

Synchronized Skating in Canada: Historical and Ethnographic Perspectives¹

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Abstract: Figure skating is an interdisciplinary activity, going beyond athletics and involving choreography, music, creativity, spectacle and interpretation. This ethnographic study focuses on a transnational figure skating genre called synchronized skating, performed mainly by girls and young women on teams consisting of ten to twenty skaters. Drawing on historical and ethnographic perspectives, the author examines local and national practices with an emphasis on how synchronized skating embodies musical, social and political synergies.

For many people born in Canada, skating is part of childhood. Whether done in a rural or urban setting, outdoors or indoors, skating is often a family activity. The Canadian cities of Ottawa and Winnipeg boast the longest outdoor skating rinks in the world. In February 2006 the “Great Skate,” a fund-raising event for underprivileged children, took place across Canada in 230 locations, including ponds, rivers and skating rinks. More than seventy thousand participants skated to raise money to support children whose families could not afford recreational activities. Canada has achieved international figure skating recognition, producing Kurt Browning, four-time Men’s World Champion, and Olympic Gold medallists Jamie Salé, David Pelletier, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, among others.

Figure skating is interdisciplinary and “falls between the cracks” of scholarly research. It goes beyond athletics because it involves music, choreography, creativity, spectacle and interpretation. Some recent ethnographic studies have focussed on the “athletics versus aesthetics” debate that separates “pure sports” from sports that have a performing arts component (see Grindstaff and West 2006, and Picart 2006). Figure skating, gymnastics and dancesport (competitive international ballroom dance) are interdisci-

plinary because they combine athletics and aesthetics; however, interdisciplinary sports have often been trivialized by the sports establishment in North America (Grindstaff and West 2006:501). My goal in this study is to highlight some connections between dance and figure skating and to discuss an unpublicized genre, which many Canadians do not know exists, called synchronized skating, which blends team athletics with aesthetics. To my knowledge, this is the first ethnographic study of the genre. Canada currently has more than six thousand skaters on approximately four hundred registered synchronized skating teams, 162 of them in the province of Ontario (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-07: 26). The best teams are eligible to attend the National and World Synchronized Skating Championships. In 2009, more than one thousand skaters on seventy teams from across Canada competed for four days at the National Synchronized Championships held in Oshawa, Ontario, yet the event received no mainstream publicity. At the 2009 International Skating Union (ISU) World Championships held in Zagreb, the Canadian champions, Nexxice, won the gold medal, but no mainstream Canadian media covered the event or reported the results. In contrast, games of the National Hockey League and amateur hockey championships receive regular national media attention in Canada on the front pages of newspapers and during the news portions of radio or television broadcasts.

The synchronized skating genre has spilled across regional and national boundaries and become transnational, yet its athletes do not receive the media attention and public appreciation that they deserve. This study addresses the lacuna of research on this genre, and provides a voice for some young women who are synchronized skaters in the Toronto area. The paper is divided into three main sections: (1) a brief history of international figure skating competitions, Skate Canada and the Leaside (Toronto) Figure Skating Club; (2) skating choreography and music; (3) ethnographic research based on the experiences of sixteen interviewees, with a preliminary examination of related issues such as publicity, gender and judging. As I will demonstrate, participants in this artistic sport comprise what Mark Slobin has described as an “affinity group,” members of which are connected by their attraction to the genre and may have little in common in terms of race, ethnicity, class, age or other factors” (Slobin 1993:69). Synchronized skating teams span a range of ages, from young children to seniors, and comprise both female and male skaters, although young women predominate in Canada and the United States.

A Brief History of International Figure Skating Competitions

The first international figure skating championship was held in Vienna in 1882 (International Skating Union Website 2005). In 1892, six countries – Austria, Germany, Britain, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden – formed the International Eislauf Vereinigung (IEV), now the International Skating Union (ISU), to standardize distances for international speed skating competitions and create potential rules for figure skating. In 1894, Canada joined fifteen delegates from Europe to discuss rules for international skating competitions (Smith 1999:17).

In 1902, Madge Syers of Britain became the first female skater to enter the international figure skating championship. At that time, no separate category existed for women, nor was there a specific rule preventing women from entering. Following her controversial appearance and second place finish, women were banned from the competition, ostensibly because their long skirts prevented the judges from seeing their skates (Ibid.:21). Just four years later, however, the first women's world championship took place and in 1908 figure skating became the first winter Olympic sport. Europeans dominated figure skating championships prior to World War II; after the war, North American skaters gained some prominence. The Soviets, who did not enter World or Olympic competitions from 1914 to 1959, re-entered the World Figure Skating Championships in 1960 and won numerous World and Olympic titles. In the past ten years, skaters from China, Japan and Korea have been extremely successful internationally. The popularity of figure skating is reflected in the fact that sixty countries are currently members of the International Skating Union (International Skating Union Website 2006).

Ice dance entered the Olympics in 1976; since that time, Olympic figure skating competitions have focussed on four categories: men's and women's singles, which rely extensively on jumps and spins; pairs, which use side by side jumps and spins as well as overhead lifts and throws; and ice dance, which uses dance holds, dance music and dance genres such as the tango and waltz. Synchronized skating, a relatively new skating genre, began in the United States in 1956, when a coach of the Ann Arbor Figure Skating Club decided to choreograph a group routine for the annual ice show. The routine was such a success that the group, the Hockettes, named in reference to the famous Rockettes synchronized dance troupe, was invited to perform at other events; from there, precision skating, as it was originally known, spread from the northern United States into Canada (MacLeod 2007:8).

