

# Where Do We Go From Here?

"Where do we go from here?" Lately it seems as if that is *the* question.

Figure skating, obviously, has made it. Now what?

We, as coaches, define skating in our work with students at all levels. We, from detailed, intellectual knowledge and well-developed "feel" of it, have the power, the ability, to move our sport in a positive, winning direction. But what is "positive?" To what kind of "winning" should we aspire? US competitors atop international podiums? Sure, but...

How about the ordinary individual who, having been inspired by TV's images, pulls open the rink door, inquires at the office and signs up for lessons? What do these innocents represent to us? In the case of children: potential top competitors? Possible recreational competing skaters? Private lesson revenue? \$\$? Adults: hmm?

Let us put ourselves in their shoes...er, ill-laced, too-big, dull-bladed rental skates. Scary, really. Those of us who have skated nearly all our lives can barely remember the basic, horrible, wobbly uncertainty.

Should we care? Well, aside from the fact that these people are customers in our industry, they are, as my business partner, mother and pal keeps saying - *the base of the pyramid*. There are more low-level, beginner skaters at any given moment paying out a total of more money to rinks and professionals than are there are top level skaters. But what are they learning for their money? What are they experiencing?

In serving those lower-level skaters all professionals can assist not merely in their acquiring the ability to execute the all too familiar maneuvers but also in achieving "command" over themselves, the ice surface, their particular audience.

Technically advanced concepts can be presented to beginners, with some study and creativity. The most effective stance over the blade, true alignment over one skate, subtleties of ankle flexion, sense of being "on edge," ability to move, extend the free leg while maintaining torso integrating the strong, efficient push down "into" the ice - it is never too early to address these notions, seemingly exotic to the beginner. Both the multi-revolution jumper and the group lesson family skater

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will benefit from our continuing attention to fundamentals, which we as experienced skaters may be tempted to take for granted.

Practical means for helping neophyte skaters attain safe, enjoyable use of boots, blades and ice fall into five categories which can form the core of lessons.

1. **Centered stance over blades** - The skater must learn, as soon as possible (preferably off-ice) to center body weight, carried primarily in the hips, directly over mid-blade. (Stylistic choices, requirements for various maneuvers, come later.) With a straight back, student's knees and ankles need to bend well. To facilitate this during the first lesson we must check on skate size, fit and lacing. If ankles cannot flex forward, hips will hang out behind rendering balance over blade precarious. Lacing is often too tight above ankles, especially for beginners' muscular ability.

As a student steps onto the ice it is essential that we promote this crucial stance—spine perpendicular to ice, shoulders and arms firm, palms down, head balanced atop spine. Continual referral to the necessity of sitting with hips over

the middle of the skates will pay off. Students get the feel of it by facing the barrier on straight legs, holding on with arms spread wide (stroking position), feet parallel (toes about 4" from barrier), directly under hips and attempting to flex ankles sufficiently to bring knees forward toward the barrier with the hips and torso adjusting forward as well as remaining over the middle of the skate. In this position, when the student looks down, toes are invisible beneath knees. (Remarkably, many healthy, intelligent people young and old, have difficulty assuming and maintaining this stance, especially when we ask them, later on, to extend the freeleg behind, as in stroking, etc.)

2. **Alignment over one skate** - A simple exercise, "shift and lift," helps beginners transfer weight initially from one foot to the other. (Subtleties of rapid weight transfers can come later.)

Gliding forward in a straight line, balanced on two feet in the aforementioned posture, the skater shifts body weight to left (or right), aligning head, skating hip, knee and ankle over one blade. Next the

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skater lifts the free foot straight up off the ice, beside the other skate, preferably with the free toe elevated sufficiently to render the blade parallel to ice and glides on one foot.

With aspiring spinners and jumpers benefits of being truly aligned over one skate can be demonstrated

by a basic spin, a clean jump takeoff and landing. Encourage critical appraisal of TV coverage - why do some skaters fall on jumps, some land cleanly?

3. **Ankle/knee flexion** - As they learn various elementary ways to move across the ice—forward two-foot sculling, backward skating, forward stroking—it is essential that skaters develop a fluid quality, pliability in knees and ankles. That is, leg joints are not merely “bent” but are constantly flexing and adjusting moment to moment. This continually changing, supple quality, especially felt in one’s ankles, is the secret to power, quick maneuvering, flow and assurance in skating. Effective stroking, success in jumping, everything we do on ice depends upon

acquiring this special awareness and control.

