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Figure Skating Multiplied by 16 and All in Sync

By Allan Chernoff

Two straight lines of figure skaters, eight on each side, are on a collision course, accelerating toward each other to the tune of Michael Jackson's "Beat It."

A second before impact, all 16 skaters suddenly rotate, performing two 360-degree counterclockwise turns through the point of intersection, passing within inches of one another, then flow into lines of four that transform into revolving circles. It's more than a Michael Jackson music video on skates: it's a graceful sport that few Americans are familiar with: synchronized skating.

Synchronized what? Other than sharing adverbs and the chemical composition of the performance space — one frozen, one liquid — synchronized skating has little in common with synchronized swimming.

Although casual observers may question whether synchronized swimming is a legitimate sport, there is no doubt about its skating counterpart. To some, it packs more action and is more interesting than conventional figure skating. Consequently, synchro, as it is called, is a fast-growing discipline of figure skating that combines the athleticism and artistry of singles, pairs and ice dancing with the timing and coordination required for 16 skaters to perform as one.

"Keep it up, up, up up," cried Geri Lynch Tomich, coach of the Synchroettes, the Essex Skating Club of New Jersey's synchronized skating team.

She was referring to the spiral position in which every gliding skater had a leg pointing skyward, the team seeming to extend Jackson's high notes. Then, maintaining their spirals, the skaters slipped under one another's legs. More than performance was at stake; one false slip and a sharpened steel blade could have sliced a skater's face. The complex maneuver was performed flawlessly.

"These are elite skaters," Lynch Tomich said. "They're very accomplished individual skaters."

Outside the sun was just beginning to rise, but the Synchroettes, most of whom are high school juniors and seniors, had been on the ice in West Orange, N.J., for a half-hour, preparing for the national junior

championships this week in Plymouth Township, Mich., near Detroit. Their competition will include the Skyliners, who represent the Skating Club of New York and the Springdale Figure Skating Club in Stamford, Conn.

Synchronized skaters wear glitzy dresses as [they perform highly choreographed musical routines](#) that include required elements like spins, intersections, circles, wheels — in which skaters form spokes rotating around a common point — and blocks, which require team members to maintain a perfect formation of three to five parallel lines as they skate across the ice. To determine scores, judges evaluate technical criteria, like unison, speed and edge quality (precision of strokes and turns) and program components like musical interpretation, choreography, transitions and execution.

“It’s figure skating multiplied: all the wonderful things you see with singles, pairs and dance, but there’s more of it — it’s really eye-catching,” said Kelly Vogtner, senior director of athlete development for U.S. Figure Skating, the governing body of the sport.

Skating is known for its individualism. Synchronized skating, though, is one of the most interdependent of all speed sports — 16 individuals disciplined to work as one, each required to be aware of the precise positioning and timing of 15 teammates. If one falls, the team must compensate while maintaining its program to assist in a recovery that will allow the skater to slip back into the dance.

“There’s no room for one person to stand out more than another. It’s a really even playing field,” said Becca Haupt, 19, one of the Synchroettes’ captains, contrasting synchro with other team sports like soccer and basketball, where one player may star. “For some people it might mean toning down their skating. For the others it might mean picking up their skating. There’s a lot of compromise.”

The International Skating Union accepted synchronized skating as a figure skating discipline in 1994. The first world championships were held in 2000. Since then, the sport has grown significantly: U.S. Figure Skating now counts 579 teams across the country.

Skating officials now say it is time for synchronized skating to enter the spotlight. While the sport would appear to have telegenic appeal, it has yet to receive national broadcast television coverage. Events from the final two days of the 2013 United States synchronized skating championships, which conclude Saturday, will be streamed on the fee-based [Icenetwork.com](#).

“This should be on television,” said David Raith, the executive director of U.S. Figure Skating, who is promoting synchronized skating to NBC, which broadcasts traditional figure skating. “This should be exposed more than it is now, and that’s part of our mission.” NBC Sports declined to comment.

A higher goal is inclusion in the Olympics. U.S. Figure Skating is talking with the International Skating Union, which must make the formal request to the International Olympic Committee.

“It’s not going to happen overnight,” Raith said. “I would say in the next 10 years I fully expect it will be an Olympic discipline, and it should be.”

The sport has had to overcome its own nomenclature. It has had three names in its short life: precision team skating, synchronized team skating and, since 2005, synchronized skating. The sport has not used the term “team figure skating.”

“We felt synchronized skating most accurately described what we do,” Vogtner said.

Casual observers can find the sport’s divisions to be confusing as well. While the senior category is its highest level, the junior division, which consists of skaters of high school age, is very close in skill and has the most teams and the fiercest competition.

U.S. Figure Skating selected the junior teams from the Synchroettes and the Skyliners to compete in international events. In February, the Skyliners placed fourth at the French Cup, in Rouen, France, and the Synchroettes were third in January at the Leon Lurje Trophy competition in Goteborg, Sweden. The results were significant, particularly because Scandinavian countries have dominated international events.

Now the cross-river rivals will face off in Michigan with other teams from around the country.

“We both respect each other,” Josh Babb, coach of the Skyliners, said. “It’s great to have competitors.

“People, when they see it, they really are impressed by it. I have lots of friends who are not in the skating world. When they see synchronized skating they say, ‘This is incredible.’