Canada held the first National Championship for synchronized skating in 1983, followed by the first American Championship in 1984. Canadians

helped the Europeans organize their first Championship in 1989 (Skate Canada Website 2009). From 1996 to 1999, international synchronized skating championships called the World Challenge Cup were held without ISU sponsorship; however, in 2000 the ISU sponsored the first World Synchronized Skating Championship in Minneapolis, near the birthplace of synchronized skating. Subsequent World Synchronized Skating Championships have been held in Helsinki (2001), Rouen (2002), Ottawa (2003), Zagreb (2004), Goteburg (2005), Prague (2006), London, Ontario (2007), Budapest (2008) and Zagreb (2009). Teams generally consist of between ten and twenty skaters, with sixteen required for World competitions. The 2009 World Championship, won by the Canadian team, Nexxice, included twenty-three teams from sixteen countries on four continents - Finland, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Croatia, Russia, Japan, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Figure skating is part of Canada's national identity as promoted by Sport Canada, Skate Canada and the media. In Canada, television coverage of national and international solo, pair and ice dance events, particularly the World Championships and Olympics, receives some of the highest viewer numbers in the country. In 2002, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) recorded two million viewers for Olympic figure skating events (Keay, Interview 2006).² Peak television ratings occurred for the 2010 Olympics, where the broadcast consortium in Canada averaged more than five million viewers for events between February 15 and 21 shown in prime time, including figure skating (BBM 2010). However, despite the potential audiences, mainstream national media coverage has never been provided for synchronized skating in Canada.

Skate Canada

Within Canada, a formal structure of tests and competitions has been standardized by Skate Canada, which is partly funded by the federal government through Sport Canada/Canadian Heritage, private corporations such as the Bank of Montreal, and fees paid by individual skaters and skating clubs. In 2006-2007, Skate Canada had more than 180,000 registered individual members including 1,600 officials (accountants, judges and referees), more than four thousand coaches, 167,000 skaters and 1,327 clubs (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-2007:41). With annual net revenue of approximately thirteen million dollars, Skate Canada has only fifty paid employees; all officials are volunteers (Skate Canada 2004). Not all Canadian figure skat-

ing clubs register with Skate Canada; independent clubs offer their own programs and may have synchronized teams; however, Skate Canada is the official organization for competitive and international figure skating events.

The roots of Skate Canada lie in the Amateur Skating Association of Canada, formed in 1887 for speed and figure skating. By 1914, a separate figure skating organization had been created and the first official Canadian Figure Skating Championship was held (Skate Canada 2006). Renamed the Canadian Figure Skating Association in 1939, it joined the ISU in 1947 and changed its name to Skate Canada in 2000. The following excerpt from Skate Canada's website reflects its mandate:

Skate Canada...is the largest figure skating association in the world. With skating programs for athletes of all ages...Skate Canada is an association dedicated to providing every Canadian the opportunity to experience the passion, spirit and triumph of skating. Primarily self-supporting, Skate Canada is able to provide direct athlete funding, which reaches approximately 1 in 7 competitive athletes. (Skate Canada Website 2006)

Skate Canada currently offers eight programs in two streams. Skaters usually begin with a learn-to-skate program called CanSkate. If skaters persevere, they separate into two streams – one for an elite group of skaters who have the potential to compete internationally, called CompetitiveSkate, and one for other talented skaters who want to advance but who are not at the elite level, called StarSkate. Programs also exist for synchronized skaters, adult skaters and university skaters who hold their own competitions sanctioned by Skate Canada. Approximately eighty per cent of Skate Canada's members (ca. 131,000 skaters) are in the learn- to-skate program or are recreational skaters; eighteen percent of members (ca. 29,800 skaters) are in StarSkate; and 1.5% (ca. 2,800 skaters) are in the Competitive stream (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-2007:34). For the synchronized skating program, Skate Canada merged more than six thousand skaters from two streams into one stream in 2009. Now consisting of thirteen different levels, from Beginner I to Adult III, each level is based on age restrictions and skill development (Skate Canada Website 2010). Five of the thirteen levels participate at the National Synchronized Skating Championships and the top teams from the Junior and Senior levels represent Canada internationally and at World Championships.

Leaside Skating Club

The city of Toronto has 162 public indoor and outdoor skating rinks as well as numerous private skating rinks. One of Toronto's public skating rinks is in the neighbourhood of Leaside. In 1951, this community opened an indoor arena to accommodate both hockey and figure skating, and in 1952, the Leaside Hockey Association and the Leaside Skating Club were formed, the latter becoming a member of the Canadian Figure Skating Association that same year.

The Leaside Skating Club is non-profit and, with 400 skaters, has a larger membership than the Skate Canada national average of 126 skaters per club (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-07:40). Attracting skaters from both Leaside and neighbouring areas of Toronto, the club is run by a part-time administrator and a volunteer Board of Directors, primarily parents. Sixteen professional coaches provide group and private lessons, while some of the more advanced skaters help the younger skaters in group lessons. The annual budget is approximately \$200,000, including ice rental fees of approximately \$80,000.

The Leaside Skating Club runs the nation-wide program created by Skate Canada, beginning with the learn-to-skate program or CanSkate, then the StarSkate program, which is divided into multiple levels based on age and skills.³ Most skating clubs have more skaters in the lower levels than they do at the higher levels, since it takes persistence, skill and money to advance. Leaside is typical in this regard, with more than two hundred skaters in the CanSkate program, while the test levels of Bronze, Silver and Gold have approximately forty, twenty and fifteen skaters each. For the CanSkate program, skaters may wear either hockey or figure skates; at the higher levels, figure skates and private lessons are imperative. If a Leaside skater has the potential to compete at the elite level, he or she relocates to another skating club which offers the competitive stream.

