

# Synchronized skaters practice for perfection

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At the crack of dawn, 21 girls are awake and ready to practice. They are the Orange Experience, a student-run synchronized ice skating team at Syracuse University. And every Thursday morning, they hit the ice at Tenny Ice Skating Rink at 5:30 sharp.

"Your alarm goes off, you wake up and think, 'What am I doing? Why am I awake? It's still dark out,'" said Nicole Williams, junior conservation biology major and treasurer of the team and Figure Skating club. "Then you get dressed and drive to the rink, and you're still half asleep. But then you get on the ice and forget about how early it is."

Despite the odd practice hours, the entire team wants to practice in order to do well in competition, Williams said. After ranking third out of eight teams at the Eastern Sectionals in Providence, R.I., the weekend of Jan. 30, the girls are working hard in preparation for Nationals, starting March 5 in San Diego.

"I never expected to do so well, because we're such a young team. But since we did so well at Sectionals, people will expect us to step up," Williams said.

Synchronized ice skating, which originated with the Ann Arbor Hockettes in 1957, is one of the fastest growing branches of figure skating. Orange Experience began in October 2001, because club members wanted to have a competitive skating team.

"It was like a whole new world, and it is so much fun working with the team," said Nicole Leifer, a junior English and textual studies major and co-captain of the team.

All 21 girls have become like family.

"It has made the sport much more fun," Leifer said.

Last year the team placed 15th out of 17 at Nationals, and 11th out of 13 in 2001.

"So placing third ... was a huge, huge accomplishment for us, especially working without a coach," Leifer said.

The team had a coach the previous two years but decided to go out on its own this year. Leifer and Melanie Barton, a sophomore art history major, now lead the team. The Orange Experience is the only team of the 24 in the nation that has student coaches.

"It was a lot of work, but the girls have all come together as a team, and it was a lot of fun," said Leifer, who described herself as the moral support coach.

Barton has coached skaters since she was 12 years old and has competed seriously in synchronized ice skating since her freshman year of high school. She now teaches lessons at Tenny Ice Skating Pavilion.

"It beats working at McDonald's," she said.

Barton also choreographed the team's entire program for Sectionals. Her years of experience, she said, gave her a solid idea of the judges' expectations. She checked with the United States Figure Skating Association on the required elements and had a coach from her home team in San Diego review the program in advance. The team will perform the same program at Nationals, but with a few additions to increase its difficulty.

"We owe everything to her," Williams said of Barton.

Despite the hodge-podge of talent - some members have years of competitive experience, others years of freestyle experience and some with little overall experience - the team stepped up to the high level of footwork Barton choreographed. However, the process was not without a few concerns.

"You're right next to each other and need to be able to do intricate footwork. It can be a little scary," Barton said.

The Figure Skating Club, which started in the spring of 2000, provides some extra time to practice. The club is allowed to practice spins and jumps during this time that regular free skate hours do not allow. The club skates Tuesday nights from 8:15 to 9:15 p.m.

"It's just extra practice time for your own personal growth," Leifer said. "When you see (synchronized skating), it doesn't look that difficult to do, but it's really difficult to get 18 girls' feet moving the same way at the same time. It's hard not to trip over each other, but we make it work."

Girls without much skating experience often make use of the club time.

Kasenia Sheynina, a freshman in The College of Arts and Sciences, uses the club ice time since this is her first year skating seriously.

"Sometimes it'll be easy for me to grasp things, other times I need to come extra early," she said. "I knew I had to do it because I couldn't let (the team) down."

All that extra work has helped Sheynina feel more confident in her performance.

"(The team's) support and (its) belief in me has been a tremendous help," she said. "I want to do well for them, not to impress them, but not to let the team down."

Sheynina's years in high school as a competitive rhythmic gymnast helped her with the competitive aspect of the sport, but she learned skating is a very different experience.

"(Rhythmic gymnastics) is all you, all eyes on you, waiting for you to mess up," she said.

But with synchronized skating, she said, "there are 17 other girls with you, rooting for you. You feel so much support."

Despite her years as a figure skater, Williams also has to work hard on her footwork.

"I was a little leery (of synchronized skating) at first, because I didn't really know what it was about. But I love it now," she said.

Most of the team is made up of former freestyle skaters who found their way to synchronized skating, Williams said.

Amy Huber, a sophomore accounting major, found the same support on the ice as Sheynina. Huber has been skating freestyle since she was six years old.

"Skating single is nerve-racking because you're the only one on the ice and there is more pressure on everything you do," Huber said. "Having other girls on the ice pushes me to do better and eases my nerves."

This support also helps to form a bond between the girls that is evident on and off the ice. They laugh, have a good time and cheer for other teams, Barton said. The team's attitude has prompted younger girls on other teams to ask competitors for their autographs at competitions. The bond between team members is also made stronger by the fact that they are constantly connected - literally. During the program they are either holding hands or touching shoulder-to-shoulder, Williams said.

"There is an unconscious bond you have being on the ice together," she said .