

Mississauga

Ice Precise

by Andi Coyle
photos provided by Ice Precise

There might be another skating club that has more fun than the Canadian Mississauga adult and masters teams, but you would have a hard time convincing them of that. That's not to say the Ice Precise crew doesn't take their skating seriously. They are all, in fact, pretty darn serious about showing their best stuff out on the ice. But as with many adult skaters who understand the value of having fun, they have managed to strike a fine balance between work and play.



Ice Precise Masters Team at the 2008 Lloyd Ogilvie Synchronized Skating Competition following another gold medal performance.



Adult team members, Dana Cathcart and Michelle Gulyas, celebrate a gold medal performance.



October 2007, Ice Precise adult enjoys a fun Halloween dress up day!



Skaters taking their final pose during the finale of the 2007 Mississauga Synchronized Skating Spectacular Exhibition.



Adult team performs at the 2007 Dr. Richard Porter Synchronized Skating Classic.



Adult team member, Michelle Gulyas, taking the time to get ready to perform.



Adult team members, Alison Reynolds makes finishing touches to Michelle Gulyas' hair.



Ice Precise adult team at the 2008 Central Regional Synchronized Skating Championships.

"by the skaters, for the skaters"

That "let's-make-all this-hard-work-fun" approach was a bit new to Nita Patel, the young coach who admits that she had to learn a thing or two about coaching adults. As a successful coach of the Mississauga Motion novice and junior teams, Nita had the experience to bring out the best in a team of skaters. What caught her by surprise though had little to do with formations or footwork.

"There is a joy that comes out when they skate," explains Nita. "They almost have 'fun' written into my contract. These are busy women with lots of responsibilities. For them, skating well isn't enough. They also want to enjoy themselves. They come to skating with a different mind-set."

They also come with their own ideas – like having a say about a few things. The unofficial team motto is "by the skaters, for the skaters," and the team members have an active say in team operations and decisions. Music selection and choreography is left to the coach. But Nita also learned that these women like to think for themselves. They create their own warm-up. They organize their own fundraising activities. And, as it turns out, they also create their own schedule!

"One time, I was late for practice with the masters team because I was working with one of the younger teams," laughs Nita. "By the time I arrived, they had made all kinds of decisions about the season, including which competitions we would enter. They told me they would be competing in the Acquitane Cup in France that year. That's the last time I showed up late."

But sometimes the skaters know best. Because they won Acquitane. Not once, but twice. Combine that with the Festival track club's other wins and Ice Precise adults and masters teams have won almost 20 gold medals since 2004. Seems having fun pays off.



Skaters pose for the camera at the 2007 Aquitaine Cup in Bordeaux, France.



Masters skater and 2007 France team member, Laura Maybee, on top of the podium at the 2007 Aquitaine Cup International Synchronized Skating Competition.

Two Teams. . . One Spirit

Ontario-based Ice Precise originated as an adult team 10 years ago. After winning silver at their first competition, the team went on to become a force to be reckoned with. When the sport started changing and speed and quality of skating became increasingly important, some of the skaters who had been on the team for years found it was a little harder to keep up.

"It was a really tough decision but they decided to start a masters team, not so much based on age but for those who were at a different skill level than adult level," says Nita.

"We knew it was a risk and would affect some people who had been there from the beginning. We wanted to create a place for all skaters interested in pursuing synchronized skating. So when we set goals for the new masters team, we put quality at the top of the list and quality skating is what drives both teams."

Other than adhering to the Federation's regulations, the ages of the Mississauga adult and masters teams run the gamut. The adults range from 19 to 39 and the masters skaters are in their 20s up to late 50s. The adult team has twice-weekly one-and-one-quarter hour practices. Masters have a weekly two-hour practice. The adults are eligible to compete at Nationals. The Regional Championships are as high as the masters can go. But other than that . . . "It's hard for me to distinguish between the two teams sometimes because Ice Precise is one organization," says Nita.

One very close-knit organization.

Both teams had the rare opportunity to compete against and cheer for each other in December when they both skated at the Dr. Porter Synchronized Skating Classic in Ann Arbor. Unlike U.S. masters teams which have a three minute program, Canadian masters programs top out at 3:40. Ineligible to compete in their own division, the masters entered in the adult division and skated their Queen medley against their own adults' Michael Jackson program. The adults were up first and after they skated, they set a speed record

for getting changed and clearing out of the locker room so they could be in the stands to cheer on the masters.