The first Leaside Skating Club synchronized skating team was formed in 1975, eight years before the first Canadian National Championships. By 1990 the Club had three teams; in 2006 a fourth team was added for skaters eleven years of age and under; in 2007 a fifth team was created. The teams consist of eight to twenty skaters, with extra skaters acting as alternates in case of injury. Each team has age and test requirements and all Leaside synchronized skaters are required by their coaches to continue with their individual skating. Since 2007, the four older teams (most of these skaters are between the ages of twelve and eighteen) compete under the name "Synergy," while the youngest skaters (under eleven years of age) perform as "Minergy." Many skaters come to Leaside from other skating clubs to try out each spring for the teams.

The teams hold a yearly pep rally in December before competitions begin to showcase their routines in front of family, friends and interested spectators.

Skating Choreography

Advanced skaters must cover extremely large ice surfaces and move with great speed, whether performing solo, in pairs or on a team. Synchronized skating routines often use genres and music from ice dance, which in turn has borrowed genres and music from ballroom and Latin dance such as tango, samba, waltz and quickstep. In addition to borrowing dance genres and music, ice dancers use dance holds in closed position (partners face each other in close proximity), promenade position (partners turn to each other but face down the line of dance), open and shadow positions. Synchronized skaters often separate into duos that use these positions during a routine. Ice dance and synchronized skating also share these dance-related elements:

1. Body Position – skaters usually have an erect torso and head, extended arms and hands, and point their toes while wearing skates;



Figure 1. Leaside Junior Team – Wheel. “Streets of Paris” program, 2007. (Photo by Tim Gokcen. Used with permission)

2. Holds – these include shoulder, elbow, hand and wrist holds (hand and wrist holds are unstable and therefore more difficult), basketweave, teapot and pair holds;
3. Synchronization – skaters must be synchronized with the music and with each other; heads, arms, shoulders and legs must be aligned;
4. Formations (see Figures 1 and 2) – these consist of the circle, line (single or parallel), wheel (single or parallel lines with two to six spokes), block (three or more lines travelling down the ice; the lines may be straight, diagonal, circular, curved or complex), and intersection (two or more intersecting lines);
5. Elements – the spiral (based on the arabesque in ballet), spin (extremely difficult to synchronize), twizzle (travelling turn on one foot), spread eagle (based on second position plié in ballet), Ina Bauer (based on fourth position plié), lifts, jumps and lunges.

The transitions between required elements often distinguish a superior team from its competitors. A good transition follows the mood and phrasing of the music and does not feel separate from the required elements. Other aspects of a superior program include speed and flow across the ice,



Figure 2. Leaside Junior Team – Block. “Streets of Paris” program 2007 (Photo by Tim Gokcen. Used with permission)

quality of skating edges, maintenance of holds and change of holds. The ISU regulations for competitive programs are extremely detailed. For example, a Senior Well Balanced Program must contain eleven elements including a block where “the step sequence must cover a minimum of 2/3 of the length of the ice in a straight or diagonal pattern or comparable length using other patterns”; a circle where “the step sequence must cover 2/3 (240 degrees) of the circle”; and a line where “the step sequence must cover half the length of the ice in a straight or diagonal pattern” (International Skating Union Website 2006).

Under the revised judging system initiated in 2005, two scores are awarded to competitive synchronized teams: the first score is the Technical score, where each element is assigned a base value, then is graded on its execution. A fall now receives an automatic deduction, which did not occur under the old rules. The second score is the Program Component Score, which has five areas:

1. Skating skills – balance, flow, glide, deep edges, power, one foot skating.
2. Transitions – difficulty, quality, intricacy.
3. Performance – translating the intent of the music and choreography.
4. Choreography – purpose, proportions, unity, use of space, phrasing and form; movements structured to match the phrase of the music.
5. Interpretation of the music – expression of music style, character and rhythm; reflection of the nuances of the music (International Skating Union Website 2006).

Coaches frequently change the choreography of a routine from week to week; sometimes a program looks completely different at the end of a season from the way it looked earlier in the same season, as coaches experiment with different combinations to achieve the maximum impact. Coaches also study dance performances, including ballet, ballroom, Latin and folk dance. All skating teams rehearse their routines off-ice, where they appear to be dance ensembles, with erect posture, extended arms, pointed toes, geometric formations, jumps and lifts.

Music

One of the challenges facing synchronized skating coaches is the selection of music. Each year, new programs must be created with new music, a new theme, new choreography and new skating attire. Coaches need to select music that is motivating for their skaters and that engages the judges and audience. The ISU requires at least one tempo change in the free program. Some coaches attempt too many tempo and music changes, resulting in a lack of continuity which may be exacerbated by poor music editing. Music recognition motivates many coaches, so film themes are a popular choice; however, sometimes several teams skate to the same film music, indicating a lack of originality. Some teams post their music on their websites in hopes of discouraging others from choosing the same music. All music information with titles, composers and timing must be submitted in advance to Skate Canada for Regional and National competitions.

Based on my examination of music from 2004 to 2009 at regional, national and international competitions, the main music categories are:

1. Film music – these themes, both musical and dramatic, are easily recognizable – excerpts have included *Zorro*, *Batman*, *Van Helsing*, *Schindler's List*, *Beetle Juice*, *Footloose*, *Austin Powers*, *Kill Bill*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*
2. Popular and rock music from various eras – e.g., *Blue Moon*, *I Will Survive*, *Thriller*, *Born to be Wild*
3. Dance music – may be Latin, ballroom, ballet or other dance pieces, including flamenco, tango, mambo, samba, waltz, can-can and swing
4. Musicals – e.g., *Chicago*, *Cats*, *West Side Story*
5. Famous classical pieces – e.g., excerpts from Rachmaninoff's piano concertos, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*
6. Recently composed neo-classical or neo-romantic pieces
7. Television themes – e.g., *Peter Gunn*, *The Simpsons*
8. Techno or jazz versions of existing pieces, including classical,

dance and popular repertoire; e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* with a techno beat; Sarah Brightman's version of Albinoni's *Adagio*; pieces by the group Bond, which adds techno or jazz elements to classical works

9. World music - examples have included East Asian, Bollywood, Middle Eastern, African, and Celtic traditions

10. Excerpts from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* or Neo-Orff pieces - these works have a fast, driving ostinato rhythm underneath a chanting choir; - e.g., music from Cirque du Soleil's production of *Ka*.

