

Practicing Figures

by Claude Sweet

Patch Practice Sessions:

When I was competitively skating in the 1960's, a patch session was usually forty-five minutes to an hour long. Figure skaters may not have been able to practice all the figures they need practice, for tests or to compete, during that time, so watching the clock was important during a patch session.

With up to eight different figures on a test and the average skater needed to practice each figure for ten minutes (include time to layout the figure), the skater would need more than sixty minutes of patch practice. For that reason, most high level competitive figure skaters needed two to four patch practice sessions each day – two before school and will returned to the rink in the afternoon for more patch practice sessions.

Practicing figures took more time for competitive singles skaters than time spent practicing their free skating elements and running through their program to music. Most skaters practice their free skating on two or three forty-five minute to an hour-long free skating sessions each day.

About Figure Tests:

There were eight figure tests originally. The Preliminary Figure Test was added, before the First Figure Test, increasing the number of figure tests to nine. The higher the test, the more difficult the figures were to acquire the skills to pass the test and place in competitions.

It sometimes took one to two years to pass certain figure tests. To compete at the Senior level (the level that is seen at Olympic and World figure skating competitions), the skater has to pass the Eighth Figure Test. Some skaters give up because the higher figure tests are so difficult and never pass the Eighth Figure Test.

What an Individual Patch Looked Like:

As the patch practice session continues, the skaters continue to move to the right (or left) and layout each figure one by one. Eventually, their clean patch is filled up with circle eight designs, turns, and scribed circles (which are used to see if circle sizes remain correct).

When a skater did a "layout" of a figure, they tried to trace the circles so that only one line

appeared on the ice. A "layout" means that the first circles are traced two additional times. No marks on the ice were allowed to help ice skaters find their centers, check their side lineup, or turn placements.

After the patch the ice looks like clear sheet of glass filled with circle eight designs with all the circles that have been laid out during the previous practice session.

Serpentines:

Three circle (lobe) figures, called serpentines, also move toward the center of a strip of ice. If two skaters share a strip, the third serpentine circle overlaps into the patches. As a courtesy, before "overlapping", skaters ask each other for permission to "overlap". Overlapping uses precious clean ice space and it is an art form to maintain a nicely laid out patch because of the overlap marks of the opposite patch's skater.

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Loops:

Near the last ten to fifteen minutes of a patch session, skaters will practice loops. Loops are done on smaller circles and their long axis will sometimes be drawn horizontally across the patch. Loops make heavier marks on the ice and can be done over slightly marked up ice. Sometimes some skaters stayed on the session that follows a patch session (a freestyle session with skaters jumping and spinning) for five to ten extra minutes to get in last minute loop practice. Loops look like little oblong circles inside larger round circles.

Coaching:

Some coaches wear skates while teaching patch lessons. Others wear heavy boots that can walk on the ice so that their blades don't mark up skaters' patches with unnecessary marks.

End of a Patch Session:

At the conclusion of a patch session the ice rink would suddenly become filled with the sound of voices and music. A few skaters might leave the patch session five minutes early to get ready a lesson on the free skating session; everyone else would practice to the end of the session or hear from their parent about "wasting their money".

Figure boots must be taken off and blades must be dried or the blades will rust. The free skating boots and blades must be put on quickly. Skaters rush to get back on the ice so they can free skate.

Suddenly, music begins playing, and kids begin to laugh and begin to chatter. Skaters take to the ice and begin to obliterate the beautiful tracings on the patches that were laid out during the previous hour. Soon, jumping, spinning, noise, and smiles would fill the rink.