



Ice skating with Canossaville **Warm hearts in a chilly sport**

By: Laura Reid • Photos: Aundry Gan

Frankly, the little girls were pretty dubious even as they trembled with excitement. The 19 girls from the Canossaville Children's Home were going ice skating for the first time, and they weren't at all sure they were going to like it.

The skates were so heavy, and the rink was so cold, they fretted. And what if we fall? *So painful, lah.* It was an inauspicious beginning.

Ah, but what a difference a good sport can make—in only a couple hours! Sports philanthropy doesn't always have to be delivered in dollars. Sometimes, it's just children helping other children.

The little girls from Canossaville didn't want to leave at the end of their two-hour ice skating session sponsored by the All Stars Figure Skating Club (ASFSC) at Fuji Ice Palace. Even the 12 year old who fell twice, bruising her pride

if not her bottom, pleaded to "stay just a little bit longer." Whispered a seven year-old to one of the event organizers: "How much money if I come back by myself?"

The thrill of ice skating may have been a new experience for the kids from Canossaville—but not for the All Stars volunteers. Figure skating coach and ASFSC president Raymond Cheah says: "It happens like this every time a kid comes to the rink for the first time. In the beginning, they're scared but by the end, they are totally in love with skating."

The Canossaville Skate was sponsored by the All Stars Club, Yeap Transportation, which supplied the bus free of charge for the second year in a row, and Fuji Ice Palace, which cordoned off part of the rink at a discounted rate. Coach Cheah noted that "our sponsors have been very generous and supportive of our efforts."



Cheah led the girls through the initial skating steps with some big-hearted help from 15 club members, including three current National Figure Skating Champions: Anna Lee, Jasmine Mehaffey and Alexandria Wong. The Canossaville session also got a boost by the presence of the skating members of SISA's executive committee, Alison Chan and Philip Au.

Anna, 13 years old, volunteered her time because she "wanted to share the joy of ice skating with the children." Anna is the 2005 National Champion in the Prejuvenile Ladies B event. "We had a great time and they learned so quickly it was really amazing." Added 11 year old Alexandria Wong: "The girls were eager and smart. "

Among the volunteers helping out at the Canossaville Skate was SISA vice president Sonja Chong. As she helped the girls lace up



their skates, she summed up why the All Stars club held the event for the children. "We love skating, and the skaters want to share the fun with people, who might not get the chance otherwise," she said. "And it's important for our skaters to give back to the community."

The gift was as much about self-esteem as it was about sport. As the girls' competency on the ice rose, so did their confidence, said Alison Chan. "Hey, aunty, look at meeee," called one skater, skating triumphantly on her own force.

The children learned how to fall safely, push, glide and stop on the ice. Often, the children didn't even realize they were acquiring new skills and pushing their physical boundaries. By introducing play activities, says Coach Cheah, the volunteers were able to distract the children from their fear of falling. During the on-ice bowling games, the children had to use different body muscles to roll the ball as

well as an entirely different set when they had to pick up the pins. The same was true for the basketball relay race.

"They thoroughly enjoyed themselves," said Gregory Goh, assistant director at Canossaville. The trip "was a good opportunity for them to learn something new." It was the third time that the ASFSC had volunteered to teach skating to the Canossaville kids.

The club first took the children skating in 2002, but it has been a new adventure with new skaters and new children every time. Canossaville Children's Home has been helping and guiding children in Singapore since 1941. The All Stars Club feels privileged to be able to help Canossaville in this small way, said Coach Cheah.

ASFSC members donated their own time and money to make the excursion a memory-filled

adventure for the kids. Lim Su Yin, an ASFSC committee member, photographed all the children and patiently printed out their pictures as mementos. Committee member Helen Foo donated gloves to protect the kids' hands while on the ice. ASFSC members also provided the children with an after-skate snack and take-home goodies bags, which included treats and lanyards that said "I love skating".

And judging from the children's reluctance to leave the rink when it was time to go home, they really did love skating.

If you would like to introduce your sport to the children at Canossaville, please contact gregory@springville.org.sg. You can learn more about Canossaville's programmes at www.catholic.org.sg/canossaville.

The rise of the skater boys!

