

Its like herding cats

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But the Oaks Park Oakettes are cats with talent

Thanks to the growing popularity of artistic roller skating in the Portland area, the Oaks Park Skating Club has a junior precision team, the Oakettes, entered in the 2013 USA Roller Sports National Artistic Roller Skating Championships, which got underway this week in Albuquerque, New Mexico.



by: JOHN LARIVIERE - Oaks Park Oakettes junior precision skaters take a break from a recent practice to pose for a team picture. Team members include: (front, from left) Caitlin Richardson and Adelaide Holenstein; (standing, from left) Sarah Wellock, Elsie Stevens, Bailey Goleman, Madison More, Megan Brooks, Evelyn Wellock, Ellianna Foster, Camdyn Chinn, Makayla Simonelic and Kaicy Wilde; and (not pictured) Miyu Endo and Greta McCabe.

It's a first for both the Northwest Region and the Oaks Park Skating Club, which before this year had never had a junior precision team compete at the regional level, let alone nationals.

“We have a lot of kids now coming up through classes,” said Oaks artistic coach Tiffany McKinnon. “For once we have the kids to do it, and they are all enthusiastic about skating.”

The idea for fielding a junior precision team emerged during last summer's national championships in Lincoln, Nebraska.

“Joan [Oaks coach Joan Dreyer], Tiffany and I were watching junior precision [at the nationals] and we looked at each other and said, ‘We can do that,’” recalls Oaks artistic coach Cindy White.

“We were surprised with the interest,” said McKinnon. “We thought we could get eight girls. We got 14, and they all committed to going to nationals.”

White, who lives in Oregon City, and McKinnon, who lives in Clackamas, have been coaching the team, along with McKinnon’s daughter Courtney Richardson, since last November.

With the rink available for only two practices a month and the diverse ages and personalities of the girls on the team, at times it’s been like one step forward and two steps back. But with the limitless patience of the coaches and leadership from the older girls on the team, the team has come together and learned to skate in unison. And they are likely to represent the local area well at nationals.

“When you have 14 girls, ages 6-14, sometimes it is like herding cats,” admitted McKinnon.



by: JOHN LARIVIERE - Oakettes skate a 4-spoke pinwheel as they gear up for the USA Roller Sports National Championships in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Only five of the girls on the team are over nine years of age.

“Practices can get a little hectic and chaotic,” said Richardson. “It’s a lot of work dealing with 14 little girls.... But they’ve come a long way. I think they’re skating well.”

“On day one, some of them could hardly skate forward, let alone turn around and skate backwards,” White observed. “Now they can all turn, and skate backwards, no problem.”

Courtney Richardson's 13-year-old sister Caitlin and Happy Valley 14-year-old Adelaide Holenstein are two of the older girls on the team. They have greater skating skills and skating knowledge than most of their teammates and they help the coaches keep the younger girls headed in the right direction.

"A lot of time it's frustrating for them and it's frustrating for us, because we're doing stuff they can't do yet....," said Caitlin.

Asked what's been the most challenging in practicing and perfecting their routines, Caitlin said, "The toughest thing is dealing with those little girls screaming. Sometimes they have little-girl fights and they come to you, expecting you to referee and take their side...."

"I want to coach someday, but only one-on-one. When you work one-on-one, they calm down."



by: JOHN LARIVIERE - Oakettes join hands and form a circle during a Sunday evening practice at Oaks Park. The Oaks Skating Club is the first club in the Northwest Region to send a junior precision team to compete at the national championships.

"I'm surprised at how quickly we learned," Adelaide said.

Adelaide added, "This has helped me with my skating, being more comfortable with people on the floor next to you. One misstep, someone hits your skate, and you go down."

Recalling her first national, at age 6, Caitlin said she is a little concerned with a possible "deer-in-the-headlights" reaction by some of the younger girls on the team.

"For 11 of the 14 girls, it's their first national," Caitlin said. "I remember my first national. When I saw myself in the Minnie Mouse costume on the big screen the first time, I just froze. I was going around and looked up at the big screen and just stopped. I looked at myself for some time and after awhile I remembered I was doing my routine and decided I better finish."

After giving the question some additional thought, Caitlin said, “I think they’ll be okay. Most of the girls will be doing other routines [at nationals] before we do precision, so they’ll be over the big screen.”

“Eight of the 11 girls new to nationals also qualified in dance or figures,” McKinnon observed.

Caitlin Richardson will be busy at nationals, skating 10 other events besides junior precision; Adelaide will skate four other events besides precision.

The coaches have no illusion about bringing home a medal from nationals in junior precision this year.

Asked if the team had a chance of placing in the top three this year, they said in unison, “No.”

McKinnon noted, “In junior precision you can have team members as old as 15 and some of the teams there will have every member age 15, or close to 15...”



by: JOHN LARIVIERE - (From left) Oakettes junior precision team skaters Kaicy Wilde and Bailey Goleman visit with coaches Tiffany McKinnon, Cindy White and Courtney Richardson during a break at a recent practice session.

“Most of our girls are pretty green. Right now we’re just trying to get them all going in one direction.”

White was quick to add, “These girls are competitors. When they see what there is at nationals, it’s going to make them want to come back and work harder. Try some harder stuff, and get better. They’ll all be eligible to compete again next year. We’ll get more practice time, they’ll work harder, and we’ll get better.”

Looking ahead to this year’s nationals, Oaks precision skater Elsie Stevens, who gives her age as “seven-and-three-quarters,” said, “It’s going to be scary, because it’s like the biggest competition there is. But I think we’ll do pretty good.”

Elsie, who lives in Portland, also skates roller derby on a Rose City Rollers Rose Pedals team for 7- to 11-year-olds, the Daughters Of Doom.

“Precision is a lot harder than roller derby,” Elsie said. “You have to memorize a lot of stuff.”

“Most of the girls are relatively new to skating and they don’t realize how much skating they’ve learned while participating,” said Dot Leppin, who has been involved in coaching, judging or administration of competitive skating at Oaks Park for over four decades. “The entire club is very proud of these kids.”

Members of the Oakettes junior precision team include: Caitlin Richardson, Adelaide Holenstein, Elsie Stevens; Megan Brooks from Tualatin; Makayla Simonelic from Tigard; Kaicy Wilde from Gresham; Bailey Goleman and Madison More from Vancouver; and Portland skaters Miyu Endo, Greta McCabe, Camdyn Chinn, Ellianna Foster, Evelyn Wellock and Sarah Wellock.

Makayla, 6, is the great, great granddaughter of Oaks skating coach Joan Dreyer.