

A Primer for Figure Skating

Selecting a coach will likely be the most important decision a parent and skater initially make when they transition from being a recreational (non test Basic Skills/ISI) skater to becoming a competitive United States Figure Skating (USFS) skater.

Staff Coaches

Coaches on the rink staff provide a selection of individuals who are generally members of the Professional Skating Association (PSA) and carry liability insurance, have passed a background check, and participate in various continuing education seminars and courses. Some rinks have guest coaches who teach part time and are not on the rink staff.

All coaches who are involved in taking USFS tests and participating in exhibitions, carnivals, competitions, or related activities must be members of the Professional Skating Association (PSA) and the USFS. The PSA has a voluntary rating system of its members that will become mandatory in 2010.

The PSA ratings are based on the coaching expertise reflected by:

- The level of skating they achieved in tests and competitions
- Demonstrated skill and experience to teach students to pass tests and compete in qualifying competitions
- Participation in continuing education seminars, workshops, etc.

Coaching Experience and Expertise

Coaches who have earned their gold figure medal understand the physics of performing turns of two and three lobe circles. The Moves in the Field (MITF) were developed to replace the hours of practice required to perform the close tracings of figures skated on a clean sheet of ice without any guidelines.

Skaters earning a MITF gold medal generally have not acquired an understanding of the principals that underlie figures, and thus are unable to apply these concepts to MITF.

It is important that parents who are new to the sport understand that the experience and expertise of staff coaches can range from skaters who have just begun their coaching career through to coaches who competed internationally, plus have a decade or more of experience coaching beginners to gold level performances.

The expertise and experience of available coaches at any rink can vary even when they charge the same fees. Fees coaches charge vary, from the East to West coast, depending on the economic vitality of the region – salaries, income and property taxes, housing prices, and general cost of living expenses.

Beginning parents should take the time to observe the performance of coaches who teach the different levels of group classes in the rink's "Learn to Skate" program. Most rinks schedule intermediate and advanced group classes on different days and times.

Warning - Parents should not sign a non-revocable contract that is typically used by many ballroom dance studios.

Coaching Policies

Most coaches have a policy of charging for lessons that are canceled less than 24 hours before the lesson. However, they usually do not charge if they can fill the vacant time slot.

Most skaters start with a 15 or 20-minute private lesson per week while they are taking group classes and practicing on afternoon public sessions. Skaters first begin planning to enter Basic Skill and/or ISI competitions and practice compulsory elements that are skated without music on half of the ice surface (from the red midline to the hockey box – 85 to 100 foot wide by 100 foot long).

As the skater improves, they will begin to skate a few morning practice sessions before school for a total of 5 or 6 practice/public sessions ranging from 45 to 90 minutes per session. At this point, a second weekly private lesson is usually added as a free skating program, set to music, is added to items to be practiced.

Basic Skill/ISI Competition Expenses

Basic Skill and ISI skaters who compete usually are charged for a lesson when the coach puts the skater on the ice for practice sessions, and competitions.

Extra fees may be charged for transportation, lodging, and meals to travel out of town with the skater for competitions. These costs may be prorated if the coach has other skaters who have entered the same competition.

Sometimes a coach will fill in for another coach to put the skater on the competition's practice ice and event. USFS and PSA rules prohibit anyone, including a parent, from putting the skater on the ice unless they have a valid badge for that purpose.

Test and Elite Competition Skaters

Test and Elite Competition Track Skaters must devote considerable time each week, practicing on and off the ice, to achieve a consistently high level of technical and performance skills if they realistically expect to place in the top 3 in groups that can exceed 12 skaters in an event.

The difference between a test track and an elite skater is the willingness to concentrate on figure skating and foregoing other sports or school activities such as chorus, band, and drill team, etc.

A Coach or a Team

Parents start by selecting a primary coach. Depending on the level of the skater, the primary coach may recommend involving other consulting coaches. These coaches have specialized expertise in choreography, dance, pairs, MITF, etc. and function as part of a team approach.

Scheduling lessons requires the parent to speak directly with each individual coach. A parent should inquire with each coach about the progress of the skater and ask the primary coach for a comprehensive strategy that outlines a plan to achieve specific milestones over a 12-16 month period.

Securing the services of a figure skating coach a business arrangement. When a skater enjoys their lessons there usually are no unresolved issues so coaching relationships will be uneventful. If things aren't to your satisfaction, you need to discuss the problem individually with the primary coach and any others who act in a consulting basis.

Often problems are the result of miscommunications and can be ironed out. However, positive relationships can become negative, especially as skaters become teenagers.

Figure Skating Skills are a Foundation for Success

The Basic Skill/ISI group classes are designed to interest the public in the sport of figure skating. The USFS Transition Program is designed to provide a smooth path from group classes to the world of the USFS skill based assessment program of passing Moves in the Field (MITF) and Free Skating tests.