Most synchronized skating music uses strong rhythms, fast tempos and loud dynamics. From my perspective, the music often seems to be chosen to add excitement to somewhat ordinary choreography and skating. Slow tempos at the opening of a program are rare on account of the difficulty of synchronizing the footwork; however, Canadian champions Nexxice are known for their ability to synchronize to quiet, slow music even at the beginning of a program. The team captain is usually responsible for setting the skating tempo, but high level skaters instinctively know the skating speed based on hours of rehearsal to the music both on and off the ice.

The interviewees made the following comments about synchronized skating music: "movie music is often very good...but I would stay away from recent films as many teams end up doing the same thing"; "the right music can make or break a program"; "music is everything...of the utmost importance"; and "some coaches choose music that really brings out the skating, while other coaches choose techno remixes or overdone music." Skating judge Marion Dyke, who is also the parent of a synchronized skater, commented:

Music needs to be perfectly chosen and edited...coaches really try hard to pick good music to please their skaters and audience...Most coaches are researching music all the time... Some coaches go to a first rate music editor to prepare their music.
(Interview 2006)

Regarding the selection of music, Meredith Gilbert, a Leaside coach, said she may hear a piece of music first or she may have an idea first. She "always looks for something skaters can count to easily" and "tries to pick what they can relate to" (Interview 2006). She also analyzes what her team does well in

order to choreograph appropriately, while including all the required elements. An arrangement of Gershwin's piano and orchestra themes won her team of 13-15 year olds second prize at the 2004 Canadian Nationals. After selecting her music, she gives it to a composer/arranger for correct timings, transitions and enhancement; for example, creating a cadence where the original did not end at that point. She then pays an editor who has calibrated the vibrations inside various skating arenas. Sound may bounce off the arena walls, but she said that her editor can calibrate the music to prevent distortion in particular arenas and keep the tempo identical to the rehearsal tempo in the team's home arena. Meredith believes that skating music in general is better than it used to be; for a while, the programs were too theatrical, which detracted from the athleticism, but with rule changes in 2000 and more restrictions, she thinks that coaches now choose better music (Interview 2006).

Ethnographic Research

The ethnographic research for this paper took place primarily from 2004-2007 and included interviews with eight skaters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four who have been skating for more than ten years, five parents who have been active in synchronized skating, and three coaches. All of the skaters have skated on more than one team and two of the interviewees (one skater and one parent) are also skating judges. At the time of the interviews, two of the skaters were in high school, four in university and two were recent university graduates.⁴ The research included observation of Skate Canada tests as well as numerous regional, national and international competitions. My own skating experiences began at age five in Alberta, where I skated on outdoor and indoor rinks in Lethbridge and Grande Prairie until I left for university. As a child, I took lessons at the local skating club; as a teenager, skating became a recreational and social activity, where I met my friends and caught up on the news while skating to music. From 1992-2005, I was involved with the Leaside Skating Club as the parent of a skater who progressed through the StarSkate program primarily in ice dance and who skated on three Ontario synchronized skating teams and an Australian team. I also served on the Board of Directors of the Leaside Skating Club for six years. My research and participation in dancesport have helped to inform my understanding of ice dance and synchronized skating.

Synchronized skating is an art and a sport performed in Canada mainly by girls and young women and requires technical ability, physical strength, endurance, rhythm, poise and synchronicity. I asked the interviewees about

their experiences as solo and synchronized skaters, the music, the benefits and drawbacks of synchronized skating, and issues such as gender, judging and image. One skater described synchronized skating as “the corrupt and exciting world of skating.” When asked to describe synchronized skating to people who had never seen it, one skater summarized the sport:

Synchronized skating is a lesser known figure skating discipline where up to twenty skaters take the ice at a time; the athletes skate in unison through different patterns and geometric shapes incorporating traditional skating elements in an entirely unique way.

All of the skaters I interviewed began with group lessons as children; all were enrolled by their parents in a learn-to-skate program. As the skaters progressed through the ranks, they saw synchronized skating teams at their skating clubs and wanted to join: “I saw one of the older teams at the Club and loved what they were doing. The younger team was looking for skaters... so a bunch of us all joined the same year.” There are no synchronized skating tests; instead, teams perform at skating shows or competitions, which may be local, regional, national or international. Most of the skaters I interviewed felt that ice dance related best to synchronized skating, although one skater said that synchronized skating is unique:

Ice dance is definitely the most important for synchronized skating. Some single skaters do not have a good sense of rhythm... rhythm is very important in synchronized skating.

In my mind synchronized skating is its own discipline, different and separate from all other disciplines. If I had to explain it to someone in terms of other skating disciplines, I'd say that it incorporates elements of singles, pairs and dance, but in a totally unique way.

Related Training and Team Commitment

In interviews with the eight synchronized skaters, we discussed their related experiences and training, and I asked them to share their views about the main issues and challenges in synchronized skating. Five of the eight skaters had taken dance or music lessons, which they credited with helping their synchro-

nized skating. One skater began with dance lessons, but switched to skating at age eleven. By age twelve, she had joined the local synchronized skating team after watching them practice. Another skater took both piano and dance lessons, including ballet, jazz and hip-hop. She said that these lessons “absolutely” helped her skating because they taught her “a sense of rhythm, musicality, posture and gracefulness.” She added that running on the cross-country school team helped to increase her endurance and aerobic stamina. Two skaters said that participation in soccer and basketball helped with endurance and cardiovascular fitness. The skaters agreed that single skaters do not necessarily make the best synchronized skaters because they are not used to working with a partner and because solo skating has more emphasis on jumps and spins than synchronized skating.

