Tone up the graceful way

Ice skating isn’t just for kids. Rediscover its joy—and get fit, too

It was the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. Glued to the TV, I watched Katerina Witt and Scott Hamilton glide and spin and leap across the ice. My body seemed to respond to their every move. I had loved to ice skate as a child. It was that sense of flying, of feeling the wind in my face, of going faster than I could ever run, that excited me. I wanted to fly again.

So after 15 years or so away from the ice, at the age of 31, I signed up for lessons at my local rink. The class met for 45 minutes on Sunday nights and included seven women ages 25 to 50 or so, plus two men in their early 40s. Afterward we had an hour of “ice time” to practice.

Certainly I was no natural. Even as a child, I remember feeling frustrated that I was no ballerina. More often than not, my attempts at spins and turns (or sometimes simply stopping) would end with me wiping out. And as an adult, I couldn’t just watch something and then do it myself. I had to break it down and then practice, practice, practice. But I enjoyed learning control and actually doing some of those fancy moves I’d seen on TV. It was fun, and I got great satisfaction from learning skills that were completely foreign to
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anything else I had done in my life.

In eight weeks, I was doing forward and backward crossovers, several very pretty turns, and extending my arms with the grace of a dancer. I even mastered how to look over my shoulder while skating backward, a skill that saved me from countless angry “Watch where you’re going’s.” The sense of speed, now combined with balance and control, were better than my wild abandon as a child. I was hooked.

If you can walk, you can skate

I wasn’t really concerned about falling and breaking any bones because, as a beginner, one of the first things I learned was how to fall properly (and not hurt anything). As I lost my balance, I learned to tuck my arms and head in and sit down on the ice. So far I’ve never had a serious injury, even though I’ve sometimes failed to get into “fall mode” before I hit the ice.

Taking lessons also helped me break some bad habits such as pushing off with my toe picks and letting my arms fly and flail. A big bonus was something I hadn’t really considered when I signed up: Skating just twice a week firmed my butt and thighs, improved my endurance and strength, and sharpened my sense of balance.

Am I too old to learn those jumps?

After you learn the basics, you can concentrate on freestyle—the solo routines that include spins and jumps. Unfortunately, I’d been discouraged years ago from trying to learn to jump by a teacher who told me I was too old.

But that attitude seems to be changing. “For example, I have one woman in her early 50s who has learned salchows and toe loops, which are full rotation single jumps,” says Gloria Leous, a skating instructor at Pennsylvania State University in State College. “And even if you choose not to jump, there is always something else that you can work on.”

If jumps aren’t your speed, try ice dancing (your feet only leave the ice when and if you’re lifted). While not as demanding of strength as freestyle, it can get as complicated and challenging as you want. “Just a few months of

Better butt, trimmer legs

The fitness gains of ice skating look like this:

Muscles used:
• Gluteals (buttocks)
• Hamstrings and quadriceps (thighs)

Calories burned (based on a 150 pound person):
• Leisurely pace: 175 calories per half hour
• Moderate to strenuous pace: 235 to 320 calories per half hour
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lessons lets you get out on the ice and do a few very respectable turns around the lake or the rink with your partner,” says Rhea Schwartz, chairman of the United States Figure Skating Association’s adult skating committee.

Ice dancing is also sociable. Every weekend of the year, somewhere in the US, there’s an ice dance weekend. These often include instruction and a dinner dance. Partnerless? Take note: Solo ice dancing is also becoming popular, Schwartz says.

Who does it?

Turns out I’m a pretty typical adult ice skater. More and more older Americans are realizing that staying fit can be fun, and I witnessed the growth of the sport firsthand: On Sunday nights, more older adults showed up on the ice, including one gray haired man in a Swiss yodeler’s outfit who monopolized the middle of the rink practicing jumps. The place I skated even had a kind of “Ice Capades” team of 15 or so women of all ages who competed in choreographed ice dances. (I would have joined just for the pink and black outfit, but I heard the fund-raising activities were time consuming.)

Fourteen years after my second start in life, I’m still hooked. I go when I can. I take occasional late
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lunches and hit the rink mid-afternoon weekdays, when nobody else is there. I wait for those early winter deep freezes, when the local farm ponds freeze solid, but before they’re topped with snow. The freedom of movement and sense of flying, along with the need to focus on what I’m doing, make my cares disappear. These moments are pure delight.

GETTING STARTED

**Lessons:** At your local rink, get names and phone numbers of instructors who enjoy teaching adults. Beginners may prefer group lessons, where people tend to be more sociable.

**Prices:** Group, $10 to $28 per hour; private, $30 to $50 per hour, but most lessons don’t last a full hour. (Be sure to ask if the price includes skate rental and additional ice time. Private lessons often do not.)

**Equipment:** You can rent skates for $1 to $3. (Quality of rental skates varies widely from rink to rink, so if the skates at one place stink, try the rink across town.) If you decide after a few lessons that you have the soul of a skater, invest in a pair of good skates, professionally fitted. Good figure skates are thick leather; the blades are Sheffield steel, the same stuff used to make fine knives. Cost: $100 and up.

**Caution:** Needless to say, if you simply can’t afford to fall—if you have osteoporosis or chronic back problems, for instance—you’ll want to enjoy ice skating from the spectator perspective.