

Game On/Need for speed (skating)

BY MATTHEW BIDDLE

When I attended a Buffalo Speedskating Club practice in October, every athlete I spoke with said the same thing about why he or she enjoys the sport: "Because I can go fast."

It may seem like an obvious answer—it's not called speedskating for nothing—but it wasn't until I was standing at center ice with twenty skaters zipping around me that I really understood what they meant. It's not the mere act of achieving top speed that these athletes enjoy, but rather the feeling that comes with it—a feeling that sprinting, cycling, driving, and other activities do not provide.

"One of the greatest moments when you're skating is that moment when you're not thinking and your brain turns off," says Julie Gehring. "It's a cool feeling because you're going fast and it's essentially like you're flying, but you're not. That's the best way I know how to describe it."

Gehring is a former competitive speedskater who was named national champion in 2011 at the intermediate level. Her proudest accomplishment as an athlete is completing the 500 meters—four and a half times around a rink—in less than fifty seconds. Today, as a full-time teacher at Tapestry Charter School and a coach

Members' ages range from six to over seventy.



with the Buffalo Speedskating Club, she's shifted her focus to educating.

"[Coaching] is where my heart is. I still love skating fast and skating against people I can skate fast with, but, right now, that's not my goal anymore," she says. "I love working with kids. They bring so much enthusiasm to everything they do."

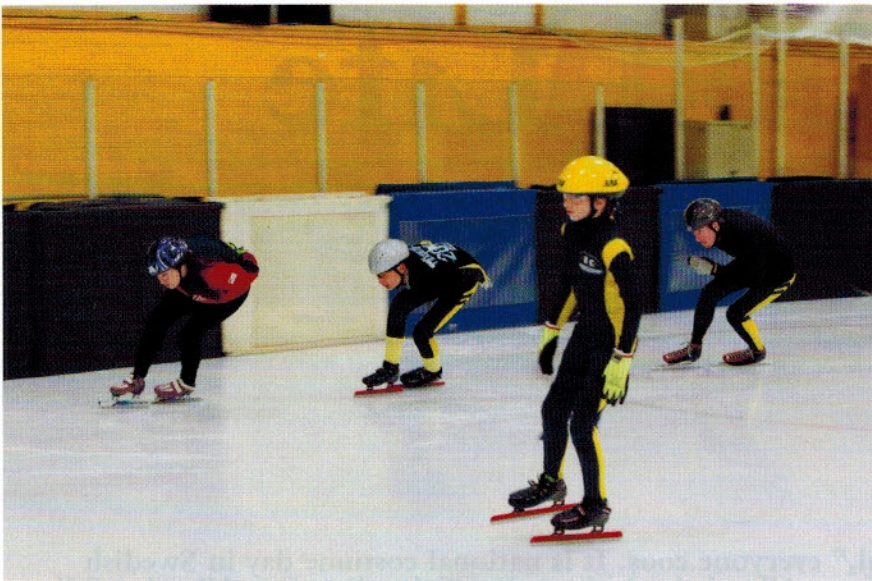
The Buffalo Speedskating Club has existed, in one form or another, for a few decades. These days, the club has about thirty members ranging in age from six to over seventy. Some members come to the club with prior experience skating, but many are first exposed to speedskating through the club's Learn to Skate program. Through the program, new skaters attend three practices and receive personal instruction and all the equipment needed for \$40. (If you'd like to continue, the fee is applied to a prorated membership cost for the rest of the season.)

"I enjoy the fitness aspect of it," says Alan Jay, club secretary. "You can never really learn everything there is to learn about speedskating, so there's always a challenge."

While the sport is popular in Ontario, the club is the only place in Buffalo to train—a big change from the 1940s, fifties, and sixties, when speedskating was the dominant winter sport in the area. Speedskating on outdoor rinks—including a frozen Hoyt Lake in Delaware Park—was a regular sight, and races could easily attract a thousand cheering spectators. Buffalo native Kit Klein won the first gold medal in women's Olympic speedskating in 1932, which earned her a place in the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame, National Speedskating Hall of Fame, and International Women's Sports Hall of Fame.

Craig Pielechowski, a seventy-two-year-old coach with the club, taught himself to skate in the 1950s and competed in the *Courier-Express's* Buffalo Speedskating Championships as a teenager. "Back then, hockey wasn't a big thing, so there were more speedskates on the ice than hockey skates," he recalls, standing near the boards at Riverside Park's Bud Bakewell Rink. "Anyone who wanted to play hockey had to go across the bridge and over to Fort Erie to play. Delaware Park, Como Park, we used to skate there a lot. Back then, the rinks were outdoors—even this one. There wasn't a roof."

Pielechowski returned to speedskating



Buffalo Speedskating Club members take a spin around the ice.

to stop watching and join him on the ice.


Jay says many members are former hockey players who'd rather just skate, like Gabe Hasselback, or former figure skaters looking for the speed and competition of racing. Matthew Grodensky, a twelve-year-old skater from Rochester, had a simple reason for joining—he wanted a sport that was a little bit different.

“It’s a sport no one knows about—that’s what I like about it. I really want to be in the Olympics,” says Grodensky, who has already participated in several regional camps and competed at the Empire State Games.

Six-year-old Henry Lee Komp discovered skating at a friend’s birthday party. He got on the ice tentatively, but quickly took off. “I really like skating. I’ve never seen these kind of skates before, so I wanted to try them,” he says.

“And you wanted to go fast too, right?” asks his father, Steve Komp.

“Yeah!” he responds, as he eagerly waits for practice to begin.

For more information on the Buffalo Speedskating Club, visit buffalospeedskating.org. Matthew Biddle is a regular *Spree* contributor who, shockingly, didn’t fall when the club invited him on the ice. 

Photos by kc kratt

in 2002. Since then, he’s set multiple world records at the sixty-to-sixty-nine and seventy-to-seventy-four age levels and won national and world championships for his age group. He even met his wife, Christina, on the ice; she attended the Learn to Skate program with him as her instructor, and the pair hit it off.

“It was a speedskating wedding,” says Jay. “I planned Christina and

Craig’s wedding. They were married by one of our members who’s a minister, and one of our members designed their invitations.”

The club has a distinct family atmosphere, and the membership includes pairs of siblings and parents and children. Nathalie Hasselback, a Hamburg resident, brought her son, Gabriel, to the club last year, but quickly decided



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