Drawing on the interviews, it became clear that the main challenges confronting synchronized skaters include time management, team-building, self-esteem, publicity, gender and judging issues. All of the skaters cited time management as critical. Four of the skaters had competed internationally on synchronized teams and spoke of rigorous practice schedules both on and off the ice. Two of these skaters advanced from their local teams to Nexxice, the 2007-2010 Canadian Champions and 2009 World Champions, based in Kitchener-Waterloo-Burlington, Ontario.

I was with the Leaside Festival teams for nine years. I decided to switch to a competitive team because I wanted more of a challenge and more intensity. While I liked the social aspect of the Leaside team because I was skating with girls I had grown up with, girls who lived around the corner, girls from my school and girls I had skated with all my life, I wanted something more. My skating ability went beyond that of the team, and after nine years at Leaside, I wanted to take a risk and try something completely new.

All of the skaters continued with their individual skating as well as synchronized skating until they reached university. They committed eight to sixteen hours per week towards skating, off-ice practices and commuting. Seven of the eight skaters had completed or were working on their StarSkate Gold level tests, mainly in ice dance. Of the four skaters who competed internationally, one was able to maintain her competitive skating during four full years of university, while three skaters moved to less demanding teams during university. Two skaters returned to synchronized skating after graduating from university; both are nurses and one is also a skating judge.

Skaters routinely did homework or attended skating practices on Friday and Saturday nights, times when their peers would be out socializing. Skating practices were often held weekdays at 6:00 a.m.; after rising at 5:00 a.m. and skating for an hour, skaters returned from practice, showered and got ready for school. Regarding time management, skaters said:

I did homework on the bus while commuting for an hour and a half to skating practices; I also stayed up late doing homework and gave up other social events. I tried to be really organized and finish my homework at school – at lunch or between classes.

I chose to take a reduced course load for my final year of high school in order to manage both skating and school and still be able to do them well. Even with the extra time, I had to use many time management strategies to get everything done. Every Sunday night I would sit down and decide what I had to accomplish that week, and when I would do it. I would write this down in a day-timer and refer back to it over the course of the week to keep track of my progress. I rarely watched TV and would often have to stay up very late at night to get things done.

For skaters and coaches alike, a big challenge is that team membership changes from year to year as skaters graduate to older teams, switch teams or leave, often for university. Teams which hope to compete internationally must create two programs each year – a short program (maximum two minutes and fifty seconds) and a free program (maximum four minutes and thirty seconds). All other teams skate one program of three minutes and thirty seconds on two different days. Judges and audiences remember teams' previous routines, so coaches must be careful to have variety.

In my interviews, one theme that emerged was the importance of the sense of team atmosphere: "It's fun being with like-minded people working towards a common goal and it's not as lonely as singles skating"; "It's not just for yourself, but a team effort"; and "I enjoy the team aspect and working for one goal... I've made so many friends and I like the social aspect." Team bonding is extremely important and because most of the Canadian teams are all-female, the concept of female solidarity also emerges. Coaches use team-building strategies such as team dinners and excursions, "secret buddies," team cheers and good luck rituals (see Crocker 2007). At competitions and performances, team cheers are important: family and friends help create cheers using the letters of the team name (e.g., Nexxice) or the team loca-

tion (e.g., Leaside) and enthusiastically shout it when the team steps onto the ice for the warm-up prior to the program. Attire also helps create team identity. In addition to unified skating costumes during performances, each team has off-ice and practice attire which help to reinforce team identity. Often the team name is on the back of the off-ice jackets. Colourful scarves help create identity, especially when skaters are in public spaces. At competitions, team members usually sit together and cheer for their favourite teams in other categories.

A combination of good coaching, good managers and good attitudes is necessary to create a successful team. Teams may hire specialists to help skaters with stress, motivation, performance and diet. Potential problems include the lack of effort on the part of some team-mates, or disagreements between coaches and skaters, coaches and managers, or skaters and managers, the latter usually being parent volunteers. Sometimes parents or Board members (most of whom are parents) become overly involved and create problems. Because teams have up to twenty skaters plus alternates, the potential for conflict is high.



Figure 3. Nexxice – Lift. “Carmina Burana” program, 2009 (Photo by Jim Coveart. Used with permission)

Common Skater Profiles and Image Issues

Euro-Canadian females are the mainstay of Skate Canada.⁵ Female skaters outnumber males at virtually every level and ninety per cent of Skate Canada coaches are female (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-2007:39). Some Canadian synchronized skating teams have male skaters; at the 2010 Canadian championships, two of the competitive teams each had two male skaters (Gold Ice Junior and Phoenix, both from Ontario). Prior to 2005, Russia sent teams with up to ten men to the World Championships. At the 2007 World Championships, the Russian, Japanese and several European teams had male skaters. Because skaters must perform overhead lifts at the Senior level, three or four young women, on an all-female team, lift one of their teammates.

The ISU recently ruled that no more than four men can skate on a team at the World Championships, ostensibly to prevent teams with more men from having an advantage in lifts. However, one of my interviewees said she believes the ISU plans to ban men completely because of their fear that synchronized skating will never become an Olympic event if teams are mixed. A ban on male skaters would seal the female orientation of synchronized skating. For male figure skaters, the issue of athletics versus aesthetics becomes intensified. Sport purists value athletic elements such as jumps, but often devalue the artistic elements such as interpretation of the music and transitions between elements. Male skaters have been criticized for too much emphasis on artistic aspects (see DiManno 2010a and b): “The perception by many in the sport establishment is that aesthetic elements are “naturally” intertwined with femininity and that they are the purview of women and gay men (Grindstaff and West 2006:515).”