"Oh, we definitely cheer for one another," says Donna Sas, who along with Irene Gryniewski, manages the Ice Precise teams. "You wouldn't believe how loud the Mississauga cheering section is." Anyone who was in the arena that day can probably still hear the cheering that came from the Mississauga corner when their teams stepped onto the ice. >>>

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Team spirals: adorned with gold medals, Tricia Stephenson, Laura Maybe, Rhonda Dinicolantonio and Dana Cathcart pose outside of the arena in Bordeaux, France.



Members of the 2007 Ice Precise France team explore caves of a winery in Bordeaux, France.

"They are all kids at heart."



Ice Precise France Team waits for their marks during the Aquitaine Cup Synchronized Skating Competition in France, May, 2007



Team members, having a little "fun" mingling with the Aquitaine Fire Department between performances at the 2007 Aquitaine Cup Synchronized Skating competition in France.



Team members following the rules "no alcohol on skating nights".

One reason for that mutual support, Nita believes, is because the adults know at some point, they too will be on the masters team. Case in point . . . After qualifying for the adult team in October, Donna Sas, one of the original Ice Precise adult team members, made the switch to masters.

"Although I have it in me to still do the 'big tricks' I just find that at 41, the aches, pains and injuries prevail," says Donna. "Family commitments . . . and a job were also getting more demanding, not to mention the work running the teams."

Making the transition has, she says, been a blast. "We've had other skaters make the switch in the past," says Donna. "It's really nice to know you have a team to move to when you hit that point in your skating life."

On-Ice Teamwork . . . Off-Ice Friendships

Despite the hectic schedules that come with being a grown-up — Mississauga's two teams include a pharmacist, nurse, graphic designer, a few physiotherapists, a couple of computer whizzes and 8 teachers who all skate for the adult team — the women (and two men who skate on the masters team) have forged lasting off-ice friendships, due in part to the many bonding activities they do in preparation for their competitions.

"I do a lot of different games and team building activities with them. Sometimes with coaching four teams I forget and they are all "hey, where are our games? They are all kids at heart."

Both teams have similar pre-locker room routines. Nita gathers them in a circle where they have a team chat, talk about what they are feeling and remind them-



Ice Precise France Team on the steps of a spectacular chateau in Bordeaux.



Masters team skaters enjoy their Baguettes on the streets of Paris.

selves of their goal. They listen to the music and walk through the program. Inevitably someone cracks a joke to relieve the tension. Sometimes Nita gives a motivational speech but often turns it over to them to psych themselves up.

What they don't do is spend too long in the locker room. Or watch other teams' routines. "They like to stay focused on their job and not get sidetracked by things they can't control," says Nita.

Once their on-ice job is done that's when Ice Precise cuts loose. "They enjoy each other's company more than any team I've ever met," says Nita.

Each year, Ice Precise has a Secret Santa exchange. They make up themed T-shirts imprinted with a saying or phrase that has some meaning to the team. And before each big competition they make up goody bags for one another.

"Every skater buys something and hands it over to someone who assembles the bags," says Donna. "It might be a treat or tissues or noisemaker or something. Then we all open the bags at a team meeting before our competition. Some people get very creative about it. Like one skater who asked everyone what their favorite song was in advance and then she burned a CD for each person containing the entire team's favorites."

Team friendships extend off-season and off-ice. Weddings . . . babies . . . funerals . . . they are there for one another. They car pool, babysit for one another, and vent about their jobs. They've had martini parties. They've even gone on ski trips together which Nita admits made her nervous but "they came back in one piece."

Mutual Admiration Society

While the combination of hard work and fun are at the root of Ice Precise's philosophy, there is another factor that undoubtedly contributes to the teams' successes. The coach and teams clearly adore one another.

"Nita is an outstanding coach," gushes Donna. "We talk to [her] all the time and work very well together."

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On Nita's end, she is enthralled with her skaters. "I am constantly amazed that these skaters who are lawyers, teachers, analysts, graphic designers, managers, physiotherapists, parents, students, flight attendants, and generally hard working and all around busy individuals would consider synchronized skating such an important part of their lives," says Nita. "The fact that year after year they devote a considerable portion of their precious time each week in order to pursue a common goal is a compliment. Their dedication to teamwork, enthusiasm for the sport, and long lasting friendship make me feel honored and proud to be their coach!"



2007-2008 Ice
Precise Masters team
encouraging each other in
a team huddle.