HPPS wins 5th Interschool Ice Skating Comp

By: Laura Reid

Photos: Foo Chen Khai, Aundry Gan for Fuji Ice Palace



Max Ko never liked sports, and he never liked getting up early in the morning. So, no one was more surprised than his mum when Max threw himself passionately into ice skating. Now in Primary 2, Max dutifully sets his alarm clock for six in the morning on Saturdays so he can be at the rink on time for his 7:30 class. His mother Michelle Ko asks herself, “Do I know this boy?”

Max is one of 26 boys and 32 girls from Henry Park Primary School (HPPS) who helped the school win first place at the 5th Interschool Ice Skating Competition, held last month by Fuji Ice Palace. Raffles Girls Primary School placed second while United World College of South East Asia was third.

Max's close friend from HPPS, Dominic Soh, aged eight, won third place overall on an individual basis at the competition while his 12 year-old brother Benjamin Soh, an HPPS graduate, won first place. It was the first time in the history of the Interschool competition that a boy skater had been named as overall champion.

The results bode well for HPPS' enrichment co-curricular activity (ECCA) program—and even better for the Fuji skating school. “Skating is a great sport for children,” says SK Tan, the general manager of Fuji. Tan helped pioneer skating in Singapore but he says, “we need to work harder to get the message across to the schools.”

Compared with the numbers in bowling or badminton, ice skating *is* a small sport. Only Henry Park recognizes skating as an ECCA on an organized basis while other schools do credit co-curricular activity points to skaters who apply. However, some schools still do not sanction the sport, much to the dismay of the skaters. Raffles Girls Primary School, for example, has two National Champions who

have invested years in the sport, but the school does not accredit CCA points to the competitive skaters.

Nonetheless, on an informal basis, more schools appear to be heeding Fuji's call that ice skating is a viable sport for children. During the schools holidays, the rink was packed daily with school children taking part in recreational skating camps.

At this year's Interschool competition, a new record for participation was set with about 170 students from 43 schools taking part in the one-day event. Watching one of the large group production numbers by HPPS, Tan beamed with pride. When he started the competition five years ago, only 40 skaters competed. In 2004, 95 skaters signed up. Next year, Tan aims to have 200 skaters on the ice over two days.

Just over 20% of the skaters at the Interschool Competition this year were boys. If skating is to be woven into the fabric of the new 'Sporting Singapore', the sport needs to have widespread appeal—and not just for little girls dreaming of becoming the next Michelle Kwan or Shen Xue.

At HPPS, girls in the ECCA outnumber boys but not by very much: 46 girls to 32 boys. HPPS launched the ECCA class in early 2004 to its incoming Primary 1 and Primary 2 students. The first class was capped at 20 children. Under pressure from enthusiastic parents, the school agreed to take in older siblings of the P1-P2 students as well.

In the beginning, girls seemed to dominate the group lesson classes, says Joan Yip, mother to Ben and Dominic Soh. “Now, things are balancing out. The boys just love the sport. They think it's cool.”

Under normal circumstances, Ben and Dominic have skating lessons twice a week. Both boys try to balance skating with other sports such as golf and badminton. As the competition drew nearer, they were training every day. “I gave the lessons to them because they love skating so much,” says Joan.

Henry Park and its parent association went into the Interschool competition with a great sense of purpose. Not only did parent volunteers help arrange and choreograph large production numbers, they also booked the ice on a private basis so that the skaters would be able to practice without interruption.

“Winning the competition has encouraged the children to want to take the sport even more seriously,” says Julia Wan, head of CCA for HPPS. The school offers 24 CCAs and 3 ECCAs (skating, golf and taekwondo). Wan says the school's strong results at the Interschool competition more than justified HPPS's foray into ice skating. “It's an unusual kind of sport,” she says, but the children “get a good workout...The cool temperature helps overcome fatigue.”

And some children are picking up the sport with remarkable ease. Eight year-old Bramina Braet started ice skating with the HPPS ECCA class in 2004. In March 2005, she finished 6th at the National Figure Skating Championships in her event and was named to the National Youth Development Team. “Her training has emphasized strong skating skills and a good foundation, but we were still shocked,” said her mother Irean Braet. However, she adds: “there's a lot of hidden talent in the skaters at HPPS.”