In the Toronto area, a group of male skaters founded a mock synchro team in 1995, parodying synchronized skating much like the all-male ballet troupe *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo* parody ballet. Called *The Ice Men*, the all-male team performs at skating shows and raises money for charity. Despite their pratfalls on ice and ballet tutus, all of the young men are excellent skaters and many often act as paid partners during ice dance tests because there are more females than males in ice dance. Several of the skaters I interviewed have been partnered by *The Ice Men*, and one commented: “I don’t like that they’re teasing synchro, even though two of my dance partners are on *The Ice Men*.” However, another skater thought it would be wonderful to have them compete at Nationals or represent Canada at international competitions.

In relation to gender bias, figure skating is considered by many to be a female sport. A common belief in North America is that hockey is a violent sport, physically demanding and best suited for males, while figure skating

is deemed a “girly” sport. All of the interviewees disagreed with this cliché because many synchronized skating programs emphasize strength and power rather than elegance and grace. Program themes have included martial arts, Celtic warriors and films such as *Kill Bill* and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. Anyone who has watched or participated in synchronized skating knows how physically demanding it is: “Synchronized skating is not fluff, it’s real hard skating.”⁶

Related to the misconstrued notion of femininity in synchronized skating is the well-documented institutional pressure in the skating world to be thin and petite (Davis 2007:250). However, on a synchronized team, the skaters often vary in both height and weight. Skating judge Marion Dyke noted:

Synchro lends itself to stronger body types, not waifs... You must have a strong upper body because the force/pull on the shoulders is enormous... You can’t keep your place in line if you’re weak... Also, you have to be a better skater to do well if you’re tall. (Interview 2006)

Meredith Gilbert, one of the Leaside skating coaches, is 5’10” tall. She said she could never have done singles or pairs competitively because of her height; however, she skated with many other tall girls on synchronized teams and felt very comfortable (Interview 2006). Most coaches accept skaters who meet their skating requirements without being concerned about body type; however, coaches of the elite competitive teams may look for specific body types in order to help achieve a unified appearance.

Although synchronized skating is virtually unknown to the general public, recent mainstream television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *America’s Best Dance Crew* feature synchronized dancing. Music videos also utilize young women dancing in synchronized groups and I asked the skaters what they thought of the images of young women in music videos:

There’s a lot of sexuality... The body images and portrayals are not healthy... Some of the young performers are too old for their age. Their look is being promoted... not necessarily their talent.

I don’t like music videos – they’re not appropriate... The images of young women are awful... yet a lot of young girls look up to them.

I’m tired of seeing scantily clad girls shaking their booty – it’s so unimaginative.

The images of young women in pop videos are hugely unrealistic...The real shame is that young girls idolize these images and go to great lengths to look like the pictures they see on the TV. As a result they also begin to develop poor self-esteem because they don't feel they measure up to what's on the television. I also feel that because this perception of women has become the "norm" in music videos, it's difficult for producers to break from these stereotypes and know that they will still have a successful video. Many would agree that the music industry is all about dollars and cents and sex sells.

All of the skaters agreed that synchronized skating has helped their self-esteem or self-confidence. One skater said that synchronized skating is a "great way for young women to work with others, work under pressure, express themselves and develop self-confidence on and off the ice." Leaside coach Meredith Gilbert, who works with young teenagers, said:

This is a delicate time in their lives...The benefits of synchronized skating include athleticism and physical fitness, self-esteem, confidence and a positive learning environment. (Interview 2006).

A high school student summarized:

Synchronized skating has given me the opportunity to work with the hardest working and most phenomenal women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. In working with them, they have become a huge inspiration to me. These are people who don't settle for "it can't be done"...That is the kind of person I want to be. Whenever things get tough, I just think back to these girls and the challenges they've faced to realize that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that I will get through it.

Publicity and Recognition of Synchronized Skating

The interviewees were unanimous that synchronized skating does not receive enough publicity and that other team activities receive far more media coverage and have easier access to proper rehearsal space and resources.⁷ Their comments included:

Cheerleading in the US gets national TV; so does dance. Nobody knows about synchronized skating.

There are entire channels devoted to hockey, and during the winter, singles skating competitions are replayed multiple times.

Hardly any of my friends knew what synchronized skating was until I told them. I wish it was on television so I could watch it like any other sport. I have never heard it mentioned on the radio.

Olympic figure skating is one of the most-watched TV events in Canada, yet there is no coverage of synchronized skating. Why is synchronized swimming in the Olympics, but not synchronized skating?

Synchronized skating exists in a “pink ghetto” in Canada because it is performed mainly by girls and young women and there is virtually no mainstream publicity about it. Canadian sport researchers have shown that women’s athletics receive less funding and less media coverage than men’s athletics (see Crocker 2007). The skaters and parents I interviewed believe that much of the blame lies with Skate Canada. When I looked at the website “Synchroboards.com” in the summer of 2006, more than fifteen pages of entries concerned Skate Canada’s lack of support. One skater said that Skate Canada treats synchronized skaters as if they are people “who can’t skate.” Even Skate Canada’s membership statistics have historically underestimated the number of synchronized skaters since skating clubs are not required to submit separate numbers for skaters who participate in both synchronized and other figure skating genres. An involved parent commented that Skate Canada’s treatment of synchronized skating made her angry. She questioned why all other skating genres receive national media coverage, but not synchronized skating. She noted that in many European countries, particularly Finland and Sweden, which have produced many medallists at the World Championships, synchronized skating is supported by both the national media and government. Ironically, attendance at internationally-held synchronized skating competitions has been lower than Canadian-held National and World competitions. For example, only four hundred spectators attended the 2001 World Synchronized Championships in Helsinki (Interview 2006), whereas nine thousand people sold out the 2007 World Championships in London, Ontario.

