter Nicolette who took to the ice at age 3 and hasn't left since. In no time at all, Nicolette was stroking, spinning and jumping in competition. While attending Saint Viator High School in Arlington Heights, Nicolette became a four-time United States Figure Skating gold medalist. She went on to compete in European, World, and international

ice dance competitions with her skating partner, Aidas Reklis, representing Lithuania. Now a student at DePaul University, Nicolette, who just turned 21, coaches a new generation of skaters and performs in professional shows. Aidas coaches in several area programs as well.

Ilona, Nicolette and Aidas actively promote their sport as art. Last year, they produced a show called "After Dark" that featured a group of international skating stars at the Edge Ice Arena in Bensenville. Tapping into Chicago's rich and diverse cultures, the show drew from fans across the area including many Chicagoans of Russian and Lithuanian origin. More shows are planned.

The House family skaters does not end with Ilona and Nicolette. Nicolette's dad, Jeff House, also did a bit of skating in his younger days in Columbus, Ohio before pursuing his degree in Veterinary Medicine. Dr. House founded the Hoffman Estates Animal Hospital in 1985 where he continues to practice, but he also finds time for his family's athletic passion. In great "Boomer" fashion, House is back on the ice taking lessons. Remarkably, Jeff's mom, Marilyn House, a former Ohio State University skating instructor, still laces up her skates in Columbus at age 84.

Nicolette is also promoting figure skating off the ice. This spring, Sporting Chance Press (www.sportingchancepress.com) published her middle grade skating novel called *Maddie Takes the Ice*. About.com Figure Skating Correspondent, Jo Ann Schneider Ferris, calls "Maddie" "one of the most accurate and 'true to life' fictional books about competitive figure skating" - a Five Star Rating. While in the drafting process, Nicolette got some input from students in Mrs. Lieber's fourth grade class at East Prairie School in Skokie. Nicolette was invited back to the school for a post publication "party" where she led a discussion on "Maddie" for the class. More school talk will follow this fall. The House family is promoting figure skating in performance, lessons, classes, lectures and literature.

Getting Started Again

Interestingly enough, many people who left skating behind decades ago are taking it back up again as a fun way to get exercise all year round. Of course, a certain fitness level is needed to get back on the ice. But those who are able to get back on the ice are asking themselves "why did I wait so long to return to something that is so much fun and does so much good for me?"

Skating Options

There is no getting around the fact that competitive figure skating training is going to be expensive. But there are a wide variety of figure skating programs for kids. Several suburban park districts offer group lessons for beginners at very reasonable rates. Open skating periods are typically affordable. But be warned, once a kid becomes fairly proficient, he or she may become hooked for life! Which is a good thing—just ask the House family.