

Joy on skates comes to rink in Roseville

For the love of it, a veteran tutors the 'Class of Michelle.'

By Debbie Arrington -- Bee Staff Writer

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Jayne Meyer Throckmorton looked out on the ice at Roseville's Skatetown and saw a dozen budding Michelles and Sashas.

Like her, these California kids were drawn to ice in part by gold -- Olympic gold and the kind of dreams spun in triple loops.

Throckmorton started skating in the "Class of Peggy," inspired by 1968 gold medalist Peggy Fleming. Her students now are mostly Class of Michelle, idolizing world champion and current gold-medal favorite Michelle Kwan.

"I begged my mom and dad to take me to the rink," recalled Throckmorton, who grew up skating indoors in Sacramento. "From the first time, I really loved it."

Starting at age 11, Throckmorton became an elite skater. She studied with former ladies champion Barbara Roles and John Nicks, Sasha Cohen's coach in Orange County who was known back then as the mentor of Tai Babilonia and Randy Gardner.

Her parents drove Throckmorton frequently to San Francisco for lessons, then to longer weekend trips to the Los Angeles area. She spent most of her high school years living away from home in Colorado Springs, Colo., and Southern California with other skating families so she could be the best that she could be.

Now 44, Throckmorton never made it to the rarified strata of the Olympics. At 5-foot-10, her height became a hindrance.

"With the triples and quads required today, it helps to have a tiny body," she said during a break from the ice.

She tried ice dancing and, while a student at Sacramento State, went to the nationals in rhythmic gymnastics. But figure skating, with all its twists and intricacies, remained her first love.

So she turned to coaching, something she has been doing for 24 years. She balances skating with family (her two kids prefer other sports). Her days on ice begin around 5:30 a.m. and stretch to after 5 p.m. Her students range from toddling 2-year-olds with their parents to seniors in their 70s.

You're never too young or old to find joy on skates, she said. And the Olympics inspire all ages.

"We see a big surge after each Olympics," said Throckmorton, who teaches approximately 45 students and expects to see plenty of new young faces in the weeks ahead.

"My advice to parents: Let them do it. This is a great and healthy sport. Skating offers many opportunities outside the Olympic championships."

And most important, it's fun, said the coach.

"You can see it in their eyes when (kids) love to skate," she said.

Two examples glided by and, yes, their eyes sparkled.

Shannon Quigley, 14, of El Dorado Hills started at age 6 with group lessons.

"I just loved it," she said.

But it wasn't until age 11 that she started taking her sport seriously. She trains two hours a day on ice, then two hours in the weight room improving her strength. The Olympics are some far-off, fuzzy goal; she's more concerned with passing tests that would move her up in the senior competition ranks.

Quigley saw the American Olympians in action at the U.S. National Championships, held last month in Los Angeles. She met Cohen and Tim Goebel -- who won a bronze medal last week in Salt Lake City -- but she's rooting now for Kwan.

"She's so graceful and unique," Quigley said. "She has that maturity on the ice. Watching her is special."



Jayne Meyer Throckmorton works with Shannon Quigley, 14, at Roseville's Skatetown.
Sacramento Bee/Bryan Patrick

Melissa Brozdounoff, who turns 11 in March, is enthralled by Kwan, too.

"I love watching her," she said enthusiastically.

Brozdounoff discovered skating at a birthday party four years ago and has been in love with the ice since.

"When I see (skaters) on TV, it inspires me," she said. "I love their music. Skating's fun, but it's also hard work. I love skating."

These young skaters' passion typifies why figure skating generates so many new fans -- and athletes -- every four years.

"Clearly, it's the most popular sport in the Olympics, winter or summer," said NBC Sports chairman Dick Ebersol, who oversees the network's massive Olympic coverage. "Why? No. 1, Americans do well. And No. 2, people are taken by the mysteries of the judging system. That mix of liking and not liking made a career for Howard Cosell."

And that was before this year's controversy involving the Russian and Canadian pairs.

Scott Hamilton, who won the men's gold medal at the Sarajevo Games of 1984, said he thinks skating's appeal is more personal.

"Every athlete is different. Every performance unique," he said. "You see their personality come out in their performance. That hooks people."

Not known for outdoor ice rinks, California has become a hotbed for figure skating. Kwan, who grew up in Torrance, tops the current list of stars with Golden State roots. Cohen lives in Laguna Niguel. Past California greats include Kristi Yamaguchi (Olympic gold, 1992) and Debi Thomas (bronze, 1988). It's not just a women's thing. Brian Boitano (gold, 1988) lives in San Francisco.

The reason: California's top-flight facilities and high-profile coaches draw the best students.

For example, 2001 U.S. men's champion Goebel, now 20, moved from Rolling Hills, Ill., to Lake Arrowhead in the mountains above San Bernardino two years ago to be coached by Frank Carroll.

Best known for his work with Kwan, Carroll and other major coaches attract top skaters from around the world to the Ice Castle International Training Center, built exclusively for figure skating with state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems accenting a championship-quality rink.

In this case, California skaters train with the best in an environment like they'll find in major arenas.

Throughout the state, skating isn't treated as just seasonal outdoor recreation; it's a year-round indoor sport. And facilities such as Roseville's Skatetown draw skaters from miles away. The heat of summer makes skating an even more popular option.

The Olympians make many moves look simple, but those routines take hard practice to perfect.

"This is a sport that requires training for many, many years," Throckmorton said. "Jumps depend on the skater. You need strength and coordination."

Skaters who start at age 7 or 8 could be doing small jumps within months. But working up to triples can take years.

"I've had adults at age 40 learn axels," she added. "It's never too late."

In addition to coaching and competition, Throckmorton has the insight of a longtime skating judge. What separates the best skaters isn't a triple lutz or quadruple toe loop. It's confidence.

"They're skating so close in terms of difficulty, any of the top three or four could win the gold," Throckmorton said of the top Olympic contenders. "The deciding factor could just be a lack of confidence, like Michelle and Tara (Lipinski) in Nagano."

Back in the 1998 Winter Olympics, Kwan showed some early doubts in her short program, allowing the fearless Lipinski to seize the day -- and the gold.

"It's very, very mental in this sport," Throckmorton said. "Any fear breaks your concentration and won't allow you to complete your routine. Mental toughness is high on the list of skating necessities."

That's why skating -- at any level -- can help teach children self-confidence. "That's something they'll carry throughout their lives," she said.

On or off the ice.

About the Writer

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