

Artistic roller skating takes center stage at Tennessee's Heart of Memphis Invitational

By Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

Figure skating to most people involves ice. But not all figure skating is on the rocks. On the first weekend in February of this year, skaters as young as six and as old as 88 competed in the 13th annual Heart of Memphis Invitational figure roller skating competition at the East End Skating Center on Mt. Moriah in Memphis, Tenn.

Some of the younger competitors included Scarlett Akin, seven; Natalie Cardone, eight; and Isabella Crownover, nine. Some young veterans of competitions, such as Memphian Antwanette Stigger, 15, who has been competing in roller skating competitions for 8 years, did not have to travel far from home. But other competitors came from as far as Colorado, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Texas. Dressed in a yellow zoot suit and a white fedora, Stigger wowed the crowd with her artistic exhibition.

Hours of practice, rehearsal and training go into preparing for a competition. Hairstyling, makeup and wardrobe changes must also be considered. There are regional, national and world competitions for artistic roller figure skating. Events at roller figure skating competitions usually include figures, pairs, free skating, dance, and precision (synchronized) skating.

Artistic skating is gaining popularity with youth, especially teenagers like Pazia Kingma, 13; Abigail Corns, 13; and Sarah Stewart, 13. Morgan Hall, 15, twirled into the air, a blur of color like a whirling dervish, to the amazement of the crowd.

Artistic roller figure skating is rarely shown on television so few people know about the skills of artistic skaters like JoAnn and Steve Wojtowicz, who skated in pairs at the Heart of Mem-

phis Invitational. Their perfect precision and synchronization brought beaming smiles as the crowd cheered. This dazzling couple, dressed in black with silver sparkles, traveled from St. Louis, Mo., to participate in the Memphis event. The Wojtowiczs demonstrated the elegance of pairs skating, which combines all of the difficulty of singles skating with the complexity of adding a partner.

As Figure Skating Director Jane Puracchio Wojnarowsky of USARS notes on usarollersports.org, "Harmony is the key to pairs skating, with partners mirroring each other as they move through their program. Skaters strive for the perfect conversion of music to movement by executing simultaneous spins, jumps, and footwork, punctuated by exciting and physically demanding overhead lifts. Contestants in this event are also scored according to both technical merit and manner of performance."

Most artistic roller figure skaters skate on quads, which have turning trucks that steer the skate much like the steering mechanism on a car. Although artistic figure roller skating is not an Olympic sport, there are some Olympic ice skating champions who got their start on wheels. The 1998 Olympic figure skating champion Tara Lipinski was originally an artistic roller skater. Other famous champion ice skaters who once competed in roller skating include Brian Boitano and Marina Kielmann.

At the Heart of Memphis event, competitors demonstrated skill in jumps such as axels and lutztes. Roller skates are heavier than ice skates, which makes jumping harder. Ice allows the skater to draw a deep, solid edge to push off from when performing jumps. The roller skater enjoys no such advantage.

Linda Kingma, eight, dressed in a buttercup yellow tutu with princess puff sleeves and an orange torso, resembled a flowery ballerina more than a skater.



Clara Novotny, 6, competes during the 13th annual Heart of Memphis Invitational at East End Skating Center on Mt. Moriah. The figure roller skating competition drew competitors from Colorado, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Texas as well as Memphians. (Photos courtesy Mike Brown/The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn.)

Clara Novotny, six, bent forward and balanced on one skate as she glided on the wooden floor, with arms outstretched like the wings of a bird.

Ema Meyer, 88, of St. Louis, Mo., wore a maroon long-sleeved mini skirted dress, her blonde short hair curled, for the competition. She was surprised when Kendra Brauchsick, 12, held Sara Bass, nine, revealing her panda slippers instead of skates. Some skaters customized their skates as well as their outfits – one con-

roller skaters are similar to those performed in ice skating, but they are called different names.

A "toe loop" on ice is often called a Mapes in roller skating. Mapes was the inventor of the jump. The Euler jump, called a "half-loop" by ice skaters and some roller skaters, is a useful connecting jump for multi-jump combinations. Lengthy multi-jump combinations are emphasized in roller skating judging. A five-jump combination might be Axel, loop, double Mapes, Euler, double flip. It's hard to keep up enough speed to complete the fifth jump, which is often the most technically difficult. Ice skaters usually take off with two feet while roller skaters take off with one foot in the "loop" jump.

Roller skating also traditionally emphasizes spins that are uncommon on ice. Freestyle moves include the inverted camel, in which the skater is on an outside edge standing on one foot with their body and other leg extended outward parallel to the floor, the skater then rotates their hips 180 degrees while continuing to spin so that they are spinning upside down. The inverted camel is generally performed by women – few men learn to do it and even fewer perform it in competition. One spin that can't be done on ice is the broken ankle, which begins as an inside-edge camel and the skater then pushes the skate over so that the spin is rotating on the edge of the two inner wheels, and the heel camel spin, which is only rotated on the back two wheels, or heel.

After a long weekend of fun and competition, Pat Widma took a power nap before her drive home to St. Louis, Mo. With devoted coaches and talented performers, artistic skating is enjoying a renaissance, and may soon be ready to make the leap to Olympic competition.

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verted her skates to look like elf shoes, complete with curling, pointed toes.

Many of the competitors took part in the artistic freestyle skating events, which incorporate figure skating jumps, spins and footwork into a program set to music. Many jumps done by freestyle



Left to right: Pazia Kingma, 13, Abigail Corns, 13, Kendra Brauchsick, 12, and Sarah Stewart, 13, watch the competition and talk during the 13th annual Heart of Memphis Invitational at East End Skating Center on Mt. Moriah.