

An Introduction to Figure Skating

Figure Skating is a sport with many dimensions. its many disciplines include: *Singles Freestyle, Pairs Freestyle, Dance, Precision, Figures, and Moves-in-the-Field*. More about them later. But first, what about the sport in general?

Skaters normally begin to skate in a group lesson environment, such as the USFSA's Learn-to-Skate program, often called "Basic Skills". Basic Skills classes are taught at most rinks on a regular basis throughout the year, and are a very cost-effective way to learn the basics of skating, whether your interest is in competitive figure skating, recreational skating, or hockey. When skaters have learned the basic elements of skating in this group environment, many will join a skating club and begin to further develop those skills by working with a private instructor, or "Pro". In order to join most clubs, skaters must have passed through, or have demonstrated capability in all of the skills through the "Basic 6" or "Basic Eights 8" level of the Basic Skills program.

Club skaters typically practice anywhere from 1 to as many as 12-15 hours per week, depending on their level of interest, competitiveness, and budget.

Many skaters compete, and when they do so, they compete within groups of other skaters with similar ability levels. These abilities are proven by the passage of official USFSA tests, taken in front of USFSA appointed judges at designated "test sessions". The tests establish several "Levels" of skating in each discipline. When you watch skating on TV you are watching skaters who have passed all the way to the top of the test structure, called the "Senior" level. But there are many levels below Senior, and most club skaters are somewhere on that ladder, moving upwards. Competitive skating levels are not determined by age, although often in competitions, age will be used as a secondary factor to group smaller "flights" of skaters within a single test level.

Freestyle

This is the discipline in Figure Skating that most spectators are familiar with. In Freestyle skating, or "Singles Freestyle" skating, a competitive skater performs a "program" that lasts anywhere from 1 to 4-1/2 minutes, is composed of elements such as jumps and spins, and is usually skated to music.

In freestyle competition, both "long" and "short" programs are skated. The "short program" at each level has a very specific list of elements which must be performed, and the skater is marked on his/her performance of those elements. Specific deductions are taken for missing or failed elements, and for added or repeated elements. The "long program" has no list of required elements, only a general set of guidelines for what should or should not be included. Skaters are marked on both the quality of elements performed and the difficulty & content of the program. Contrary to popular belief, there are no required deductions for falls in a long program, however the skater is given no credit for having executed or tried the maneuver which caused the fall.

In Singles Freeskating, there are 8 Test Levels defined. With the exception of the very first one, each test is a program skated to music, with very specific required elements (sort of like a "short program" for competition). In the very first, or "PrePreliminary" freestyle test, the skater is asked to perform jumps and spins as separate elements. The singles freestyle test levels are: *Pre-Preliminary, Preliminary, Pre-Juvenile, Juvenile, Intermediate, Novice, Junior, and Senior*.

Pairs

Pairs skating is similar in many respects to singles freeskating, except that 2 skaters perform together. This adds all sorts of opportunities for new moves, such as lifts, throws, and pair spins and jumps. Pairs skating has both "long" and "short" programs, just like singles freeskating, and a test structure which includes: *Preliminary, Juvenile, Intermediate, Novice, Junior, and Senior*.

Dance

Ice Dancing is the discipline within skating that most emphasizes the "beauty" of the sport, rather than the athleticism. Dance emphasizes the techniques of edgework, flow, and motion of 2 skaters together in rhythmic interpretation of music. Ice Dancing has 2 main focus areas, the "Compulsory Dances", and the "Free Dances".

In compulsory dances, skaters are given a very specific pattern to follow. This pattern is shown in the form of a drawing which specifies the skater's moves right down to which foot is doing what particular step during every single "beat" of the music. Dancers are marked on their ability to skate the required pattern with demonstrated musical feeling.

In free dances, skaters get to make up their own "programs", within specified guidelines. These programs must demonstrate basic dance elements and steps in a musical, but not "theatrical" way. No jumps or spins are allowed, and dancers are required to stay close together throughout the course of the dance program.

The test structure for dance includes tests in compulsory dances, as well as free dances, and includes the following levels: *Preliminary, pre-Bronze, Bronze, pre-Silver, Silver, pre-Gold, Gold, Junior International* and *Senior International*.

Dance is one of the skating disciplines where age is no barrier. Many adults and senior adults nationwide enjoy this discipline for both its athletic value and its social aspects.

Moves-in-the-Field

Moves-in-the-Field, or "Moves" is a technical discipline, designed to help skaters improve their execution of the basic moves of skating. Edgework, turns, stroking, body control and extension are emphasized, mostly done with "power" as a primary focus. The Moves-in-the-Field discipline is primarily a test discipline, although some competitions are running Moves events. Moves-in-the-Field has test levels matching each singles freestyle level, and it is required that all skaters testing freestyle must pass the equivalent Moves test prior to taking the corresponding test in the freestyle or pairs disciplines.

Figures

Figures is another of the technical disciplines, one primarily emphasizing body control and edges/turns. Figures are the famous "figure 8s" for which the sport is named, and there are dozens of different ways to modify the basic figure 8 for testing purposes. Each variant emphasizes a certain skill, and all require great concentration and stamina to perform. Figures are still tested and competed, although this discipline is dropping in popularity of late.

Synchronized Skating

Synchronized Team Skating (once known as "precision skating") is a "team" event, with teams of 8 to as many as 24 skaters skating complicated routines similar to those performed by marching bands or drum corps. Large teams may execute patterns of incredible complexity and beauty. The teamwork and timing required makes this a challenging sport. Precision skating is another discipline where age is not a significant barrier, and adults nationwide enjoy and compete in this discipline.