As figure skaters acquire a basic foundation of skating skills, their coach will recommend they become a full member of a USFS club. Initially most skaters start out by focusing their energies competing as a single skater:

- Free Skating
 - Men and Ladies Singles
 - Artistic Skating
 - Showcase

Figure Skating Multiple Disciplines

If a skater discovers that they do not have the talent of a natural "jumper" or "spinner" necessary to succeed as a competitive single skater, but they are interested in continuing to figure skate, they should exploring the opportunity to express themselves in one of the following disciplines:

- Pair skating
- Dancing
 - Couple performing compulsory dances and free dancing
 - Soloist - compulsory dances
- Team Synchronized Skating
- Theatre on Ice

The Teenage Years

As skaters enter middle and high school, they may experience changes in their personalities. Sometimes these changes spill over into their skating activities. Occasional mood swings are to be expected, but sometimes there are serious problems that range from being disrespectful, not showing up for lessons and practice sessions, and/or poor work habits when they are at the rink. The coaches and parents must not ignore these problems.

There can be many bumps in the road to achieving a gold medal in figure skating. Parents should be aware of potential problems.

When a coaching relationship is not working, a parent should ask the following questions – Why is this relationship not working, is it because:

- The parents and coach are not in agreement about -
 - Weekly practice schedule on and off ice sessions?
 - The lack of the skater to focus on program components?
- The skater is unhappy –
 - Practice strategy in daily running through complete program?

- Emphasis in developing a well balanced program rather than concentrating on multi-revolution jumps and higher levels of difficulty of spins and footwork sequences?

There are ethical obligations of coaches to athletes and parents that need to be discussed objectively. Skaters form an especially strong bond with their coach if they are making positive progress. Parents should attempt to preserve that positive attitude.

If the skater is unhappy, parents need to identify if the issue is solely related to the coach or with the skater. Every skater goes through "slumps" during their skating. Often this is related to growth spurts or may be injury related. Keeping motivation and enjoyment high can be really challenging.

Parents must determine if their skater is only having personality issues with their coach or if the problem is a general problem exhibited at home, in school, and other activities. In either case the parent should speak with the coach regarding the situation.

If after several conversations or meetings and things are not working out, it may be time to consider:

- Switching coaches
- Having the skater cease being a competitive single skater
- Concentrate on another form of figure skating that they may excel in:
 - Pairs
 - Dance
 - Synchronized Team Skating
 - Artistic
 - Showcase
 - Theatre on Ice

Switching coaches is a major decision and should be undertaken if there is a definite conflict in the personalities involved or the coaching arrangement no longer provides a positive benefit for both the skater and coach.

Sometimes competitive parents of skaters are quick to consider changing coaches when their skater is not achieving the results they believe the skater should have achieved. In this situation it is necessary that that skater and parents need to take a step back and clearly analyze the situation.

Are the expectations of the skater and parent realistic? When looking back over a skating season or a year, has the skater continued to im-

prove and develop or based on one poor performance that lasted less than five minutes?

If the decision is made to change coaches, parents have the following obligations:

- Inform the coach that you will be making a change.
- Ensure that all outstanding debts are paid.
- Inform any new coach that all matters have been settled with the former coach

The Competitive Test Track provides an alternative to the Elite Qualifying Events held at regional championships.

The Competitive Test Track has been designed for skaters who are enrolled fulltime in advance placement high school courses designed to assist students in obtaining college scholarships and admissions to elite public and private universities.

Students with high academic goals usually will not have the time and energy to pursue practicing and competing in events that qualify them to skate in the US National and international competitions.

Students who want the opportunity to test their skill in a competition situation can enter Test Track events that provide an opportunity to skate against others who share their academic goals.

Difference between Club, Open Competitions, and Interclub Competitions

Club competitions are held just for club members. Open competitions allow skaters from other clubs to enter to expand the number of skaters who compete in the various skill levels.

The events follow USFS guidelines (e.g. length of program, category name, type of event offered, etc.) Both club and open competitions may also offer creative events such as artistic, showcase, and theatre On Ice.

Southern California Interclub Association involves all of the USFS clubs in the Southwest Pacific Region. The association hosts an annual non-qualifying competition with standardized events that conform to the USFS current rule-book. A different club hosts the competition each year.

Qualifying competition Events

Skaters who want the challenge of competing and progressing through the ranks to national championships can enter qualifying events held at each regional.

The top skaters advance onto the sectional championships with the top skaters qualifying to skate at the US National Championships and possibly in International Skating Union (ISU) sanctioned events and are evaluated using the International Judging System (IJS).