The popularity of the sport is expected to grow with the government's growing emphasis on sports for Singaporeans of all ages. Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, the minister of the community



development, youth and sports (MCYS), has called publicly for Singaporeans to develop more active lifestyles. "If the message comes through, it will be very good for ice skating," says Fuji's Tan.

Almost everyone involved with skating is looking for more government support, either from the ministry of education to encourage greater recognition of the sports as a co-curricular activity; or from MCYS through the Singapore Sports Council with funding for youth development.

At HPPS, Julia Wan says that the group lessons for the ECCA students are reasonably priced. However, parents begin to feel the pinch as their children improve and they switch to private or semi-private lessons. The cost of running an ice rink in tropical Singapore is expensive, compared with the charges of running a soccer pitch or a basketball court.

And therein lies the rub for parents. Max Ko likes being on the HPPS gymnastics team, says mum Michelle, but "he more than loves skating." At eight years old, Max already has big dreams about the sport, she says. "I'm more cynical. I'm thinking how far can he go in Singapore without more government support?"

Here's the fast answer: recently, Max won four gold medals and one silver in a competition in Malaysia. His commitment to ice skating is even stronger. As she watches her son's love for the sport grow, she wonders where it will end. "I'll do my best to support him as long as I can," Michelle says on a deep, difficult breath. "I think God makes everyone good at something, and I feel that skating is what God had in mind for Max. He was never into sports before. Even with swimming, it was hard. But from the moment he put on his skating boots, that was it."



Life on the edge

By: Casatrina Lee

If there is one thing that I have learned from ice skating, it's how to pick myself up after a fall. It's a painful life lesson that a young person can learn from sports and especially so from my sport.

Don't get me wrong. I love ice skating. It teaches you about perseverance, dedication and commitment. But you get taught these lessons almost every time you step on the ice, whether it's just for practice or for competition. So, whenever I skate, I learn something about my sport and myself.

There are some lucky skaters who simply love to compete, but for me, competitions are the most stressful. I just competed in the 5th Interschool Ice Skating Competition. I trained for three months, and I competed in x events.

I wasn't alone in my nervousness that day. Everywhere I looked, skaters in their expensive competition dresses paced nervously, jumping and stretching, trying to warm up for their upcoming events. You could see the anxiety on their faces. As I cheered on my fellow skaters, I could feel my heart racing with tension and excitement. Soon, it would be my turn.

In the footwork category, skaters are marked on their general skating speed, their steps and turns and generally how well they can use the edges on the blades of their skates. Most people don't know this but a figure skate actually has a groove down the middle of the blade

with an edge on either side. A skater who knows how to use those edges can move quickly and quietly across the ice by shifting from one edge to another, going backwards or forwards.

"Casatrina Lee, from Raffles Girls' School". It was time for me to show whether I had learned anything from my training. Smiling broadly, I stepped onto the smooth white ice, and took my starting pose. The music boomed from the loudspeakers. My feet actually began moving to the beat, instinctively performing the routine I had been practising for weeks. As I performed fancy three-turns and mohawks, my mind was numb. Only one thought was present...Do. Not. Stumble.

