

# Variety pack

Michigan rinks provide building blocks to skating for life

BY COURTNEY WELCH

**I**t's commonly said you must crawl before you can walk and walk before you can run. What do you have to do before you can skate? That's easy, sign up for a Basic Skills class at your local ice rink and we will teach you.

Jessica Pierce, 9, is just one of nearly 50,000 skaters to enroll in Basic Skills group classes offered by one of the five arenas owned or managed by Michigan-based Suburban Sports Group. Pierce started at Suburban Ice – Macomb in the Basic Skills program three years ago and is one of the rink's most promising skaters.

"I think the skating program is very cool; it gives little kids like me a chance to ice skate," said Pierce, who started skating with the opening of the Suburban Ice facility.

"That was exciting to have Jessica start out at the ground level when the rink first opened," Jessica's mom, Bonnie Pierce, said. "She was able to grow with the club."

With her daughter practicing four to five times a week for approximately an hour at a time, Bonnie said Jessica is competing at singles competitions with a goal of attending her first regional championships this year. Her coaches, Lindsey Weber and Vickey Weber, have helped her advance to landing her Axel and double jumps, putting her one step closer to her ultimate goal of winning an Olympic gold medal.

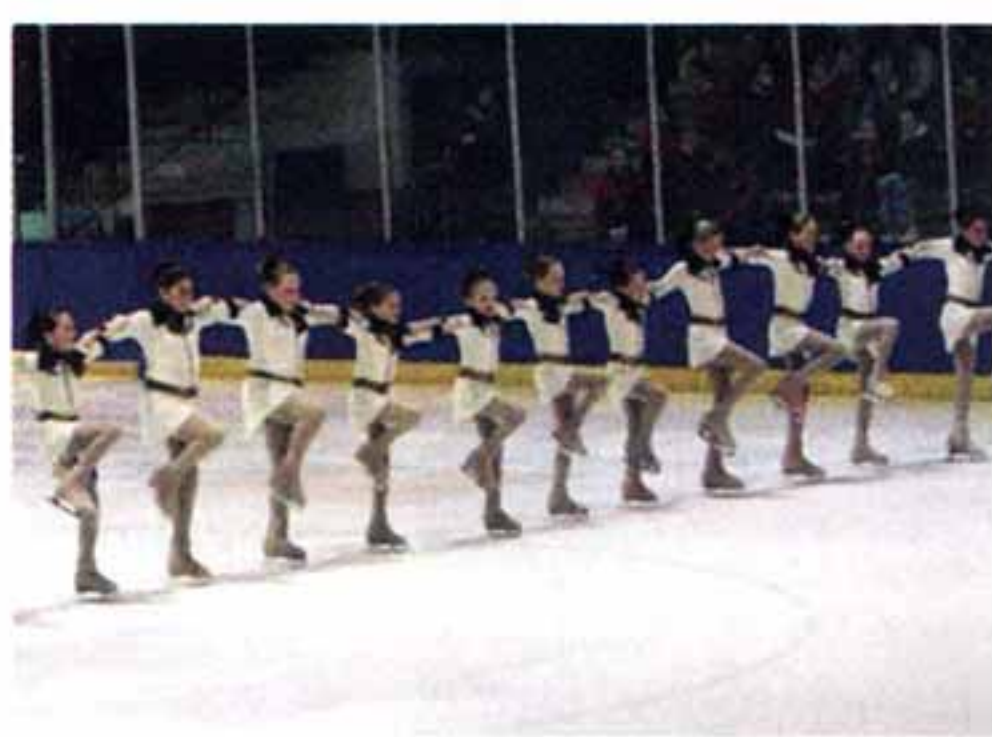
Creating the fundamentals of skating is of the utmost importance whether a skater pursues recreational skating, competitive figure skating or hockey. That's why Suburban Sports Group places such a significant focus on the Basic Skills program.

It is the feeder program to the Onyx Suburban Skating Academy, FUNdamental Hockey Program, Phoenix Synchronized Skating, House Hockey, ice shows and competitions.

"What drew me over to the Suburban rinks: their organization within the Basic Skills program and how the kids were funneled into competitive skating, synchronized skating, hockey or whatever avenue they decided to pursue," said Lindsey Weber, former international competitor and Onyx Skating Academy coach. "There was an avenue for everyone. Not every skater is going to be a competitive skater, not every skater is going to be a hockey player, but there are places for all the kids to go and enjoy skating."

"Skating is a fantastic sport you can participate in at any stage in life. My grandmother was a coach, my mother was a coach and now I am also. The sport has stayed in our family through many generations. We are trying to encourage kids to skate for life whether it's collegiate skating, synchronized skating, coming back as a coach or a judge – there are other avenues they can pursue other than being done at the end of high school."

"I think more than anything skating becomes a part of these kids' lives and Suburban does a really good job of nurturing them through their coaching staffs, ice shows, hockey camps – everything that they do to make skating a part of who they are. The most important aspect of coaching is to enrich their lives through the sport. It's something they



The preliminary Phoenix synchronized skating team puts out an entertaining program.



Jessica Pierce and Julia Griessel celebrate a successful competition at Suburban Ice – Macomb.

want to come to the rink to do every day. To me, that's success, when you have kids that want to come to the rink day after day to do something they love and then to stick with the sport long term."

Like all good programs, leadership plays a large role in the success of the Suburban Sports Group. Weber feels fortunate to have directors who encourage skaters to pursue skating in all venues of life.

"The neatest thing about Suburban is a lot of our students who have been skating since they were little kids, once they turn 16, they join the Suburban staff and become a part of the Suburban family because they are out there teaching Basic Skills," Weber said. "It's a full circle. As the kids get older, one of their goals is to teach at Suburban. We are able to retain employees and keep the kids interested because they want to do what their coaches are doing."

Kaylee Handy, 21, who learned to skate at age 3, is part of that skating circle. Now a senior at Michigan State University, she teaches Basic Skills and other programs at Suburban Ice – East Lansing.

"Here in East Lansing, we started the Suburban Competitors Group, a bridge program that is a cheaper alternative to private lessons,

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where we have anywhere from two to four coaches who teach four to eight skaters at a time," Handy said. "The cost is the same as Basic Skills classes but they are getting an advanced type of group lesson."

Besides finding the joy in teaching others to skate, the Roseville, Mich., native also recaptured the thrill of skating for herself. After tagging along with her older brothers as they learned to play hockey, Handy, who was coached by Vickey Weber, competed through high school. She earned a berth to the U.S. Junior Figure Skating Championships and attained triple gold medals through U.S. Figure Skating's test structure.

"I definitely needed a little bit of a break after training for so many years," said Handy, a health sciences major. "I missed it. It's amazing to be back on the ice again. I am on the Michigan State collegiate team – skating singles. You can compete in singles or in ice dancing – either short or long or both programs."

Reconnecting with the sport has helped Handy realize the main reason she and most people first begin to skate: to have fun.

Suburban Sports Group has a unique commitment to enrich the community through sport and recreation. The Suburban family means working together as a team. The teamwork incorporates five facilities: Novi Ice Arena, Onyx Rochester Ice Arena, Suburban Ice – East Lansing, Suburban Ice – Farmington and Suburban Ice – Macomb.

"We want every child and/or adult to have the opportunity to skate during every stage of life, competitively or recreationally... We have it all," said Helene Wolf, skating director at Suburban Ice – Macomb. ■

*Courtney Welch is the director of communications at Suburban Sports Group. She has been with Suburban since August 2006.*



Audrey Yarema receives instruction from coach Lindsey Weber during a Basic Skills session.