Despite the potential audience for synchronized skating, Skate Canada

persists in holding Canadian National Synchronized championships in out-of-the-way venues that lack a major airport so that teams and parents coming from across the country must spend extra time on buses after travelling for several hours by plane. In 2004, the city of Brandon, Manitoba did not have enough hotel rooms to accommodate more than a thousand skaters and many had to be bussed from Winnipeg, two hours away, then bussed back each evening. The 2007 and 2008 championships were also held in locations that lacked a major airport and enough hotel space (Chicoutimi, Quebec, and Chilliwack, British Columbia). All expenses for the teams' travel, accommodation, attire and coaching are born by the skaters and their parents.

Registered skaters in Canada pay a fee to Skate Canada, but fees appear to support elite Olympic soloists and duos rather than grass roots clubs and skaters. The Leaside Skating Club, one of more than a thousand skating clubs registered with Skate Canada, sends approximately six thousand dollars per year in membership fees to Skate Canada; in addition, skaters pay separate test fees to Skate Canada for each test. My interviewees said that they receive few benefits from their fees and that Skate Canada is out of touch with its grass roots skaters.

Judging

All of the interviewees agreed that judging at figure skating events has often been controversial. When researchers scrutinized judging at Olympic skating events from 1968 to 1988, they discovered that judges awarded inflated scores to skaters from their own countries (McGarry 2003:129). Probably the best-known judging scandal occurred at the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002 in the Pairs category, when Canadian skaters Jamie Salé and David Pelletier did not receive the gold medal after flawless performances. American media and public outcry was so great, with a French judge initially admitting to being pressured to vote for the Russian team, that eventually the President of the ISU was forced by the President of the Olympics to award two gold medals. Since then, the entire skating judging system has been revised. However, the original judges involved in the scandal have been reinstated, while the whistleblowers have been banned from the ISU. Under the new regulations instituted in 2005, judges' scores are anonymous, which the ISU justifies by saying that this new rule will reduce pressure on judges because no one will know for whom they voted.

Judging issues do not arise only at the international level – problems exist at virtually every level, from local arenas where skaters are tested by one

judge to national competitions with multiple judges. The skating world, like the dance and sports worlds, is prey to egotism and biases. Because the Program Component Score involves some subjectivity – for example, “translating the intent of the music and choreography” and “interpretation of the music” – there will always be some variations in judging. However, it appears that under the revised rules, biases are less likely to have a strong impact on results.

In test situations where there is only one judge, repeated negative judging can have a serious effect on a young skater’s morale and seem particularly cruel in the StarSkate stream. Skaters must re-try a failed test before they are allowed to advance, yet on account of a shortage of judges, skaters often have the same judge on each retry. No official appeal process exists, nor does Skate Canada keep track of individual judges’ pass/fail rates. The number of tests has declined drastically from the 1990s, from a high of 182,005 tests in 1997-1998 to a low of 91,716 in 2004-2005 (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-2007: 36). Skate Canada is desperate for judges, expressed on its website as “Dare to be a Judge.” The same judges appear at the same clubs year after year, resulting in the same comments on skaters’ evaluations. For example, the Central Ontario Section held in 2003-2004 more than seventeen thousand skating tests, but had only seventy-five judges.

Judging at synchronized competitions has also been problematic. When the ISU decided to change the judging system for skating competitions after the controversial decisions at the 2002 Olympics, synchronized skating was included. The ISU asked Skate Canada to appoint someone to help create the new regulations, act as Skate Canada’s liaison, and train the technical specialists who are now crucial in judging. Skate Canada decided to appoint the coach of one of the Senior Competitive Teams, and a former skater from the same team as the technical specialist. That team then won the National competition in 2005 after not placing in the top three for several years. From a musical point of view, the team skated its short program to the theme from the film *Jaws*, not a creative choice in my opinion. After the competition, the Synchroboards website had more than twenty pages of comments about the conflict of interest. According to many skaters, information about the new ISU regulations was not properly shared with other coaches by the Skate Canada appointees. Comments on-line included:

In my opinion Skate Canada should be ashamed for putting the skating community in this position again. As if the judging issue wasn’t precarious enough, Skate Canada had to go and do this (Synchroboards 2005)

I am not blind to the conflict of interest and I do see that as a

real problem... People left the arena with sinking feelings in their stomachs. People didn't feel good about what they saw. (Synchroboards 2005).

Controversy about the coach, who is still Skate Canada's representative to the ISU, has recently resurfaced. In February 2010, the Central Ontario Section of Skate Canada decided that synchronized skaters who want to skate at the senior level must try out for that coach's team before auditioning for other teams. The Synchroboards website has had more than twelve pages of postings to date. Comments included:

It feels like all the major decisions are always done to benefit one team and one coach at the expense of everyone else. (Synchroboards 2010)

No other sport tells players where they can play... If you're going to have a centralized tryout every year and juggle skaters so that [one team] will always have the best twenty skaters... other teams are going to suffer. (Synchroboards 2010)

Parents or spectators may be afraid to speak out publicly about judging for fear of being overheard and having their team penalized. After controversial judging at the 2005 Nationals, I was told "no comment" by several parents. In summary, problems at Skate Canada include a shortage of judges, uneven judging, conflict of interest issues, failure to support grass roots members and failure to wholeheartedly support synchronized skating.

