

Masters Skating

By Susan Ellis

Growing up in Saint John, New Brunswick, I lived in the heart of 'long blade' country. Legends abound of Charlie Gorman, war hero and champion speed skater who won the 1926 World Championship on Lily Lake in front of a screaming crowd of 10,000. I heard the stories about the people who would skate to town from Long Reach every day on their long blade 'reachers' – a distance of 15-20 km each way. And every Sunday night I'd sit in awe of the 'oldies' crowd who skated to the Legion Band right after our practice. I mean, geez, some of these ladies and gentlemen were over 70 years old and whizzing around the ice arm-in-arm with their partner like they were taking a stroll in the park.

There are those of us who are over 40 and act like the general over 40 population who find it unimaginable to take more than a mere walk around the block. In anything else, there is the risk of injury, heart attack, or the outrageously humbling thought that a 7-year-old might make us look bad as he zooms by.

Then there are those who are over 40 but still believe we have the bodies and stamina of a 14-year-old and tear around the ice rink at breakneck speeds hoping we don't break our neck – Masters who skate for the sheer pleasure of the speed, the challenge of physical exertion, the fun of tactical maneuvering, or simply enjoying the companionship and camaraderie that exists in the skating community. Some still have aspirations of winning National Championships, some have aspirations of keeping up with the 7-year-olds.

I have a friend who tells me he is 7/47. Seven because he gets to act like one at the rink, and forty-seven only because he realizes he can't have the other 40 years back.

Many clubs in the US are predominantly made up of Masters skaters with some young blood mixed in. In Canada, Masters skaters are finally starting to be welcomed into clubs and mixed in with younger athletes according to their ability.

Masters play an important role in the development of the sport at all levels. One, they have money. That helps to pay for ice time, board pads, equipment. Two, they help with club organization. Not all want to and that's OK, but some do. They tend to be well connected in the community so if the club needs something a Master skater can often help them get it. They help with coaching and giving advice to other skaters, both young and old. Most Masters serve as great role models for younger athletes, bringing maturity and perseverance to the practices. Masters are proof that skating is a lifelong sport and this helps to promote healthy living. They ask plenty of questions, which helps the other skaters to learn. They are always looking for better ways to do things, which brings new ideas to the club. They are encouraging to all other athletes no matter their age. And best of all, they are strong enough to throw the darn mats over the boards!

The dilemma some clubs have is in giving equal attention to both Masters and younger athletes. Both pay their due, right, so why not give them equal attention. Most practice sessions can be divided so that groups of fairly equal ability are grouped together. If not, find a drill one group can do while the other group is on the track or doing something else. Masters are too important to our development to lose.

Masters skaters can, in most cases, do the same kinds of training as the younger athletes. They may not do it as fast, as much, or as well, but they are eager to try. As I do camps across the US and Canada I am amazed at the abilities of some of the Masters. Sixty year olds who skate as smooth and strong as 14 year olds – and with big grins on their faces. Man, if a kid can't learn from that, I dunno..... And what I find even more amazing is the willingness of kids to help the Masters learn and get better. From a social standpoint this is healthy productive interaction which benefits both parties.

Masters new to the sport and to training should start out slowly and if you have any medical problems, check with your doctor before embarking on a training program. Strength training is very important to avoid injury, as well as doing a lot of flexibility training. Endurance takes time to develop, especially if you haven't been too active, so be patient. You don't want an overuse injury when you're just getting pumped up.

Generally Masters tend to compete in their own divisions, but occasionally are mixed into general categories in all points competitions. Meet co-ordinators have to use their own discretion, taking into account the size and overall ability of the other skaters in each category. And Masters have to learn when to play safe as well.

So clubs, get behind your Masters, and start recruiting. You'll be glad you did!