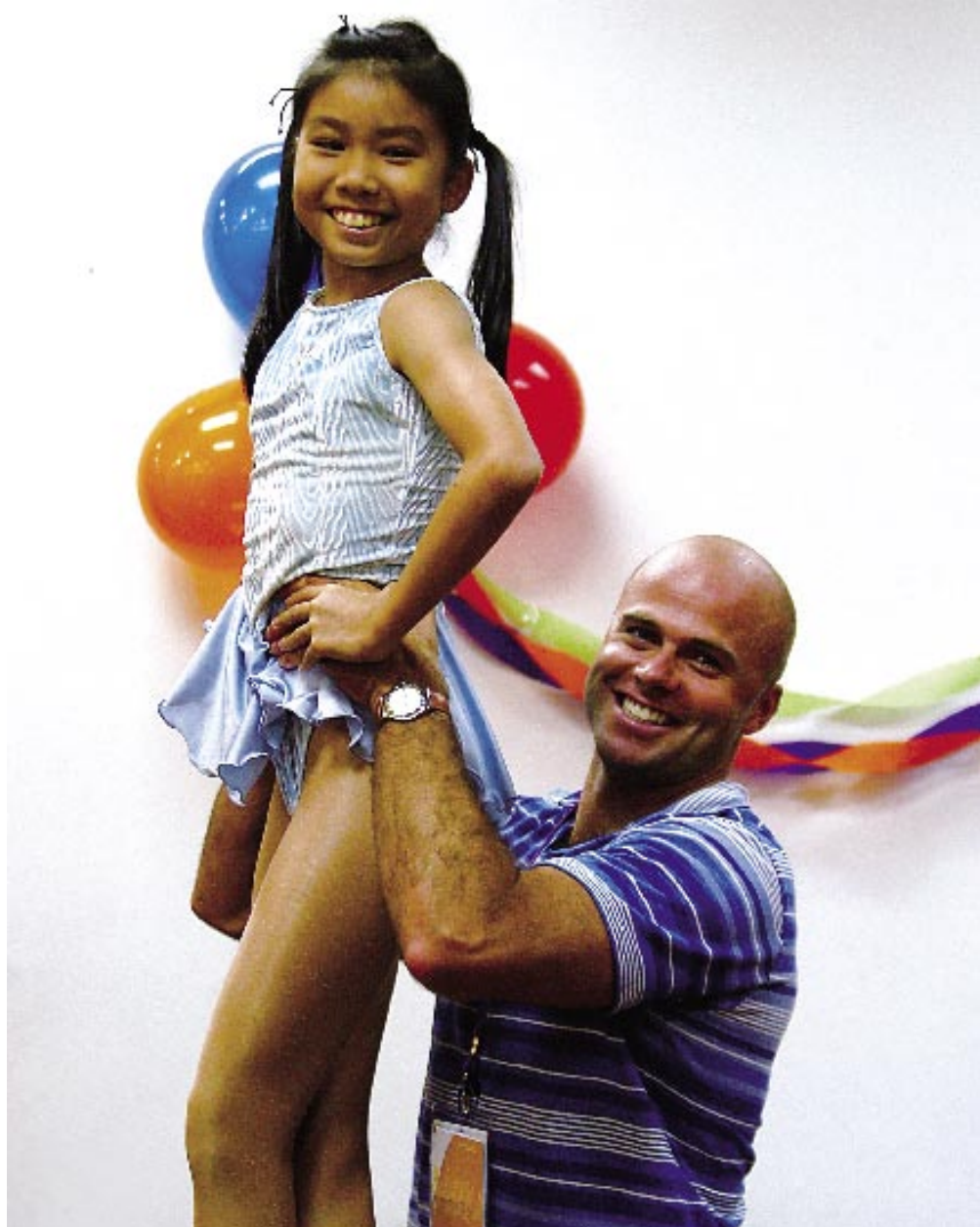
When my music ended, I felt as if a huge load had been lifted from my back. Now, the only thing was to wait for the results. (Did I say competing was the most stressful?) Skaters are filled with eagerness and dread when we wait for results at the medal counter. Time crawls by, such a contrast from earlier where it raced by on wings.

1st! The welcoming number '1' loomed out in front of me. First place! Picking up the pen with trembling fingers, I signed against my name and received my medal from the counter. It was beautiful. I heaved a sigh of relief, my face glowing with pride.

Casatrina Lee
Raffles Girls' Secondary School

IOC delegate & Olympic Champion speed skater meets with local stars

Photos: Chan Bin Kan



A real champion never says no to an opportunity to encourage young athletes. So, when Adne Sondral, Norwegian Olympic champion of speed skating in 1998, was asked by the Singapore Sports Council to an impromptu meeting with local figure skaters, he was more than happy to oblige. Sondral was in Singapore as a delegate for the International Olympic Committee's 117th

Session. He proved an entertaining speaker for the 30-plus skaters in attendance, saying that he was once called the 'Donald Duck' of skating because of all his pratfalls on the ice. However, he must have improved significantly over the years. He won three Olympic medals during a 10-year period: a silver medal in the 1,500 metre event in Albertville, a gold medal

in Nagano and a bronze medal at the Salt Lake City Olympics. Officially retired from competitive speed skating after Salt Lake, Sondral in Singapore seemed willing to try a new direction as a pairs skater. Singapore National Champion Alexandria Wong, 11 years old from Raffles Girl Primary School, said she would be thrilled to have him as a partner. *Laura Reid*

