

An Ice Rink That's Packed With Warmth

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The midday sunlight that streaked through the rooftop windows of the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society in Ardmore gave the ice a pristine shimmer.

Figure skaters clad in sweatshirts, leotards, jackets and coats moved about the rink. They skated alone or in pairs, tracing figures, executing dance patterns or casually skating laps around the edge of the ice.

At the far end of the rink was 69-year-old Joe Krush of Wayne. Surrounded by a group of 15 skaters, coaches and spectators, Krush demonstrated why fellow club members have been known to call him "an old swamp skater."

With each stroke of the blades of his skates, Krush sketched pictures in the ice - a picket fence, a ball of twine, and an intricate pattern called the Philadelphia Twist.

He learned this 19th-century style of figure skating from his father. As a child, Krush would glide over the frozen ponds and lakes of southern New Jersey with his dad.

"I've been skating almost all my life, but only the last 40 years have been in a rink," said Krush, a short, round man dressed entirely in black,

from his turtleneck sweater to his skates.

Krush graduated from swamp skater to rink skater in 1948, when he joined the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society at County Line Road and Holland Avenue. In those days, Krush said, he could jump, spin - "the whole thing." But today, when he skates at the club three times a week, he said his skating "is tempered with age."

At about noontime on most days, the older members of the club can be found skating, as well as laughing, talking, eating and reminiscing in the warm refuge of the glass-enclosed lounge adjacent to the ice. The atmosphere is relaxed, and the mood is one of familiarity and friendship.

Everybody seems to know everybody at the oldest skating club in the United States. The familial feeling is a quality that is treasured by members of the 138-year-old club, which last weekend celebrated its 50th anniversary at the Ardmore location.

The 1,200-member Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society is the largest figure-skating club in the country, according to J. Robert Morris, co-chairman of the 50th-anniversary celebration. It is one of the few skating

clubs in the country where the members own the ice-skating facility.

The club is rich in history and tradition. Generations of families are active and remain loyal to the organization. One member flew in from her home near Athens, Greece, to attend the weekend celebration.

"We're the best there is," said Jane Heintz, club president. "We have a marvelous facility, a long history that brings a feeling of closeness and cohesiveness, families that have been members for years and years . . . and a nice mixture of people who skate for recreation along with people who are involved in competitive skating."

Former Olympic champion Dick Button, who trained at the club and is still a member, agreed.

"The club has the best kind of approach to skating - the building, the sense of historical continuity and history of skating," Button said in a telephone interview last week. Button won the men's figure-skating championship in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics. "It was a wonderful experience to skate there and get to know the people."

Members point proudly to the fact that Button and another former Olympic champion, Scott Hamilton, trained at the club. Currently, the Ardmore rink is the home ice of several national competitors including Doug Mattis, who grew up in Radnor and now lives in Drexel Hill. Mattis was 1985 National Junior Men's Champion and finished in ninth place two weeks ago in the Senior Men's division at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Denver.

The club's insignia, a 19th-century skate, is imprinted on walls, on floors and on bulletin boards throughout the building. Paintings, photographs and drawings of skaters are everywhere, and atop the fireplace in the second floor lounge is a mural of a skating scene on the frozen ice of the Schuylkill. There are displays of skating memorabilia, locker rooms, offices, an upstairs and downstairs lounge, a skate shop, and a snack bar in the two-story arc-shaped building. The yellow walls and baby blue accents, the skylights and the large window at one end of the building give the rink a light, airy quality.

"If you skate here in the early morning when the sun is coming up, there really is a nice glow about this place," said Mattis, 21.

Rink manager Fran Mycek agreed.

"When you're inside a lot of other rinks, you walk outside, and you don't know whether it's snowing, raining or sleeting. Here, through the back window, you can see the leaves turning in the fall and the snow falling in the winter," said Mycek, who has been rink manager for five years and whose father, Frank Mycek, managed the rink for 45 years before his death.

Architect E. Nelson Edwards, a club member, designed the structure in 1937 solely for figure skating. In addition to the natural lighting and the arched roof, the rink is unusual because there are no barriers around the edge of the ice. Because rinks are usually used for hockey as well as figure skating, the ice normally is encircled by a partition.

Figure-skating coach Charles Fetter said that few facilities in the country can compare.

"Rinks today are minus a lot of features. They're big metal barns. No heat, no dehumidification - nothing," Fetter said. "This facility is in tip-top condition. The members care about it. It looks like it was built yesterday, and it's been here for 50 years."

The mood and activity at the rink change with the time of day.

In the morning darkness of 6 o'clock, you'll find young skaters practicing school figures and freestyle skating before school. Oftentimes parents sit in the lounge watching, knitting, reading or talking with other parents. At midday, the senior members skate and socialize. On some afternoons, children ages 6 and under scurry around. Many of them spend as much time on their rumps as on the blades of their skates. At 6 p.m., the competitors take over the ice. These are skaters who have participated in regional or national figure-skating competitions. They are the people who Krush says "skate by at 90 miles an hour and fling themselves in the air."

On Fridays, there is open skating for nonmembers and on Saturdays there's the tea dance - ballroom dancing on ice. Men in jackets and women in short skating skirts sail across the ice in the precisely defined patterns of dances, such as the fox trot and the starlight waltz.

In between sessions, 11 times per day, Mycek will hop aboard the blue-and-yellow Zamboni, a machine used to clean and recoat the ice surface.

"We try to maintain a balance of young competitors, juniors and seniors, to give every group as much ice time as possible without slighting anyone," Heintz said.

During the November-to-March skating season, the rink is open every day. The club has short mini-sessions in April and September. For the remainder of the year, the club is closed. Prospective members must be recommended for membership by five club members. Annual fees range from \$55 to \$500 depending on the type of membership and the extent of skating privileges.

The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society was chartered on Feb. 28, 1861. It was the result of the merging of the Skater's Club of the City and County of Philadelphia and the Humane Society of Philadelphia.

The merger only made sense. The skaters club had been founded in 1849 by a group of men who liked to skate on the frozen rivers and lakes of the Philadelphia area - and sometimes fell through the ice. Frequently coming to their rescue were members of the humane society, which in that era rescued more people than animals.

The group's first clubhouse was a boathouse on the east bank of the Schuylkill, now the home of the Philadelphia Girls Rowing Club. A small plaque above the fireplace in the boathouse still bears the initials PSC - Philadelphia Skating Club - said Jane Morris, anniversary celebration co- chairman.

The development of artificially frozen indoor rinks in the early 20th century signaled the demise of river skating, and the club members skated for a while at the Arena at 45th and Market Streets in Philadelphia. In 1937, the club bought land in Ardmore from Haverford College for the construction of a club skating rink. The rink was financed by the sale of bonds to members and friends and opened on Jan. 8, 1938.

"There is such an aura of history and permanence about this place," Mattis said. "It's something I felt even when I was too young to realize what it was."

The 50th anniversary was celebrated with a party and skating exhibition on Jan. 16. Krush opened the program sporting a fake handlebar mustache and a black derby in a nod to skating history. With the help of Mattis and J. Robert Morris Jr., Krush skated the Philly Twist.

He calls skating "the great panacea," a sport that offers self-expression and self-discovery.

The bonus, he said, is being able to skate in a place like the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society.