

SLUG: SKATING CHANGES

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By Erin Simpson

UNIVERSITY PARK -- To many people, the world of competitive figure skating is a colorful display of graceful choreography, gravity-defying jumps and eccentric costumes. But no amount of glitter or sequins can cover up the fact that the sport is about to experience a drastic change to one of its three major disciplines, called moves in the field.

This discipline requires skaters to pass eight consecutive levels of intricate footwork patterns before a panel of judges. The levels start with pre-preliminary, which teaches the basics of skating forward and backward, and ends with senior, which expects a professional level of expertise.

The United States Figure Skating Association adopted the discipline in 1990 to help skaters master the basic figures and turns that are the framework for any performance.

Wayne Hudley, chairman of the moves in the field task force, said there are two main reasons for the changes: "First, we've restructured a lot of patterns that were unnecessarily long and created patterns that include the same elements but save a lot more time. And secondly, we are bringing back skills that have always been a part of figure skating but were not included in the original moves test."

Many figure skaters and coaches worry that the proposed changes will deter people from a sport whose participants are already dwindling.

“I think these changes are going to slow the sport down for a while until coaches and skaters get comfortable with them. The lack of progress might deter people from the sport,” said Kelly Rexrode, a recent graduate of Penn State.

Rexrode, who was president of the Penn State Student Figure Skating Club for the 2008-2009 academic year, has coached at Penn State for three years and knows how easily students can become frustrated with moves in the field.

Figure skating’s other disciplines are freestyle and dance, which rely heavily on the skills and techniques skaters learn in moves in the field. Freestyle, the most popular and recognizable discipline, is a choreographed routine combining jumps and spins with footwork learned in the moves levels.

Ice dancing showcases the artistry between a male and female skater through compulsory and original dances. Compulsory dances, such as the Argentine Tango or the Westminister Waltz, follow specific patterns across the ice, while original dances allow pairs to choreograph their own routines.

There will be 14 new changes to the eight moves levels. The first phase will take effect Sept. 1 and includes the first three levels. The second phase, which includes the last five levels, will take effect Sept. 1, 2010. Hudley said his task force wanted to give more time to the higher levels because phase two includes the introduction of loops and twizzles, which were not previously in the moves test.

Loops and twizzles are basic turns and edges that are incorporated into the footwork of freestyle and dance programs. They are easy to learn but difficult to master because a skater needs to have a lot of speed and control over the movements.

Jessica Shulik, a senior who is a coach and a member of the Penn State Figure Skating Club, said the changes are going to make it much harder for skaters to pass not only the moves tests but also the freestyle tests.

“Some of the elements that they have added to the mid-level moves, like the loops, are really tough. I think that is going to make it a lot harder for skaters to make it to the national and world competitions,” she said.

With membership in the United States Figure Skating Association reaching more than 175,000, the organization has attracted a large following since its inception in 1921. There are more than 645 figure skating clubs across the country. During the season, the United State Figure Skating headquarters will pass an average of 5,300 skills tests covering each discipline each month.

“I think that these changes will bring figure skating up to a higher caliber,” Shulik said. “I think the skaters are going to hate it, but I think that those who have a real passion for the sport are the ones who will make it through.”

But the Penn State coaches are also worried about their ability to teach patterns they have just learned.

“This is really going to affect me. I love teaching moves and I feel confident with my teaching because I have passed them myself and gotten approval from judges. But I’m not going to have that same level of confidence with these new moves,” says Rexrode.

Figure skating has earned a reputation for its subjective, sometimes scandalous, judging standards. Rexrode said that testing moves in the field has always been hard because judges will differ from one rink to the next.

“If it’s still so subjective with the levels we’ve had for years, it’s going to take forever to get some standards with these new ones,” she said. This uncertainty is another factor that she thinks will scare people away from competitive figure skating.

Hudley said he knows the changes bring challenges. The task force has posted diagrams and videos on the United States Figure Skating Association’s website (www.usfsa.org) so skaters and coaches can review the changes before they go into effect.

The Professional Skaters Association, an internationally recognized organization for figure skating coaches, has planned 20 seminars for the fall to help coaches become more familiar with the new elements.

Rexrode said she thinks the seminars would help motivate skaters and their coaches but they need to be affordable. “As a college student, it’s just not realistic for me to pay to attend a seminar,” she said.

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