We all know this but conveying that “feel” is an ongoing process. Natalia Dubova suggests that students “put butter” in their knees.

4. **Sense of being on edge**- Edges, as skated, and the physical construction of blades and their use should be explained

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and experienced during students’ first lessons. By looking at the blade and its hollow, discussing terms “inside” and “outside,” “edge” and “flat,” watching as we demonstrate simple one-foot moves, naming edges as we skate them (preferably on clean ice, so tracings may be inspected), students can become educated while they’re still on two feet.

Traditional “school figures” appear to be vanishing but the need to command edges remains with us. Judges may cease marching around the ice sleuthing out changed three’s but they’ll not allow

that instability during MIF tests. We do students no favors by teaching them “tricks” without acquainting them with edges and their use. Knowing where you are on the blade and why forms the foundation for all advanced moves.

Beginning with two-foot exercises, students can progress gradually to elementary control of single-edge gliding. As

soon as they’re moving on the ice—doing simple curves on two feet—talk about “lean” and demonstrate how both blades we’re gliding on are inclined toward the circle center (like bicycles

rounding a corner), and that the one towards the center is on an outside edge. What’s important here is that beginning skaters get the idea of this, even if they can’t yet do it physically (bad skates, fear, etc.).

Next, still gliding on two feet, skaters learn slalom pushes. Building upon basic two-foot forward sculling, we do one-foot sculling first, weight centered over one skate, the other skate pressing into the ice to push, out and in, along a straight line. Students find this requires real concentration - holding one foot still and parallel to the line of travel while the other pushes.

After practicing both feet of the one-foot sculling exercise, begin alternating the pushing foot, while balancing over the other, changing edges at each transition, tracing an undulating snakelike pattern across the rink. Explain, demonstrate, help skaters experience change of lean and edges as feet come together to begin the next push. This is an opportunity to emphasize ankle and knee pliability; deep outside edges can be felt on the balance foot and gutsy inside edge pushes experienced with the other.

Some students will be ready to do all this backwards right away.

Then, quite simply, we apply the “shift and lift” exercise, delineated above, to gliding on one foot in a circular path. The student, introduced to outside and inside edges, having experienced them gliding on two feet and having gained a measure of control over hips, shoulders and arms, head and free foot, can glide on two feet, leaning into the circle, shift their weight to one foot and lift the other. Elevating the free foot directly beside the skating leg (not too high), will enable students to maintain correct stance, skating hip centered over skating blade, while gliding successfully on an edge. If a beginner



pushes and simultaneously moves the free foot behind, the hips will move backward with resultant loss of balance. It is best to feel outside and inside edges first (on both feet), then learn to isolate the free leg's motion and place it as desired.

Introduce terminology (skating foot, free foot, skating shoulder, etc.) as early as possible to assist in communication with students and increase their awareness of the role of isolated body parts in performing exact maneuvers.

**5. The effective push** - Efficiency in pushing, the technical means by which we gain speed over the ice, should be taught right away.

On two feet, while sculling forward, the absolute beginner must be urged to press down hard into the ice, using available muscle power on each push, keeping feet pointed straight ahead during the pushing action, rather than turning feet out and in to propel. The pushing blade should produce a sound like a large cat purring. If students can attend live skating events or home rink opportunities exist to observe high level skating, they should listen for that lion-like sound which distinguishes the great ones.

Slalom moves on two feet, described above, can be refined into impressive pushes. These exercises are pushes to be initiated from a standstill (permitting beginners to get up speed first is not helpful).

Forward stroking should be presented, in simple form, as soon as possible. Little ones, even, respond positively to "feet together, turn out, and push down." Toe pushes and ineffective pushing won't just go away over time. It's our duty to prevent such difficulties before they occur.

We must inform and remind students, at all levels, that the pushing action in stroking is downward into the ice, not backward or out to the side. Strive for the purring sound.

The more careful we are, the more we spend teaching detailed postural basics, the safer students will be and the more likely they'll return to the rink. Technical omissions, over time, lead to a general resistance to later corrective instruction. Postural difficulties acquired early on will stand in the way of a skater's progress.

Lower-level skaters can enjoy our sport with greater assurance if they are in command of the ice and themselves.

Our customers will be real winners if we can make available to them the joy derived from efficient pushes, unimpeded flow and the feeling of being "into" the ice.

Maybe that's where we go from here. ■