

BY CARLA CONTINENZA
PHOTO BY EMILY J. DAVIS



Mandy Pirich,
Maple Grove's
skating director,
oversees student
Natalie Garvey.

Ice Dreams

Figure skating is finding its local niche.

TRACK IN THE SPRING, soccer in the fall and of course, hockey in the winter—for most families, the change of seasons is synonymous with gearing up for one of these sports. But for a number of Maple Grove residents, the oft-overlooked figure skating program at the Maple Grove Community Center is the one constant sport. From ages as young as 3 years old, boys and girls can sign up for the Learn to Skate program at Maple Grove Arena and start a year-round, and lifelong, season of skating.

Take 16-year-old Courtney Koenig's past 12 years as proof. Since age 4, she's been skating through the United States Figure Skating (USFS) levels, starting with Snow Plow Sam for balance and getting acquainted with the ice, and finishing this spring as a Senior Double Gold Medalist, doing double axels and more advanced moves. Thanks to the year-round enrollment in the Maple Grove program, skaters can

develop at their own pace, adding private lessons to prepare for national and regional competitions as they grow.

Still, May through August is the sport's busiest time, Koenig says. Early in the summer, skaters hone what they've learned in the USFS classes, as well as what moves meet the International Skating Union's (ISU) standards, a huge factor for judges at the regional competitions. For many, this means spending up to eight hours a day on the ice. Once those dog days of June hit, skaters take what they've developed to places like Chicago, Bloomington or St. Paul for the regional USFS competitions. If they wow the panel of five judges there, they move on to the national competitions held in August.

Fourteen-year-old Natalie Garvey also has been skating almost as long as she's been walking, since about age 5. She's spent summer after summer in



For a copy of the Maple Grove Parks & Recreation brochure, visit the city's website at ci.maple-grove.mn.us. Winter registration starts in the beginning of December and closes when classes are full.

rinks fine-tuning her jumps, crossovers and spins in private lessons with one of her two coaches. When she wasn't in the rink, summers were spent at day camps especially for skaters focusing on stretching or working out off the ice to supplement her USFS and Ice Skating Institute (ISI) training. There's a class at camp for every skill of skating—dance for improving flexibility and even swimming for building overall fitness. (Garvey's a Senior Gold Medalist in Moves in the Field and is working on her Intermediate Free Skate.)

For skaters like Koenig and Garvey, Maple Grove is a great place to skate because of its specialized skating program and skating director Mandy Pirich, who coordinates the entire organization of 800-plus students and coaches. As a private coach, Pirich choreographs routines for national and regional competitions and chooses moves and music specifically for each student. Another one of Pirich's girls, Kadrian Hill, is working her way through the USFS program even after a late start. Unlike Koenig and Garvey, Hill didn't start skating until she was 9 years old, but thanks to Learn to Skate—and her natural talent—Hill is whizzing through the levels. Her mom, Jeannette, has braved every icy competition, embracing 6 a.m. practice drop-offs and black-and-blue hips along the way. Her only complaint: skating's overlooked status. "It's hard because hockey's so predominant in Minnesota," she says.

The Hills' home is a perfect sample. But Kadrian doesn't let being outnumbered by hockey-playing brothers stop her from showing them who—and which sport—is boss. "I play hockey with my brothers and kick their butts," she jokes. In fact, during the early years of skating, boys and girls interested in either sport are grouped in the same Snow Plow Sam lessons. As Jeannette points out, the best hockey players are actually good figure skaters, too. If that weren't clear enough, Kadrian even has a t-shirt that reads, "If figure skating were easy, it'd be called hockey."//


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