

***Clackamas*Review**

A family affair

A local skating family comes together on the floor and helps a NW precision team earn a shot at the World Championships

BY JOHN DENNY

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Competitive roller skating has been a family affair for Clackamas skating enthusiast Susan Richardson since her oldest daughter Tiffany first laced up skates as an infant over 40 years ago. But this year has been something special.

Sue Richardson was on the floor as a competitor with daughter Tiffany McKinnon and granddaughter Caitlin Richardson at the 2010 U.S.A. Roller Sports Pacific Northwest Regional Artistic Championships, held at Oaks Park June 19-21.

The trio, who are members of the Oaks Skating Club, skated together with the Northern Dynamics senior precision team. The team won the Northwest Regional senior precision title and qualified for the USA Roller Sports National Championships in Lincoln, Nebraska.

They'll perform at the national championships on Aug. 1, attempting to earn a spot on the floor at the Federation of International Roller Sports World Championships, slated for Brasilia, Brazil, in November of 2011.

"That would just be a really awesome experience!" said 15-year-old Caitlin. "I've always wanted to place at nationals and go to worlds. It would be one big party with my extended roller skating family. And we'd get to skate too. It would be a lot of fun."

"What's nice about this precision team is it is truly a Northwest team," said Northern Dynamics coach Marlene Bruland. "This year we have skaters from five clubs, Marysville, Lynnwood, Burlington, Centralia and the Oaks.

"This is also the first team we have had that has three generations of skaters: Sue Richardson, grandmother; Tiffany McKinnon, daughter; and Courtney Richardson, Sue's granddaughter."

"I hadn't even thought about it," said Sue. "I've been so busy trying to remember what I do in the 40 seconds I'm out there. When I think about it now, it is pretty neat. Three generations skating together."

Both Sue and her daughter have coached precision. Sue coached Tiffany on an Oaks Skating Club senior precision team that went to nationals in 1999.



JAIME VALDEZ / CLACKAMAS REVIEW
Three generations of competitive roller skaters joined together to skate for the Northern Dynamics senior precision team at the recent USA Roller Sports Northwest Regional Championships. Pictured are (from left): Sue Richardson, daughter Tiffany McKinnon and granddaughter Courtney Richardson.

“It’s a little nerve-wracking at times,” Tiffany said. “You’re trying to make sure you do all the right steps and that you’re in the right place at the right time. You don’t want to let the team down.”

Bruland is not new to precision skating or to success with senior precision teams. She had Northern Dynamics teams place at nationals and qualify for the world championships five years in a row (2003-2007).

Bruland’s teams competed in Argentina in 2003, in Fresno in 2004, and in Rome in 2005.

The Northern Dynamics did not to make the trip to Spain or Australia in 2006 and 2007 because of finances. And there was no Northern Dynamics team in 2008 or 2009.

“After nationals last year, some of the skaters came to me and said, ‘I think we can get a team together again for next year,’” said Bruland. “Their persistence paid off... Our goal is top three at nationals, which would qualify us for worlds.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing it, but we got talked into it,” said Tiffany. “It was all Courtney’s idea.”

“We’re doing it for Courtney,” Sue said.

“I went to [the first practice] with the intention of working with the kids, so I could help them,” Tiffany said. “But they said, ‘No. You are going to skate.’”

“I did it to make sure they had enough people to do it,” said Sue. “Courtney was having such a good time.”

It’s been quite an experience for grandmother Sue and mom Tiffany. Sue, a retired nurse, has had 50 years of experience, competing, coaching and judging. She was national pairs champion in 1953. She’s still active today, coaching figures and dance four days a week, 11 months out of the year.

But this is the first time that Sue has been in competition since 1964, when she did a freestyle dance number at nationals with George Kolibaba, the current head professional at Oaks.

As an alternate on the Northern Dynamics precision team, Sue is on the floor at the start of the routine and at the end. But she’s worked with the team through grueling practices, which have lasted as long as 2-1/2 hours.

“It feels strange,” said Sue. “I’m supposed to be on the other side [coaching or judging].”

“At regionals, it was nearly time to perform and we had to remind mom to get ready and put her skates on,” Tiffany recalls.

“I was busy watching my own skaters and forgetting that I had to do it myself,” said Sue. “I have seven skaters in this year’s nationals.”

Tiffany and Courtney skate the full five-minute routine, which requires team members to be in continuous motion, while they attempt to synchronize their movements with teammates.

Tiffany, who works full-time as a senior business analyst for Blount International Inc., has 32 years of experience in competitive roller skating, working as a coach, judge or competitor. She followed in her mom's footsteps in 1978, when she won a national title in pairs skating.

Tiffany still coaches today – figures, dance and creative solo – three days a week, 10 months out of the year.

But before this year, Tiffany had not competed since 2002, when she performed figures at nationals.

Commenting on what it's like to be back on the competitive side of things, Sue said:

"I'm only out there for 40 seconds, but it's scary. It's been so long [since I've competed], and I don't want to let the team down."