While there are clearly problems with various aspects of judging and Skate Canada, many conscientious skating judges work tirelessly. Skating judge Marion Dyke is an articulate spokesperson for the benefits of skating. In addition to judging national and international skating competitions, Marion is a medical doctor and the mother of three children, one of whom is a competitive synchronized skater. Marion grew up in the small town of Clarenville, Newfoundland. In 1966, Marion's mother, concerned that no recreational activities for girls existed in Clarenville, approached a representative from the Newfoundland government who recommended she start a figure skating club. Coincidentally, this came at the same time as a new Skate Canada learn-to-skate program. Marion's mother hired a coach to come to Clarenville once a week and enrolled her daughter, who loved it as soon as she had her first lesson. The club had its first figure skating show one month later and Marion performed a small solo. However, at age sixteen, she had knee surgery and

was unable to continue skating. She then began training to become a skating judge and wrote her first judge's exam while still in high school. She kept up with her judge's training while taking two degrees from Memorial University, including her medical degree (Interview 2006).

Marion views skating as "one of Canada's national past-times" and said that "synchronized skating works at all three levels of Skate Canada's motto: fun, fitness and achievement. It is a team sport where girls do not need to wear helmets or bulky padding" (Interview 2006). She believes that the new judging system is much better than the old one and that the problems at the 2002 Olympics forced the judging system to change. Canada's idea became the foundation for the new system – that is, each element is assigned a base value and then evaluated on its execution. She is optimistic that Skate Canada will begin listening to its athletes. She has been impressed by Skate Canada's initiatives since the 2006 AGM, which established a series of Think Tanks for coaches, administrators and synchronized teams. In January 2007, Skate Canada created a synchronized skating committee, which has undertaken a comprehensive survey of managers and athletes (Skate Canada Annual Report 2006-2007:26).

Conclusions

Synchronized skating is a relatively new athletic and artistic activity that has crossed regional and national boundaries to become transnational. Within Canada, it provides an opportunity for girls and young women, who comprise the majority of Skate Canada's membership, to perform as members of an affinity group joined by their love of figure skating. Synchronized skating is multidisciplinary, involving athleticism, choreography, music, interpretation and creativity. As the newest figure skating genre, it suffers from lack of mainstream publicity and support in Canada for several reasons:

1. Skate Canada has not promoted it as actively as it promotes Olympic skating genres.
2. Its multidisciplinary nature, with artistic elements and music, places it outside the realm of "pure sports."
3. Most synchronized skaters in Canada are women; historically, Canadian women in sports have been under-funded and under-publicized.
4. Judging issues have made potential audience members sceptical about results.

During the CBC national broadcast of the 2009 Canadian Figure Skating

Championships, which does not include synchronized skating, commentators noted the often poor international performances of Canada's women figure skaters. They appeared to have no idea that Canada's elite synchronized teams, comprised primarily of young women, consistently earn medals at international events. International supporters of synchronized skating and dancesport are actively campaigning to have both genres declared Olympic events, which will lead to more media attention. However, within Canada, synchronized skaters continue to compete and perform unrecognized. The athletes deserve support and recognition; furthermore, the benefits of this activity and the empowerment of young women is noteworthy. As one high school student related:

I enjoy the challenge, the discipline and the work ethic of synchronized skating. I also love the team aspect as it relates to skating. I love the people I meet, the opportunities and the doors it opens for you. I feel [that] at the elite level, synchronized skating becomes a lifestyle... It's how I carry myself on the ice and even the colour of my skates. I feel [that] on a successful team there's a sort of unspoken bond; a group of up to twenty-four young women driving towards a common goal, who will stop at nothing to get there. It's hugely empowering and enormously rewarding when a lifetime of hard work finally pays off. ❁

Notes

1. This article is an expanded version of papers presented in 2007 at the World Conference of the International Congress for Traditional Music in Vienna and the annual conference of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music in Edmonton. I am grateful to Timothy Rice, Sherry Johnson and the MUSICultures reviewers for their suggestions.

2. For comparison, the final World Cup Hockey game between Canada and Russia in May 2008 had 947,000 Canadian viewers on TSN. A recent Canadian study showed that interest in televised hockey has declined in the past fifteen years, especially among Canadian youth (see Bibby 2009). An exception was the 2010 Olympics where an audience averaging 16.6 million Canadians watched the final Canada-U.S. hockey game (Toronto Star 2010).

3. The main levels are Junior and Senior Bronze, Junior and Senior Silver, and Gold. At the Junior Bronze level in ice dance, for example, skaters across Canada must complete three dances - a swing dance, tango and waltz, using set music and patterns.

4. Eight of the sixteen interviewees provided feedback on the draft of this study.

To protect the privacy of the interviewees, they are not identified, with the exception of coach Meredith Gilbert and judge Marion Dyke.

5. Euro-Canadian dominance in Canadian figure skating reflects Canada's history and the history of figure skating. However, over the past ten years diversity in all genres of skating has increased. An important issue for parents is cost - the higher the skating level, the more expensive skating becomes.

6. Because senior teams must perform overhead lifts, the potential for injury is high. Skaters often cope with chronic back, shoulder and knee pain, injuries from falls or sharp toe picks. Audiences applaud skaters who are able to get back into their programs after a fall. At the 2006 Canadian National Synchronized Championships in Hamilton, an injured skater from one of the teams lay on the ice for fifteen minutes before qualified medical personnel arrived, while her team-mates and the audience looked on in shock (one questions the lack of emergency planning for this event). After the skater was taken away on a stretcher, her team resumed its program to a standing ovation.

7. At most competitions, lack of rehearsal space is a problem, so teams often rehearse off-ice in public areas of the arena, motel meeting rooms, corridors and even shopping malls. At the 2007 World Championships held in London, Ontario, teams from France, Hungary and Great Britain rehearsed simultaneously off-ice in a shopping mall across the street from the John Labatt Center.

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