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Everybody Wins with ISI Special Skater Program

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by Lori Fairchild

Witnessing the boundless joy and pride on the face of a special-needs skater who has just conquered a new challenge on the ice is among life's greatest rewards - just ask any ISI Special Skater coach or volunteer.

"Teaching special skaters is just like teaching everyone else; it just takes a little more heart and patience," says Patti Feeney, ISI managing director of member programs and services, "and each accomplishment is a cause for celebration."

The Special Skater program, which essentially consists of a modified learn-to-skate curriculum and test standards, opens the door to the wonderful world of ice skating for individuals of all ages and abilities. While Special Olympics paved the way with its focus on athletes with mental retardation, ISI Special Skater encompasses all special needs, whether mental or physical. "It means that a facility doesn't have to limit who it offers the learn-to-skate curriculum to," Feeney adds. Many ISI special skaters are also registered with Special Olympics.

The Special Skater curriculum was introduced 15 years ago, with written recommendations for teaching skaters with mental retardation, epilepsy, autism, cerebral palsy, visual and auditory disabilities and various other special needs.

Nearly a decade before its official ISI launch, the seeds for the program were being sown at Wayne Community Center in Wayne, Mich. Members of the Tri-City Therapeutic Recreation Program, who met at the community center, often stopped by the rink to watch the skating classes and shows, and soon expressed an interest in trying the sport for themselves, recalls former skating director Janis Rychlinski. In addition, the skating staff began receiving referrals from Special Olympics.

"We started with one special skater, and just kept adding," Rychlinski says. "We ended up with about 25. We used qualified instructors, then our skating adults and older teenage skaters got involved in working with the special skaters, and it just grew into a big family supporting each other."

As word spread, Special Skater competitions were staged in Carol Stream, Ill. as well as in Wayne. Today, all ISI national individual skater events include a Special Skater category, and some facilities offer additional performance opportunities. The Oxnard Ice Skating Center in Oxnard, Calif., for instance, has an active program which includes performances in the rink's holiday and spring ice shows. The special skaters' 2003 holiday number - Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" - drew thunderous applause and rave reviews for the rink's community outreach.

In an effort to promote and update the Special Skater curriculum, ISI is reviewing the program and its manual, Feeney reports. "Several individuals have stepped up to bring the Special Skater program up to the standards of our other ISI programs," she says.

Among those individuals is Olympic champion Scott Hamilton, who serves as ISI's Special Skater spokesperson. Hamilton, who also is a board member for Special Olympics International, says he sees a need for more programs for athletes with special needs: "There just didn't seem to be enough going on in skating, and I thought if we could set up a strong program in skating, other sports might

follow suit. I like the idea that the skating community could lead by example."
The program's advantages for the special skaters are numerous, but the benefits also extend to their instructors, volunteers, the facilities and even other skaters.

Special skaters gain confidence and a sense of accomplishment, notes former instructor Sarah Rinehart. "Without a doubt, it gives them the opportunity to be a part of the world. They get to be in the same venue as traditional skaters, and treated with as much dignity. Figure skating is such a hard thing, and this gives them a chance to see how far they can go," she says.
"People with any disability should be given an opportunity to be the best they can be, to experience everything they can," Hamilton adds. "Without opportunity, no one can thrive in any way."
Those with physical challenges often gain strength, coordination and flexibility from ice skating. And while ice skating is a seasonal activity in the Special Olympics, ISI's Special Skater is a year-round program. "If athletes really enjoy a sport, they want to do it more than a limited amount of time," says Mike Paikin, chairman of the Special Skater program.

Teachers who work with special skaters learn patience and develop creative, inventive instruction techniques. If they can teach beginners, they can teach most special skaters, Paikin notes.
"The other athletes at the rink get a lot out of this, too," Rinehart says. They learn acceptance, inclusion and respect as well as the rewards of helping others.

In fact, all who work with the Special Skater program discover they can make a difference in others' lives, Hamilton points out. "To know that you can touch someone in a positive way is a great gift," he says. "To know that you are capable of bringing joy to someone is worth every moment of time invested. Gifts tend to give and give again."

The special skaters have a way of giving back to those who work with them, through their appreciation, warmth and energy. "Skating school is at the end of our long day each Wednesday. But the special skaters come in and they bring us that second wind," says Michelle Wilkin, skating director at Oxnard Ice Skating Center.

Any ISI member facility that wishes to work with special skaters can do so, simply by using the Special Skater curriculum. "We supply the tools to assist them, and the facilities offer the curriculum. Some donate ice time or coaching," Feeney explains, adding that it's a great opportunity to give back to the community.

"Our dream is for the majority of arenas around the country to offer the Special Skater program, and for instructors to get involved," says Paikin. "We want to offer more people at all levels of learning the chance to get into our sport and be a part of the rink on a day-to-day basis. It's a wonderful thing."

For more information about the ISI Special Skater program, inquire at your rink or call the ISI office at (972) 735-8800.