

Young jam skater draws crowds to Germantown, Ohio rink

By Catherine Meidell

The seasoned crowd that flocks to Orbit Skate in Germantown, Ohio, for rhythm skating night is often lead across the rink to their favorite organ tunes by a young local celebrity. His moonwalk and rhythm-synchronized toe-jams have not only been turning heads locally, but nationally on YouTube. Though he's just a little guy, the smallest in his third grade class, Benjamin Neff, a 9-year-old Ohio native, jam skates better than most that are triple his age.

"Old people don't know what we do in the newer days," Benjamin said. "Back then they didn't have much to skate to and it's fun teaching people what it's like now."

Whether the music is today's pop or '70's disco, after only one-and-a-half years of practice, Benjamin can skate to anything that booms from the speakers.

Benjamin spends a great deal of free time in Tom Sowder's Orbit Skate facility, and Sowder has been a closer friend of the Neff family, watching Benjamin progress from crawling, to walking, to dancing on skates. Sowder has stood wide-eyed watching Benjamin study his father, who demonstrates a jam skate move, and soon after imitate him perfectly. It's uncomfortable for Benjamin to have anyone watch him while he first tries to learn a new move, so he wanders to a secluded space until he gets it.

"He brings people into the rink in the winter just because they want to see him skate," said Benjamin's father, Corae Neff, "I'll be there and 50 people will ask if he's going to skate. He's small in stature, but people are amazed to see him keeping up with any adult."

Sowder bought Orbit Skate from a man who also knows how to play the old



Benjamin Neff demonstrates the splits - one of his favorite moves - at Orbit Skate in Germantown, Ohio.

rink organ, which they blow the dust off of a few times a month to remember roller skating as it was decades ago. When the organist first saw Benjamin skate, he gaped at his ability, saying he had never seen someone as young as Benjamin skate with so much spunk, Sowder said.

"Skating is fun to do," Benjamin said. "It's fun to learn how to do something new. I try to do the best of my ability and I have fun doing it. My very favorite stuff to do is probably moonwalk or the splits, and skating backward."

Never before seen moves are spotted on Orbit Skate's classic wood-floored rink

when Benjamin performs, Sowder said. Jam skating can be a creative outlet for Benjamin, and he understands what the sport is all about, Corae said.

Though Corae and Sowder considered putting Benjamin in a jam skating competition, they decided to hold off until he is a little older to make sure he has a good chance of winning when matched up against opponents that are much older than him. Benjamin doesn't take losing well, Sowder said. He always wants to be the best, so waiting until he develops more physically will be necessary to heighten his chances. Besides, jam skating isn't all about

winning, he said.

"Roller skating is whatever you feel like," Corae said. "It's how you are going to skate naturally. You don't have to say what's right and what's wrong."

Technically, Benjamin is already a professional, Corae said, because children are shelling out their allowances to get one-on-one lessons from the jam skating prodigy himself.

"Tom said he'd see Ben at the snack counter buying candy because we try to watch how much sugar he eats," Corae said, "and I asked him where he was getting the money."

Children of all ages would pay Benjamin from \$1 to \$5 for his wisdom on their favorite tricks, and he would try to explain what he did the best he could. After Benjamin was told taking the money wasn't a good idea, Corae said Benjamin no longer accepts money, though many children still seek brief jam skating tutorials from him.

Recently, Vanilla Skate Company, a company that manufactures roller skating equipment, was interested in sponsoring Benjamin at nationals, but Corae declined the offer. Though Benjamin isn't equipped with Vanilla Skate swag, he is rocking an ideal set of wheels—a pair of Ryder skates complete with light-reflecting aluminum plates and strobe lights. Benjamin said he feels he can do any trick when he fastens them on. Sowder built the skates himself for Benjamin's birthday and made sure they were "top-of-the-line."

"I hope that I can compete with this stuff in these skates," Benjamin said, "I think competing is most important. I just love skating. I don't worry about anything else when I'm doing it."



Nine-year-old Benjamin Neff enjoys teaching jam moves to kids at Orbit Skate.