

The Steel City Blades junior synchronized skating team goes for the gold.

Below: The team holds some events at Mt. Lebanon Ice Rink.



# Synchronized Skating



**Y**ou work as a team and set goals, and it's excellent when you achieve them because you get to celebrate with friends. It feels like family." That's Emily Smokonich's explanation of why she enjoys participating on one of the Steel City Blades synchronized skating teams.

A senior at Mt. Lebanon High School, Smokonich, Vanderbilt Drive, became involved when one of her friends approached her in ninth grade and asked if she would be interested in trying synchronized skating. "She said they needed people to join the team, so I thought I'd see if I liked it," Smokonich says. "And I really enjoyed it. I skated (single figure skating) for many years, and I still do, but I definitely like the benefit of having teammates."

Lindsay Mullen agrees. Mullen, Valleyview Road, has been skating since the age of 6 and says she likes synchronized skating. "It's everyone working together, because if one person doesn't do it right, it affects everyone's performance. And I've made a lot of close friendships."

A 2008 graduate of Mt. Lebanon High School, Mullen now attends Villanova University, which does not have a synchronized skating team. She says she may join an adult team in a

few years, but for now will concentrate on school.

If you don't know what synchronized skating is and don't understand what the excitement is about, imagine the Rockettes on ice—skating in exact formation and executing perfect maneuvers—and you'll have the right picture.

Although the sport has been around for more than 50 years in other parts of the country and is especially popular in Europe, synchronized skating is just starting to take off in this area. Teams range in number from eight to 20 individuals skating at the same time, as one unit, and performing various steps set to music. As with individual and pairs figure skating competitions, the participants are required to cover certain elements in their routines, including a circle, a block (four lines of four), an intersection, a long line, and a pinwheel (a long line with half of the skaters facing one way and half the other).

Affiliated with Robert Morris University and under the umbrella of the U.S. Figure Skating Association, the Blades were formed in 2004 and are composed of six teams, including the Little Team (beginners), the Junior Competitive Team (elementary and middle school), the Competitive Team (middle school and high school), and the Free Spirits (adults). The ages run from 6 to 60-plus.

Marsha Snyder was the coach and choreographer of the teams

until this year, when she stepped into the position of director. Having performed individual skating since the age of 5, Snyder says she first learned about synchronized skating when she saw a brochure for a summer camp at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, one of the top schools for the sport. "I thought I'd try it out one summer because a coach suggested it to me," she explained. "I thought that was a good way to go to the university and see what else I could do with the skating, because I was going to be graduating from high school. So I went to the camp and absolutely loved it."

For four years Snyder skated on the varsity team, which won three national titles, and which went to the World

fore generally travel to Ohio, Michigan, and throughout Pennsylvania to compete. Competitions are designated as qualifying and non-qualifying, and the top five teams from the qualifying competitions go on to the Nationals. But according to Snyder, because the Steel City Blades "are a newer establishment, it's going to take them a little time to build up that credibility. They could possibly go on to more qualifying competitions in years to come, but right now they're just trying to get a little more advanced."

And that is happening. For example, at the Diamond Classic Synchronized Skating Championships in Ohio last March, the Little Blades took first place in their category and the Free



Renee Rosensteel

Championships in Ottawa in 2003 and placed eighth. She came to the Steel City Blades as an assistant coach in 2005, and later took over as head coach.

While Snyder will continue to handle the choreography as director, her two assistants, Grace Fields and Jennie Vicinie, are moving into head coaching roles; and Christine Lippert and Karen Volk are coming in as their assistants. "We're not only getting more skaters, we're also bringing in more coaches, so our program is definitely growing," Snyder commented.

Each team also has a manager, and Smokonich's mother, Paula, serves in that capacity for the Competitive Team. She explained a little more of what takes place in the competitions: "The skaters have to be linked a certain amount of time—either through their arms or shoulders or wrists or elbows. (At times) they can be unlinked, but they have to skate in formation—they have to do blocks or pinwheels, and they have to do footwork in a pattern." She added that all skaters wear identical outfits and wear the same makeup. "They all have to look the same and skate the same."

The skaters are judged on their technical skills and creative performance, with points being deducted for such mistakes as falls, or touching a skate down at the wrong time.

The Blades are part of the East Coast section and there-

Spirits were second in theirs. The Little Blades also finished first at the Golden Blades Competition in Delmont last April.

Emily Smokonich skates on the Competitive Team. She has participated in several competitions and says, "We improved our scores from past years, which was our goal. We made it to the point levels we were hoping for, and for next year, we want to improve."

The synchronized skating calendar runs practically year-round, with some of the activity taking place at Mt. Lebanon Ice Rink. Tryouts are held in April and May. Summer skating, for training and strengthening, starts in August. The competitive season begins in December or January, with nationals held in February and world competition in March. "Our teams are not to that level yet," Snyder says, "but that's one of our goals, to get a team to the national level. Hopefully we can achieve that in the years to come."

There's no doubt that the popularity of the sport and the skill level of the participants is growing. In 2006, synchronized skating was featured as an exhibition sport at the Olympics in Torino, Italy, and everyone involved is hoping to see it become included as a regular event—perhaps as early as 2010 in Vancouver.

By that time, the Steel City Blades will likely have done their part to make synchronized skating much more well known. ❏