

# An Introduction To Figure Skating

by Claude Sweet

The test and competitions events hosted by the United States Figure Skating (USFS) and the International Skating Union (ISU) are based on the concept of skating figures on the ice using two sizes – figure eight and loop circles.

***The basic figure eight is approximately 3 times the height of the skater and the loop circles were between 3/4 and the full height of the skater.***

On tests and competitions the individual figures would be performed on a clean sheet of ice with no markings such as patch lines or the use of hockey lines.

On tests, a panel of three official judges and additional trial judges (judges in training) would stand in a line on the side of the area designated by the skater to layout the figure.

After the skater would perform the correct number of tracings on each foot (usually 3 tracings), they would exit the figure. The head judge would mark the direction of the first edges and mark all turns with pointers.

The judges would then closely examine the print (tracing on the ice) for wobbles, subcurves, wrong edges, flats, circle size, shape and alignment.

Skaters would sometimes perform variations of the basic figures as serpentine (3 lobe figures) and paragraph figures where skated as one complete pattern requiring the skater to perform both circles of the figure eight on one foot.

The judges would walk around the figure in the counter clockwise direction and closely examine areas of concern they had identified while watching the skater perform the figure. After about two minutes, the judges would return to the side and put a value (mark) they felt the skater deserved.

The process repeated itself until all of the figures on that test were completed. The official panel would meet on the ice to decide if anyone needed the skater to redo one test figure. If not, the test sheets were then handed to the test chair to determine if the test passed or was retried.

***While tests were being skated, the entire rink had a quiet reverence to avoid noises that might startle the skater and result in an error.***

The system of figures began with the basic forward and backwards eights skated three times on each foot on either the outside or inside edges. The complexity of the tasks was increased at each level by adding turns and serpentine changes to previously performed skill sets along with the addition of new elements.

Skaters found that the second figure test elements were much more difficult than the change between the preliminary and first test. A similar increase in difficulty was usually experienced at the fourth, sixth, and eighth test levels.

Skaters always began each practice session by scribing a figure eight on the ice to establish a “bench mark” to warm-up on. They would then proceed to layout sets (3 tracings) of the figures they were practicing on new centers. Beginning skaters might establish new centers 12 inches from the previous centers.

***More experienced skaters who had learned to skate tidy, uncluttered centers would make more effective use of the ice by allowing 4 to 6 inches between their centers.***

Skaters lucky enough to skate a second patch, would begin immediately to layout 3 tracings of their figures to practice their ability to achieve circles of equal size and shape along with the sides of the circle being perfectly in line.

When turns were part of the figure, they too were checked to see if they were properly located on the figure and if the edges were cleanly held into and out of each turn.

Most rinks only sold 18 flat level patches. The strip that included the hockey box had rounded corners and was generally not very level. Gradually rinks added the two strips to increase revenues. The skaters were rotated to insure they did not skate on an end patch twice in a row.

Because the nature of skating figures restricted the number of skaters per session, the cost to practice figures was much higher than free skating sessions, which can accommodate 40 skaters per session of relatively equal skills, ages, and sizes. Younger skaters take up even less space and don't skate as fast as older, elite skaters in Novice, Junior, and Senior events.

At summer training centers where there are more skaters at various levels, the number of more advanced free skaters per session declines as management adjusts the scheduled activities due to the practical reason that they require more space practicing their jumps and thus the number of skaters must be restricted.

Scheduling for winter figure skating practice sessions at the local rink depends on the starting times of the local elementary, middle, and high schools.

Some school administrations are willing to work with skaters in class scheduling to provide additional flexibility. This needs to be discussed with school counselors at the middle and high schools.

Some parents choose to use home schooling alternatives so their skater can make use of the relative empty ice time available in the middle of the day from Monday through Friday. Weekends are generally very busy with hockey, group classes, and general public sessions with 200 plus skaters going round the perimeter of the rink.

When figures were part of the test and competition structure, ice was generally sold as a patch and free skating session.

***The Moves In The Field (MITF) has replaced the figures as a lower cost alternative to acquiring the same skills.***

Compared to free skating, MITF are not as exciting to practice or perform so few skaters take the time to really master their basic stroking without toe pushing or the ability to acquire the body control to hold all of the basic edges (F Outer & Inner, plus B Outer & Inner).

The ability to turn from forward to back and back to forward should be a smooth, uninterrupted process. Figures provided skaters with such an opportunity of learning how to bend the skating knee and transfer their weight from one edge to another without scraping the turn and maintaining their body alignment and balance.

Free skaters are usually highly focused (obsessed) with jumping and learning the higher revolution jumps. The beginning skater should strive to achieve the correct form both on the ice and in the air.

Learning to master the back outside edge spin is extremely important for the beginning skater as this is the foot they must rotate around to achieve a controlled landing for all backward landing jumps.

No skater can perform higher revolution jumps unless they first learn to JUMP high and with speed. This determines how long they are in the air and how fast they must rotate to achieve 1, 2, 3, or 4 rotations prior to landing.

***Clean, correct edge takeoffs and landings must be emphasized at the initial stages of learning to jump.***

Our emphasis in the summer workshops is to teach the correct techniques and attempt to prevent skaters from practicing errors. Our coaches strive to get skaters to learn the new skills while having their heads up.

***Skaters who look at their feet while learning a new element must compensate for their incorrect posture by constantly adjusting their balance. This is an avoidable error!***

The coaches at our summer workshops are attempting to have skaters learn core body posture so they neither bend at the waist forward or backwards and/or side to side.

Skaters must make an effort to practice correct techniques. It is silly for students not to focus their attention on the coaches, but still some will become distracted and carry on conversations with other skater and in the process distract them from learning.

Parents need to encourage their skater to ask questions when they don't understand during class and after class. Every coach wants their skaters to progress and successful past tests and enter competitions.

The skill level to pass tests is about a "C" or satisfactory level used by schools in grading against standardized expectations adjusted by grade levels.

Passing the test at the minimum score indicates that there are problems that the skater MUST continue to correct prior to taking the next test.

Failing to make these corrections only postpones the day when the skater will encounter the test in which these basic corrective problems will not be acceptable.

Delaying the effort to correct small problems generally results in MAJOR performance difficulties that should have been correct several years earlier.

The skater who quickly masters being over their skating blade at all times will quickly progress. Others who are constantly struggling to achieve their balance are wasting their energy and will have to spend many more hours at a future date to first unlearn and then correct these basic errors.

Passing a MITF and Free Skating test makes a skater eligible to compete in competitions. Open competitions allow skaters to gain the experience for the Southwest Regional Competition, in which only the top 3 or 4 skaters continue on to the Pacific Coast Section Championships.

Skaters who consistent skate well in the regular practice sessions tend to land every jump and complete every spin as planned in test and competitions. Developing stamina and presentation skills play an important role in their success!