She added, "I hope we have 12 people there for nationals, because if we don't, I'll have to skate the full 5-minute routine. And it's going to be panic, big-time."

Sue observed that it takes 12 skaters to perform the complete synchronized routine and due to injuries, she was one of only 13 members of the 15-skater Northern Dynamics team healthy enough to skate at the regional championships.

"[The two that were out hurt] are back now, thank goodness," she said.

Sue noted that skating the full routine in competition would be very taxing on her 66-year-old body.

"There's a lot of pushing and pulling [in precision skating]," she said. "It's hard on your wrists and shoulders. And there's a lot to remember [in a 5-minute routine]."

"The scary part for me was when we have two circles skating next to each other going real fast," said Courtney. "You get skating faster and faster, and you wonder if you are going to be able to slow down."

"It's a little scary when you haven't competed for awhile and you have to do something in front of the judges, and it's not something you do anymore....," said Tiffany. "The Thursday before regionals [which were on a Saturday] was the first time the whole team had practiced together. In a few places you weren't sure you were going to get through cleanly, and it's not always clear who you are supposed to be next to.

"We practiced in sections, a Northern Group and a Southern Group, and because of work, church, vacations or for other reasons, we were always missing people. [My daughter] Caitlyn isn't old enough to skate senior precision, but she filled in at practices all the time, when people weren't able to make it."

The first full practice, where the complete team was together, was from 10:45 p.m. to midnight on June 17 at the Oaks Rink.

The complete team practiced again from noon to 1 p.m. on Friday, June 18.

And the next day they were performing at the regional championship meet.

“We have practiced off skates, on skates, in parking lots – with skates off, in the late evening, in the morning, and it finally came together at regionals and worked very well,” said Bruland. “The team is the 2010 Northwest Region Senior Precision Team champion.”

“The amazing thing is we got such a late start and we did so well,” said Courtney, who will be a junior at Clackamas High School this fall.

The Clackamas teenager noted that most precision teams begin practicing in September, but because the Northern Dynamics team was still being assembled, the team did not start practicing until February.

“I started working on the music and choreography in December,” said Bruland. “It was a real challenge. I have never put one together that fast before.”

“It takes a lot of planning, but because most of these skaters know a bit about precision, the experienced skaters made it work. It is very difficult to find time to practice for a team whose members are so far apart, but we did it....”

“The team is a very different combination from the 2007 team. They have fun and work together like a real team. The attitudes are positive. I enjoy being their coach.”

Courtney is the second youngest member of the 2010 Northern Dynamics senior precision team. Sue, at 66, is the oldest. Team members on this year’s team range from age 12 on up.

“That’s the beauty of precision skating,” said Bruland. “Some of the older members still skate very well, but there are not any events – except for dance and figure events – where the older skater can participate at a higher level. They can’t continue doing jumps and spins [in precision], but everything else remains possible. Precision is where all age groups can fit together.”

“It’s kind of weird,” said Courtney. “All of the people I’ve been skating against and been at events with forever, now I’m skating with them. And it’s all ages skating together. That’s kind of weird....”

“But it’s a lot of fun. I’ve skated every other event available, and it’s something new....”

“I get to know people I’ve skated with or competed against my whole life. We’re just a little family now. I think it brings the region closer together.”

They’ve won national titles, but like Courtney, neither Sue nor Tiffany has ever competed at a world championship.

“It would be kind of exciting,” said Sue. “I would hope that I could still be a sub. Five minutes is a really long time.”

“I think it would be fun,” said Tiffany. “It would be my first time and I wouldn’t have an opportunity any other way, except as a coach....”

The Northern Dynamics have two more practices planned before nationals. If they place in the top three, they’ll have over a year to prepare for the world championships.

“The other teams at worlds are skating with a lot of financial support from their countries and they take it very serious,” said Bruland. “It is hard to compete with them. It is like a business to them.

“For us, it is an honor to even be a part of it, and there are great memories. Traveling to other countries is a great opportunity to skate on the world scene....

“Precision is one of the most challenging events to coach and one of my favorites, as it is so creative. It also gives the skaters a chance to skate on the world level.

“There is a pride of accomplishment when you finally make it to worlds and represent your country.”

“It’s hard, because it’s a lot to memorize,” said Courtney. “I’ve got three other events at nationals and now I’ve got to throw precision on the pile of things I’ve got to remember. In precision you’ve got arm movements, who I am supposed to be next to, which direction I’m supposed to be going....”

Asked if she had any regrets about returning to competition in senior precision, Sue said, “No. I only do a little bit, but it’s been fun.”

“My only regret is that we didn’t get the team together sooner, so we could have had more practice time,” said Courtney. “I absolutely love it. It’s my favorite of all my events.”

Tiffany said, “It’s basically a two-year commitment if you qualify for worlds, because worlds is not until November of next year. But we’re having fun.”

Tiffany added, “I could use a massage.”