Long-Term Athlete Development

There are seven stages in the development of competitive figure skater. These stages may take a decade or more to pass the required tests and achieve the skills required to earn a berth to the US National Championships.

Even more time is generally required to compete at the International level. The stages are as follows:
1. Starting out – exposure to ice skating
2. Basic skill development in group classes – emphasis on fun
3. Training – recreational with a focus on skill development
4. Training – transitioning to private lessons to begin testing
5. Training – daily practice sessions aimed at the goal of competing
6. Training – training to win
7. Life long participation – coaching, USFS official involved in club management, judging, accounting, technical specialist, test and competitive adult skater.

Each learning stage relates to the physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive development of the learner. Young children and emerging adolescents respond differently to the stressors that occur in an athletes development.

Individuals will be challenged differently at every stage of developing physical competency of fundamental figure skating motor skills.

Many by standers espouse the theory that champions start in early childhood and freely tell parents that their child is too old to become a competitive skater.

The truth is that too many young skaters are being encouraged to develop skills for which their growing bodies are not equipped to perform without risking long-term damage.

Boys generally lag behind girls in physical coordination and social maturity. At 8 – 11 years, development of girls is comparable to 9 – 12 years in boys. This age group of skaters is able to respond seriously to a structured figure skating training program.

The emphasis for younger skaters (5 to 7 in girls and 6 to 8 in boys) should concentrate on a wide range of general development of sport skills (gymnastics, swimming, dance, running, etc.).

The ages of 8-11 in girls and 9-12 in boys are the ideal time for skaters to learn good technical skills prior to the inevitable growth spurt that usually is associated with puberty.

While adolescents are capable of participating in a program of serious training, they also will be experiencing rapid physical and emotional changes. Parents should be very careful not to over-develop (train) “talented” skaters at this age.

Excessive training and competition can be very detrimental in a sport like figure skating where individuals face high levels of physical and mental stress as part of later stages of development specialization.

A training program that is one-sided in physical, technical, and tactical development also greatly increases the likelihood of a career ending injury or a total emotional burnout.

Starting in early adolescence, skating parents must weigh the educational options and the every increasing demands on a child’s daily schedule associated with any competitive physical activity offered by schools or outside of school sponsored sports activities before and after school, plus weekends.

Advanced course work at school or participation in an elite sport program can result in a child being unable to perform to the fullest potential and pursue both competitive sports and advanced educational opportunities.

Parents whose children are involved in elite competitive sports must place an emphasis on providing optimal training, limiting competition, and require mandatory periods for both physical and mental recovery throughout the pursuit of academic and athletic goals.

Coaches must stress the importance of developing a skater’s optimal technical and presentation skills that are consistent with the expected stage of athletic development rather than attempt to cover up deficiencies with the goal being winning a competition.

The ISU and USFS provide competitive opportunities for elite athletes. It is a fairly recent development that the USFS has started to promote recreational skating and encouraged adult and collegiate competitive events.
The test track competitive events is the most recent effort to encourage competitive opportunities for skaters who are pursuing both advanced academic goals and yet have a desire to compete against other skaters in a level playing field that is usually not possible in the elite track competition environment.